

## Notes Toward Thinking the Sacred in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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[E]ven if the pack—reviewers, friends, enemies—pays me no attention or sneers, still I'm free. This is the actual result of that spiritual conversion (I can't bother to get the right words) in the autumn of 1933—or 4—when I rushed through London, buying, I remember, a great magnifying glass, from sheer ecstasy, near Blackfriars: when I gave the man who played the harp half a crown for talking to me about his life in the Tube station.

- Virginia Woolf, *Diary*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1938<sup>i</sup>

Virginia Woolf was an atheist—avowedly and emphatically so, through her whole adult life. The daughter of “eminent Victorian,” Sir Leslie Stephen—who was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1859, 23 years before Virginia’s birth, but would later repudiate the Church—Virginia was raised in a household in which God was spoken about primarily through an intellectualized, post-Darwinian agnostic lens of skepticism and doubt. God would have been spoken about rationally, but not reverentially. In her adult years, Woolf embraced an atheistic outlook that has generally been understood as intrinsic to her avant-gardism and feminism, and, indeed, to the larger project of “secular” literary modernisms. I want to ask, though, how “secular” was Woolf’s version of modernism, really? Gauri Viswanathan, among an increasing number of other critics, has made the point that much ostensibly secular early twentieth literature retains vestiges of effaced religious impulses: “literature’s self-definition [has been] as a secular vehicle for ideas whose possible religious origins were subsequently effaced as religious sensibility became absorbed into aesthetic form and imagery, especially in modernist writing” (466). It does seem that modernist writing provides an especially rich site for exploring the emergence of what Charles Taylor has diagnosed as “a secular age,” with shifts in values, mores, and beliefs about the meaning of the human becoming increasingly pronounced from about the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward. As it happens, it was in 1882, the very year of both Virginia Woolf and James Joyce’s births, that Friedrich Nietzsche (in)famously pronounced, “God is dead.” This statement gave voice to a widespread crisis of faith that would continue to play out through the modernist period, with writers in the following decades often repudiating the divine, and yet being drawn to negotiate (and re-negotiate) partial, fragmented sacralities through metaphor, ethics, and aesthetic experiment.

In Woolf’s fictional, journalistic, and autobiographical prose, it is true that we find little direct engagement with theological, religious, or spiritual questions. But if we look a little more closely at thematic and linguistic preoccupations in her writing, the extent to which she explores questions of immanence, transcendence, redemption, and illumination becomes astonishing. In fact, I would argue that we find Virginia Woolf covertly exploring the sacred by way of approach, turning away, disguise, and then cautiously re-approaching some aspect of sacred experience in almost every one of her novels. Just here I want to begin the work of undertaking a semantic taxonomy of two of Woolf’s most well-known texts: her novel, *To the*

*Lighthouse* (1927), and her unfinished autobiography, “A Sketch of the Past” (1941). In both pieces she slips into spiritually inflected idioms that resist the atheism she otherwise pronounces by engaging in an energetic return to a fundamental preoccupation with the difficult and often taboo terrain of the sacred even as she reveals a nervous resistance to such sacralizing. What we might call these *theo-critical*<sup>i</sup> explorations range from passing exclamations about a “capital G” “God” or a “capital H” “Heaven,” to sustained interests in the redemptive and healing power of light, vision, and revelation.

With a preponderance of phrasing, metaphors, and motifs from a religious—or at least a spiritual—register appearing regularly from the beginning of the novel—“heavenly bliss” (3), “fringed with joy” (3), “reverential” (6), “pray Heaven” (6), “wretched atheist” (7), “God knows” (8), “her vision” (19), “thank Heaven” (19), “Heavens” (23), “consecrated” (33), and “divinely” (33), and, of course, “lighthouse” all appear early on—it is difficult to insist on evacuating the religious from the book. It might, indeed, be time to read *To the Lighthouse* as a sustained exploration of the fabric, meaning, and workings of seeking, belief, and faith that tears apart Woolf’s supposed atheism with suggestive (almost aggressive) persistence.

