

*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*. By Pericles Lewis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 236 pp. £50.00 (hbk).

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Pericles Lewis begins his exploration of religious experience and the modernist novel by invoking two poets, Philip Larkin and Matthew Arnold. He argues that the predictions of these two poets about the erosion of faith bracket the period of literary modernism and that novelists as well as poets ‘sought to provide replacements for religion in the wake of a God whose announced withdrawal from this world never seemed to be quite complete’ (1). The subject of Lewis’s study is the engagement of the major modernist novelists Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf with religious experience. As Lewis points out, poets are more often associated religion, but novelists also share the concern with religious views and experience and these elements of their work have been largely overlooked by previous studies of the modernist novel (6). Thus *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* provides a welcome exploration into the role of religious experience in the work of these five novelists in the context of early twentieth century philosophical engagements with religious experience exemplified by the work of William James, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud and Max Weber. In his thoughtful and nuanced readings of these novelists and thinkers, Lewis provides ample evidence for his thesis that despite the rise of secularism, modernists ‘sought to offer a new understanding of the sacred in their own texts, and in so doing they created a modern form of sacred text, charged with the meaning and power that seemed to them to have evacuated the church buildings’ (19).

A preoccupation with the dead marks the work of all five of his authors and also forms a thread through the diverse chapters of *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (this extends beyond human death, as Lewis describes *Ulysses* as ‘God-haunted’) (179). It supports Lewis’s thesis that modernists’ look for ways other than organised religion to contain and carry the significant events of life, which they consider sacred but unmoored from the supernatural (21). However, Lewis does not explain precisely why he, or his authors, privilege death over sex and birth (which Lewis also considers but grants much less space). It remains for future researches to explore these themes more thoroughly.

Alongside a preoccupation with the remembrance and forgetting of the dead, two other themes draw together the writers under discussion: a concern with establishing (an often tenuous) communion or ‘shared fictions [that] create their own communities of belief and desire’ (James and Proust), and an emphasis on the ‘ritualized form of daily life’ (Kafka and Woolf) (80, 141). Lewis argues that Woolf’s aim ‘to effect a re-enchantment of the world’ is most clearly seen in her preoccupation with ‘moments of being’, sublime ‘almost sacred’ moments that emerge from everyday, routine experience and transform it (144-45). For Woolf, ‘the sublime relates not so much to grand or extraordinary things as to modest, everyday objects, things that have never been noticed but that turn out to open up unexpected worlds’ (160). In a rare engagement with gender and feminist concerns, Lewis argues that Woolf’s is a ‘feminist, modernist sublime [that] has for its archetype not a solitary man on a mountain pass, but a woman at a party’. Lewis’s contribution to the understanding of the feminist sublime emphasises the significance of the interpersonal alongside the tensions and diversity inherent in modernity: ‘it is a type of sacrament appropriate for a world in which no single measure of the sacred obtains, and in which community must result from the always temporary, ironic, and visionary merging of competing value systems’ (160).

Theologians may wish for further discussion of such categories as hermeneutics and typology. For instance, in his chapter on Joyce, Lewis presents a skilful reading of *Ulysses* as an engagement with typology, following Dante, which, unlike the *Divine Comedy*, deploys ‘a variety of typological patterns, all potentially in conflict with one another, but all brought together by the authorial imagination’ which thus leads to the challenge of how to interpret the many meanings and mythical models within the text (181). However, in his discussion of the logic of typology itself, Lewis does not consider how Joyce engages (if, indeed, he does) with the problematic inheritance that comes from Dante’s medieval Catholicism. Joyce is certainly doing something different than Dante, this much Lewis effectively explores, but he may not have entirely escaped the anti-Jewish tendencies of typological works such as the *Divine Comedy*, that interpret the Hebrew Bible in light of the New Testament.

Although Lewis alludes to the occult, spiritualism and totemism, for the most part he situates his readings in the context of mainstream Christianity and Judaism. Likewise, he deliberately chooses

canonical authors that are representative of modernist formal experimentation. This opens the door to further research which would consider modernist religion in terms of more marginal authors and forms of religiosity. However, in exploring the terrain of canonical writers' literary engagements with religious experience, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* is an invaluable resource for all those interested in literature and religion. Literary scholars and theologians will find much of value in Lewis's readings of James, Proust, Kafka, Woolf and Joyce, particularly in the elegant connections drawn between various representations of religious experience and the modernists' interventions in the form of the novel itself.