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## AS WE ARE NOW IS NOT THE ONLY WAY TO BE: ON THE PLACE OF THE HUMANITIES IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

Consider three things and you will not come to sin: Know whence you came and where you go and before Whom you are destined to give an account.<sup>2</sup>

Novels are romances--but romances which have to negotiate the prosaic world of modern civilization. They retain their romantic heroes and villains, wish-fulfillments and fairy-tale endings, but now these things have to be worked out in terms of sex and property, money and marriage, social mobility and the nuclear family.<sup>3</sup>

My sense of the need for *Torah u-Madda* has sharpened, particularly in light of public events throughout the Jewish world. So, however, has my awareness of the difficulties of realizing it; of the very considerable spiritual and educational cost—regrettably far in excess of what is inexorably necessary—which the proponents of *Torah u-Madda* often pay for their choice.<sup>4</sup>

In his untroubled old age, the titan of 19<sup>th</sup> century novelists essayed the question “what is art?” His first observation is that those who worship art and artists pay little heed to the activities that comprise aesthetic activity in the broad sense of the term: the hundreds of thousands of clever people who become specialists in twirling their feet rapidly or

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the 2011 Orthodox Forum on Judaism and Culture and will appear in the upcoming Orthodox Forum volume on Theology and Culture, edited by R. Yehuda Sarna. A different version of part of the essay appeared in *First Things* November 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Avot* 3:1.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel* (Blackwell, 2005), 2.

<sup>4</sup> R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northville, NJ 1997), 291.

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touching strings very rapidly or drawing or turning language inside out, and the many others whose enormous labor must be exploited to make these feats possible.<sup>5</sup> Tolstoy wanted to test the value of art for life and to probe its moral value. His first step was to take art off its pedestal and look upon it as one human activity among others, to personalize the production, performance and appreciation of art.

Something similar needs to happen in the discussion of liberal arts among Orthodox Jews. We are accustomed to argue about the role of liberal arts for God-fearing Jews as if contemplating a Platonic essence. This abstraction we denominate *Madda* and contrast it with another term, *Torah*. Some shun *Madda* as a farrago of falsehood and pretty flowers without fruit. Others embrace it, with a variety of qualifications and caveats. Meanwhile, the individuals who work hard at twirling their feet and putting sentences on paper, who mix paint and sometimes metaphors, are discussed less as human beings than as impersonal repositories of the mythical *Madda*.

When the creators and practitioners of culture are recognized as human beings at all, it is often to judge the product by the moral standing of the producer. Adopting an explicit ethical or religious perspective is thought to be the same as insinuating that, when poets or historians or philosophers are flawed, that is evidence that their work is worthless or harmful. Occasionally one infers the likely wholesomeness of ideas from the decency of the creative person who espouses them. Such moral judgment, even when pertinent and justified, reinforces the depersonalization of the liberal arts. The process by which the artist or thinker creates is viewed as a kind of mechanical excretion of genius, and the result is good or bad, like the milk of a contented or scrofulous cow.<sup>6</sup> In reality, artists and intellectuals may be noble or corrupt, just like human beings. They are best studied, not as demonic or angelic, but first and foremost as human beings, imagining, thinking, inquiring, describing, as ordinary and extraordinary human beings are wont to do.

We like to argue about whether particular ideas “belong” to *Madda* or to *Torah*, as an alternative to engaging directly with the truth or value

<sup>5</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (Indianapolis, 1960), chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> The current trend in literature departments runs in the opposite direction. The canonical author, the Dead White Male, vacates his pedestal, giving way to the democratic “text.” This move removes the worshipful element from the classroom, but at the cost of making the study of literature irrelevant: if all that is at stake is the manipulation of verbal icons, rather than the living thoughts of living people, why should anyone, especially a *ben Torah* or a *bat Torah*, care?

of the ideas themselves.<sup>7</sup> The labeling debate presupposes that some accurate genealogical algorithm exists, whereby the authoritative religious decision-maker traces the pedigree of the idea much as a historian of medicine appeals to DNA in order to reconstruct the exact itinerary by which *yertsinia pestis* was propagated through Europe in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of starting from our situation as human beings and Jews living in eternity yet inhabiting a particular time and place, imagining, thinking, inquiring, describing, as ordinary human beings are wont to do, and therefore inextricably and sometimes messily engaged with the ideas and feelings we study, we adopt the curious and impersonal stance of consumers selecting from a menu of ideas and feelings commodified in their respective display cases. It is misleading to think that when we study or compose literature or philosophy or history, when we engage in music or visual art, we are proprietors of well-tended compartments in which repose ideas, purchased off the rack, as it were, and we observe them from the outside, unimplicated in the fray. Of course we should always choose Torah over its opponents; of course we should be wary of offering uncritical allegiance to any human idea or value. Yet how we stand before God depends on how well we understand ourselves, and the glib conviction that through analysis and interpretation alone we can confidently assign parts of ourselves to *Torah* and parts to *Madda* is a great error, insofar as it vitiates at the core all efforts at self-understanding.

