

Introduction

A LITERARY TRINITY

The Novel, the Sacred, and the Nation

But beyond it seemed as though there were a cloud wherein were twinkling stars; faces appeared in the depths of its folds—Eshmoun with the Kabiri, some of the monsters they had already seen, the sacred beasts of the Babylonians, and others with which they were not acquainted. It passed beneath the idol's face like a mantle, and spread fully out was drawn up on the wall to which it was fastened by the corners, appearing at once bluish as the night, yellow as the dawn, purple as the sun, multitudinous, diaphanous, sparkling light. It was the mantle of the goddess, the holy zaimph which might not be seen.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, *SALAMMO*

The gods are fugitive guests of literature.

ROBERTO CALASSO, *LITERATURE AND THE GODS*

It would seem paradoxical at first to examine the contacts between religion and the genre of the novel, given the markedly secular nature of prose fiction in Western culture. Although poetry and the theater have been harmoniously linked to religion from their respective origins, the same is not true of the novel, a circumstance which led to Georg Lukács's

famous dictum: “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). Despite the existence of doctrinal and allegorical narratives such as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), or moralizing picaresque novels such as Mateo Alemán’s *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1604) in Spain, or hagiographies or saints’ lives (which are a separate genre in themselves), there are properly no novels or short stories written *a lo divino* (that is, transferred from a secular to a sacred context) as was easily done with the verses of Garcilaso de la Vega and many other lyric poets of the Renaissance. Concerned more with the uncertainties and errors of “the kingdom of this world” than with the certainty of an otherworldly life, the novel, when dealing with religious topics—ever since the episodes of the avaricious cleric in *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1545) and of the priest who burned novels of chivalry in the *Quijote* (1605)—has done so from the critical standpoint of modernity, favoring that which can be seen and known, counted and measured, and contrasting the spheres of the ideal and the real, the sacred and the profane.

However, in spite of its decidedly secular origins, as the novel genre has matured it has also been endowed with elements that bring it closer to the sacred. Perhaps even from its earliest beginnings there is something sacred present in the novel: suffice it to recall the prodigious “found manuscripts” written by wizards that are the literal as well as figurative pretexts of the romances of chivalry, or in general that “partial magic” Borges found in the *Quijote* in one of his most famous essays. “Deep inside, Cervantes loved the supernatural,” Borges notes, and after commenting on the redoubling of a text within itself found in Cervantes and other authors, he concludes, citing Carlyle, that “Universal History is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they too are written” (*Obras completas II* 45, 47). Borges further implies that the *Quijote* may also be considered a sacred book, since like these, it confuses and mixes up “the objective and the subjective, the world of the reader and the world of the book” (45).¹

Borges’s observation brings us closer to what is probably one of the most influential contemporary definitions of religion, that offered by sociologist of religion Peter L. Berger: “Religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building. Religion implies the farthest reach of man’s self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings. Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the

entire universe as being humanly significant” (27–28). In harmony with the most commonly accepted etymology of the word “religion” (from the Latin *religare*: to tie up, to bind, to reunite), according to which religion is “that which binds believers to God” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*), both Borges and Berger coincide in understanding religion as an activity that seeks to connect the scattered phenomena of reality by endowing them with a unifying meaning.

To better understand how one can conceive that novels may aspire to a near-religious sacredness, we should review some of the basic traits historians of religion have identified in sacred books or scriptures. All specialists agree on the difficulty in defining the category of sacred texts. In large measure this is due to the “relational” character of these writings, as William A. Graham explains:

From the historian’s perspective, the sacrality or holiness of a book is not an *a priori* attribute but one that is realized historically in the life of communities who respond to it as something sacred or holy. A text becomes “scripture” in living, subjective relationship to persons and to historical tradition. No text, written, oral, or both, is sacred or authoritative in isolation from a community. A text is only “scripture” insofar as a group of persons perceives it to be sacred or holy, powerful and meaningful, possessed of an exalted authority, and in some fashion transcendent of, and hence distinct from, other speech and writing. That which is scripture for one group may be a meaningless, nonsensical, or even perversely false text for another. (8195)

Thus, there is always something somewhat arbitrary in the sacredness or sanctity of certain texts, since this depends on the judgment of their readers. Sacred texts, in this sense, resemble the idea of the “classic” text. In ancient Greece, in fact, texts regarded as classics due to their artistic perfection, such as the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*, achieved near-sacred status, and the same occurred even more explicitly to India’s Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.² There are no clear-cut generic nor formal traits to delimit what constitutes sacred texts: they may be in prose or in verse, narrative or reflective exposition; they may be ritual books, legal codes, myths and legends, historical accounts, divine revelations, apocalyptic visions, mystic poetry, sayings and proverbs of teachers and prophets, hymns and prayers to deities (Graham 8194).

Nevertheless, scholars of religion have noted a series of common char-

acteristics which, from the standpoint of the readers' experience, are attributed to all of the various sacred texts of humanity; these are *power*, *authority*, *unicity*, *inspiration*, and *eternity* or *antiquity*. The notion of the *power* of sacred texts is linked to ancient beliefs about the magical virtues of language. In religious discourse, words not only mean, they act. For believers, sacred words are vehicles of salvation that have the power to transform whoever hears or reads them (Graham 8200). For other specialists, this concept of language as action is also linked to the spoken origins of practically all of humanity's sacred scriptures; Miriam Levering posits that sacred scriptures are usually the first written expressions to appear when cultures move from orality to literacy ("Introduction: Rethinking Scripture" 14). In its most extreme expression, belief in the power of holy books becomes bibliolatry or bibliomancy, practices in which sacred texts become objects of devotion or a locus of supernatural power to the point of making superstitious or magical use of sacred writing. As Graham notes, "The answer to a problem or guidance for any occasion is often sought through scripture divination. Thus turning to sometimes random, sometimes specific pages of scripture in times of adversity, uncertainty, bereavement, or the like is a time-honored but little-documented use of scripture in Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and many other traditions. . . . Numerology and alphabet mysticism connected with a scriptural text are as prominent in such traditions as the Qabbalists and the Sufis and well known in virtually every religious tradition" (8200).

For its part, the *authority* of sacred texts is evidenced by the fact that these are also frequently regarded as the foundation of the legal structures of society. Such is the role of the Torah in Judaism, and the close links of shariah law to the Qur'an in the Islamic tradition are well known (Graham 8201). A further indication of the authority granted to these texts is the special way in which they are handled when in use, from the ark in which the Torah is enshrined in synagogues to the custom of standing when reading the Gospel in Christian churches.

Unicity in sacred texts refers to the common tendency among the various religions to regard sacred books as coherent and consistent totalities, even when, historically, they may have been groups of texts of diverse origins. Once the community of believers establishes its *canon* (a term which in Christian tradition refers to texts that have the status of divine revelation), it generally insists on the unitary nature of its origin and message.

Lastly, all sacred texts claim a superhuman or primordial origin for

their message, claiming to be either products of divine *inspiration* of prophets or seers (as in the Hebrew tradition) or a direct revelation of the deity, or of transcendence, to a chosen individual, as happens in Islam, Manichaeism, and even in Buddhism, the only great world religion that is doctrinally atheistic (Thrower 39). The words of sacred writings are also, by extension, regarded as *eternal* or of great *antiquity*: Hinduism speaks of an eternal Veda; Islamic doctrine holds that the Qur'an is itself one of the eternal attributes of God, and Buddhism affirms the eternity of the dharma, the foundations of the existence of individuals and of the cosmos (Graham 8202).

