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Thomas Pfau

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This entry considers major developments in European literature, from the early Enlightenment to the end of the nineteenth century, with particular emphasis on the relation between literary production and Christian theological inquiry in a rapidly changing cultural and political environment. Topics covered include secularization, rationalism, sentimentalism, and historicism as they successively impinge on literary form. The article mainly considers writers whose oeuvre takes up, and imaginatively extends, major topics in Christian theology (particularly creation, sin, forgiveness, redemption, eschatology, prayer, beauty).

Keywords: Theology and the arts, Literary form, Modernity, Poetry, Prose, Secularism, Culture, Romanticism, Christian doctrine, Enlightenment, Dissent

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1 Overview

The focus of this entry is on European literature, 1700–1900, insofar as it engages with Christian theology, religious thought, and scripture in informed and sustained ways (for a later period, see European Literature and Christian Theology [1900–Present]). Only in passing will the more diffuse relations between literature, religious life, and non-confessional forms of spirituality be considered. Following a brief review of the major themes in late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century theology and literature (section 1.1) this article offers a selective overview of major developments in how Christian faith-practice, scriptural exegesis, and theological reflection influence the production and consumption of literature. The eighteenth century features a lively culture of Bible translation, with particular emphasis on the Old Testament as a formal prototype for modern vernacular poetry (e.g. R. Lowth, J. G. Herder). By contrast, the Romantic era (1780–1830) features more contradictory impulses, with some writers reacting against a perceived dilution of the Christian faith, some espousing agnostic views, and some even anticipating an existentialist and naturalistic outlook that rejects both Christianity's metaphysical foundations and its normative moral worldview. For W. Blake, the main scandal has to do with the established church's self-betrayal as a 'state religion' and mainstream Christianity's alleged habit of sacrificing individual vision to theological abstraction. F. Hölderlin exemplifies German Pietism's evolution from a theology of scripture-based devotion, spiritual self-scrutiny, and personal piety, into a culture of social conformism that, in the politically charged world after 1789, is openly hostile to theological and philosophical speculation of any kind. Similarly, S. T. Coleridge's thought reflects a growing unease with Unitarianism's inadequate theological foundations, thus prompting him to (re)articulate the metaphysical and theological underpinnings of high church Anglicanism (Hedley 2000; Pfau 2013). An analogous divergence of emphasis can be observed in Romanticism's resurgent interest in apocalyptic and eschatological motifs. Thus, the early Romantics still adhere to a Christian theological understanding of 'last things' (Blake, Coleridge, Hölderlin), whereas a later generation (Shelley, Byron, Stendhal, Stifter) reframes the same topics in existentialist or even nihilistic ways.

A defining feature of the post-Romantic era (1830–1914) is the dominance of historicist and sociological methodologies (Hegel, Comte, Riehl, Durkheim), which fundamentally change the ways that Christianity – and literature's relation to the Christian faith – is viewed. Undeniably, the period's literary output, especially where the genre of the novel is concerned, features a marked attenuation and eventual decline in the moral and cultural authority of scripture and theological reflection. With a few notable exceptions (Rossetti, Droste-Hülshoff, Hopkins, Dostoevsky) discussed below, this shift toward a resolutely 'immanent frame' (Taylor 2007) accounts for the greatly diminished role of theological

reflection, scriptural exegesis, and the overall role of religious faith practice during this period.

1.1 Literature and theology in post-metaphysical modernity

Sir Philip Sidney's famous dictum, in his *Defence of Poesie* (1595; 1983: 136), that 'the poet […] nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth', while primarily intended to fend off Plato's critique of the poet as a fabricator of falsehoods (*Republic* Books 2, 3, and 10), had also positioned literature as taking a fundamentally agnostic view of Christianity's normative claims and its underlying metaphysics. Echoing Sidney's diffident outlook, and further reacting to intractable religious schisms and confessional wars during the first half of the seventeenth century, literature after 1660 increasingly avoids theological questions. In so doing, it reflects the emergence of an 'immanent frame' (Taylor 2007) that, rising to dominance in the seventeenth century, causes the moral and epistemic authority of Augustinian spirituality and Aristotelian-Thomist realism, respectively, to be displaced by a new emphasis on personal 'belief' and on naturalistic and mechanistic explanatory schemes.

After 1660, the social cachet and moral force of a growing body of literature is no longer grounded in normative truth claims central to Christian revelation. In contrast with major works of medieval and early modern literature (e.g. Dante's *Commedia*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the York Cycle of Passion plays, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*), the plot structure, imagery, and rhetoric of literary production after 1660 are no longer dominated by theological questions and, in a growing number of cases, entirely sidestep them. To be sure, core theological concepts and practices such as faith, hope, charity, sin, redemption, forgiveness, transcendence, communion, and exegesis continue to play a role, at least implicitly, in a wide array of modern literature. Yet after 1700, they increasingly do so either in the form of submerged references and allusions to, or as moral tropes incidentally borrowed *from*, Christianity. Increasingly, such theological motifs are presented in ostensibly secular language and in imaginative settings that leave the complex theological reasoning behind these concepts untouched.

A corollary of this shift can be found in the evolution of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painting. Starting in the late sixteenth century, landscape in particular sheds its symbolic background function and, in the work of Poussin, Claude, Rosa, and Gainsborough, becomes the central focus of an emergent pictorial realism. The biblical references and motifs (last supper, crucifixion, deposition, pietá, etc.) that had been the focus of painting well into the sixteenth century now begin to recede, such as in Claude's 'Landscape with the rest on the flight into Egypt' (1654) whose New Testament figures are barely visible under vaulting trees and against the luminous horizon of an expansive landscape. By 1750, the new pictorial realism with its naturalistic focus on landscapes and everyday

life (Hogarth, Chardin, Gainsborough) has effectively eclipsed the older symbolic outlook on the visible world as a conduit to the invisible. Nature and quotidian, post-confessional life have emerged as the principal, and soon exclusive, focus of art, thus tacitly fusing the previously distinct, allegorical, and mimetic dimension into a single naturalistic representation (Bermingham 1986).

What Hans Frei (1974) has called the 'eclipse of Biblical narrative' also characterizes the increasingly tenuous relation between literature and religious culture – and theology in particular – after 1660. An early illustration of this momentous shift can be found in the narrative approach of John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe, two writers often contrasted with one another and credited with shaping the form of the novel. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), one of the last allegorical dream visions, in the tradition of *Piers Plowman*, is still premised on a sharp Augustinian contrast between the secular 'City of Destruction' and the eschaton of the 'Celestial City' that the protagonist, Christian, will only reach after countless trials. A generation later, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) shows the Puritan conception of unmerited grace to have been supplanted by an individualist and notably Pelagian ethos of self-making. Thus, even as Robinson's being shipwrecked and stranded on a deserted island recalls Adam's expulsion from Eden, he now interprets his situation as a function of natural 'chance' rather than as a punishment for sin. Bunyan's allegorical drama of contrition and salvation is supplanted by Defoe's realist account of Robinson asserting dominion over the natural world as a seemingly inexhaustible resource and working his own salvation, not 'in fear and trembling' but methodically and confidently. Recent studies have significantly inflected Ian Watt's influential thesis regarding a strong correlation between the rise of the novel and the process of secularization (Watt 1957), which in recent decades has been inflected and deepened (McKeon 1987; Armstrong 2006; Owens 2016). Yet far from unilaterally 'reflecting' an ongoing, linear process of secularization, let alone 'causing' such a development, the emergence of the novel as a dominant literary form also benefits from widespread increases in general literacy, particularly in Britain (Vincent 1989; Burton 2008), precipitated by the growing availability of Bible translations and a consequent surge in scriptural interpretation after 1660. Thus numerous eighteenth-century translations of the Bible complement and, in dissenting communities, often supplant the King James Version of 1611, such as Daniel Whitby's *A Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (1703), Daniel Mace's *The New Testament in Greek and English* (1729), William Whiston's *The Primitive New Testament* (1745), Richard Challoner's *The Holy Bible* (1750), John Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755), and George Campbell's *The Four Gospels* (1789). Widely available and increasingly affordable, these new Bible translations foment a rapid growth in general literacy while also prompting a growing segment of British reading audiences to cultivate more sophisticated forms of exegesis. The result is a readership far better prepared, and increasingly motivated, to immerse itself in the new genre of the eighteenth-

century novel, in particular works by Defoe, Richardson, Sheridan, and Sterne (Seidel 2021). For much of the eighteenth century, a culture of private, devotional reading of scripture, and its communal exegesis in reading societies, runs parallel to the rise of the novel, rather than competing with or being displaced by the latter.

2 Eighteenth-century literature: 1688–1789

Following multiple waves of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, which culminate in the great civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century in Germany, England, and France, the theological framework that had shaped the pre-modern era has fragmented into multiple denominations with their own diverse liturgical, sacramental, and exegetical practices and rationales. Following nearly two centuries of inter- and intra-confessional dispute – including the Thirty-Years War (1618–1648) which devastated much of the German-speaking world, a bloody civil war in England (1642–1660), a defeated political rebellion in France that became known as the *Fronde* (1648–1653) followed by the suppression of the Jansenist movement at the end of the seventeenth century; all of them conflicts with a significant religious dimension – political leaders by 1700 seek to disaggregate politics and religion and to counteract the perceived threat that confessional divisions pose to the emergent modern nation state. Increasingly, effective political rule is tied to containing the influence of religious powers. Across Europe, rulers either serve as official heads of their national church (in England and in German territories) or, in the case of France, successfully negotiate with Rome privileges that afford the monarch a measure of control over the Catholic episcopacy and its monastic institutions. Alternately the cause or the effect of Europe pivoting toward more secular models of politics and culture is the emergence of modern denominationalism, itself reinforced by the broadly anti-philosophical nature of Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Pietist, and Methodist forms of Christianity. With the speculative and metaphysical concerns of older Scholastic and neo-Scholastic theology losing influence, affectively charged conceptions of piety emerge that will continue to weaken Christianity's institutional and doctrinal foundations throughout the Enlightenment.