I am not here interested in the historical or definitional or phenomenological job of determining, or justifying, the purpose of the liberal arts, by which I mean primarily the humanities, for general culture, but only in their function for a life conformed to the primacy of Torah. Given the complexity and multifarious nature of religious life and the rich variety subsumed under the liberal arts rubric, any account of the multifaceted and sometimes astonishing interplay between the two would be encyclopedic. My goal is limited to sketching the most urgent areas of interaction. Our understanding of the human condition, as it has been experienced in the past and as it is experienced today, is especially crucial for this generation because the prevalent winds of culture are inimical to the religious orientation we strive to embrace. Our encounter with culture is the arena in which that battle is being fought out, and if we enter

<sup>7</sup> While the willingness to return to foundational debates from time to time may be the mark of intellectual and religious integrity, the pattern of flight from concrete practice to endless preliminaries may signify a lack of interest in practicing what one preaches, and this tendency threatens to render the entire discussion irrelevant.

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it unarmed or unprepared, we invite a rout. Hence it is sad that our communal and intellectual exhibitions tend to miss the human element in the humanities.

Let me point to three principles without which our religious behavior verges on the meaningless. Concern about these principles will accompany our discussion. The first is the real awareness that what we do with our lives is a matter of transcendent importance, as individuals and as social animals, charged with a unique, mysterious destiny. The vigilance and care with which Halakha invests the details of our daily lives are ridiculous if those lives and the multitude of actions and feelings and thoughts that define those lives lack such importance. It is hard to uphold the abiding conviction that God cares about our prosaic existence if we find that existence insignificant ourselves. “Nothing really matters; nothing really matters to me.” The words with which Queen ends “Bohemian Rhapsody” capture so much of contemporary falling away from religious devotion and moral discipline.

Our obligations and solidarity with our fellow human beings require us to take their existence seriously. This is not only a matter of being solicitous of their needs and considerate towards them. If that was all there was to it, it would suffice to obtain very good information about others, the kind of knowledge we possess about inanimate objects. To fully understand other people is to consider that their existence, like ours, matters to God, and pursues, like ours, a unique and mysterious trajectory. Take away the challenge of experiencing other human beings this way and social engineering is possible, but not love or respect for others.

Lastly, a religious life, particularly a life lived in the face of a hostile and/or indifferent culture, never forgets that as we are now is not the only way to be. Traditional religion, and Judaism especially, is countercultural; it can only flourish by forging an alternative to the culture around us. Freedom is freedom to stand apart from the tyranny of the present secular consensus; it is the freedom to transform yourself into something faithful yet new, disciplined yet unprecedented; it is the freedom to realize the mysterious destiny that constitutes our dialogue with God. And so, we study history and know that the mores and forms of early 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture are not the only way to live. We study literature and realize that there are modes of feeling and perception unimagined by the culture in which we find ourselves. We learn to philosophize because we are not condemned to think exactly like the majority of our culture. The more we can creatively mobilize the sweep and scope of human experience in all its forms, the better we can put in perspective the attractions and

faults of our society and the better situated we are, in our confrontation with the conformist present, to blaze a path worthy of our own transcendent destiny and worthy of the emulation and admiration of others.

In what follows I will concentrate on the role of imaginative literature for contemporary Orthodoxy. My primary reason for doing so is that literature is relatively accessible, compared to philosophy and intellectual history or social science, for those who feel that they lack time and focus, since they are not professionally involved in liberal arts study. The implications for other subjects of study will be sketched. For the same reason, my examples are taken from contemporary fiction that has reached a wide general readership. I have also chosen contemporary literature because I wish to avoid discussing books that have been enshrined as classics, to which many of you, whether you have read these books or not, can summon the rehearsed response. Lastly, I will avoid the temptation to highlight writers attractive to religious readers because of their own relation to traditional religion. No doubt there are good reasons for religious readers to prefer Graham Greene to Hemingway, T. S. Eliot to Wallace Stevens, G. K. Chesterton to H. L. Mencken. My assignment, however, is the relationship of Judaism to culture, and sequestering a small canon of recommended authors would be an evasion of my task.