It may be argued however, that certain works in the novelistic genre share some of the same qualities attributed to sacred scriptures. The salvific power of words is an idea that has been present in certain types of novels since the beginnings of the genre. Examples of the eighteenth-century sentimental novels in England, France, and Germany come to mind: Richardson's *Pamela* (1741), Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–1796), among others, as well as their popular nineteenth-century descendants such as Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which mobilize what Jane Tompkins called "sentimental power"—the intention to change society by educating and modifying the feelings of their readers (Tompkins 81).

Claims of authority similar to those of the Old Testament books in the Bible have been made for some nineteenth-century historical novels based on their representation of key episodes of national history, in the mold of the novels of Sir Walter Scott. "It is said that Scott is neglected by modern readers," said Chesterton in an essay vindicating the Scottish novelist, "if so, the matter could be more appropriately described by saying that modern readers are neglected by Providence" (*Twelve Types* 180). Scott's characters, argues Chesterton, "have that air of immortality which belongs to those of Dumas and Dickens. . . . Scott, in his heart of hearts, probably would have liked to write an endless story without either beginning or close" (182). Decades later, nuancing his previous strict distinction between epic and the novel in *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács underscores "the purely epic character of Scott's novels" which "is very closely linked with the nature of Scott's historical subject-matter" (*The Historical Novel* 35). These novels' imaginative re-creation of the historical origins of a nation, often done with a clearly foundational intention, has frequently given them great weight in their societies. As Doris Sommer has argued in *Foundational Fictions: The National*

Romances of Latin America, “The local romances did more than entertain readers with compensations for spotty national history. They developed a narrative formula for resolving continuing conflicts, a postepic conciliatory genre that consolidated survivors by recognizing former enemies as allies” (12). In some cases, the artistic quality of these novels, along with their evocation of national origins and their foundational intention, has given them the status of “classics” with which they are regarded by educational and cultural institutions.

As for the criterion of unicity, it is well to remember that a common trait of novels during the great flowering of the genre in the nineteenth century is their totalizing impulse, as can be seen in multinovel series such as Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine*, Galdós’s *Episodios Nacionales*, and the *romans-fleuve* of Zola. Sometimes even a single novel—be it *I promessi sposi* (1825–1827) by Manzoni or *War and Peace* (1825–1869) by Tolstoy—aspires to offer an all-encompassing vision of an entire society during a specific epoch. Totalization in the nineteenth-century novel is also presided over, as is well known, by an authorial voice that, like a deity, seems to see and know everything and controls all aspects of the narrative.

Furthermore, although divine inspiration has never been claimed seriously by any work in the novelistic tradition, one does find, particularly in totalizing narratives, the use of a prophetic tone and an implicit promise that the novel’s readers will be able to achieve superior knowledge about reality. In turn, the sense of “antiquity” present even in contemporary novels may be found in the common insistence throughout the Western novelistic tradition that novels portray and explore basic aspects of the human condition, invariable character traits, or existential questions that are valid for all individuals in all epochs.

A concept allied to the transcendent or divinely inspired nature of sacred texts is that of the faith or belief that emanates from, surrounds, and sustains them. Curiously, most studies about sacred texts do not stop to explain how it is that these texts arouse such veneration. Instead, they presuppose that belief precedes or coexists with the appearance of sacred writings and that this belief is in turn a product of the shared historical experiences of a community. However, as we have seen, it is common to attribute to sacred words a transformative power that can produce “salvation” or “illumination.” Can a book (be it holy or not) produce faith in its readers? Or does one need already to have some degree of faith in order to read a book? The classic example of reading as conversion in Western lit-

erature, the *tolle, lege* episode in chapter XII of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, is also one of the few of its kind, and even this one suggests that reading the Bible (in this case, in fact, a kind of bibliomancy) was for Saint Augustine the culmination of a gradual process of acquiring religious faith.

Writing about the experience of arriving to faith, Jaroslav Pelikan points out

in the sacred literatures of religious faith, faith-as-experience has often been described in highly individualistic terms: How the poet or prophet has come to know the holy in personal experience has dominated how he or she has described that experience for others, so that they in turn, one at a time, might also come to share in such an experience and duplicate it for themselves. . . . Except for passing moments of intense mystical rapture, however, such individualism has been shown to be illusory. . . . When examined in its total context, moreover, it becomes apparent that the individualized experience of faith has repeatedly taken place during or after corporate worship: The setting of the private vision has often been the temple itself; or when the vision has come in the solitude of the desert or in the privacy of the soul, it has come as a consequence of participation in the ritual of the temple or as a response to instruction in the lore of the community's tradition. (2597)

Clearly, if faith is motivated by reading, it does not arise in a vacuum but in the context of social relations that have helped to produce it. The notion of "faith" has, of course, many nuances that go beyond Saint Paul's classic definition as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Pelikan distinguishes between faith as "fidelity," as "obedience," as "experience," as "creed," and as "confidence." This last instance is perhaps the most easily transferable to the world of books and reading. In a religious context, faith as confidence is based on the presupposition that there is a pattern of divine order that has guided events in the past and will continue to guide them into the future, although its motives may be inscrutable (Pelikan 2956). Analogously, the novel frequently evokes this providential scheme, the notion that nothing in the text happens by chance.³

Returning to Borges's observations in "Magias parciales del *Quijote*," we may note that by erasing in various ways the borders between "the world of the reader and the world of the book," both novels and sacred texts display

their power to win the trust of their readers and not merely to suspend their disbelief (as in the well-known notion of “suspension of disbelief” posited by New Criticism in the mid-twentieth century).⁴ In their highest artistic expression, novels seem able to produce in their readers sensations akin to those provoked by texts that the various human societies consider “sacred”: the promise of a revelation, the hope that by the end of the reading the process will have been worthwhile. Remembering the Pauline definition, it would seem that every novel that manages to capture and sustain the attention of its readers has also managed to produce in them a certain degree of faith as confidence, a “conviction of things not seen.” Readers can be drawn to a novel either by boredom or by curiosity, and upon beginning to read they might feel delight or resistance, astonishment or skepticism, attraction or repugnance toward what is being narrated, but at some point they decide whether to stop reading or to continue doing so. When this last happens, it is because a sufficient degree of faith has been established to sustain the reading, and in the masterworks of the novel genre this faith extends not only throughout the text but even beyond it, toward its context, its production, and its implications.

As with sacred texts, it is on the basis of this faith, this confidence, that novel and reader tend to “incorporate” each other,⁵ although from the readers’ perspective it is more common to feel that it is the novel that has “captured” them, has made them its own. Julio Cortázar’s celebrated short story “Continuidad de los parques” (1956) gives a memorable account of this phenomenon. In the story, the reader of a novel about adulterous lovers turns into the husband who is to be murdered by his rival: “From the blood galloping in his ears the woman’s words reached him: first a blue living room, then a corridor, a carpeted stairway. Upstairs, two doors. No one in the first room, no one in the second. The door to the drawing room and then knife in hand, the light of the tall windows, the high back of the green velvet easy chair, the head of the man in the chair reading a novel” (Cortázar II).