Integral to the overall shift from a 'Confessional Age' to an 'Age of Reasonable Doubt' (Eire 2016: 586–690) is a process of 'subjectivizing morality' (Gregory 2012: 180–234) that replaces the normative metaphysical and theological framework of the 'medieval synthesis' (Dupré 1993: 174–189), which itself had first been unsettled by late-medieval Nominalism and the Reformation. With Methodists and other dissenters in England, and Pietists in Germany and the Low Countries advancing 'their rival truth claims [based] on scripture, ecclesiastical authority, tradition, and the witness of the Holy Spirit', attempts to overcome confessional divisions had 'to find a different basis' (Gregory 2012: 219) likely to be discoverable only outside of confessional Christianity. In its quest for such universal foundations, eighteenth-century culture ends up proffering various alternative

‘foundations’ for adjudicating moral disagreements, such as aesthetic intuitionism, religious and secular versions of sentimentalism, and a concept of ahistorical, ‘pure’ reason (see Dupré 2004; MacIntyre 1981; 1988). Presaging some of these developments is John Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689). It represents a new direction in political and religious thought that, in circumventing metaphysical axioms and the concerns of systematic theology, lays the groundwork for an emotivism that will define English political and religious culture for much the eighteenth century. ‘No man’, Locke writes,

> has power to prescribe to another what he should believe or do in order to the saving of his own soul, because it is only his own private interest, and concerns not another man […] and if he err, he errs at his own private cost. (Locke 2010: 155, 172)

To some extent, this migration of religious meanings from the ecclesial and doctrinal into the ‘private’ realm absorbs and deflects the claims of modern Augustinianism that undergird French Jansenism, early German Pietism, and English radical dissent of the later seventeenth century. What takes their place is a marked emphasis on ‘inwardness’ as the one authentic locus of the spiritual life (Taylor 1989; Herdt 2019; Dupré 2004; Colley 1992), which will be taken up below (see section 2.4). Yet even before the emergence of sentimentalism as a dominant framework for moral and literary production by the mid-eighteenth century, another, seemingly opposed development needs to be addressed.

2.1 The impact of rationalist and deist theologies after 1700

The same forces that transform religious culture and literary taste during the first half of the century also account for significant changes in theological inquiry, which now finds itself besieged not only by the rationalism of Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, but also by the emergent tradition of British empiricism. Both strands of philosophical inquiry seek to limit, if not dismantle outright, Christianity’s grounding in revelation and its insistence on central ‘mysteries’ of the faith, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and both Catholic and Dutch Reformed teachings on sin, predestination, and grace. Once Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government* had ‘struck at all fundamentals, [throwing] all order and virtue out of the world’ and leaving virtue with ‘no other measure, law, or rule than fashion and custom’ (Shaftesbury 1900: 404), a wave of Deist and rationalist critiques followed, including John Toland (*Christianity Not Mysterious*, 1696), Samuel Clarke (*Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, 1704–1705), Anthony Collins (*An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason*, 1707), and Matthew Tindal (*Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 1730). The rise of Deism and natural theology throughout the Enlightenment (Thomson 2005; Dupré 2004), being part of a broader turn toward immanent explanatory frames pioneered in seventeenth-century mechanism and scepticism (Taylor 2007), places theological reflection increasingly on the defensive. The result is a growing stress on apologetics or, alternatively, an outright retreat from any engagement with non-believers

and into fideist and antinomian sub-communities. The latter include the Port-Royal Augustinians of mid-seventeenth-century France, Dutch and German Pietism, as well as remnants of England's revolutionary Puritans who, following their suppression after 1660, remain locally and discreetly active in London where they will eventually inform William Blake's antinomian writings of the 1790s (Thompson 1993; Mee 1994; Bentley 2001).

In seeking to place human agency on a strictly immanent foundation, both rationalist and empiricist critiques of Christianity adopt a deist outlook that is anti-trinitarian and anti-clerical, and that typically rejects revelation, miracles, as well as any suggestion of God's continuing involvement in the world. Instead, God is but 'a remote Prime Mover responsible for the motion of the universe' (Dupré 2004: 243), leaving human beings to proceed independently, based on a sceptical or naturalistic epistemology. As a result, 'theology becomes redundant, at most reinforcement, at least decoration, for what is asserted and argued for on entirely non-theological grounds' (MacIntyre 1988: 230–231). By the middle of the eighteenth century, subjective sentiment rather than the established church is considered the arbiter of religious meaning and as (covertly) governing the moral conduct of self-interested human beings. Henceforth, it falls to philosophy to elaborate a coherent 'moral theory'. Having jettisoned the Jewish and Christian 'law conception of ethics', moral philosophy no longer relies on transcendent and, thus, normative categories – that is, the just, beautiful, good, and true. Instead, it settles for contingent moral prescriptions, so-called 'ought sentences used in certain types of context' said to be grounded in 'a special so-called "moral sense" supposedly vested in each individual' (Anscombe 2005: 175). Increasingly, morality appears concerned with adjusting 'behaviour' rather than revealing non-contingent truths.

A related theological issue, occasionally confronted in eighteenth-century British literature, involves the rapid adjustment of an inherited Christian morality to the emergent system of 'possessive individualism' (Macpherson 1962) and new types of economic interestedness that rapidly transforms the social, political, legal, and affective order of England and Scotland after 1707 (see Hirschman 1977; Pocock 1985; Colley 1992). As part of this 'great transformation' (Polanyi), literature and theology struggle to come to terms with the revaluation of poverty, humility, and charity, once spiritual ideals associated with pre-modern (especially Franciscan) Christianity but, by the later eighteenth century, typically excoriated as evidence of moral failure. By the second half of the century, a palpable tension can be observed between an older theology of compassion that views poverty and suffering as integral features of the human condition and an attempt at adapting Christian moral teaching to the new prescriptions of classical liberalism and early utilitarianism represented in the work of James Steuart, Adam Smith, Joseph Townsend, and Robert T. Malthus. Attempts by these authors to construe material wealth and worldly success as tangible evidence of moral justification will, by century's end, be challenged, sometimes in sentimental language found, for example in Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William

Wordsworth's early poetry (his 'Salisbury Plain' poems and 'The Ruined Cottage') or, alternatively, from within an antinomian or Unitarian framework characteristic of Blake's *Songs* (1789/1794) and Coleridge's early, Unitarian-inspired works, respectively.

2.2 The detachment of poetics from a normative moral-theological framework

With membership in a particular denomination increasingly regarded as a matter of personal preference rather than a binding inheritance, the once essential bond between Christianity and literature loosens, a development accelerated by the emergent discourse of philosophical aesthetics and its anthropocentric conceptions of beauty and pleasure. Salient instances here are the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks* (1711), Francis Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), David Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1754), and Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). No longer informed by theological concerns, those literary forms most associated with the Enlightenment (satire, the novel, mock-epic, loco-descriptive poetry, elegy, and ode) tend to explore a wide tonal spectrum ranging from humour, wit, and parody, to the didactic and the sentimental.

The gradual disengagement of literary production from theological inquiry is also reflected in the period's move away from a 'classical' grammar of affective states (grief, joy, melancholy, anger, etc.) toward more fluid and complex modes of inwardness that prompt the later eighteenth century to evolve several new expressive techniques: unreliable narration, 'free indirect discourse' (*erlebte Rede*), the poetic fragment, and, eventually, Romantic irony. All these innovations tend to undermine, or preclude outright, a single, normative perspective on lived experience and its moral evaluation. In part, the search for more flexible forms and techniques of self-expression reflects empiricism's highly particularized account of human experience, as well as naturalism's fundamentally sceptical view of the moral life. Instead of grounding morality and community in a supra-personal, transcendent vision and given objective and binding theological expression, mid- and later-eighteenth-century literature proceeds from a detailed empirical description of human existence, which in turn is to furnish reliable evidence for inductive reasoning about the moral situation of specific individuals dwelling in specific circumstances. Reflecting this ongoing shift from normative and prescriptive to a naturalistic and experimental style, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's 'Advertisement' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) notes that

> the majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 2008: 47)

To the extent that literature still engages and intervenes in theological debates, such attempts are also being stifled by censorship on the continent. By contrast, the English Parliament's decision to let the licensing act lapse (in 1695) and, soon thereafter, pass a first Copyright Act (1710), helps establish a literary marketplace in which modern, professional authorship will rapidly supplant the older system of literary and artistic patronage. As a participant in an entrepreneurial culture and a rapidly growing and diversifying political economy, the modern author had to be responsive to fluctuating tastes and demands of a literary marketplace (Woodmansee 1994; Klancher 1987; Altick 1957) that tended to regard religious and theological publications as particularly risky investments.

Cumulatively, the developments just sketched greatly attenuate the relationship between theology and literature, as is noted (with dismay) by the character of Demea in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (published posthumously in 1776), who is left to wonder 'what resource [is left] for us amidst the innumerable ills of life, did not religion suggest some methods of atonement' (Hume 2007: 68). Sensing the incommensurability of his orthodox faith in the divine *logos* with the Deism and natural theology represented by Cleanthes, to say nothing of Philo's strict naturalism and epistemic scepticism, Demea exits the conversation. Three years later, Samuel Johnson declares literature and theology officially incompatible when observing that 'the ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestick for ornament: *to recommend them by tropes and figures* is to magnify by a concave mirror the sidereal hemisphere' (Johnson 2006: 53–54 [vol. 2]; emphasis added).

2.3 Privatization of belief and the rise of literary sentimentalism

Arguably the most significant feature of this shift involves the rise of eighteenth-century sentimentalism with its stress on interior feeling as the true foundation of human personality, in opposition to social structures perceived as mechanistic or corrupted by a self-interested, calculative rationality. Eventually absorbed by Romantic 'expressivism' (Taylor 1989: 368–390), sentimentalism posits that 'moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character' (MacIntyre 1981: 12; original emphasis). Still, as has been recently shown, the new emphasis on spontaneity transforms both the culture of prayer and of religious self-expression in literary works, including those by Bunyan, Goldsmith, Smart, and still registers in Wordsworth's well-known definition of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Branch 2006). Hence, while sentimentalism's secularizing effects appear evident in retrospect, much of the

literature fitting into this category retains close affiliations with religious culture, even as the movement's theological foundations of the latter grow steadily more diffuse.

The rise of literary sentimentalism after 1750, both in England and on the continent, is closely related to the influence of Methodism and Pietism during the previous decades. A particularly striking aspect about German Pietist culture is the close link between liturgical music and literary production, both of which draw heavily on translations of Dutch Reformed and English Methodist writings with their marked stress on personal illumination and an inspired, free embrace of divine grace objectively expressed in the sacrament of baptism. In Germany, the literary influence of Pietism is exemplified by Barthold Brockes (1680–1747), whose nine-volume collection of religious hymns – *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* ('Earthly delight in God'), published between 1721–1748 – seeks to 'edify' (*erbauen*) the faithful by stressing the continuity between their earthly existence and their heavenly reward. In England, the closest literary and religious analogue to Brockes' poetry of religious inspiration is arguably found in the hymns of Isaac Watts (1674–1748), a dissenter closely linked to the Methodist culture of his time. His more than 750 hymns were to exercise great liturgical and literary influence well beyond his lifetime.