### **Divine Goodness**

To begin to enter the terrain of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, let us consider the stunning flight of poetry nestled within the first pages of the “Time Passes” section of the novel. In this passage Woolf twice refers to “divine goodness” as she renders a merciful but unpredictable divine presence and master choreographer who looks down on the world with pathos and pity:

It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, *divine goodness* had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas, *divine goodness*, twitching the cord, draws the curtain; it does not please him; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth. For our penitence deserves a glimpse only; our toil respite only. (my emphasis 127-8)

The passage marks what appears to be a decidedly religious turn for Woolf’s narrator: even if Woolf does not name “God” specifically, she describes a “divine” transcendent force to whom she grants personhood (“he”), and who directs our ways and destinies. This masculine “divine goodness” also carries traits of multiple religious traditions, as if he is a pantheistic conglomerate and simultaneously a version of the Judeo-Christian God (both angry and compassionate), the Vishnu-Shiva preserver-destroyer dyad of Hindu religion and myth, and a *deus ex machina* from the Greek traditions. Woolf’s “divine goodness” has the ability to be “touched by human penitence and all its toil”—that is, to empathize with human suffering—but

also to be indifferent and even disdainful of his earthly “treasures,” which he “breaks” and “confuses” while withholding illuminations into the “clear” “truth” of things. As if “all the world’s a stage,” he “draws the curtain”<sup>iii</sup> to retreat when his creation “does not please him,” condemning fallen human being-ness as if operating within a post-lapsarian Biblical narrative. This godly presence is thus divinely good, yet capable of stern judgment and even violence. He means well, and literally holds in his hand the power to bestow sublimity and transcendence to the everyday, and to reveal the beauty of things “singl[y]”—but only if “we deserve them.”

After the statement that “our penitence deserves a glimpse only; our toil respite only,” “divine goodness” retreats from the scene of the human, and Woolf begins the next paragraph by turning to nature’s destructive elements: “The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly helter skelter until the lawn is plastered with them and they lie packed in gutters and choke rain-pipes and scatter damp paths. Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself” (128). Again we find traces of the angry Old Testament God who caused the great flood out of frustration with human fallibility. Woolf goes on to lament that there is little comfort for such tempestuous tossings-about, though, with no “answer” offered to assuage one’s “doubts,” and “no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude” (128). It is almost as if Woolf’s narrator is constructing a schema in which he *wishes* he could believe in a beneficent God with human interests at heart while also staging the failure to achieve this belief. What remains is a matter-of-fact passive acceptance of the absence of a nurturing God, with, still, repeated turns to other avenues of seeking alternative forms of transcendence, redemption, and illumination.

It is precisely at this moment that Woolf chooses to announce, almost in passing, the death of Mrs. Ramsay—the Madonna figure of the text, the children’s mother, and the central figure of the novel around whom all the other characters cohere: “Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty” (128). The divine has made his presence known and teased us with the promise of eternity and peace, but he has refused to offer solace on either on the personal level of the premature loss of the mother, or on the daily rhythm of “toil”; he has failed to relieve human suffering. Woolf’s “divine goodness,” then, can only be a divinity in hiding, who will offer “a glimpse only” of what it might be like to experience the “calm” of permanence or of “a perfect whole” (128). As such, he is transcendent rather than immanent; beyond rather than reachable; distant rather than loving; frustrating rather than comforting, as Woolf stresses what various strains of Judaic and Christian theology and philosophy have emphasized for centuries: that the divine is radically Other and even riddled, and that he is rarely easy for the human to approach. In staging this juxtaposition between “divine goodness” and his retreat, and the sudden death of the mother, Woolf indicates that she was at least open to the difficulty of approaching and wrestling with the otherness of theos, and that she was committed to exposing not only the infinite and unapproachable Otherness of human beingness, but also to exploring the meaning of the infinite Otherness of sacred presences and absences.