## II

The contemporary author some of you may be hearing about for the first time is Colm Tóibín. That I have both enjoyed and meditated seriously on his fiction recently would be sufficient excuse for bringing him up. My other reason for telling you about him is that I did not begin reading his work until recently. I resisted putting him on my list precisely because I had been led to expect his outlook to be so distant from mine that any encounter would end rapidly in indifference or hostility. Based on the reviews that made Tóibín's reputation in the United States, he seemed preoccupied with three themes: Irish social life, which does interest me; the landscape of southeast Ireland, particularly County Wexford, on which I am not in a position to comment; and homosexuality, regarding which his perspective and governing attitude, no matter how well-informed about his own milieu, would predictably be almost entirely irrelevant and alien to mine. As a result, when it began to dawn on me that Tóibín might be using a more varied palette than I had thought, I made it my business to go through his oeuvre in the order that would be most useful

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to me and to you, like a common reader, rather than plowing through his fiction indiscriminately, like a scholar. I didn't tackle the works most prone to cause scandal among traditionalist readers until I had embarked on this essay and felt the need to cover it all.

*The Heather Blazing* is one of Tóibín's early novels, and it was the first that I read. It opens with Eamon Redmond, a conscientious high court judge in Dublin, writing his last judgment of the term, prior to joining his wife Carmel for summer vacation in the County Wexford from which they hail. The book moves back to the judge's childhood, marked by his dead mother's absence, his father's stroke, damaged speaking ability, and death, his courtship, and his professional advancement built on the foundations of his father's political connections, while moving forward to encompass his wife's stroke and subsequent decline and his effort to sustain his self-sufficient mode of existence while mourning her death.

The marriage, despite its conventionality and apparent solidity, is not without its disharmonies. Eamon is aware that the *shiddukh* almost came apart not long after they met as election canvassers for Fianna Fail. Carmel disapproved of the legal work he did for the government in a capital punishment case, and their future together is rescued only in the aftermath of old Redmond's final collapse. He also knows that the verdict he has worked out at the beginning of the book, not without sympathy for the losing side, in which the court upheld a Catholic school's permanent expulsion of a girl who left temporarily to have a baby out of wedlock, displeases his wife and children. It is less evident to him that his wife is dissatisfied with his self-sufficiency and taciturnity, qualities that had once recommended him to her, yet which she increasingly has come to perceive as incommunicativeness. Once, during her pregnancy, she induced him to speak of his feelings about the absence of his mother, his schoolmaster father's illness, having to watch him struggle to enunciate in class in his last years. The memory of that evening matters to her but not to him.

One day, after her first stroke, while Eamon is out on a solitary ramble, she feels an overwhelming desire to speak her mind to him and rushes out into the drizzle to meet him. In her excitement and debility, she suffers an accident. With enormous tenderness and presence of mind, her husband carries her back into the house and does what needs to be done. She tells him what she had wanted to tell him, about her feeling that she does not really know him, and he cannot understand, either then or after her death, what she could possibly mean.

One wonders how many novelists, and, for that matter, how many Musar schmoozers, are prepared to confront in such detail this difficult

fact about the human condition, that sooner or later most of us will be called upon to give adults, to whom we are bound with the most powerful ties of love and respect, the services we associate with the care of infants, with their sense of dignity, and our own, now and for all eternity, dependent on the delicate attention and sensitivity we bring to the task, even as they gaze upon us helpless and vulnerable. And that even our best efforts are liable to fall short of giving total satisfaction.

You can try to diminish the achievement of this novel by a paraphrase even more selective than the one I have just given you. For politically correct liberal feminists, including most blurbers and reviewers, the bumper sticker message is that hierarchical men, no matter how decent and competent, just don't get it. The self-help shelves of bookstores abound with variations on "men from Mars and women from Venus," and these earnest manifestos, with their thumbnail scenarios and sensible recommendations, are not without insight. And if a lacuna is detected in the popular health literature, there, too, pamphlets can be produced, suitable for rehab wards or the internet: *Different Strokes—10 Helpful Points for Families*, or something similar.