A generation later, the language of religious enthusiasm has merged into a culture of sensibility whose normative theological foundations, however, now appear tenuous at best. Parallel to the dominant, secular strand of sentimentalism, represented by mid-century poets like Collins, Gray, and Goldsmith, is a minority literature of religious sensibility committed to framing theological issues for a diverse lay audience that generally prefers the certitudes of personal belief and private sentiment over the finer points of Christian doctrine. Arguably the most widely received instance of such writing is Edward Young's 'The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality' (1742–1745). A blank verse meditation on philosophical and theological subjects, the poem's nine books explore moral and theological commonplaces, such as time, death, friendship, temptation, conversion, and immortality. Similar in its aims, though of more expansive scope, is the epic poem *Der Messias: ein Heldengedicht* ('The Messiah, a Heroic Poem') by Friedrich Klopstock (1724–1803), published between 1748 and 1773 in fifteen cantos and running to over 19,000 lines; an English prose translation appears in 1763, followed by a blank verse translation in 1810.

Klopstock's pioneering choice of the Greek hexametric line, rather than the French neo-classical Alexandrine, opens up new expressive possibilities subsequently developed by Goethe, Schiller, and Hölderlin. Klopstock's amalgamation of Christian orthodoxy with Greek hexametric form, of religious pathos with contemporary sentimentalism creates a curious effect, as demonstrated in this passage from Canto I:

> *Seyd gesegnet, ihr Kinder der Gottheit vom Geiste geboren!*

> *Jauchzet, Kinder, ihr schaut den Vater, das Wesen der Wesen,*
> *Siehe, der Erst[e] und der Letzte, der ist er, und ewig Erbarmer!*
> *Er, der von Ewigkeit ist, den keine Geschöpfe begreifen,*
> *Gott, Jehovah, er läßt zu euch sich väterlich nieder.*
> *Dieser Bote des Friedens, von seinem Sohne gesendet,*
> *Ist nur um eurentwillen zum hohen Altare gekommen.*
> *Wäret ihr nicht zu Zeugen der großen Erlösung erkohren,*
> *O so hätten sie sich in entfernter Stille besprochen,*
> *Einsam, geheim, unerforschlich.* (Klopstock 1760: 19)

> Blessed be ye his offspring. Shout for joy that ye see the glory of his face, who is the SOURCE of Being, the ETERNAL and UNCHANGEABLE, whose mercy endureth for ever. He whom no creature can conceive, condescends to term you his children. For your sake alone, this messenger of peace is sent by his beloved Son, to the celestial altars. Were you not chosen to witness redemption's grandeur, we should have communicated amongst ourselves, in remote silence, solitary, in secrecy, and unfathomably. (Klopstock 1788: 12–13; translation modified)

Unfolding not only the mystery of creation and revelation but also waxing confident about universal redemption (*apokatastasis*), Klopstock's verse affirms less the eternal and triune God than the poet's Olympian confidence and clarity of disposition. Gone are the psychological acuity, rhetorical finesse, and theological high drama that pervade Milton's *Paradise Lost* (undoubtedly Klopstock's 'rival' text). Instead, as evidenced by Klopstock's elegiac, retrospective tone, the great theological questions that Milton's epic explores in vivid detail are thought to have been effectively solved, with the putative answers to be recapitulated in Klopstock's majestic, if faintly academic hexameters.

2.4 Literary form in a rationalist age: Voltaire's satire and Lessing's didacticism

If hymnal and, eventually, elegiac forms are the preferred modes for sentimentalism's engagement with theology, eighteenth-century rationalists tend to frame theological questions in didactic or satiric genres. The literary oeuvre of François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), better known as Voltaire, concentrates on questions of theodicy, such as in his poem prompted by the catastrophic 1755 Lisbon earthquake, with Voltaire querying how such calamities and suffering can be reconciled with the idea of divinely ordered creation. The theological enigmas of human suffering and evil also pervade Voltaire's satire *Candide* (1759). In the face of shipwreck, warfare, mass slaughter, state-sponsored executions, cannibalism, slavery and more, the novel's eponymous protagonist stubbornly clings to the teachings of his tutor, Pangloss, an embodiment of a thinly-veiled parody of G. E. Leibniz's claim that humankind inhabits 'the best of all possible worlds'. Fiercely anti-clerical and anti-metaphysical, Voltaire's satires, dramas, and non-fictional polemics oscillate between a Deist and an atheist position; and they consistently maintain that, as long as rationalism rests on metaphysical premises such as are found in Leibniz's

mathesis universalis (universal mathematics) and Spinoza's philosophical monism, the true promise of Enlightenment reason remains unfulfilled.

Even more equivocal, and often whimsical, is the treatment that Anglicanism receives in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), a genre-defying satiric novel whose insistent ridicule of mainstream religious culture and all forms of spiritual profundity may nevertheless be read as 'advancing the Christian faith in a decidedly odd way and against the better judgment of gloomy religionists everywhere' (Stark 2021: 5). Ordained as a deacon in 1737 and as priest the year following, the latitudinarian Sterne sought to supplement his sparse income with publications that straddle the boundaries between worldly satire and Christian sermon-writing, typically lampooning both secular and religious culture. Judged by Voltaire to be superior even to Rabelais' satires, *Tristram Shandy* is filled with humorous, often irreverent references to religion, copious allusions to scripture, and an entire sermon on 'Abuses of Conscience'. With its polyphonous and often unpredictable leaps in narrative structure and perspective, Sterne's novel foreshadows Romantic and modernist experimentations in the genre, such as by E. T. A. Hoffmann, Jean Paul, and the theories of Russian Formalism at the start of the twentieth century. It also invites readings of Sterne's signature humour as a strategy ultimately aimed at an apologetics of the Christian faith. This was an end that Sterne may have felt required adopting an iconoclast attitude towards Anglicanism's institutional practices, its often-desultory conception of the priesthood, and a pervasive conformism in thought and belief that artists and writers from Hogarth through Jane Austen and George Eliot found characteristic of Anglican congregants.

More nuanced and more consistently rationalist in its treatment of theological and religious questions, are the philosophical and dramatic writings of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781). Responding to both Leibniz's theodicy and Spinoza's critique of scripture, Lessing posits that 'all positive and revealed religions are equally true and equally false', with the best being 'that which contains the fewest conventional additions to natural religion' (Lessing 2005: 36). According to Lessing, Enlightenment thought should restore the authentic core of revealed, positive religion by stripping away doctrinal accretions, resolving contradictions between the Old and New Testament, and discounting Gospel references to miracles worked by Jesus, all of which, Lessing contends, can only obscure Christianity's message of universal benevolence. As 'biblical interpretation turns into *critique* of the Bible' (Dupré 2004: 236; original emphasis), Lessing later develops a comprehensive Deist reinterpretation of Christianity's core teachings that gradually traces the Christian faith's historical evolution. As he puts it in his commentary on the so-called *Reimarus Fragments* (1777), the ultimate purpose of Christianity is to help 'turn revealed truths into truths of reason' (Lessing 2005: 236, § 76; translation modified). In his most famous work, his 'dramatic poem' *Nathan the Wise* (1779), Lessing reargues Locke's case for religious toleration in fundamentally new ways. A vintage case of Enlightenment

didacticism, the play's central 'parable of the three rings' thus premises (1) that all positive religions (Islam, Judaism, Christianity) ought to be considered historical mutations of an original, natural religion whose true constitution they have gradually obscured ('are they not all based on history, handed down or written? History we take on trust, on faith'); and (2) that the truth of a given faith is not to be located in its doctrinal affirmations but in the way that 'the true ring [i.e. true faith] has the magic power to make beloved; to gain favour in the sight of God and humankind' (Lessing 1992: 82–83).

2.5 R. Lowth and J. G. Herder on the origins of modern poetry in Hebrew scripture

Parallel to the alternative framing of theological issues in sentimentalizing and rationalist fashion, late-eighteenth-century literature also features the emergence a different poetics that views modern lyric forms (especially ode and hymn), as direct descendants of Old Testament prophetic writing. Pioneering in this regard are the *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* of Robert Lowth (1710–1787), published in Latin in 1753 and in English translation in 1787. Lowth, an Anglican clergyman and the first professor of poetry at Oxford (1741–1751), was subsequently awarded a doctorate in divinity from Oxford for his *Lectures* and eventually consecrated as Bishop of London. He reads modern vernacular poetry as indebted, if only unwittingly, to the ancient principle of 'parallelism' that pervades the Psalms and prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. Inspired by William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* (1738), Lowth rejects that work's claim 'that everything needful in Scripture was clearly available to a literal reading' and that, conversely, a reading practice attentive to the allegorical and figurative dimensions of language was 'out of step with the rational, reasonable *telos* [end] of the moderate Enlightenment' (Jager 2015: 208).

Instead, while conceding the Enlightenment's historical distance vis-à-vis the 'coarse, mean, or deformed' metaphors of the Hebrew prophets, Lowth maintains that the 'native force and beauty' of the Old Testament is the original and inexhaustible source for a sublime poetic style that English vernacular writing has of late sought to cultivate. On this model, 'a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it, or drawn under it, equivalent, or contrasted with it,' thus causing all 'the words or phrases [to be] answering one to another in the corresponding lines.' (Lowth 1778: x–xi). Echoed in the nineteenth century by G. M. Hopkins ('On the Origin of Beauty', 1864), and in the twentieth by Roman Jakobson's structuralist approach ('Linguistics and Poetics', 1958), Lowth's argument considers all truly imaginative poetic form to build upon the prophetic books of the Hebrew scriptures.

Echoing and extending Lowth's thesis in *Of the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782), J. G. Herder (1744–1803) specifically reminds 'young theologians' not only that 'the foundation

[Grund] of theology is found in Scripture', but also that studying the Old Testament's poetic riches (particularly the Psalms and prophetic books) is indispensable for any understanding of the Gospels. Herder's life-long interest in the origins and development of language, as well as his pioneering of historicist forms of inquiry into both poetry and religion, leads him to conclusions nearly the obverse of those reached by Lowth. If for the latter, modern poetry owes an indelible formal debt to Hebrew scriptures, the Enlightenment humanist Herder at times anticipates the logic of nineteenth-century historicism by arguing that modern literature has effectively supplanted its biblical sources; the formal-linguistic and stylistic residues of the Hebrew scriptures 'could no [longer] be precisely pointed to but only felt and experienced' (Jager 2015: 211).