I begin to wonder whether Woolf's sudden attention to "divine goodness" in this early segment of the novel really exemplifies such a surprising "religious turn" after all, and I would like to propose that this moment functions as a "turn" only insofar as it is the first place in the novel in which Woolf makes her engagement with religious questions overt. The passage, though, is hardly surprising if we have been paying attention to the language and preoccupations of the book since, from the start, Woolf has offered many clues that we will miss something vitally important in *To the Lighthouse* if we read it only on a secular level. Consider the way the Ramsay children disdainfully refer to the least sympathetic character of the novel, Charles Tansley, as "the atheist"—as if what makes Mr. Tansley especially pitiable is his inability to seek value in anything beyond the mundane. Tansley also stands in as a second-generation forbidding father figure, cruelly parroting Mr. Ramsay's insistence that the weather will forbid a trip to the lighthouse with what seems to be a pathological and almost sadistic repetition compulsion in repeating the Father's "No." For what Tansley and Ramsay are both denying as even *possible* is a journey to nothing less than a *lighthouse*—a place of light, hope, vision, and childhood dreaming; an island beacon for those seeking their bearings at sea. In designating Mr. Tansley as "the atheist" in negative terms, Woolf begins her novel with an embedded inquiry into the status and value of atheism, hinting that she is perhaps writing just slightly against the grain of her "secular age."

### **Toward the Light**

Part of what Woolf is playing with in *To the Lighthouse* is the drama of seeking for light, and her frequently repeated signifying markers about "light" and "vision" come to function as two of her central tropes that drive the novel and propel its telos. Indeed, it almost comes to seem as if Woolf is half-deliberately embedding layers of "lighthouse" beacons within the language of the text, signaling to us on the level of the motif, flashing occasional signs to help guide us to unraveling the mystery of the lighthouse. "Light," and "vision," of course, have animated religious, mythical, and philosophical texts for millennia, and at the very least we can say that Woolf's novel reads generically as a barely disguised quest-romance narrative, with its principal impulse already marked out with its titular prepositional phrase—*To the Lighthouse*. If we allow ourselves to read the title with its full metaphorical weight, and in line with the motifs and registers that Woolf establishes in the novel, her title intimates that this story will concern the pull of desire and of the imagination; the pull of the unknown and perhaps even of something sacred and "set apart"; and the pull of what it means to approach the uncertainty and unknowability of an auratic symbol. Woolf never explicitly tells us what "the lighthouse" means, leaving us to do the work of teasing out its meanings. In fact, she confessed to Roger Fry that the symbolism of the lighthouse eluded her. After first reading the novel in 1927, Roger Fry had written to Woolf, "I'm sure that there's lots I haven't understood and that when I talk it over with Morgan [E.M. Forster] he'll have discovered a lot of hidden meanings. I suspect for instance that arriving at the Lighthouse has a symbolic meaning which escapes me. But I wonder if it matters" (qtd. in Bell 129). Woolf responded,

I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw

that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, & trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether it's right or wrong I don't know; but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me. (qtd. in Bell 129)

Like the central “line” that Lily Briscoe draws down the middle of her canvas to hold it together, Woolf's “lighthouse” was, at a conscious level in any case, primarily a structural platform that helped generate coherence for her aesthetic project. Her “*nothing*,” though, seems rather to verge on meaning “everything.” She “refused to think . . . out” the “feelings [that] would accrue to this”—refusing to intellectualize the dynamics of her potent symbol—but leaving the valences unconscious may actually contribute to the potency of the sign.