Cortázar’s text also underlines another resemblance between the experience of reading a novel and of reading a sacred text: it is a certain diminution—if not a sort of annihilation—of the reader’s consciousness and identity. Trusting in the novel’s text in the act of reading, readers lose their autonomy and even suspend their sense of self. Half-jokingly, Borges asks in “Nueva refutación del tiempo” (1952), “Those who fervently surrender to a line from Shakespeare, aren’t they, literally, Shakespeare?” (141).⁶

Similarly, the sacred book confronts readers with nothing less than the product of an infinitely superior intelligence whose transcendent attributes make readers, in comparison, feel reduced almost to nothingness. In fact, as will be discussed shortly, this sensation of lost or diminished identity is regarded as one of the defining traits of the experience of the sacred or the holy.

It is important to delve deeper into this term—the *sacred*—that forms the basis of my argument. It should be recalled that although the term refers to a very ancient experience, it is itself a relatively recent invention. Its invention is due in large part to German historian of religion Rudolf Otto in his fundamental study *Das Heilige* (1917; *The Idea of the Holy*). Although Otto was not the first to use the adjectives “sacred” or “holy” as nouns (both are meanings of the German word *heilige*), he was the first to use it to refer to the emotional element of religious experience (Oxtoby 4096).

Briefly, Otto proposes that aside from all rational arguments about the idea of God, religious experience has an irrational, emotional component. According to Otto, the encounter with the divine implies confronting absolute otherness (the “wholly other,” 25). In turn, being in the presence of absolute otherness arouses a feeling of deep fear in those who experience it, which culminates in a radical diminution of the self and in a vision of transcendence as the only reality. For Otto, it is not merely for rhetorical emphasis that when pleading for the people of Sodom in the book of Genesis, the prophet Abraham addresses God saying, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27; Otto 9). Evoking the Latin term *numen* (nature spirit), Otto coins the term *numinous* to refer to his more anthropological and amoral view of the sacred or the holy, which departs from the usual equivalence between the holy and the good. Reverting again to Latin, the German scholar asserts that the numinous becomes a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which “has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering” although it can also “be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious” (12–13).

According to Otto, the presence of the sacred produces in those who experience it a chill resembling fear and a feeling of vertigo similar to ecstasy. It should not be surprising, then, that for Otto the religious concept of the sacred is closely related to the aesthetic concept of the sublime (41–42). This notion dates back to Greco-Roman antiquity, particularly to the treatise *Peri hyposos* (On the Sublime, third century AD) attributed to

Longinus. In it, the ancient teacher of rhetoric explains that the sublime “does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself. The startling and amazing is more powerful than the charming and persuasive, if it is indeed true that to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience” (Longinus 4). Otto also echoes the version of the sublime proposed in 1757 by Edmund Burke: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (Burke 58). In fact, Otto argues that the sublime is the privileged way of expressing the sacred in art, and based on the theories of Wilhelm Worringer he states that the verticality of Gothic art is a concrete expression of the sublime.⁷

TOWARD A NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

Thus far I have been discussing how novels share to a greater or lesser degree some of the general traits that characterize sacred scriptures: power, authority, unicity, inspiration, and eternity or antiquity. To these I have added those of faith, reading according to providentialist schemes, and a tendency to diminish or dissolve the reader’s identity. This last phenomenon occurs particularly when the novel, as Borges argues about the *Quijote*, and as Cortázar’s short story “Continuidad de los parques” shows on a smaller scale, mixes together the world of the book and that of the reader.

Nevertheless, it was in poetry—traditionally more permeable to religious discourse—that the first modern experiments to fuse literature and the sacred in deeper and more organic ways took place, seeking to endow poetry with qualities similar to those of religious revelation. The roots of this phenomenon reach back to eighteenth-century France where, as Paul Bénichou argues, the weakening of the church by the powers of the centralizing state created a vacuum that came to be filled by the rationalist and secularist men of letters of the Enlightenment. As Bénichou points out, “In the period lasting from about 1760 until the Revolution, the apologia of the man of letters becomes a veritable glorification whose exalted tone is associated with a general doctrine of emancipation and progress” (*The*

Consecration of the Writer 14). Among the causes for these developments were the greater progress in the material conditions and legal rights of authors, the greater honor and prosperity acquired by authors, their entry as near equals into the upper classes of society, and the growth of a community of lay intellectuals due to the increase in knowledge and technological changes (14).

Infusing the cult of reason with a strong dose of sentimentalism, the French philosophes rejected the Christian notion of original sin and affirmed the essential goodness of human beings. Their views offered an exaltation of humankind and a belief in a benevolent God whose interests by and large coincided with those of humanity. The transition from the Enlightenment to romanticism, Bénichou proposes, effectively endowed men of letters (it was indeed men, since few women were granted a similar distinction) with moral and spiritual authority nearly equivalent to that of priests, although totally independent of religious institutions (*The Consecration of the Writer* 10–133).

In romantic poetry, this led to the well-known notion of the poet as *vates*, seer or prophet, whose verses were capable of giving voice to transcendental truths. M. H. Abrams shows in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1977) to what extent romantic philosophy and poetry, from Schelling and Hegel to Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, depended on the symbolic use of the biblical narrative plot of the fall and redemption of humanity, a great cyclical story that led from humans' separation from God due to original sin in the shadow of the tree of knowledge to their reunion with the divine at the foot of the cross.⁸ This was, of course, an often heterodox religiosity that continued to express, as in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a strong exaltation of the human over the divine. "The Old and New Testaments are the Great Code of Art," said Blake (*The Poetry and Prose* 271), to which Abrams comments, "Like the German authors of *Universalgeschichte*, however, Blake interprets the ancient fable in his own way. His mythical premise, or founding image, is not a transcendent God, but 'The Universal Man' who, as 'the Human Form Divine,' incorporates deity in himself" (257).

Through what Bénichou calls a "poetic ministry" (*The Consecration of the Writer* 262), romantic poetry sought to reconcile the secular and the sacred, art and religion. Nevertheless, this was done primarily by means of the reinterpretation of the Bible and a prophetic posture that often degenerated into mere pose or outright imposture. Unlike the biblical prophets

who, despite their individual identities and idiosyncrasies (from Elijah to Joel), were ultimately vehicles or messengers of divine will who called people to obedience to God, the romantic poets were above all individualists and libertarian, and each of them proposed, so to speak, their own particular “poetic theology.”

It is worth noting that although the romantics generally affirmed the sacredness of poetry, its power to express transcendent truths, none ever seriously attempted to establish a new religion or sect, unlike some heterodox thinkers and mystics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries such as Emmanuel Swedenborg and Joseph Smith. The romantics did produce, however, numerous poems with an epic tone, fragmentary or inconclusive structure, and ambitious intent, from Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–1793), Novalis’s *Hymnen an die Nacht* (1800), and Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* (1814) to Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–1818), Hugo’s *La Légende des siècles* (1855–1876), and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

The “poetic theology” of the romantics would be further refined through the use of irony and the doctrine of poetic analogy (or “correspondences”) by their heirs, the symbolists; chief among them were Baudelaire and Rimbaud in poetry, Flaubert in prose. This process would conclude at the end of the nineteenth century with the rise of the parallel phenomenon of what may be called a “narrative theology.” Before discussing this aspect further, however, it is necessary to turn our attention to developments in the novel.