Chronologically perched halfway between Lowth and Herder is one of the most popular works of eighteenth-century English poetry, 'A Song to David' by Christopher Smart (1722–1771). First published in 1763, the 500-line hymn reimagines the biblical David as the very embodiment of the inspired religious poet while also stressing how the suffering of David ('scholar of the Lord!' [Smart 2014: 508, line 223]) prefigures Christ's passion: 'There is but One who ne'er rebell'd, / But One by passion unimpell'd, / By pleasures unintic't / He from himself his semblance sent, / Grand object of his own content, / And saw the God in CHRIST' (2014: 508, lines 229–234). With its regular use of anaphora, repetition, and parallel constructions, Smart's hymn is evidently drawing on the Psalms of praise (e.g. Ps 8; 145; 146); and in its comprehensive 'Adoration' of God, Nature, and England as a divinely favoured nation, the lyric anticipates attempts by early-nineteenth-century evangelicals at a liturgical and theological reform of High Anglicanism:

> PRAISE above all — for praise prevails;
> Heap up the measure, load the scales,
> And good to goodness add:
> The gen'rous soul her saviour aids,
> But peevish obloquy degrades;
> The Lord is great and glad. (Smart 2014: 510, lines 295–300)

3 Romanticism: 1789–1830

Early Romantic literature of the 1790s either rejects or subverts the Enlightenment's two dominant approaches to theological questions: the sentimental and the didactic. Yet as it does so, Romanticism opens up new channels of communication between literature and theology, particularly in England and Germany. However, the stated aims and long-term effects of this rapprochement differ considerably. For the first generation of the English Romantics, renewed emphasis on the moral force of literature coincides with an often-unsparing critique of the established church and its perceived complicity in state-sanctioned exploitation (slavery) abroad and the growing immiseration of the poor at home. By contrast, German Romanticism unfolds along far more speculative lines, with

some of its early representatives (Novalis, Schlegel, Hölderlin) working toward a synthesis of theology, philosophy, and literature, famously set forth in the so-called 'Oldest System-Program of German Idealism' (Beiser 1996: 2–5).

3.1 Radical dissent and Unitarianism: Blake's and Coleridge's critiques of 'state religion'

An early instance of this changed outlook can be found in the illuminated books of William Blake (1753–1827), characterized by a satiric indictment of mainstream religious culture and a fiercely idiosyncratic embrace of Christ. An example is the 'Proverbs of Hell', found early in *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell* (1789), where the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs is not so much rejected as inverted and reformulated. Thus Prov 5:15–16 is rewritten as 'The cistern contains; the foundation overflows' (Blake 2004: plate 8, line 22) and 'Expect poison from the standing water' (plate 9, line 8). The measured language of Anglican catechesis is displaced by the antinomian 'road of excess', with Blake's stress on spiritual 'energy' and the artist's 'firm and determin'd hand' either openly mocking the authority of Christian virtues (e.g. prudence, friendship, moderation) – 'Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity' (plate 7, line 9) – or unravelling them in what reads like a sly epigrammatic declension: 'The bird a nest. The spider a web, man friendship' (plate 8, line 16). Reflecting his membership in one of London's radical antinomian communities (see Bentley 2001; Thompson 1993), Blake regards Anglicanism as tainted by spiritual conformism, morally coercive, politically corrupt and, worst of all, deeply complicit in the evils of slavery and colonialism. Aspects of this multi-pronged critique also inform his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789/1794), such as 'Holy Thursday', 'The Little Black Boy', 'The Garden of Love', 'London', 'A Little Boy Lost'. Blake's later oeuvre takes a more speculative directions, such as in his rewriting of the creation story in *The Book of Urizen* (1794), arguably the most sumptuously illuminated of his books, and his ambitious reimagining of Christian eschatology in *Jerusalem* (1804–c.1820; for the sources discussed in this paragraph, please see the William Blake Archive).

Blake's 'composite art' (Mitchell 1978) is rooted in an eschatology that categorically transcends history, memory, and the contingent productions of time and taste. Insofar as the 'illuminated' word realizes spiritual truth in 'minute and particular' form, it conveys a spiritual 'energy' that foreshadows the redemption of all things: 'The Last Judgment is not Fable or Allegory but Vision. Fable or Allegory are a totally distinct & Inferior kind of Poetry. Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists. Really & Unchangeably' (Blake 1982: 554). Blake's opposition to classical forms of mimesis ('none but Blockheads Copy one another') and, by extension, to an art enslaved by 'the daughters of Mnemosyne, or Memory' (Blake 1982: 531, 527) reflects more than his eccentric and pugnacious temperament. It attests to his underlying outlook on Christianity as summoning every individual to inspired vision, which by its very nature will issue in an

esoteric and, as his work after 1800 shows, idiosyncratic and frequently obscure fusion of visual and verbal cues. Indeed, 'his obscurities are as much deliberate as they are defensive' (Hurley 2018: 14), conveying Blake's strident, lifelong dissent from the Anglican establishment as represented by figures such as Bishop Watson ('I believe him to be a State trickster') and his rejection of Georgian England's commercialized and, as Blake sees it, slavishly imitative aesthetics as set forth in the *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds ('this Man was Hired to Depress art' [Blake 1982: 612, 635]).

Like Blake, the early poetry of S. T. Coleridge (1773–1834) confronts a disjointed theological landscape in which the established Church of England has not only been losing ground to Methodism and Protestant Dissent, but where more recently Unitarianism, Deism, and Pantheism have made significant inroads, especially among the highly educated. Coleridge, whose literary output would largely subside after 1810, finds himself temporarily drawn by Unitarianism, though less in its rationalist-Deist inflection than as a monism drawn from pantheist and (Neo-)Platonist speculation that includes Plato's 'dear, *gorgeous* nonsense' (Coleridge 1956: 295; original emphasis), Plotinus' *Enneads*, and Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* (1678). Coleridge's theologically heterodox position is on display in the most famous of his so-called 'Conversation Poems', initially titled 'Effusion XXXV' and then published, with some revisions, as 'The Aeolian Harp' (1796). The lyric's main conceit is that of the human mind suspended, like the eponymous musical instrument, in passive expectancy of 'the desultory breeze' and, thus 'caressed […] tremble[s] into thought' (Coleridge 2005: lines 15, 47). Yet the poem's underlying Pantheist conception of 'one life within us and abroad' and 'one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of All' meets with his wife's 'serious eye of mild reproof' (2005: lines 27, 48–49, 50). In her view, such 'idle flitting phantasies' are incompatible with orthodoxy since the 'unregenerate mind', once seduced by philosophical speculation, may 'never guiltless speak of him, / The Incomprehensible! save when with awe / I praise him' (2005: lines 41, 56, 59–61). Coleridge's lyric hints at Romanticism's growing awareness of the divide between the finite mind's abstractions and visions, on the one hand, and the transcendent God of Christianity, on the other; that is, between an ethos of autonomy and one of humility.

Echoes of pantheism still pervade 'Religious Musings' (1797), such as when Coleridge unfolds his vision of universal redemption: 'Till by exclusive Consciousness of God / All self-annihilated it shall make / GOD its Identity: God in all! / We and our Father ONE!' (Coleridge 2001: 176–177, lines 42–45). Yet there are also marked Augustinian overtones such as when the speaker anguishes over the ways that the sin of covetousness has been normalized in Britain's political economy, and nowhere more so than in the context of slavery, where 'hideous TRADE / Loud-laughing packs his bales of human anguish' (2001: lines 140–141). The ambivalent Unitarian and future high-Anglican Coleridge recoils from a world misshapen by the collusion of private interests, a permissive

state, and the ‘mitred ATHEISM’ (2001: lines 334) of an Anglican establishment that in a revolutionary era appears more concerned with upholding the established order than with advancing Christianity’s moral and spiritual mission. The result, Coleridge protests, is a world ‘where mad / Embattling Interests on each other rush / With unhelm’d Rage!’ Here, with God’s ‘presence lost / The moral world’s cohesion, we become / An Anarchy of Spirits! / Toy-bewitch’d, / Made blind by lusts, disherited of soul, / No common center Man, no common sire / Knoweth!’ (2001: lines 125–126, 144–149).

Coleridge’s heartfelt outcry – ‘Return! / Pure FAITH! Meek PIETY!’ (2001: lines 322–323) – highlights a dilemma that pervades much of Romanticism. For the appeal of private ‘belief’, fideism, and affectively charged theologies (Methodism, Pietism, radical dissent), compounded by the influence of naturalistic and sceptical epistemologies from Mandeville to Hume, Hartley, and Priestley, has placed mainstream religious culture, and particularly the Anglican Church, under considerable strain. Thus, when literature after 1800 takes up theological questions or probes the ambient religious culture, it will typically do so by flagging the apparent inadequacy of the established church, or indeed Christianity’s outright betrayal of its core mission on Earth. To the extent that theological issues and ecclesial vocation remain concerns in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century literature, they appear on the defensive against the immanent rationality undergirding liberal-secular culture after 1800. An example can be found when conversation in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) turns to Edmund Bertram’s vocational choice of ordination as an Anglican minister. Pressed by Mary Crawford, ‘Why are you to be a clergyman?’, Edmund’s tentative rejoinder (‘Do you think the church itself is never chosen then?’) fails to convince: ‘What is to be done in the church? […] distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing’ (2001: 116). For his part, Edmund’s defence of his future vocation is weakened by his commonplace understanding of the established church’s mission: namely, to reinforce a prevailing social consensus among ‘respectable people’, and for its ministers to function as the ‘arbiters of good-breeding, the regulators of refinement and courtesy, the masters of the ceremonies of life’. Tellingly, he cannot specify just how ‘the manners’ or ‘conduct’ relate to ‘those doctrines which it is the [clergy’s] duty to teach’ (Austen 2001: 116–117; original emphases). For Edmund, Anglican catechesis has effectively merged with overseeing his future parishioners’ effective socialization, a view that leaves Christianity’s theological foundations looking threadbare. As in George Eliot’s fiction, it appears that to view religious culture exclusively through the optic of moral instruction and social policing leaves Christian apologetics dangerously impoverished.

3.2 From confession to bildung: Pelagianism and narrative in Goethe and Wordsworth

A different response to the affective and didactic culture of eighteenth-century Pietism is found in Book 6 of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1796). In a free-standing

spiritual autobiography inserted into this *Bildungsroman*, Book 6 ('The Confessions of a Beautiful Soul') traces the gradual emergence of a young woman from the strict Pietist milieu of her upbringing and her aesthetic education. In what is a twofold conversion, the female protagonist initially embraces the rigorous Pietist teachings of the Herrenhut community founded by Nicholas Zinzendorf (1700–1760). In time, she grows wary of Pietism's rigid aniconic conception of faith and of the inarticulacy entailed by a purely inward model of spirituality: 'my soul had feelers but no eyes [*Fühlhörner und keine Augen*]; it felt but did not see' (Goethe 1995: 241). It is through her initiation into the arts, in particular painting, that Goethe's beautiful soul realizes 'for the first time, [how] external things brought me back to myself' and that 'in the concept of humanity there cannot be a contradiction with the idea of godhead' (1995: 246). A key premise of aesthetic education (*Bildung*) is thus Kant's and Schiller's ideal of a moral community grounded in the 'communicability' (*Mitteilbarkeit*) of aesthetic judgment. While deeply rooted in theological axioms of Pietism, the beautiful soul's aesthetic formation leads her to realize that 'one should not pursue the cultivation of one's moral life in isolation and seclusion' (1995: 248) – an insight that ultimately moves beyond Pietism's (and Romanticism's) idealization of an affective and hermetic subjectivity (see Beiser 2008; Herdt 2019).