Perhaps part of why Woolf leaves the symbolism of “the light” and “the lighthouse” open and indeterminate represents one manifestation of the kind of modernist seeking that was available after the death of God in a cultural milieu where what was sought was scarcely able to be apprehended. As in her passage about “divine goodness,” Woolf resists parsing the meaning of “light” or “the lighthouse,” participating in a new, post-Nietzschean resistance to definitively naming the sacred. But her ephemeral symbols—ever-shifting, ever-nuanced—stand in as mytho-poetic fictional substitutes for the more religiously inflected framework available to her Victorian predecessors just a few decades earlier. Again, we might recall Viswanathan's argument that during the modernist period in particular, “religious sensibility became absorbed into aesthetic form and imagery” (466). By 1927, Woolf made her lighthouse stand only as an *inferred* symbol, leaving it to her reader do the work of deciphering the hermeneutics of its particularities.

The novel's structure is also akin to the structuralism and logic of traditional quests, religious or otherwise, complete with setbacks, disillusionments, and a persistent seeking for nothing less than a place of “light.” James's early, thwarted longing to go “to the lighthouse” marks and maps the ways in which even the strongest desires for voyaging and for light are hindered and yet persist, even in transmogrified form. In James' case, when the quest is finally resumed a decade later, it is really too late for him, though the echo of his boyhood desire remains for his father, who insists on making the voyage as a kind of elegiac gesture that honors the promise of his deceased wife. In this sense, we might take more literally a phrase that occurs in passing quite early in the novel, when the narrator suggests that Mr. Ramsay is driven to find the *light* that would “pierce the darkness” (35). James longed for the “lighthouse” in childhood, while Lily Briscoe seeks to achieve her “vision,” and although he is rarely considered this way, Mr. Ramsay, too, is seeking an ontologically inflected illumination or revelation.

In Northrop Frye's monumental study of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*, we find the suggestion that “when something is revealed to us we see it, and the response to this

revelation is not faith in the unseen or hope in divine promises but vision, seeing face to face after we have been seeing through a glass darkly” (45). Drawing upon the Biblical quotation from First Corinthians 13, “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known,” which touches upon what it would mean to grow into the maturity of a closer relation to the divine and to a promised state of awakening that would involve both *seeing* and a purer kind of abstract and empirical *knowing*, Frye is insisting on the visionary quality of personal “revelation,” suggesting that when we are granted the gift of discovering something hidden about sacred experience, we experience this as *sight*. When Woolf ends the novel with Lily Briscoe’s statement, “I have had my vision” (209), Woolf implies that Lily has finally, after a decade of struggles with half-sight, and partial vision, found a way to achieve an experience that is all at once a breakthrough in her labors at completing her painting and an epiphanic, possibly spiritually visionary experience—both personal and supra-personal: perhaps a modernist version of a Wordsworthian “see[ing] into the life of things” (line 48). For, indeed, the novel is also participating in mapping out elements of sacred ritual—a point Dominick LaCapra proposed nearly 25 years ago that brilliantly anticipates current debates: “The very project of going to the lighthouse becomes implicated in a kind of displaced and secularized ritual process reconceived in art” (142).

What we come to see as readers is that Woolf’s work persistently explores questions about sacred experience while recoiling from any too-direct treatment of the thing. In the process Woolf emerges with what we might call a “literary theology” that resists its own impetuses and gestures only to double back and make them anyway: to make them again, and again. Her method thus deconstructs itself as it goes, quickly undercutting moments of near-belief with hesitations, disavowals, and disappointments, ultimately resulting in a “split” consciousness vis à vis the sacred where sacred experience is never allowed to settle or to “sit still”—as T.S. Eliot suggests we learn to do in *Ash Wednesday*, published the same year as *To the Lighthouse*, when he implores of a transcendent Christian God, “teach us to sit still” (line 40). In this ambivalent dance, Woolf, like other modernist writers, finds ways to mask and yet disclose sacred experience from within a predominantly secular context—to articulate an anxious approach to the Otherness of *theos* while alternately displacing and yet embracing the theological imagination.