The point is not merely that a good novel offers richer characterization and subtle language and therefore provides more enduring insight than the corresponding middlebrow tract. By and large, the best art is a better guide to reality than the trendy orthodoxy purveyed as social science. Yet that is not primarily because artists are wiser or better informed than professional academics—when they are silly or misguided, which is often, their rhetoric-fueled errors are even more stupendous than those of the jargon-intoxicated tenured mediocrity. It is because first-rate art makes imagined people, in all their ordinariness, real and therefore mysterious and transcendent, while our secular wisdom tends to make real people seem shallow and artificial.

### III

In Tóibín's latest novel, *Brooklyn* (2009), a kind of inverted re-telling of Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*, an older sister and an American-Irish priest, in the unpromising economic landscape of the early 1950's, conspire to transport a reluctant lower class Irish girl to Brooklyn, and the plot then conspires her back to Ireland. As so often in James, the story reaches a moment of crisis when a young woman is compelled to take responsibility for her choice in marriage. For me what is most impressive in the book is its insight into the psychology of choice.

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Here is the outline of the story: after a lonely, naïve passage to America, Eilis Lacey is placed in a job and a boarding house. Letters from home fill her with an intense homesickness, which the priest counters by arranging for her to take business courses in her free time. At a church social, she befriends a considerate, attractive Italian young man and is embraced by him and by his family. Two years later she is forced to return home. But home is not the same. She is now the experienced woman, outfitted with a bookkeeping degree, American clothes, and knowledge of the world. The well to do Irish boy she had fancied and whom she thought above her now confesses he was attracted to her but had merely been too shy to show it. Letters from Tony, with whom she has contracted a civil marriage, go unanswered and unopened. Her mother expects her to remain in Ireland; she has nobody else to care for her in old age. Eventually Eilis must choose.

It is not my intention to reduce a fascinating story of emigration, loneliness, acculturation, family devotion, and the dynamic of the Irish-American and Irish societies of their time to a thesis. However, a work of art may serve as a prism through which psychological and philosophical issues are engaged. If, as I indicated earlier, the experience of moral initiative and free will is especially crucial for contemporary ethical-religious life, then how a writer describes the process of choice reflects and/or shapes the way we experience our humanity. One vulgar, widespread approach to human deliberation conceptualizes it as a tug of war between conflicting forces, where the balance of forces automatically determines action in a quasi-Newtonian manner. Some years ago I exhibited this metaphysics in the prose of Theodore Dreiser.<sup>8</sup>

Like Dreiser's characters, and unlike some of James' noted heroines, Eilis Lacey is passive—she is more acted on than acting. Yet her moral phenomenology is significantly different than Dreiser's. It is not that the balance of forces in her breast changes with her location. Rather, it is her ability to imagine the moral reality of her situation that is hostage to her frame of reference. I mean that once she settles in Brooklyn she finds it difficult to imagine herself back in Ireland—her life there seems to belong to an entirely different existence. Once she is back in Ireland, the entire life she had constructed for herself with Tony becomes unreal: she ignores his letters not out of ill-will or simple egotism but because her life in Brooklyn seems no more than a dream.

<sup>8</sup> "Use It or Lose It: On the Moral Imagination of Free Will," in *Judaism, Science and Moral Responsibility*, ed. Y. Berger and D. Shatz (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 104-154, 133ff.

How important is this phenomenology for the analysis of moral dilemmas? Surely it deserves more attention than we commonly give it. Musar literature laments our tendency to discount the future, but not the way we are often enchanted into ignoring present realities. Among serious Jewish thinkers the only parallel I can think of is R. Soloveitchik's analysis of the "hypnotic" power of sin, a power that does not so much outweigh or overcome the imperative force of the ethical as it blinds us to the alternatives and distracts us from the voice of duty; but the Rav's depiction, too, concentrates on the dynamic fascination of sin rather than the inattention that fosters indifference and consequent moral failure.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV

The Jamesian echoes in *Brooklyn* bring us to Tóibín's highly regarded fiction, *The Master*, which is about Henry James. "He came to me," writes the author, "as the protagonist of my novel *The Heather Blazing* came to me—a distant, refined, mostly silent man, middle-aged, haunted by flickering figures from the past, animated mostly by work."<sup>10</sup> Like *The Heather Blazing*, this book begins with a middle-aged man and works its way forward while also narrating James' past. The biography is familiar: Tóibín draws judiciously on letters and other records, creating a fictional James who is at once a social being and an avid host, yet at the same time looks forward to the moment when the door closes on his visitors and he faces the solitary work of writing, who has on occasion absented himself from friends who may have needed his presence and who, despite the consequent guilt, may contemplate his life with a wary happiness.