Complicating Romantic literature's relation to theology is a marked tension between an immanent frame in which moral sentiment and economic rationality are closely aligned, especially in England, and a natural theology, exemplified by the writings of William Paley (1743–1805), that retains God as the 'First Cause' of creation while notably deemphasizing such moral topics as sin, redemption, grace, and last judgment. To the extent that central theological questions (e.g. ecclesiology, the Trinity, justification, and the Eucharist) are still addressed in literary form, they mostly operate figuratively or symbolically, as oblique sources of a naturalistic outlook such as we find in Goethe's early lyrics or in Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1799/1805; published 1850). Alternatively, questions of ecclesiology will resurface during the later Romantic period, albeit mostly as settled contents to be restated in conventional literary form, such as in Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1814; see 1836) and his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* (1822; see 1870). The dominant pattern of Romantic narrative is implicitly Pelagian, with its protagonists actively constructing their moral persona and taking themselves to work their salvation in historical time and by their own expressive means and putative merit. The Augustinian conception of unmerited grace has been supplanted by the quasi-providential operations of 'chance', a prominent concept not only in the Romantic *Bildungsroman* term but also in Wordsworth's narrative poetry, where it functions as the catalyst of a narrative development culminating in the poet-protagonist's conspicuous self-affirmation: 'again / In Nature's presence stood, as I stand now, / A sensitive and creative Soul' (Wordsworth 1979: 428; 1805 text, Book 1, lines 254–256).

3.3 At the limits of history: Romantic literature and the renewal of eschatology

A theological question broached by some major Romantic writers with an urgency not seen since the writings of Joachim of Fiore, concerns the relation between Christian eschatology and history (see Wolfe 2019 and Löwith 1949: 52–103). This renewed concern gives rise to two distinct strands of Romantic writing: (1) a dialectical schema that views Christianity as an epoch within the flow of historical time to be consummated in the project of speculative philosophy; or (2), alternatively, as a utopian or apocalyptic event that will conclude history and redeem its accumulated guilt. The former position is most fully realized in the poetry of Hölderlin, whereas the utopian retrieval of pre-modern Christianity informs the early Romantic writings of Novalis and later Catholic Restoration writers, such as Adam Müller, Joseph Görres, François-René de Chateaubriand, and Joseph de Maistre. Finally, the counterpart of such Christian (notably Catholic) restoration utopias, indeed its nihilist inversion, can be found in Romantic apocalypticism, already presaged by Coleridge's 'Wanderings of Cain' (1797) and his 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), and subsequently writ large in the posthuman worlds of Byron's 'Darkness' (1816), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), and some of Adalbert Stifter's shorter prose works.

Since the Fourth Lateran Council, official church teaching had maintained that because 'Christ's coming is quite incommensurable with historical time and its immanent laws of development, […] it cannot in any way be calculated from the evidence of history' (Ratzinger 1988: 194). Christ, in other words, 'is not the product of evolution or a dialectical stage in the processive self-expression of reason, but the Other, who throws open the portals of time and death from the outside' (1988: 194). It is this view of Christ as both the goal (*telos*) and the boundary (*peras*) of history that would be challenged by Vico's *New Science* (1725) and, during the Romantic period, by Herder's and especially Kant's writings on history ('Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View', 1784) and religion (*Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 1793). Their arguments for a human-engineered, progressive history would soon be echoed by Fichte and Schiller, major influences on the young Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) pursuing his studies at Protestant religious schools in Denkendorf (1784–1786) and Maulbronn (1786–1788), and finally at the seminary in Tübingen (1788–1793). Even as his education for a position in the clergy proceeds, Hölderlin's poetry shows him edging away from the Pietist culture of his native Svabia and speculating about how the passage from pagan antiquity to Christianity and Christ's anticipated return complicates the relationship between history and eschatology (Strunk 2007).

As late as the fall of 1799, in 'My Possessions' ('Mein Eigentum') Hölderlin still finds in nature a 'gracious refuge' and is portrayed as 'intently walking / Under the blossoms that

do not wither'. A humble faith lived out 'in safe simplicity [*in sichrer Einfalt*]' appears to offer shelter from external upheavals 'while outside / With all its waves the changeable, mighty time / Roars away' (Hölderlin 1994: 87, lines 41–47; translation modified). Just months later, in the first of his late hymns, 'As on a Holiday' (*Wie wenn am Feiertage*), the relation between historical and eschatological meaning moves centre stage as if 'a fire has been lit in the souls of the poet. / And that which happened before, but hardly was felt, / Only now is manifest' (1994: 397, lines 31–33). At the dawn of a new century and surrounded by geopolitical upheavals, Hölderlin conceives of modernity as a prolonged 'night […] little concerned about us' (1994: 263, lines 15–16), an interregnum between the pagan gods of Greece and the 'God who's to come' (*der kommende Gott* – 1994: 265, line 54). The Kantian 'universal history' of progress is starkly reimagined as the chaos of Augustinian, distended time, a spiritual desert filled with human 'errancy' (*Irrsal* – 1994: 268, line 115; translation modified) and 'darkness' (*im Finstern* – 1994: 265, line 33) in which the only thing 'that endures' is the 'on-rushing word' (*das strömende Wort* – 1994: 265, lines 32–34). Yet what is this word? Is it the 'oracles winged for far-away targets' (*fernhintreffende Sprüche* – 1994: 267, lines 61)? Or is it the word of the modern elegiac poet who, in order to 'name his most treasured possession' must fashion ever new tropes: 'Now for it words like flowers leaping alive he must find' (*nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes, / Nun, nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehen* – 1994: 269, lines 89–90)? Marooned in historical time, between the unrecoverable plenitude of Greek myth, that 'house of all the Heavenly' (1994: 265, line 55; translation modified), and an uncertain redeeming God, the poet's faith rests with the possibility that this 'word', however uncertain its provenance, 'gathers new strength when asleep' (*wächst schlafend des Wortes Gewalt* – 1994: 267, line 68). Coming 'too late' (1994: 269, line 109) and 'only at times able to bear divine plenitude' (*Nur zu Zeiten erträgt göttliche Fülle der Mensch* – 1994: 269, line 114; translation modified), the poet's invocation of the Christian eschaton remains entirely conditional:

> Why no more does a god imprint on the brow of a mortal
> Struck, as by lightning, the mark, brand him, as once he would do?
> Else he would come himself, assuming a shape that was human,
> And, consoling the guests, crowned and concluded the feast. (Hölderlin 1994: 268, lines 105–108)

Written between 1801–1803, several of Hölderlin's late hymns – 'The Only One', 'Conciliator, Never Believed in', 'Celebration of Peace', and 'Patmos' – expressly focus on Christ as the only one capable of 'reconciling' history and instituting 'all-renewing clarity' (1994: 445, line 13). Of these, 'Patmos' is arguably Romanticism's most profound and comprehensive statement on the relation between history and eschatology (see Szondi 1986; Cooper 2008; Ogden 1991).

Writing at Jena in 1799, Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as Novalis (1772–1801), also moved from the Pietist milieu of his childhood toward a religious philosophy that echoes Edmund Burke's brand of modern conservatism, while also foreshadowing views associated with Catholic restoration thinkers such as Adam Müller, Chateaubriand, and even Joseph de Maistre. Echoing Hölderlin, Novalis' 'Hymns to the Night' (1800) sees the modern subject suspended between the immanent order of human and natural history and the transcendent eschaton of Christ's return:

> As yet they have not matured, these divine thoughts – as yet are few traces of our revelation [*Offenbarung*] – One day your clock will tell the end of time, and then you shall be as one of us, […] heavenly freedom, and blessed return. (Novalis 1978: 159)

Just months later, *Christianity or Europe* (November 1799) or, as a consternated F. Schlegel was to call it, Novalis' 'Essay on Catholicism' opens with a thumbnail narrative of an inexorably declining, post-schismatic Europe; and it concludes with an earnest plea for the continent's renewal in the image of medieval Catholicism:

> Where is that old, dear faith in the kingdom of God on earth which alone can bring salvation[?] […]
> Christianity has three forms. One is the generative element of religion, namely joy in all religion. One is the notion of mediation itself, namely faith in the omnipotence of all earthly things to be the bread and wine of eternal life. One is the faith in Christ, his mother and the saints. […]
> [Now that] the old papacy lies in its grave and Rome has become a ruin for the second time […] will not Protestantism come to an end at last and make way for a new, more enduring Church? […] Christendom must again become lively and effective, and again form a visible Church without regard to national borders. (Novalis 1997: 151)

Unbeknownst to Novalis, key points of his historical and theological meditation are being echoed in Chateaubriand's *Genius of Christianity* (composed during the 1790s and published in 1802), and they will be taken up again in the poetry and prose of Joseph von Eichendorff (1788–1856), an *altkonservativ* (alt-conservative) Catholic and alienated civil servant in Restoration Prussia. Eichendorff's oeuvre is distinguished by the hypnotic force of its imagery, phantasmagorical techniques of description, and a simplicity of diction and plot that are often reminiscent of Old and New Testament parables (cf. Pfau 2005: 225–306; Adorno 1991: 55–79).

3.4 Late Romanticism's turn toward apocalypticism and nihilism

Following the Congress of Vienna and its attempted restoration of the pre-revolutionary European order, Romantic writing begins to exhibit a markedly dystopian, at times apocalyptic tone that not only rejects Enlightenment narratives of progress but also

the Christian-Platonist conception of nature as the intrinsically beautiful and good manifestation of the divine logos. Having paved the way for late Romanticism's apocalyptic speculations about a potential end to all human history are Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798) and Goethe's *Faust* (1808). Even as these works are centred on the drama of individual sin, sacrifice, and salvation, their protagonists' transgressions also beg to be understood allegorically, that is, as representative of the hubris integral to anthropocentric, post-Christian modernity and, thus, presaging an apocalyptic modernity. To the extent that nature is still regarded as divinely created, Gnostic overtones once again enter the picture. The natural world is viewed as operating on an entirely different timescale than human, 'biographical' time, and often it is portrayed as indifferent at best to human flourishing.