### **There is no God**

Despite Woolf’s engagements in *To the Lighthouse* with aspects of the sacred and the divine, she “emphatically” protests the existence of God in her autobiographical fragment, “A Sketch of the Past,” left unfinished at the time of her suicide in 1941. The piece is written almost as a diary, with dated entries, and in April 1939, in her first sustained “sketch,” when trying to piece together a “philosophy” about the “rapture” she achieves while writing, we find Woolf rhapsodically proclaiming something that sounds rather like a testament to the “truth” of pantheistic immanence even while she simultaneously denies the existence of God:

it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool [of everyday life and “non-being”] is hidden a pattern; that we—I

mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself (72).

Woolf begins this rumination with a logic of affirmation, pronouncing that “behind the cotton-wool” of our dulled, everyday senses, is something crucially important: a “hidden . . . pattern” to which “all human beings—are connected,” as if by an un-detachable synecdoche that will not break apart: “the whole world is a work of art” and “we are parts of the work of art.” Woolf persistently values wholeness through almost all of her work, and much as she participated in radical forms of avant-garde modernist experiments she resisted total rupture (from the past, tradition, or even from a sense of the “wholeness” of a work), and fought against breaking things apart, even while acknowledging fragmentedness, movement, tensions, and flows. From her affirmation that “all human beings—are connected,” she moves quickly to a disavowal: “there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven.”

Immediately after she repudiates the great artistic geniuses—some of the principal meaning makers of culture—she pushes even harder to make a larger disavowal: “certainly and emphatically there is no God” (72).<sup>iv</sup> Structurally, her phrasing places each of these statements on equal, anaphoric footing, with repetitions of the demonstrative pronoun (“there”) coupled with the copulative of the verb *to be*, alongside a pure negation: “there is no . . . there is no . . . there is no.” “[T]here is no” singularity of identity, and, concomitantly, there can be no deity with aspirations to appear to us in the guise of a Self or a voice—as do so many of the gods of religious traditions, from the Greek deities who intervened in human affairs, to the Judeo-Christian God who literally speaks the world into creation in Genesis, to many of the Hindu gods (in a modernist context we can think, for instance, of T.S. Eliot’s rendering of the speaking Thunder of Hinduism—conflated with the speaking Thunder of the Old Testament—in “What the Thunder Said” in *The Waste Land* of 1922). Having dispensed with individual singularity as signifying any possible “truth” of the “world,” what Woolf does discover as the “truth”—and it is worth noting that Woolf uses precisely this word—is the commonality of our “connection” to both each other and to the art rendered by “the pattern”: “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (72). In other words, she seems to be proposing an anthro-centric philosophy of ultimate meaning, where simply the fact of ongoing beingness and becomingness of the human is the *raison d’être* of the universe. Anaphoric, still, her phrasing in this instance moves from “there is no” to “we are the” as she announces a striking faith in an interpenetrable immanence that seems to verge on transcendence: “we are the thing itself.” What *thing*, though, we might ask? What *quidditas*? For it does almost sound as if Woolf is returning to an Aristotelian or Aquinas-inflected sublime of “the thing” or the “what” that underlies Being, as she returns again to that riddled middle ground of half wanting to believe, or of half attesting to faith in some kind of ultimate meaning.

Woolf's protest against the existence of either God or of these individual figures betrays an uncertainty about the relations between aesthetics, meaning, human beingness, truth, identity, and the divine within an early twentieth-century British culture whose sacred life had, for many, begun to seem posthumous. Woolf's "philosophy," though, as she calls it, almost verges on a *theosophy*, or at least a resistant theology: an attempt to discern the wisdom and logic of aesthetics and being-in-common (another two of her recurrent fictional themes) alongside both the undecided possibility *and* the impossibility of the divine. And her suggestion "that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern" reads like the traditional Judeo-Christian trope of the veiled Otherness of a God whom we cannot see, and often cannot even detect, but who is, nevertheless, present, "hidden" in a sense, but ready to emerge: at all times *in potential*.