As I remarked earlier, the paths followed by the novel almost until the twentieth century remained insistently within the realistic confines of the worldly. Even in novels that seemed to veer away from everyday reality, from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1735) to the Gothic and fantastic romances of the romantics (best exemplified by Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* [1816]), these works focus through satire or scientific or philosophical conjecture on critical considerations about “the here and now” and not about spiritual or otherworldly questions. Moreover, through the late eighteenth to most of the nineteenth century, novelists showed little interest in emphasizing possible contacts between their novels and sacred writings, despite the growing prestige and authority of writers in their societies.

It is commonplace to refer to the bourgeois origins of the novel and to its consistent preoccupation with exploring and representing the life and adventures of the new social class that had come to dominate Western society. In his classic essay on poetry and poetics *El arco y la lira* (1956), Mexican Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz underscores the novel’s links to “the lay

spirit” of modernity, which, in Paz’s view, is built upon the “emptiness of conscience,” the dismantling of religiosity by the critical impetus of “the modern revolution” (221). Commenting on the desacralization of nature by modernity, Paz observes that today, “Man’s relations to nature and to his fellow man are not essentially different from those he has with his automobile, his telephone, or his typewriter. In the end, a gross credulity—as witnessed in political mythology—is the other face of the positivist spirit. Nobody has faith, but everyone has illusions. However, illusions evaporate and then there is nothing left but vacuum: nihilism and platitudes. The history of the lay or bourgeois spirit could well be titled, as in Balzac’s novellistic series, *Lost Illusions*” (222).

Paz’s remarks serve as reminders of the fact that throughout the nineteenth century the novel was founded largely on unbelief and disillusionment, almost as the antithesis of the romantics’ ambitious theologico-poetic project. Examining the echoes of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) in Balzac’s *Les Illusions perdues* (1837–1843), Pericles Lewis observes, “The title, ‘*Illusions perdues*,’ echoes that of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (in French ‘*Paradis perdu*’). The disillusionment plot is a secularized form of the story of the Fall. In the fallen world, the possibilities are to try to be like God . . . or to accept one’s place in the world abandoned by God” (*Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* 20). The seemingly exceptional cases of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, both of whom were devoutly religious, proves the rule: both Russian novelists’ works deeply explore the extremes of skepticism and dogmatism and the search for good in a world dominated by evil. Pierre Bezukhov’s wavering between relativism and all-encompassing philosophical systems in *War and Peace* and the Quixotic misadventures of Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot* (1869) tend to confirm the unredeemed condition of the world and the difficulty of living in the world while trying to follow the moral teachings of religion.

A glance at the panorama of the Latin American novel—which, after its fragile beginnings in the colonial period,⁹ develops strongly in the nineteenth century—shows patterns similar to those of the European novel regarding the presence of religious discourse, although in certain aspects the Latin American novel could even be said to anticipate that of Europe. From its origins, the Latin American novel views institutional religion—at the time, exclusively the Catholic Church—with attitudes ranging from respectful distance to open antipathy. The first attitude is evident in the Mexican José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi’s picaresque novel *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816), in which priests are generally pictured in a positive light

as well-educated individuals endowed with common sense. For example, when Periquillo visits the hacienda of his friend Januario and begins to display his dubious knowledge about comets before the dinner guests like a Cantinflas *avant la lettre*, it is a priest who contradicts and corrects him with an explanation that is scientifically accurate for its time. The priest then recommends Periquillo certain readings about comets, leaving him “charmed by his honest demeanor” (Fernández de Lizardi 49). Similarly, when Periquillo later tries to pass himself off as a doctor in the town of Tula, it is the prudent priest who sees through his disguise (235–47). It should be noted, however, that one of the “bad influences” during Periquillo’s youth was the dissolute Martín Pelayo, a student of theology (80–83). Nevertheless, although Fernández de Lizardi avoids confronting the church directly, his novel displays a rationalist-style moralization that turns the notion of sin diffuse and problematical by pointing out the difficulty in telling who is an *hombre de bien* (an honest man) in a society dominated by injustice, lies, and simulation.¹⁰ As Periquillo warns his own children toward the novels’ ending,

What I want you to get from this story is to realize how vulnerable we are to being tricked by any sly picaroon who makes us believe ourselves giants of nobility, talent and wealth. We fall for his persuasion—what they call *labia* [winning eloquence]—, he bilks us if he can, tricking us always, and we only realize we have been had when it is too late to stop it. In any case, my sons, you must study man, observe him, penetrate into his soul; watch the way he operates, disregarding the exteriors of dress, titles, and income, and as soon as you find one who always speaks truthfully and doesn’t stick to his own advantage like iron to a magnet, trust him, and say: this is an honest man [*hombre de bien*], this one will not trick me, nor will I receive harm from him. But in order to find this man, you will have to ask Diogenes for his lantern. (369)

The repeated discourse about simulation and dissimulation in *El Periquillo Sarniento* seems to be linked to the baroque topic of disillusionment. However, baroque disillusionment was intended to lead to a mistrust of worldly reality and a search for the divine: “*Acudamos a lo eterno*” (Let us seek eternity) is the lesson drawn by Prince Segismundo in his own disillusionment in the third act of Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueño* (1633). Instead, in Fernández de Lizardi’s novel, already at the dawn of the nineteenth cen-

tury, disillusionment is associated with a radical skepticism that is less a baroque residue than an anticipation of the theme of bourgeois disillusionment that would arise in the European novel not long after.

The Latin American historical novels in the style of Sir Walter Scott, which began to appear around the 1830s, display a more openly critical attitude toward the church, viewing it as part of the colonial heritage the new nations were seeking to leave behind. From the “relatively neutral posture” (103) toward Spaniards and Indians Benito Varela Jácome finds in the Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Guatimozín* (1846), there arises an entire subgenre of the Latin American historical novel devoted to denouncing religious repression under the Spanish regime and inspired by the Inquisition archives that began to be recovered and investigated after the region’s independence.¹¹ Following the pattern set by Scott’s “historical romances” as well as by popular serial novels such as Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–1843), novels such as *La novia del hereje o La Inquisición en Lima* (1846) by the Argentine Vicente Fidel López, *El Inquisidor Mayor. Historia de unos amores* (1852) by the Chilean Manuel Bilbao, *La hija del hereje* (1848–1850) by the Mexican Justo Sierra O’Reilly, and *Monja y casada, virgen y mártir* (1868) by another Mexican author, Vicente Riva Palacio, chastised not only the church and the Spanish colonial regime but also the conservative parties or factions in their respective countries.

Antonio Benítez Rojo notes that the liberal program of the Argentine “Asociación de Mayo” founded by Esteban Echeverría sought to reconcile the divisions between Federalists and Unitarians in Argentina through the evocation of the heroic events of the independence period and the anti-Spanish ideology of the “Revolución de Mayo” (447–48). Following Echeverría’s ideas, *La novia del hereje* offers a liberal romantic interpretation of Spanish history in which the Inquisition, the church, and the Spanish monarchy combine to jointly exploit the New World colonies:

Royal despotism, and the perseverance with which the disciples of Torquemada persecuted even the least spark of freedom in the sciences and the intellect, ended up placing at the feet of the authorities, debased, the spirit of vigorous aristocracy with which Spanish nobility had arisen at the dawn of modern history. The middle class, so well-prepared for industry and politics by their communal traditions, had been swept away along with their knowledge and their factories. A verdant and advanced agriculture covered the lands that had belonged to the Arabs; but in that blooming vegetation

the friars thought they could smell the stench of treason and heresy, and they made the better part of the Spaniards flee in their millions from their fatherland for the crime of not thinking in the same way as their oppressors. . . . An army of fanatical and cruel friars took the Christian cross in their hands and, like a banner of blood turned it into the symbol of war and conquest. (López 6–7)

Similar expressions are made by Bilbao in *El Inquisidor Mayor* when he describes the oppressive and dull environment of Lima in the 1740s:

A wealthy and fanatical city, [Lima] showed its character in the immense wall-ed buildings that occupied its principal neighborhoods, within which were the convents of nuns and friars, with their haughty towers and churches. . . .