Thus, if Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' (1817; 1977: 89, lines 1–3) still adheres to the classical cosmological view of an 'everlasting universe of things' flowing through and constituting itself in the beholder's 'mind […] now glittering – now reflecting gloom', Byron's 'Darkness' (1816) has effectively stripped away all Christian metaphysics. Instead, natural history is presented as wholly finite and aimless, a mindless physiological happening to be concluded once the sun has been 'extinguish'd' and all living beings on Earth will suffer abrupt and total decreation. Gathering 'beside / The dying embers of an altar-place / Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things / For an unholy usage', those humans last to die shall contemplate a creation that has been reduced to a 'void […] a lump, / Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless – / A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay' (Byron 1986: 42–43, lines 2, 57–60, 69–72 [vol. IV]). A generation later, witnessing the total solar eclipse of 1841 in Vienna, Austrian novelist Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868) in his account of the event will reference Byron's apocalyptic vision. Yet Stifter's post-Romantic, forensic description sharpens the antagonism between the natural history's ceaseless generation and destruction of organic forms and inorganic matter, on the one hand, and a Christian view of creation, on the other, that has paid insufficient attention to the reality of decreation. A similar, post-metaphysical account of an apocalypse, this time in the form of a plague killing off all human life, is unfolded in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826).

4 The nineteenth century: 1830–1914

T. E. Hulme's characterization of European Romanticism as 'spilt religion', later echoed and elaborated by M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism*, follows Hegel by arguing that core motifs of Christian theology had been assimilated and, to an extent, attenuated by, modern literature and 'aesthetics'. To be sure, the normative theological framework that still undergirded the poetry of Blake, Coleridge, Klopstock, Novalis, and Hölderlin, is not being rejected outright, at least not initially. Works satirizing Christianity or disavowing it in favour of an existentialist or nihilist stance, Byron's *Don Juan* (1822–1824), Stendhal's

Le Rouge et le Noir (1830), or Heinrich Heine's *On the History of Philosophy and Religion in Germany* (1833) remain an exception. Even so, by the end of the Romantic era both the practice of Christian faith and its theological foundations face a fundamentally new challenge in the form of Hegelian dialectics, which aims to reconcile the order of finite history with the timeless, transcendent logos (*Vernunft*). In his *Aesthetics* (1821), Hegel situates Romantic art, and literature in particular, as the threshold beyond which religion and, ultimately, philosophy will be the only adequate medium for the fully reflected 'notion' (*Begriff*) of God towards which all history has been tacitly ordered. As imaginative and figurative writing transitions into what Hegel calls 'the prose of the world',

> poetry appear[s] as that particular art in which art itself begins at the same time to dissolve and acquire in the eyes of philosophy its point of transition to religious pictorial thinking [*zur religiösen Vorstellung*] as such, as well as to the prose of scientific thought [*zur Prosa des wissenschaftlichen Denkens*]. The realm of the beautiful, as we saw earlier, is bordered on one side by the prose of finitude and commonplace thinking, out of which art struggles on its way to truth, and on the other side the higher spheres of religion and philosophy where there is a transition to that apprehension of the Absolute which is still further removed from the sensuous sphere [*zu einem sinnlichkeitsloseren Erfassen des Absoluten*]. (Hegel 1975: 968)

The impact of Hegel's philosophy on the course of both literature and theology throughout the long nineteenth century is considerable. Between 1815 and 1850, the dominance of speculative dialectics and Romantic historicism in intellectual culture brings about a sweeping reorganization of modern academic disciplines, including the reorganization of literary and theological inquiry along historical and philological lines. The classical model of the *artes liberals* divided into the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and quadrivium (music, arithmetic, astronomy, geometry) is supplanted by modern disciplines such as classical and modern philology, history, art history, musicology, law, economics, and the interpretive social sciences whose methodology and sub-fields are all organized in historical fashion.

4.1 The art of cultivated detachment: George Eliot's sociology of religious life

This dominance of historicism across virtually all interpretive fields also accounts for the shift, from lyric genres that had anchored Romantic conceptions of literary and religious expression toward narrative modes, both fictional and non-fictional. Informing most nineteenth-century grand narratives (e.g. Auguste Comte, Hippolyte Taine, Jules Michelet, Leopold Ranke, and Heinrich von Treitschke) and the realist fictions of Charles Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and Theodor Fontane are a number of axioms that explain why the period features so little cross-pollination between literature and theology. First, there is a robust commitment to close-up empirical observation, which in turn reinforces the period's naturalistic epistemology. Furthermore, nationalist politics have supplanted Enlightenment cosmopolitanism and Romantic universalism, and in the

case of the French novel (Balzac, Flaubert, Zola) the new focus on national culture also entails an aggressive anti-clericalism.

In her 1856 review of Riehl's *Natural History of German Life*, George Eliot affirms the primacy of detailed and verifiable observation over all prescriptive reasoning, be it broadly moral or of a more technical, theological kind. For literature must not rely on 'sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity' but, rather, is committed to 'the extension of our sympathies' (Eliot 1990: 110). Proceeding in much the same way as the domestic ethnographer Riehl, Eliot identifies the novelist's principal objective to consist in an oblique type of moral catechesis aimed at infusing goodness rather than presupposing it: 'the thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks *ought* to act on the labourer or artisan, but what are the motives and influences which *do* act on him' (1990: 111). No nineteenth-century novelist pays more attention than Eliot to the religious dimension of everyday provincial life, as lived by various faith communities, the clergy or, in some cases, as besieged by forces intrinsically opposed to it. From her first book, *Scenes from Clerical Life* (serialized by *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1857), via *Silas Marner* (1861) to *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) and the late *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a recurrent feature of Eliot's plots is the protagonist's externally embattled and internally divided religious consciousness. Often, these antinomies are reproduced within specific faith communities, such as in *Silas Marner*, which with a concision reminiscent of New Testament parables maps the antinomy between spiritual love and economic gain onto the division between a strict neo-Calvinist evangelicalism and latitudinarian Anglicanism. The conflict is only resolved when the titular character, Silas, recovers the ability to love, a 'humanistic' solution that notably sidesteps the theological question of whether such *caritas* is a personal achievement or a divine 'gift' (*donum*). Even so, the older ideal of the *imitatio Christi*, realized in an act of conspicuous self-sacrifice that hearkens back to the sixteenth-century Reformer's view of Christ's passion as a case of penal substitution, continues to inform mid-Victorian narrative plots, including those of Eliot, Dickens, and Gaskell (Schramm 2012).

Characteristic of Eliot's approach to religion is an intellectual, prevaricating outlook on the normative claims shared by both Christian and Jewish faith. Eliot was a translator of Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss, as well as an admirer of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Ernest Renan, whose *Vie de Jésus* (*Life of Jesus*) she declared immediately upon publication (1863) 'is a favourite with me'. She views religion exclusively from the outside, as an important facet of mid-Victorian culture deserving of scrutiny by the novelist's overarching project of 'domestic ethnography' (Buzard 2005). It is this antagonism between intrinsic faith practice and its extrinsic, sociological examination which figures prominently in Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Given up for adoption by his Jewish mother, who intended to pursue her career as an opera singer, Daniel gradually, and at first reluctantly, learns of his Jewish identity as a young man. Decisive

is his encounter with the young and consumptive proto-Zionist Ezra Mordecai Cohen. Yet even after Daniel marries Mordecai's sister and commits himself to advancing the project of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he finds himself unable to emulate Mordecai's and his own biological father's piety and commitment to Jewish mysticism.

4.2 Coping with secularism: from religious melancholy to fin-de-siècle symbolism

Eliot represents one way in which literature and theology tend to be related throughout the nineteenth century. Her overall project bears marked affinities to the dialectical approach found in Hegel, Feuerbach, and Comte, according to which the immediacy of 'religious consciousness' is gradually supplanted by second-order reflections of philosophical, sociological, and anthropological inquiry. Unlike tradition-based forms of knowledge that had been integral to Christian thought (MacIntyre 1990) since the patristic era, the encyclopaedic thrust of the interpretive disciplines just mentioned rests on a Cartesian methodology intended to produce objective, verifiable, and critical knowledge. In its variously sociological and historicist permutation, the nineteenth-century study of religion continues to advance the secularization of modern inquiry. As a result, Christianity by the middle of the century tends to register increasingly as a cultural 'memory' rather than a lived reality, a change often accompanied by what Hegel's terms 'unhappy consciousness'. Such melancholy estrangement is memorably expressed in Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' (1851, published 1867). As 'the Sea of Faith' remains audible solely in 'Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, / Retreating', Christianity's metaphysical certitudes endure only as memories of a past that now proves utterly irretrievable:

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! for the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night. (Arnold 2002: lines 21–26, 29–37)

An alternative way in which mid- and late-nineteenth-century literature engages religious culture with its theological and ecclesiological foundations, refuses the dialectical 'solution' and, instead, posits an insoluble contradiction between a religious faith sought but never truly attained and the tawdry and dispiriting nature of everyday secular life. In Honoré de Balzac's short story 'La Messe de l'athée' (1836), the avowed atheist and eminent physician Desplein is challenged by his friend Bianchon about his repeated attendance at Mass: '[Y]ou! You must tell me the reason for this mysterious activity, and explain to me the

flagrant discrepancy between your opinions and your behaviour. You don't believe in God, yet you go to Mass!' Desplein answered, 'I am like a great many pious men, men who appear to be profoundly religious but are quite as atheistic as we are, you and I' (Balzac 1977: 225–226). Following the death of a poor and devout Catholic neighbour, Bourgeat, whom Desplein's medical skills could not save, the doctor arranges to have four masses said for the deceased and, to his friend, remarks 'that I would give my fortune to be a believer like Bourgeat' (1977: 234).

By the end of the century, the faith-science antinomy (see The History of Science and Theology) resurfaces as a tension between two fundamentally incommensurable aesthetics: (1) a fin-de-siècle symbolism associated among others with the work of Rimbaud, Huysmans, Rodenbach, Wilde, Maeterlinck, Hofmannsthal, and the young Rilke and T. S. Eliot; and (2) a literary naturalism already stirring in mid-century writers such as Eduard Mörike and Adalbert Stifter that will culminate in the late-nineteenth-century works of Hardy, Zola, and Hauptmann. Not only does their astringent, proto-scientific style foreclose on religious and metaphysical commitments of any kind but, in the case of Zola and Hardy, it is also characterized by a marked anti-clericalism. Conversely, the symbolist movement, even as it draws on Christian tropes, tends to deploy them mostly as plot devices or as a backdrop for its often-luscious imagery. Exemplary in this regard are the later novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), *En route* (1895), *La cathédrale* (1898), and *L'oblat* (1903), whose finely spun metaphors and recondite allusions, characteristic of fin-de-siècle decadence and aestheticism, trace their protagonist's uneasy evolution from a liberal-secular culture of progress via Schopenhauer-inspired pessimism to his eventual conversion to Catholicism and life as a Trappist oblate.