With James it is impossible to avoid the subject of homosexuality. Though Tóibín the reviewer has reservations about some scholarly speculations regarding the master's private life, he exploits these interpretations in his fictional portrait. James is revealed as a late Victorian gentleman, unwilling to act on his impulses, unwilling even to acknowledge them, and yet, despite prevailing 21<sup>st</sup> century wisdom, a man leading a worthwhile and satisfying life. Tóibín's James is "a reticent man from a Puritan

<sup>9</sup> See R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, ed. M. Berger (Ktav, 2005), chapter 6.

<sup>10</sup> Colm Tóibín, *All a Novelist Needs: Colm Tóibín on Henry James* (Baltimore, 2010), 25.

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place, ready to do battle on behalf of freedom for his characters, but more skilled at allowing them to renounce what freedom came their way for the sake of other things that are harder to define.”<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, there is an immense difference between James’ chastity and that of a God-fearing individual confronting the same challenge. James does not suppress his nature out of reverence for the Almighty, but out of a sense of social propriety, conventionality, and a virtually aesthetic conception of how he wishes to appear to others and to himself.

The following reflections of the French Catholic writer François Mauriac, who succeeded in leading a conventional family life despite what he experienced as the powerful lure of alcohol, drugs and homosexuality, demonstrate the gap between the austere piety of the religious individual and the tactful life style that Tóibín detects in James:

A feeling of guilt so out of proportion with what my life was, is it inscribed in the nature of every child born into this world (the moral law within us, according to Kant, attests the existence of God), or is it a deformation occurring in infancy, imposed upon the Christians of my kind, and which I have not known how to cure?... I acknowledge it and am troubled by the fact at times. But then what I observe of those presumably liberated men reassures me: it is of no use to decide that evil is good, as almost all of them do.<sup>12</sup>

Mauriac can serve us as a role model, as James cannot, although, one regrets, in the passage quoted, the absence of joy in leading the life God ordained for him. James’ example is nonetheless not without value, as it presents a dignified way of life different from that preached by most present day conventional people abreast of the *zeitgeist*, who cannot help dismissing both Mauriac and James as relics of an outmoded past.

It is hard to conceive of Tóibín, the liberated homosexual, commending James or Mauriac as models for his brethren. Tóibín is, after all, the same author who, in *The Story of the Night*, winner of the 1998 Ferro-Grumley Award for best gay novel, on Lambda’s list of the best 100 gay novels of all time, brings to life a world in which opportunistic homosexuality and casual adultery go hand in hand with pervasive financial and political corruption, and a narrator who can blandly report how a friend, dying of AIDS, endeavors to conceal his IV lines when he goes cruising at the public bath.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> François Mauriac, *The Inner Presence: Recollections of My Spiritual Life* (Indianapolis, 1968) 151. The background to some of Mauriac’s obscure biographical hints is explored in Jean-Luc Barré, *François Mauriac: Biographie Intime 1885-1940* (Paris, 2008).

What is impressive and instructive about Tóibín's achievement is that his art and the study of history enable him to enter sympathetically and respectfully a way of life so distant from what finds favor today. We are reminded, time and again, that what human beings do with their freedom matters, even when, like James, they choose paths that are no longer easily understandable to most readers, renouncing worldly values for the sake of something "harder to define;" even when, like the characters in *The Story of the Night*, they seem have fallen away from treating themselves, or their fellow human beings, with the appropriate respect. For us, as a counterculture committed to the mystery of human responsibility before God, and charged with the task of pursuing our own unique individual and communal destiny in a conformist uncomprehending world, such reminders are always timely.

V

*The Blackwater Lightship* (2001) is ostensibly about a young Irishman dying of AIDS. Declan, the sick man, is a minor figure in the story. From what we learn of him, he is an immature individual who could be said to confirm some of the common stereotypes about his kind. Two of his homosexual friends come across as effective, mature people; the story of one of them plausibly shows that individuals who do not believe the dogmas of Christianity and live in contravention to its laws might nevertheless want the Church to bless their union for non-frivolous reasons. In any event, the core of the novel is the coming together of Declan's family, his sister and grandmother and mother, to care for him, and their efforts, particularly that of his sister Helen, to overcome and undo their prolonged estrangement, going back to the sickness and death of Helen and Declan's father when they were children.