Persecutions were then blessed in the name of fanaticism and the fires of the Inquisition sanctioned or justified the actions of the corruptors who became wealthy in the name of their faith. The *Holy Inquisition* policed the intentions, the amorous relationships, the political aspirations and the beliefs of all. It was then at its peak, persecuting with its absolutist order all useful spontaneity and doing everything it could to foster ignorance. There had never before been so much superstition in America, nor so much corruption. (22, 25; italics in the original)

Even in other better-known nineteenth-century Latin American novels that do not follow closely Sir Walter Scott's model, an anticlerical attitude similar to López's or Bilbao's is found. Such is the case of *Amalia* (1855) by the Argentine José Mármol, a canonical work that was originally published as a serial novel attacking the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Mármol denounces the close links between the Rosas regime and the Catholic Church through the gruesome figure of the priest Gaete, who always carries a knife under his cassock and whom the novel's hero, Daniel Bello, insults vehemently:

You unworthy priest, filthy Federalist, despicable man! I should be stepping on you right now like a poisonous reptile to free our country from people like you, but spilling your blood fills me with repugnance because it seems to me that your stench would infect me. I see you're trembling, you wretch, while tomorrow you'll raise your demon's head to look among all the others

for the one you can't see right now and who is yet strong enough, because he makes you quake: you who climb up to the chair of the Holy Spirit with your dagger in hand, and show it to the people to urge them to exterminate the Unitarians, whose dirt beneath their shoes is purer and cleaner than your conscience. (270–71)

The widespread anticlericalism present in the novels of Latin American romanticism continued unabated in the subsequent novels by realist and naturalist authors, largely because it was part of the reality of political and social life in the continent: In all the new Latin American nations—including Mexico, despite its liberal constitution of 1857—the Catholic Church continued to have enormous importance in daily life, and in not a few countries priests and church authorities were still seen as allies of the powerful. In Peru, for example, the “Indian’s Trinity” embodied by the priest, the governor, and the judge, exposed by José Torres Lara in his 1855 romantic novel of the same title, was still being denounced thirty years later in the naturalist novel *Aves sin nido* (1889) by Clorinda Matto de Turner.

Nonetheless, certain Latin American naturalist novels begin to display changes in their representation of religion. In *Sin rumbo* (1885) by the Argentine Eugenio Cambaceres, which some consider the first openly naturalist Latin American novel,¹² one finds not so much an anticlerical posture as a wholesale substitution of scientific and philosophical discourse for religious discourse: from Arthur Schopenhauer’s pessimism to the biological determinism of Claude Bernard and social Darwinism’s idea of a “struggle for existence.” Cambaceres does away altogether with the vague deism and the transcendental view of nature held by the romantics and emphasizes instead “the blind and unthinking force of a Nature gone mad” (first part, chapter 30).

Another classic of Latin American naturalism, *La charca* (1894), by the Puerto Rican Manuel Zeno Gandía, tells of the miserable lives of the peasants who toiled in coffee plantations in the mountains of Puerto Rico. At various moments in the narrative, Juan del Salto, a landowner with liberal ideas, discusses the country’s problems over dinner with his friends, Doctor Pintado and Father Esteban. In their debate, neither the physician’s positivist ideas nor the priest’s spiritualism manages to convince a skeptical Juan. Toward the end of the novel, after the death of the naïve Silvina, the narrator evokes, perhaps ironically, the image of a compassionate but impotent Deity: “In the mystery of night, God was weeping” (214).

Published the same year as *La charca*, the Mexican novel *Tomochic* by Heriberto Frías offers a highly emotional portrayal of the intense conflict between popular religious belief and the philosophical positivism of the Mexican government's ideology. Resembling a less intellectual, more compact version of the Brazilian classic *Os Sertões* (1902) by Euclides Da Cunha, *Tomochic* testifies to and denounces the brutal repression of a religiously inspired revolt among the peasants of the Sierra Madre by the Mexican army in 1892. As in *La charca*, the narrator's sympathies in *Tomochic* are equally distanced from the regime of Porfirio Díaz (in whose army he is an officer) as from the fanatical devotees of the Saint of Cabora that the army has been sent to subdue.¹³

It is important to remember that the Latin American naturalist novels were contemporary to Latin American modernismo, regarded as the first autochthonous and highly influential literary movement in the region. Modernismo was also a deeper and more encompassing cultural phenomenon, in which Latin American literature began to display new attitudes toward spirituality and to experiment in both verse and prose with new ways to link literature and religion. The modernista authors, from the Cuban José Martí to the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, were attentive to the echoes of the politico-religious crises taking place in French culture in the last third of the nineteenth century, which contributed to the rise of European literary movements such as symbolism and decadentism. This is an extensive panorama that has been amply studied, most notably in the French context by Paul Bénichou in *L'École du désenchantement: Sainte-Beuve, Nodier, Musset, Nerval, Gautier* (1992) and in the context of Spanish-language literature by Octavio Paz in *Los hijos del limo* (1974). Paz considers symbolism to be "the true French Romanticism" (100), adding that "in fact, the true heirs of German and English Romanticism are the French poets who came after the 'official' Romantics, from Baudelaire to the Symbolists" (101). As Bénichou explains, the "negative Romanticism" Baudelaire derives from Gerard de Nerval and Théophile Gautier (*L'École du désenchantement* 526) arises in part from the political disillusionment and aesthetic introspection among French writers after events such as the authoritarian turn of the July Monarchy, the collapse of the 1848 Revolution, and Louis Napoleon's coup d'état on December 2, 1851, which led to the change from the Second Republic to the Second French Empire. However, as Ross Chambers reminds us, "Symbolism also had roots in the midcentury, and its idea—an ancient one—that artistic signs could be a medium for expressing the mysteries of ideal, surreal, or spiritual reality gained impetus from

a wave of ‘spiritualist’ thinking and a craze for table-rapping that reached France from New England in the 1850s. The work of Edgar Allan Poe, combining spiritualist beliefs with a formalist aesthetic, was to be a major influence on French art until well into the 20th century. The translation and presentation of Poe became a major preoccupation for Baudelaire in the early 1850s” (711).

Symbolism adopts Théophile Gautier’s notion of “Art for art’s sake”—the emphasis on the autonomy and dignity of art—proposed in the prologue to his 1835 book *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and further intensifies it into the idea of a “religion of art”: art as a focus of cult and ritual. In poetry, their pose as *poètes maudits* (cursed poets) allows Baudelaire and Rimbaud to ironically appropriate Christian symbols in the service of visions often contrary to that of Christian morality. As Baudelaire declares in “Le voyage” (1861), “Dive to the depths of the abyss, Heaven or Hell, what does it matter? / To the depths of the Unknown to find what is new!” (263). Baudelaire’s image of the “abyss” hollows out the meaning of the polarities of religious symbology, depriving them of their transcendent character and leaving only their empty forms to be contemplated indefinitely.