With the dialectical and historicist master narratives of Hegel, Comte, and their heirs having undermined Christianity's normative moral framework and its metaphysical foundations, the prevailing view around the middle of the century places religious faith in direct competition with the naturalism of the empirical and interpretive social sciences. For John Henry Newman, to whom 'the being of a God […] is as certain as the certainty of my own existence', the ambient world of mid-Victorian England appears drained of that very certainty. As he writes in 1864, 'if I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me, when I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator' (Newman 2008: 322). At this point, then, a sustained and searching engagement of modern culture, including literature, with religious 'certainty' and theological reflection proves the exception.

At first glance, the Oxford Movement might be viewed as an exception to this general trend. Yet by and large, the often-technical disputes between high church Anglicans and the 'Tractarians' concerning sacramentality, liturgy, soteriology, and the role of tradition show theological inquiry during the 1830s and 1840s to have become increasingly isolated

from other discourses, either peripheral to the modern university, as proved to be the case with Tractarianism, or firmly enclosed within it, such as the Tübingen Catholic School in Germany. As a result, literary works written by those centrally involved in theological debates between 1830 and 1860, such as John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827), J. H. Newman's two novels *Loss and Gain* (1848), *Callista* (1855), and his long poem, *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865), mainly use established literary genres to convey theological views on conversion, martyrdom, sacramentality, or the soul in purgatory – views already articulated in theological prose elsewhere. As a result, mid-Victorian religious literature mainly serves as a vehicle for disseminating established doctrine rather than as a medium uniquely suited for extending the range of theological reflection.

4.3 Rejecting the 'immanent frame': Hopkins' and Dostoevsky's literary theologies

Bucking that general trend is a small handful of writers whose exploration of central theological questions entails a profound rethinking of the possibilities of literary form. An early instance, albeit virtually unknown outside of Germany, is the religious poetry of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797–1848), a German Catholic whose later lyrics leave behind Romantic expressivism and any lingering traces of religious sentimentalism. One of her poems, 'Gethsemane', vividly fuses Christ's spiritual affliction with his moribund flesh in ways that not only recall Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece but also point ahead to a symbolism that will extend from Baudelaire to Georg Trakl. Droste-Hülshoff depicts Christ in the garden, tenuously illuminated by the light of 'the moon's pale disc' (*des Mondes blasse Scheibe*), with his prayer suddenly disrupted by a proleptic vision of himself on the cross:

> Before the Savior the cross rose up
> his own body he saw suspended on it
> Lacerated, limp, his tendons
> like ropes protruding from his limbs.
> […]
> Dark grew the air, a dead sun floated
> In a sea of grey
> [*Dunkel ward die Luft, im grauen Meer*
> *Schwamm eine tote Sonne*] (Droste-Hülshoff 1998: 549–550, lines 5, 9–22).

Arguably the most widely read and influential devotional poet of the mid-Victorian era is Elizabeth Rossetti (1830–1894) whose first published collection of verse (*Goblin Market*, 1862) initially, and in retrospect surprisingly, scandalized her (mostly male and frequently condescending) readers as formally undisciplined and impetuous. As Michael Hurley has shown, a striking reversal soon ensued, with Rossetti's poetry now praised almost exclusively for its formal 'perfection'. As a result, her late-Victorian admirers, following George Saintsbury's authoritative critical promptings, came to appreciate

Rossetti mainly as ‘a poet of daintily arrested development to be read only for her lissome technique’ (Hurley 2018: 77). At the same time, ‘reviewers seemed unwilling to imagine that an unworldly woman could have the intellect and temperament or education and experience to produce much more than personalized emoting or prettified devotion’ (2018: 78). The resulting ‘domestication’ of Rossetti as the leading female writer of devotional poetry can be explained, at least in part, by her close adherence to biblical motifs and her mastery of cross-rhymed, iambic pentameter which proved reassuring for a middle-class, Anglican sensibility increasingly besieged by the materialistic and naturalistic axioms of the mid-Victorian age. Telling in this regard is Rossetti’s frequent deployment of the vanitas mundi (vanity of the world) motif (e.g. ‘One Certainty’; 2005: 66), with the biblical prooftext (Eccl 1:2) quoted over a dozen times throughout her poetry.

By the mid-1860s, Rossetti’s lyrics, including her devotional poetry, become more complex. Standard meter is increasingly supplanted by irregular forms, some of which anticipate Hopkins’ ‘sprung rhythm’, as in the opening of ‘Despised and Rejected’:

> My sun has set, I dwell
> In darkness as a dead man out of sight;
> And none remains, not one, that I should tell
> To him mine evil plight
> This bitter night.
> I will make fast my door
> That hollow friends may trouble me no more. (Rossetti 2005: 172–173)

As confirmed by her countless allusions to scripture (here to Eccl 52:3), Rossetti’s devotional poetry is aimed at a readership possessing a high degree of biblical literacy. Indeed, scripture remains the dominant sub-text for Rossetti’s poetry, at once conferring motivic and thematic unity on many of her lyrics while also helping to legitimate the pursuit of poetry as a medium enabling her mid-Victorian and mainstream Anglican readers to sustain their faith in a world whose embrace of historical and scientific ‘progress’ is widely felt to conspire against it (cf. Mason 2018). Yet even as ‘the imitative force of her style is often remarkable’, Rossetti’s preoccupation with formal perfection does ‘not only, or principally, employ style in a way that straightforwardly sharpens the theological thesis or heightens spiritual testimony. Her verse style seems often indeed to inhibit such possibilities’ (Hurley 2018: 86). In this she reflects a wider pattern already observable in John Keble’s earlier collection of devotional poetry (*The Christian Year*, 1827), Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850), and the writings of F. D. Maurice and Matthew Arnold; namely, to enlist verse form principally for disseminating and reinforcing mainstream religious doctrine, rather than probing, extending, and deepening its scope and implications. Well into the 1880s, Victorian England’s self-image as a broad-based Christian nation thus

continues to be fueled as much by private reading habits as by attending religious services and active membership in church communities (cf. King 2015; Hurley 2018: 73–100).

Arguably the one exception to this pattern involves the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889). For personal and professional reasons, Hopkins effectively desisted from any attempts at seeing his poetry into print in his lifetime; a first edition of his verse would only appear in 1918, edited by his friend and eventual poet laureate of England, Robert Bridges, at which point its high-modernist readers found themselves startled by Hopkins's uniquely creative fusion of theological insight with a highly original approach to literary form. Yet it was the Oxford (or 'Tractarian') Movement, then in its late phase (see Nockles 1994), which had first provided the budding poet with a spiritual and intellectual alternative to the secularism and, not infrequently, overly anti-Christian ambience prevalent at Balliol College, where Hopkins was pursuing his studies in classics and humanities between 1864–1867. During the decade following Hopkins' conversion to Catholicism (1868) and his decade-long Jesuit training, other theological and intellectual influences (Duns Scotus, Ignatius, Ruskin, and Darwin) deepen his understanding of visible nature in relation to the triune God (see Ballinger 2000; Ward 2002; Pfau 2022).

When he resumes writing poetry in late 1875, following a self-imposed eight-year hiatus, Hopkins leaves behind the Keats- and Tennyson-inspired 'Parnassian' of his college years and, instead, fashions an idiosyncratic style that no longer relies on traditional prosody with its preestablished distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables. Instead, what he calls 'sprung rhythm' seeks to build on and intensify the expressive force of ordinary language. Being 'current language heightened' (Hopkins 1986: 240), sprung rhythm 'is the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced' and it is 'less to be read than heard' (1986: 228–229). The new technique is first introduced in Hopkins' longest poem, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' (1875; 1986), a stunningly original and unsparing meditation on conversion and human affliction. What must be suffered, however, is not only natural disaster but, far more importantly, divine power and grace. Suspended between God's 'terror' and 'stress' ('The frown of his face / Before me, the hurtle of hell / Behind' [1986: 110, lines 12–19]), Hopkins finds in poetry the unique medium through which to grasp his faith vocation as an Ignatian exercise of sorts (Ballinger 2000: 61–102), a challenge at once central to his faith but impossible to meet.

During the next few years, a gentler, more hopeful note comes to the fore in Hopkins' nature sonnets ('God's Grandeur', 'As kingfishers catch fire […]', 'The Windhover', 'Pied Beauty', et al.). Here the deeper purpose of sprung rhythm is to furnish a formal, audible equivalent to the specific 'thisness' of a given natural entity, to capture its formal organization or, as Ruskin calls it, 'the specific' (in contradistinction to the abstract and the particular). Hopkins' term for this distinctive quality of each created being is 'inscape'; he stated that 'design, pattern or what I am in the habit of calling "inscape" is what I above

all aim at in poetry' (1986: 235). On this view, 'Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: / Deals out that being indoors each one dwells; / Selves – goes its self; myself it speaks and spells, / Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*' (1986: 129, lines 5–8; original emphases). With impressive visual and verbal acuity, Hopkins' lyrics bear witness to the ineffable specificity ('instress') and formal cohesion ('inscape') of each created being. His sonnets of the late 1870s thus fuse the conceptual rigour of Duns Scotus' theology with a pre-Raphaelite ideal of visuality first unfolded in John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843–1860), yet also echoing a forensic style found in Darwin's notebooks and botanical writings (Pfau 2022: 557–640).

The deceptively generic opening line of 'Spring' (1877) – 'Nothing is so beautiful as Spring' – is immediately supplanted by the speaker's microscopic attention to nature's abundance of texture, colouration, soundscape, and movement. With its intricate sound patterning, alliteration, and subtle variations of tempo, Hopkins' approach to verse shows that seeing is essentially an act of witness, rather than a standard case of value-neutral, Lockean perception or dispassionate scientific prose. The visible world calls upon the beholder to be present to the drama of creation staged each spring:

> When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
> Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
> Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
> The ear, it strikes like lightenings to hear him sing;
> The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, the brush
> The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
> With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling. (Hopkins 1986: 130–131, lines 2–8)

As it nudges mid-Victorian naturalism and aestheticism to their forgotten grounding in Christian revelation, the sonnet stages seeing as the supreme 'spiritual sense', much as pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, St. Bernhard, or Nicholas of Cusa had done long before. Sonnets such as 'The Windhover', 'Pied Beauty', or 'Hurrahing in Harvest' unfold a phenomenology of religious experience (Hart 2017; Pfau 2022), with the attentive visualization of 'inscaped' nature amounting to a form of catechesis and, potentially, offering a fleeting glimpse of Edenic bliss. To the central question – 'What is all this juice and all this joy?' – which reflects both mid-Victorian culture's theological perplexity and confused notions of beauty – the poem's response is unequivocal. The sensory plenitude just unfolded is 'A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning / in Eden garden', as well as a summons: 'Have, get before it cloy, / Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning' (1986: 131, lines 9–12). In Hopkins both the act of seeing and its reconstitution in poetic form amounts to a *lectio divina* and Ignatian spiritual exercise of sorts. Describing some frost-covered blades of grass, he recalls how 'I saw the inscape freshly, as if my eye were still growing', only to note how such contemplative seeing, like prayerful contemplation, presupposes solitude: 'with a companion the eye and the ear

are for the most part shut and instress cannot come' (Hopkins 2015: 544). Except for the late, 'dark' poems of his last years in Dublin, marked by personal despondency (though not religious doubt), Hopkins' sonnets fuse sacramental and contemplative elements, with opening octet typically tracing the formal distinctiveness and sensory abundance of a visual experience in quasi-Eucharistic terms, followed by theological reflections in the concluding sestet.

