Guest-editor's introduction

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This cluster of articles is the fruit of a panel that was organized at the Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association that took place in Paris in July 2013. The topic of discussion was the interface between religion and literature. In the initial essay, Figueira examines the fundamental concern of the cluster. In the context of a more general de-emphasis of religion as a theme in literature, she questions the reception of deeply religiously-themed novels in the twentieth century. She sees a reticence on the part of readers, particularly in the US, to deal with texts that are significantly informed by belief structures. She questions whether Catholic-themed novels, for example, might be particularly disregarded, given the Protestant prejudice against Catholicism that pervades American society and academe. Do Catholic texts suffer because Catholicism in general is deemed “un-American”? This question leads her to ask how the study of religion, in general, is institutionalized in the US? How does religion figure in interdisciplinary studies? Figueira notes that, of all the interdisciplinary subfields that have flourished in the US under the umbrella of comparative literature, religion and literature has had the least traction. As a case in point, Figueira focuses, in particular, on the reception of *I promessi sposi*, placing it within the context of American anti-Catholic nativism and Italian anti-clericism that have both tainted the reception of Manzoni's work.

After this examination of theoretical concerns regarding the role of religion in the large novel, we proceed with a series of individual case studies. Gerald Gillespie evokes the extensive scope of religious consciousness in literature from the revolutions of the nineteenth century to the modernist period. He offers a succinct panorama of the foci that appear in literature. In the work of Schopenhauer, we find the human subject to a cosmic will and capable of moral insight through art.

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Pessimism and its answer of heroic perseverance finds particular resonance in the work of Nietzsche, Wagner, and Freud. Gillespie then moves on to modernist authors who use anthropological insight in order to understand the human condition. In particular, he notes their efforts to constitute meaning through the reenactment of myth and ritual. Thomas Mann's Protestantism and its affirmation of the individual prevented him from sacrificing that same individual to the State or any other mythic collective. James Joyce, while abhorring the anti-individualism of totalitarianism, deconstructs all religions by subsuming everything in archetypes. By viewing experience as sacramental, Marcel Proust provides a ritualistic relationship to art by clothing his prose in a language of religious symbolism. For all these modernists, literature functions as a reincarnation of the ritual moment, a sacramental embodiment that seeks to reunify the past and the present.

This basic inquiry—how literature deals with transcendence—is followed up in Monika Schmitz-Emans's investigation of the work of Jean Paul. Schmitz-Emans asks what kind of language is most appropriate to deal with religion, belief, and man's relationship to the transcendent. Clearly, it is not the language of philosophy that is best suited for this task. Rather it is the language of the imagination and emotion, in other words, the language of literature where the dimension of inner experience beyond the grasp of reason can be articulated. Schmitz-Emans focuses her examination on the work of Jean Paul, particularly on the manner in which he investigates theological concepts as a form of religious discourse. She shows the degree to which this author's oeuvre deals with the themes of death, resurrection and the afterlife and how these themes are articulated as part of a larger thematic dealing with writing and communication. The Self in Jean Paul appears isolated in a world of phantoms, often addressed in a monological sermon and involving the persona of the preacher. Schmitz-Emans also traces Jean Paul's indebtedness to the *Glaubensphilosophie* of his friend Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. His characters engage in what can be termed nihilism experiments, where the Self undergoes trauma at the thought of the non-existence of a transcendent world. The ensuing desperation loosens emotions that provide access to a spiritual realm. As Schmitz-Emans shows, Jacobi's *Glaubensphilosophie* also becomes a propitious vehicle for Jean Paul to express a unique self-image of the artist.

Steven Shankman offers two additional case studies—this time from Russian literature—of authors' attempts to grapple with religion in the format of the large novel. Shankman provides a close reading of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and Vassily Grossman's *Life and Fate* in light of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Shankman explores Levinas's injunction to "think God" on the basis of ethics outside the question of God's existence or non-existence. He explores Levinas's thesis that obedience to God manifests itself in responsibility to the Other. He then applies Levinas's directive to Dostoevsky's masterpiece. Similarly, in his close reading of Grossman, Shankman shows how the itinerary of what Levinas terms "illeity" can be conceived outside of ontology and outside the question of God's existence. Schmitz-Emans and Shankman both show how an examination of religious imagery and ethics can enrich our understanding of canonical texts in new and inventive ways.

Finally, John Burt Foster, Jr. continues to analyze the long Russian novel in his examination of the themes of vengeance and mercy in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. He distinguishes the role religion plays in this novel from that of his later post-conversion shorter works. As in the case of Figueira's essay, Foster also addresses the issue of the reception of religion in the English-speaking world. Because of the translation history of Tolstoy into English, he has often been seen as a writer who deals with religious issues, whereas in *Anna Karenina*, religion is expressed primarily through character delineation, action and situation rather than through dialogue, thus setting it apart from his later didactic work. Foster notes how in *Anna Karenina*'s epigraph, Tolstoy appropriates (via Schopenhauer) Paul's words "Vengeance is Mine", but omits the coda "This sayeth the Lord." He argues that Tolstoy was not interested in the divine source of punishment but rather articulating Schopenhauer's concern with limiting human vengeful tendencies. If we do not recognize what is left out of the biblical injunction of Tolstoy's Old Church Slavonic, we can misunderstand the phrase as harshly vindictive. Instead Foster argues that the Russian author is interested in depicting the psychic counterweight to revenge located in mercy and the power to forgive. In fact, *Anna Karenina* examines the interplay between forgiveness and taking revenge upon oneself. Tolstoy issues a stern command to harness vengeful feelings and acknowledge mercy's natural power. It is Anna's inability to forgive herself that causes her death and any condemnation of her is not Tolstoy's intent. Rather, his depiction of the interaction between vengeful feelings and forgiveness is more fluid, subtle and complex.

This cluster seeks to raise interesting questions regarding the role of religion in literature and the reception of the religious themes in literary studies. It explores several fruitful avenues for viewing literature from a religious perspective. As such, it offers a timely corrective, reminding readers that religious issues (symbolism, ritual, myth, ethics and theology) are worth exploring, even if they have fallen out of fashion. The theoretical, philosophical and sociological reasons why such studies are not explored more frequently is also of fundamental interest to literary scholars.