The influence of Gustave Flaubert’s symbolist-inspired “narrative theology” can be seen in numerous Latin American novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I have studied elsewhere in detail the echoes of Flaubert in the Latin American modernista novel;¹⁴ it was certainly modernismo’s aesthetics that played a key role in adapting Flaubert and the symbolists’ appropriation of religious discourse to the Latin American milieu. Religion (and its occultist variants), eroticism, and an incipient existentialism were among the main semantic fields from which the modernistas drew the metaphors they used when referring to literature and textuality. The modernistas, with Rubén Darío as their head, created their own literary theology, a “religion of literature” partly modeled after Pythagoreanism but which made use of all the varieties of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century occultism.¹⁵

Many examples abound in the modernista novels of attempts to “sacralize” the novel and to endow it—although rudimentarily—with the capacity to offer a totalizing view of culture. Let us recall José Asunción Silva’s *De sobremesa* (1896), which consists largely of a viva voce reading of the protagonist José Fernández’s diary. This diary, which Fernández treats like a sacred text because it is devoted to the memory of his dead beloved, Helena, even has the beautifully decorated external appearance of a medieval Bible or

a sacred book: “It was a thick tome with corner protectors and locks of matte gold. Over a blue enamel background, inlaid in the black Moroccan leather were three green leaves, over which there fluttered a small butterfly with wings made of tiny diamonds” (Silva 120). Fernández proclaims in his desire to “possess EVERYTHING” (129) and, in passages with an exaggerated prophetic tone, he tells of his “plan” to become a multimillionaire and a benevolent despot in his country, remaking it in accordance with a utopian and conservative model (141–47).

More explicitly still, the feeling of the sacred is joined to the search for a totalizing vision in another prototypical modernista novel, *La gloria de Don Ramiro* (1905) by Enrique Larreta. As in José Enrique Rodó’s essay “El que vendrá” (1896), which is filled with messianic images, Larreta’s novel is moved by “the longing to believe which is almost a form of belief” (Rodó 154). A historical novel that harks back to late sixteenth-century Spain in search of the origins of Latin American culture, *La gloria de Don Ramiro* tends to sacralize a conservative vision of the history and culture of Spain, seeking to lay the foundations of a pan-Hispanic “national theology.”

This novel’s totalizing thrust is evidenced in Larreta’s comments about how he came to write it. As Larreta explains, his initial project had been to write

a book about the great masters of Spanish painting, but in such a way that, after analyzing each one’s technique, I could shift toward the study of a different aspect of Spanish life under the House of Austria. With Velázquez I would describe the court, its intrigues, politics, and dynastic marriages. With El Greco I would try to go deep into the soul of the *hidalgo*, of his double work, at once religious and heroic. With Zurbarán I would study the convents, theology, mysticism. With Murillo, popular devotion and the picaresque life. With Ribera, Spaniards outside of Spain. It was, as may be seen, an imposing project. A cathedral. I hadn’t yet laid the first stone and I could already feel the scaffolding’s vertigo. (Larreta 15–16)

SACRALIZATION AND DESACRALIZATION OF THE NOVEL

The modernista novels tried to assume a “metadiscursive” position, one in which, through literary discourse and its powers of synthesis, these nov-

els would offer readers a more extensive and nuanced grasp of the great social and political issues of the age, while avoiding both the abstractions of science and the simplifications of political ideology. In the modernista novels, one may see the rise in Latin America of the figure of “the intellectual” in the twentieth-century sense of the term: scholars or artists who, with the authority of their disciplines, made significant statements about issues of public concern.¹⁶

It is worth recalling that the concept of “the intellectual” had been examined polemically by French author Julien Benda in *La trahison des clercs* (The Treason of the Intellectuals, 1927). For Benda, the category of the *clerc* (a medieval term Benda used to refer to those he regarded as “pure” intellectuals) is made up of “all those individuals whose activity essentially does not follow practical ends, and who, finding pleasure in art, scientific research, or metaphysical speculation, that is, in the possession of non-temporal things, all say, each in his own way: ‘My kingdom is not of this world’” (54). The modern intellectual is one who, in Benda’s narrowly conservative view, becomes a “treasonous” *clerc*: a *clerc* who becomes involved in political passions and who abandons the contemplative or at best moralizing tenor that, according to Benda, characterized intellectuals of earlier times (55–56).¹⁷

Benda’s ideas are pertinent in our context because he underlines the near-priestly status (another resonance of the term *clerc*) held by intellectuals in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century culture. However, by favoring action over contemplation, modern intellectuals do not abandon their eminent or distanced position with regard to the rest of society even as they try to exert their influence over social debates. Not surprisingly, in consonance with their quasi-religious image, early twentieth-century intellectuals frequently assumed a prophetic stance, and thus prophetic discourse made its appearance in a good number of Latin American novels at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, not just in modernista works but also in those of the more combative naturalist novelists.

Prophetic discourse in the early twentieth-century Latin American novel is the point of departure of the process of sacralization (and, later, desacralization) of the novel this book attempts to describe. As will be seen, chapter 2 focuses on two Latin American naturalist novels: *Santa* (1903) by the Mexican Federico Gamboa and *Redentores* (1925) by the Puerto Rican Manuel Zeno Gandía. In both works, using the rhetoric of prophecy and

taking as their point of departure Flaubert's view of the novel as an ironic commentary on holiness, Gamboa and Zeno Gandía explore the possibility of transforming the novel itself into an object of veneration and revelation.

In *Santa*, the story of a beautiful peasant girl's descent into prostitution in Mexico City and her posthumous redemption through the love of a blind musician becomes an allegory of the moral conundrum of novelistic writing, particularly that of naturalism, which, to remain faithful to its salvationist project of revealing the truth and denouncing social ills, must first immerse itself in abjection and sin. *Redentores*, in turn, written and published during the heyday of the Anglo-American avant-garde—Joyce's *Ulysses* is from 1923 and John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* from 1925—features an ironic and negative version of the sublime very similar to Flaubert's. Chastising Puerto Rico's society and politics in the early decades of the island's military occupation and its transformation into a colony of the United States, Zeno Gandía offers his readers the overwhelming spectacle—sublime in the mode of Burke and of Flaubert—of the entire Puerto Rican nation sinking into a vast and confusing whirlpool of political, economic, and social forces over which it has no control.

In *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010), Pericles Lewis has observed in the novelists of European and Anglo-American high modernism (Henry James, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and Virginia Woolf) a process of religious appropriation similar to what I have noted in regard to Latin America. Lewis points out that in the transition to the twentieth century, influenced by scientific research on the religious impulse by thinkers such as William James, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber, and reacting to the growing secularization in their societies, the agnostic or atheistic novelists of the Anglo-European avant-garde devoted themselves to experimenting with the novel's language and structure so that it could more effectively describe transcendent experiences (19). Lewis explains that these novelists understood "transcendence" as everyday experiences that produced extraordinary insights into reality, although they often used religious terms to refer to such experiences, such as the term *epiphany* in Joyce (Lewis 19). Lewis concludes that "the modernists sought a secular sacred, a form of transcendent or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world, without reference to the supernatural" (19–21).