Of an entirely different cast, though just as deeply informed by Christian doctrine, particularly on guilt and redemption, is the oeuvre of Fyodor M. Dostoevsky (1821–1881). A decisive factor in the author's conversion from a secular radical, to a writer committed to probing the dramatic and interpersonal structure of the moral life, was his mock execution, followed by imprisonment and exile in Siberia from 1849–1859. Upon his return to St Petersburg, Dostoevsky decisively breaks with the Western European ideology of liberal reform, represented by intellectuals such as Belinsky, Herzen, and Turgenev, and, more emphatically yet, with their radicalized successors, including Chernyshevsky and Strakhov. Above all, Dostoevsky rejects the nihilists' crude secularism and their commitment to violent action, a stance abandoned by some of his protagonists once they grasp Christianity's moral economy of contrition, conversion, just suffering, and the hope for (though not certainty of) *apokatastasis* – that is, the restoration of all sinful beings to God. Exemplary in this regard is the evolution of the character of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866), the disaffected nihilist who, ostensibly in pursuit of social justice, has robbed and murdered his landlady and her half-sister. His consequent suffering is intricately entwined with an agonizing process of self-analysis that leads him to realize that his murderous intention cannot be explained by his ostensive political commitments. Rather, it stems from a fundamentally disordered will that cannot be causally reduced to material depravation and ideological conflict. Having agonized over whether to confess his crime, he eventually does so after experiencing and learning to accept the love and forgiveness of Sonya, a former prostitute, who will accompany him into Siberian exile where his confession, conversion, and redemptive humanization as *imago Dei* (in the image of God) will be completed.

While the plot structure of Dostoevsky's novels revolves around instances of conversion (not all of them successful), many key episodes are modelled on the sacrament of confession, often in private but sometimes also in scandalous, public form. In marked contrast to the solitary experience and contemplative silence at the heart of Hopkins' lyric oeuvre, Dostoevsky's novels stage Christianity's truth claims and their potentially transformative impact in the form of dialogue. Yet unlike the rational exchange of settled and reflected 'views', dialogue here unfolds in entirely unscripted ways, propelled by impulsive utterances, spasmodic gestures, and half-formed thoughts that 'suddenly' (*vdrug*; a word found everywhere in Dostoevsky's novels) erupt from the characters' subconscious. Thus, in *The Idiot* (1869), we find Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky's

attempt ‘to portray a perfectly good man’ and evidently modelled on Christ, unexpectedly drawn into an exchange with his adversary Rogozhin on the subject of Hans Holbein’s *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* (c.1522). To the Prince’s alarmed conjecture that ‘a man could even lose his faith from that painting!’, Rogozhin replies with a casual affirmative: ‘Lose it he does’ (Dostoevsky 2002: 218). Shortly afterwards, having listened to the Prince’s recollection of minor everyday episodes that confirmed for him the presence of faith, love, and charity in the world, Rogozhin is briefly tempted to accept, but then refuses, the Prince’s conciliatory embrace, thereby revealing the full extent of his spiritual destitution both to the reader and, crucially, to himself. Later in the novel, the moribund anarchist Ippolit inexplicably decides to read out to a startled social gathering a complex and agonizing personal narrative, his ‘Necessary Explanation’ (2002: 387–415) for the suicide attempt that is to follow. Proceeding from recollections of sin and dreams of affliction to insisting on the impossibility of forgiveness and redemption, Ippolit’s ‘explanation’ succumbs to contradictions of its own making. Above all, he becomes painfully aware of the illicit pleasure that he derives from contemplating his sinfulness (*delectatio morosa*):

> Know that there is a limit to disgrace in the consciousness of one’s own nonentity and weakness, beyond which man cannot go and at which he begins to take a tremendous pleasure in the disgrace itself. […] Well, of course, humility is a tremendous force in this sense, I admit that – though not in the sense in which religion takes humility for a force. (Dostoevsky 2002: 413)

As Ippolit realizes, the nihilist’s life is one of inward despair and, as such, parasitically feeds off the redemptive vision of love that he continually disavows: ‘in spite of all my desire, […] I could never imagine to myself that there is no future life and no providence’, however ‘impossible to understand it’ (2002: 413–414). It is this paradox of a Christian life and redemptive vision, all but unattainable and yet irresistible, and of an omniscient and omnipotent Creator-Redeemer seemingly impervious to humanity’s boundless affliction, which fuels accounts such as Ippolit’s. More scandalously yet, the same dynamic is at work in Stavrogin’s confession in *Demons* (1871–1872), in a chapter rejected by Dostoevsky’s publisher Katkov and not published until 1922 (Frank 2010: 623). Entitled ‘At Tikhon’s’, it has Stavrogin confess to the monk Tikhon how he had raped a twelve-year old girl. Here and throughout Dostoevsky’s fiction, dialogue is the formal device by which unpremeditated exchange can suddenly veer off into the realm of theological speculation and agonized confession (see Williams 2008; Friesen 2016; Contino 2020). Another chapter in *Demons*, entitled ‘Night’, features a long exchange between the former radical Shatov, who has since converted to Orthodox Christianity, and the anarchist Stavrogin, who later will murder Shatov. Here Dostoevsky posits a Slavophil vision of a Russia that not only rejects atheism (‘an atheist cannot be Russian, an atheist immediately ceases to be Russian’) but also rejects Roman Catholicism’s compatibilist view between the two kingdoms: ‘having announced to the whole world that Christ cannot stand on earth without

an earthly kingdom, Catholicism thereby proclaimed the Antichrist, thereby ruining the whole Western world' (Dostoevsky 1995: 249).

In his last and arguably greatest work, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), Dostoevsky triangulates the competing attitudes to life in the figures of Dimitry the hedonist, Ivan the nihilist, and Alyosha the mystic. Two chapters in Book 5, entitled 'Rebellion' and 'The Grand Inquisitor', have long been recognized for their profound exploration of the antinomy between a world awash in violence and human affliction and its casual disregard for Christ and his teachings. Ivan Karamazov's dream encounter with the devil in Book 11 (famously reimagined in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* [1947]) imagines the protagonist's confrontation with evil with an intensity perhaps not seen since Dante's *Inferno*. Admittedly, its spiritual fervour and psychological acuity notwithstanding, what Joseph Frank (2010: 559) calls 'Dostoevsky's fanatical belief in the moral elevation of the Russian spirit' at times marred his Russian Slavophil and nationalist outlook, further compromised by a strong undercurrent of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism that is most prominently on display in his *Writer's Diary* (1873–1881) and in his correspondence after 1870. Still, what sets Dostoevsky apart from virtually all other writers of his century is his ability to uncover a metaphysical realism beneath the 'horizontal' logic of realist fiction. In this he differs from all his contemporaries who, as his friend Vladimir Soloviev was to put it, 'cannot […] serve pure beauty' because its practitioners

> only search for content. […] Alien to the previous religious content of art, they turn wholeheartedly toward current reality, […] attempt[ing] to copy phenomena of this reality slavishly; and […] just as slavishly to serve the topic of the day. (Soloviev 2003: 2–3)

Contrary to the realist novel's 'unsuccessful pursuit of only apparently real details, the actual reality of the whole is lost', Dostoevsky had grasped that 'it is an act of faith not to be seduced by the visible dominion of evil […] and that the Russian nation, in spite of its visible bestial image, carries another image in the depths of its soul – the image of Christ' (Soloviev 2003: 2–3, 14).

5 Concluding reflection

The developments sketched in this article suggest a gradual, and after 1850 sharply accelerating, parting of ways between literature and theology. Despite (or perhaps because of) a growing dispersal of Christianity into numerous denominations, eighteenth-century literature reflects a robust culture of faith practice, biblical exegesis, and theological inquiry, even as the scope of the latter begins to contract and questions of grace and eschatology, so prominent throughout the seventeenth century, are notably elided. In the wake of the Romantic era, this symbiotic relationship appears to have been dissolved, as a result of which the gap between 'religious' and 'secular' writing becomes

more palpable. A century after this split has emerged, T. S. Eliot in a 1935 essay succinctly describes the dilemma of conceiving literature either as an unequivocally secular enterprise or, alternatively, as 'religious' in a narrowly doctrinal and confessional sense. The former scenario, he contends, has resulted in a 'Secularism that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life'. Conversely, Eliot argues, a literature exclusively preoccupied with religious orthodoxy in an ambient culture of religious doubt and disbelief is liable to aestheticize religion in ways that ultimately works against Christianity itself, perhaps nowhere more so than where the Bible (typically the KJV) is extolled as 'the noblest monument of English prose'. In Eliot's blunt appraisal, 'those who talk of the Bible as a "monument of English prose" are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity'. Likewise, a literature overtly committed to restating central Christian themes in poetic form will, at best, constitute a 'minor poetry […] the product of a special religious awareness, which may exist without the general awareness which we expect of the major poet' (Eliot 2021: 219–220 [vol. 5]). The poetry of John Keble surely fits that description, as perhaps also the oeuvre of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and possibly Christina Rossetti, too.

While literature after 1830 no longer predominately models itself on biblical forms (e.g. odes, hymns) or incorporates central motifs of the Christian faith and biblical narrative, a small but influential handful of writers (see section 4.4) chose to probe central aspects of Christianity (creation, beauty, original sin, grace, ecclesiology, eschatology) with a degree of formal freedom and theological acumen perhaps not seen since Langland and Milton, and arguably absent in most of their eighteenth-century forbears, except for Blake. It is this opening, inadvertently created by the mid-nineteenth century divide between secular and religious literature, that Hopkins and Dostoevsky above all explore in in startlingly original and creative fashion. In modelling an expansive and constructive relation between poetry, poetics, and theological narrative, their oeuvre not only exercises enormous influence on twentieth-century writers such as Paul Claudel, T. S. Eliot, George Bernanos, Simone Weil, Graham Greene, Czesław Miłosz, and Geoffrey Hill. It also revives the project of a theological aesthetics first outlined long ago in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor (Balthasar 2003; Thiessen 2005; Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2011) and now revived and expanded in the writings of Jacques Maritain, Hans Urs von Balthasar, David Bentley Hart, John Milbank, and Catherine Pickstock, to name but a few.

Attributions

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