This 1939 passage from her autobiography is also reminiscent of something Woolf wrote in her journal in 1903, when she was just 21:

I think I see for a moment how our minds are all threaded together—how any live mind today is of the very same stuff as Plato's & Euripides. It is only a continuation & development of the same thing. It is this common mind that binds the whole world together; & all the world is mind. Then I read a poem say—& the same thing is repeated. I feel as though I had grasped the central meaning of the world, & all these poets & historians & philosophers were only following out paths branching from that centre in which I stand. And then—some speck of dust gets into my machine I suppose, & the whole thing goes wrong again. (*A Passionate Apprentice*, 178-9)

Her repetitive syntax and lexicon fixate on the "same"(ness) of the "thing"-ness she perceives as common to all "minds" across space and time—a gesture that anticipates her observations in 1939 that "all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (72). And as if she is at a loss for accurate words, she repeats "thing" twice, while also mentioning what might be another variant on "thing"—"stuff"—and she repeats "mind" twice. Her vision of a commonality of "mind," linking us to Plato and Euripides, is also steeped in ancient Greek religion, philosophy, and tragedy, as if she is again borrowing from the doctrine of *logos*, where *logos* is the prime mover behind the creation of the universe. It would be a version of this mind and intellect that pronounces "Let there be light" at the opening of Genesis, thus beginning to found a new theology. The "thing itself," and the "same thing" might just be a version of *light* after all.

Jean-Luc Nancy argues in *The Inoperative Community* that "perhaps, in the end, it will no longer be necessary to speak of the 'divine.' Perhaps we will come to see that community, death, love, freedom, singularity are names for the 'divine'" (11). In Woolf's novel, set on the "Isles of Skye" [*sic*], she renders an isolated (literally *isola*-ted—*on an island*) mini-society of complicated social and familial relations with explorations of love (and its failures and triumphs); community, isolation, and alienation; art; posterity; redemption; spiritual questing;



and the whole question of *what matters* at its core. As it happens, one of Woolf's early (anonymous) reviewers in the *Times Literary Supplement* insisted that "this question of the meaning of things" that dominates the book "is not only the essence but the real protagonist in the story." We might say, too, that part of why the book remains so captivating is because it creates a kind of quasi-sacred poetry out of everyday life. Just as the painter, Paul Cézanne, had insisted in the 1870s-1890s that there was art to be made by revealing the luminosity in simple bowls of fruit—that is, by painting in a vein where Realism almost becomes Romanticism, and where we find a revelatory attention to everyday objects—Woolf's fictional experiment verges on a poetry that celebrates human seeking on the plain of the everyday as a new kind of sacred.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols., ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt, 1980), vol. V, 141.

<sup>ii</sup> I am here indebted to Raji Soni, who first brought my attention to the term and practice of “theocritics.”

<sup>iii</sup> Woolf’s writings turn frequently to motifs of hiding and concealment that are accompanied by longings for personal and/or spiritual revelation. To give just two examples, in the last novel she wrote before her death, *Between the Acts* (1941), she plays with theatrical hiding behind curtains as she stages a “village pageant;” in “A Sketch of the Past” she famously describes her sense that “behind the cotton wool” and “non-being” of the unconsciousness of everyday life, “is hidden a pattern” (72). I wonder if—though it might not please Virginia Woolf—it is time to “part the curtain” on the sacred in her work? For the tendency to “miss” the sacred in Virginia Woolf does seem to be reversing, thanks to a smattering of pieces that have appeared in the last five years or so, including Amy Smith and Isabel M<sup>a</sup> Andrés Cuevas’s Fall 2011 special issue of the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* on the subject of “Virginia Woolf and Spirituality.”

<sup>iv</sup> It is worth noting that Woolf’s insistence that “there is no God” follows directly after an attempt to explain the “rapture” she achieves while writing, and this religious-laden word is one that Woolf will repeat through the early pages of “A Sketch of the Past” (66, 68, 72, and 93). Each time she associates “rapture” with some extreme physical or sensual pleasure, and, once, with a sense of being “exalted” (93).