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the genre of the novel on both sides of the Atlantic begins to

incorporate into its makeup, deliberately and self-consciously, the idea of the sacred. However, there were also significant differences in the way in which this happened in different regions: the European modernists, as Lewis remarks, focused their search for the sacred not through collective experiences or extraordinary events but through individual experience and everyday life, seeking to describe what Virginia Woolf called “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (Lewis 22).¹⁸ This explains in part these novelists’ intense use of literary techniques such as interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and a heightened descriptiveness, observed by Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset in his 1925 book *Ideas sobre la novela* when he quipped that in Proust “the novel is reduced . . . to a pure, immobile description” (176). This also explains the modernist novels’ emphasis on psychology, as Ortega y Gasset notes when he proposes that this new type of novel is based on “imaginary psychology” and “the invention of interesting souls” (199, 201).

The Spanish and Latin American vanguardist novel of the 1920s and ’30s, instead, evolves against the grain of Ortega y Gasset’s statements that the novel is a “morose genre” or a “cluttered genre” (160, 193), and tends toward what Pérez Firmat calls a “pneumatic aesthetics” in order to produce cloud-like novels that are “weightless, agile, incorporeal” (Pérez Firmat 49). The insistence on formal and verbal experimentation and on the notion of art as play in Hispanic vanguard novels such as *El profesor inútil* (1926) by the Spaniard Benjamín Jarnés, or *Margarita de niebla* (1927) by the Mexican Jaime Torres Bodet, among others, leads them to deliberately display their lack of transcendence, in which there is no room for the sacred. A few years later, however, strong sociopolitical pressures arising on both sides of the Atlantic, embodied in events such as the Mexican Revolution (1910–1940) and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), led avant-garde authors as well as those who kept their distance from vanguardism to reorient their focus and to seek to give their texts a sense of transcendence by linking them to greater and more encompassing phenomena. In this regard, many authors of the period began to feel that the vacuous pros and cons of political discourse and the ideological differences that often dissolved into sloganeering were insufficient to give greater value and resonance to their writings, as evidenced in works of poetry such as César Vallejo’s *Poemas humanos* (1938) and José Gorostiza’s *Muerte sin fin* (1939) and in novels such as Miguel Angel Asturias’s *El Señor Presidente* (written in 1933, published in 1946) and Alejo Carpentier’s *¡Ecué-Yamba-O!* (1934).

In turn, the rise of irrationalist tendencies in European culture after World War I gave rise to “neo-primitivism” in avant-garde arts and stimulated renewed curiosity both in Europe and in the Americas about religious experience and its effects on society and culture. This can be seen quite clearly in *negrismo*, one of the most wide-ranging and influential Latin American avant-garde movements, with which Carpentier was affiliated. Even in the “telluric novels,” or *novelas de la tierra*, of the 1920s and ’30s in Latin America, despite their rhetoric derived from nineteenth-century realism, one finds a spiritual, nearly pantheistic relationship posited between Latin Americans and their lands, specifically their geographic and natural milieu. As Carlos J. Alonso points out, in telluric novels “the autochthonous Latin American landscape became a privileged literary category, since it was through its constant contact with it that the spiritual essence of the continent’s people was shaped” (63).

All of this serves to highlight the widely recognized fact that the Latin American narrative contemporary to that of high modernism was propelled by more urgent impulses than those that gave rise to the novels of Joyce, Woolf, Proust, or Kafka. The “crisis of secularization” that perturbed these European authors scarcely compares with the deep existential questions of political and cultural sovereignty that tormented Latin Americans since the crisis of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Put in starker terms, Latin Americans were much less worried about “the death of God” proclaimed by Nietzsche than by the death of their nations—or at least the severe sociopolitical and economic instabilities that threatened to undo feelings of collective identity that, in the early twentieth century, were barely a century old. As Michael Goebel observes, “The sovereignty of most Latin American nation-states remained fragile and uneven for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both internally in terms of the state’s reach into distant and often inaccessible territories and externally through foreign, first European and later U.S., interference” (6). Nicola Miller has further remarked that

the almost certainly crucial role of religion in the development of Latin American nationalisms remains underexplored by academics, who tend to be secular in outlook. When religion is discussed, it is usually under the guise of popular culture—for example, the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico. Moreover, the religious subtext of much Latin American nationalist discourse has often been remarked upon, but that would also be true of many

other parts of the world. But the long history of Catholicism in the region is yet to be fully addressed, as is the broader relationship between religion, religiosity and nationalism in Latin America. . . . As [Claudio] Lomnitz argued, [Benedict] Anderson's claim that nationalism replaced religious feeling is hard to sustain on the basis of Latin American evidence. (208)

Indeed, as I argue throughout this book, religion and nationalism come together in a series of key works of the Latin American novel in which the nation becomes the transcendent "secular sacred" of which the novel becomes the holy vessel, its sacred scripture. The intensity of these issues was such that it smothered the playful tendencies of the Latin American avant-gardes and led to the creation of novelistic subgenres that were anachronistic in style and content, such as the *novelas de la tierra* and the *indigenista* novels, or—as in Carpentier's *¡Ecué-Yamba-O!* (the title in Yoruba means "Praised Be Thou, Oh Lord")—it produced texts in which vanguardist frivolity coexisted uneasily with Afro-Cuban religiosity (González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* 61–86). It is not my intention to write a detailed account of the history of the Latin American novel, but it is important to note here that in a small but significant number of narratives from the 1930s until after World War II, one finds an overt appropriation of ideas and motifs associated with religion and theology and an attempt to link them organically in theory and practice to the discourse of the novel and, in turn, to the novel's discourse about the nation. Of fundamental importance, in this regard, are authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, María Luisa Bombal, Alejo Carpentier, and Juan Rulfo.

Chapter 3 of this book examines Borges's immense contribution as a critic of many of the ideas of high modernism about literature and transcendence and as the designer of a new "literary theology," more rational and systematic than Flaubert's postromantic vision. We will consider how Borges's rationalism takes into account the nonrational aspects of language in order to understand language's ancient links to belief and spirituality, as when he observes in the prologue to his book of poetry *El otro, el mismo* (1964) that "the roots of language are irrational and have a magical character" (*Obras completas II* 236). During the 1930s, as he began to critically distance himself from the Hispanic vanguardist movement called *ultraísmo* to which he had belonged in his youth, Borges wrote a series of essays, such as "Una vindicación de la cábala," "Vindicación del falso Basíledes," "La postulación de la realidad," "El arte narrativo y la magia" (collected

in *Discusión*, 1932), and “Historia de la eternidad” (collected in *Historia de la eternidad*, 1936). In these essays, he began to theorize about narrative, making use of concepts linked to the anthropological and historical study of religions such as magic, eternity, Gnosticism, and the Kabbalah. In the 1950s, Borges lays the ideological foundations of the Boom’s “total novels” in short stories such as “El Aleph,” in which, through the ironic appropriation of the theological concept of eternity, he creates the prototype of texts that are simultaneously totalizing and synthetic.

Chapter 4 discusses how the three previously mentioned key novelists of the postvanguard—Bombal, Carpentier, and Rulfo—explore the nature of the sacred in consonance with the ideas of Borges as well as those of anthropologists and historians of religion such as Émile Durkheim and Rudolf Otto. In Bombal’s 1938 novel *La amortajada*, Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo* (1949), and Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955), we find a similar use of concepts and images associated with the holy, such as eternity, faith, darkness, emptiness, and silence, to bring readers of their novels closer to the experience of what Otto calls “the numinous.” In this context, discussion of Carpentier’s celebrated prologue to *El reino de este mundo*, “De lo real maravilloso americano,” will help us to reflect on how these and other mid-twentieth century Latin American novels seek to “re-enchant” the novel, endowing it with an aura of magic and holiness.

Twenty years after the end of World War II, there arose in Latin America the novelistic flowering known as the Boom, characterized by lengthy and complex novels with structures reminiscent of works by some of the masters of high modernism such as Joyce and Woolf, as well as of authors belatedly associated with high modernism such as Faulkner.¹⁹ The so-called “total novels” of Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, José Lezama Lima, and Mario Vargas Llosa, among others, sought to forge—paraphrasing Stephen Daedalus’s words toward the end of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)—the “uncreated conscience of [their] race” (Joyce 299). Thus, in these ambitious novels the evocation of the sacred and reflections on national identity often went hand in hand.

The nation—its origins and destiny, its outlines and definitions—was also to a great extent the transcendental subject of these novels. However, unlike the earlier novels of the 1930s and ’40s, which focused on individual countries and the internal struggles of their formation, the Boom novels focused on the Latin American region as a whole, in consonance with the growing sense of Latin American continental unity fostered by events

such as the Cuban Revolution in the 1960s. Realizing that such a unity was very much a “work in progress”—or even a utopian vision harking back to Simón Bolívar—the Boom novels frequently functioned as prophetic invocations of a future *patria grande*, a single great continental nation-state whose arrival seemed to be just over the horizon.

Promising access to transcendental knowledge about the national origins of Latin America, the Boom novels demanded devoted, attentive, and informed readings driven by a faith of some sort: readings that were less an experience of pleasure than an exercise in ascetic purification or an initiation ritual. Encyclopedic and totalizing, the Boom novels aimed to produce not just scandal and amazement but also a veneration akin to religious devotion. Furthermore, these novels assumed a foundational role in creating a new discourse on the nation in Latin America. To carry out this project, following a well-known dialectic of modernity, the Boom’s “total novels” evoked and critically reviewed national history in order to go beyond it and thus prepare the ground for a new beginning.²⁰ This explains the eschatological or apocalyptic tone common to both the Boom novels and to their models in high modernism, from the mortuary word games of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) to the literally devastating ending of *Cien años de soledad* (1967) when Macondo is destroyed by a “Biblical hurricane” (García Márquez 447).

The process of sacralization of the novel in Latin American narrative reaches its zenith with the Boom. Chapter 4 explores three masterworks of this period whose architecture depends, more or less implicitly, on elements derived from theology and sacred texts. Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1964) narrates in an existentialist vein the intellectual and spiritual itinerary of a representative individual, a sort of Latin American Everyman named Horacio Oliveira, while García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* presents a collective portrait of an entire family through the abundant and elaborate use of prophetic discourse and the symbolic mechanisms of “magical realism.” In turn, Lezama Lima’s *Paradiso* (1966) offers an ambitious attempt to fuse novelistic and religious discourse through the use of highly poetic language. To a great extent, these novels are all stories about creation: of art, of literature, and of the nation, and all of them offer foundational tales as revelations about the history and destiny of Latin America. Aspiring to resemble sacred books, these works emphasize the act of reading as an experience of initiation, of decipherment and discovery and, as said earlier, they demand of readers the utmost attention and devotion.

However, in the very midst of the Boom period there arose in Latin America a group of younger novelists who carried out an implicit critique of the “total novels” and explored a wide range of new novelistic modes: Miguel Barnet and Elena Poniatowska inaugurate the mode of the testimonial or documentary novel that would become predominant in Latin America during the decade of the 1980s; Alfredo Bryce Echenique leads the return to a new sentimental novel that privileges the feelings and accounts of amorous experience; Severo Sarduy and Manuel Puig produce intensely experimental and self-reflexive novels that undermine many of the narrative conventions of the Boom novels; and Mempo Giardinelli and Paco Ignacio Taibo II give greater prominence to crime novels in the “hard-boiled” style. Critics have already characterized these novels and identified many of their commonalities, which appear largely as the negation of many of the salient traits of the Boom novels: a rejection of totalization and of metanarratives that seek to explain everything in favor of narratives centered on individuals and their experiences; a critique of the genealogical structure of the Boom novels and of the patriarchalism and elitism this structure promotes in favor of stories about characters from socially marginalized groups (women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities); a greater emphasis on popular and mass culture; and—of greater relevance for this book’s arguments—a rejection of the processes of textual sacralization linked to the artifices of “the marvelous real” and “magical realism” in favor of a desacralizing and disillusioned view of fiction.²¹

Both the post-Boom novelists as well as those of the following generation, which comes of age at the turn of the millennium, display this desacralizing attitude that seeks to stimulate greater diversity and individuality in novel writing as well as to bring narrative closer to the experience of daily life in a Latin America that has been transformed by phenomena such as the return to democracy, neoliberalism, and globalization. However, unlike the post-Boom authors, who resisted being categorized, millennial authors—to give them at least a provisional name—have been much more willing to view themselves as part of a community. Two consistently mentioned references given as starting points of the new twenty-first-century Latin American narrative are the short-story anthology *McOndo*, published in Spain in 1996, edited by the Chileans Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez and presented that same year in a MacDonald’s chain restaurant in Santiago de Chile, and the “Manifiesto del *Crack*,” signed by Mexican authors Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, Ignacio Padilla, Pedro Angel

Palou, Eloy Urroz, and Jorge Volpi. The full outlines of these new novels are still to be defined, but critics have begun to observe in many of them a common trend of breaking with the idea of the nation, partly as an expression of their artistic maturity and search for greater creative freedom.²² The title of Jorge Volpi's 2009 book-length polemical essay, *El insomnio de Bolívar: Cuatro consideraciones intempestivas sobre América Latina en el siglo XXI* (Bolívar's Insomnia: Four Untimely Considerations on Latin America in the Twenty-First Century), deftly captures the desacralizing thrust of Volpi and his millennial companions, which deconstructs Bolívar's unrealized dream of a single Latin American nation-state on the eve of the bicentennial of much of the region's independence (1810–2010).

The sixth and last chapter in this book studies the process by which Latin American novelists of the post-Boom and millennial generations have proceeded to dismantle the elements of the sacred in novelistic discourse. The chapter begins with a discussion of the ways in which post-Boom novelists begin to pay more explicit attention to religion and its role in society as well as in literature, thus making visible, among other things, the sacred status of the nation that was part of the Boom novels' background and making it possible to carry out a critique of religion's effects in the novel. The work of Elena Poniatowska is highlighted, in particular her account of the role of the religious beliefs of Jesusa Palancares, the protagonist of the testimonial novel *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (1969). The chapter continues and concludes with two works that can be considered attempts to disconnect religion and the cult of the nation from novelistic discourse in order to produce novels that are more open and receptive to the social, technological, and artistic changes of the new century: in this regard, the systematic use of blasphemy and contradiction in Fernando Vallejo's *El desbarrancadero* (2001) and the anti-nostalgic attitude in Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* (1999) open new paths for the Latin American novelists of the twenty-first century.