Towards the end of the book, after a night made horrific by her brother's spiking fevers and endless vomiting, Helen goes out to the eroded cliff overlooking the sea. Tóibín gives her the following thoughts:

For some time, then, no one would appear in this landscape; the sea would roar softly and withdraw without witnesses or spectators. It did not need her watching, and in these hours, she thought, or during the long reaches of the night, the sea was more itself, monumental and untouchable. It was clear to her now, as though all week had been leading up to the realisation, that there was no need for people, that it did not matter whether there were people or not. The world would go on. The

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virus that was destroying Declan, that had him calling out helplessly in the dawn, or the memories and echoes that came to her in her grandmother's house, or the love for her family she could not summon up, these were nothing, and now, as she stood at the edge of the cliff, they seemed like nothing.

Imaginings and resonances and pain and small longings and prejudices. They meant nothing against the resolute hardness of the sea. They meant less than the marl and the mud and the dry clay of the cliff that were eaten away by the weather, washed away by the sea. It was not just that they would fade: they hardly existed, they did not matter, they would have no impact on this cold dawn, this deserted remote seascape where the water shone in the early light and shocked her with its sullen beauty. It might have been better, she felt, if there never had been people, if this turning of the world, and the glistening sea, and the morning breeze happened without witnesses, without anyone feeling, or remembering, or dying, or trying to love. She stood at the edge of the cliff until the sun came out from behind the black rainclouds.<sup>13</sup>

Constraints of space in this essay have led us to confine our attention so far to the contours of plot. Literature, and all serious cultural productivity, operates not only through such broad strokes, but also, perhaps primarily, through particular insights and the details of language. The passage before us seems to contradict the thesis of this essay. We have argued that the significance of the human being, and the significance of choice, is essential to religious wholesomeness, and that the liberal arts are valuable in bringing this conviction to life. Here we have a woman eloquently stating the opposite—that human life and memory and love mean nothing. How is a religious reader to digest such feelings?

At the outset we stressed that literature is not a revelation from beyond, the outpouring of an occult entity called *Madda*; it is made by imperfect human beings. Philosophers engage in bad reasoning and poets are sometimes foolish and sometimes possessed by their own rhetoric or ideology or desire to entertain or by the innocent desire to make verbal beauty of a seaside dawn in County Wexford. It is not heresy to suggest that Tóibín's evocation of the indifference of the universe to human action and suffering is a cliché that does not contribute to our understanding of anything but the workings of the novelist's mind.

<sup>13</sup> *The Blackwater Lightship* (New York, 2001), 260.

Charity, however, suggests that we give the author the benefit of the doubt. In the ten pages that remain after Helen's meditation, she and her mother must deliver Declan to the hospital, after which she invites her mother into her home for the first time. It is an act of reconciliation that she chooses yet also dreads. She fears her mother's perceived inclination to take over her life; she fears her judgment; she fears her self-centeredness, her talkativeness, and her need for approval. Let us not forget that Helen is physically spent after the last few days and nights; she would do anything to put off welcoming her mother into her life, to defer conversing with her over tea; above all, she wants to sleep and prepare for the return of her husband and two sons, who have never met her mother.

It does us no good to deny that we experience at times the feeling that human existence is futile in the face of nature's endurance and majesty. Honesty, moreover, demands the recognition that this feeling is not only demoralizing but also carries a moral message. Helen thinks: "Imaginings and resonances and pain and small longings and prejudices. They meant nothing against the resolute hardness of the sea." This awareness may enable one to relinquish one's pain and resentment, as she is required to do in the last scenes of the book. Honesty also demands that we acknowledge the pressure exerted by physical fatigue and mental weariness—that, after a terrible sleepless night, we do not want to be bothered with people and our difficult negotiations with them, that "if this turning of the world, and the glistening sea, and the morning breeze happened without witnesses, without anyone feeling, or remembering, or dying, or trying to love," things would be easier, even as we know that these experiences and the duties they engender cannot be evaded.<sup>14</sup>

## VI

What I have said about contemporary fiction is surely true of the classics of literary history as well. If anything, these works furnish us with broader and deeper perspectives on the human condition; the knowledge they draw on and the insight they form are broader and less tied to the vicissitudes of our own received opinion. One would hope that individuals who are the beneficiaries of 16+ years of schooling have the intellectual tools and habits, including some training in critical reading and the minimal knowledge of context we call "cultural literacy," that would enable

<sup>14</sup> My discussion of this passage was developed in conversation with Amichai Levy.

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their emancipation from current opinion. For those who have not developed a taste for critical and religiously formed reading, one would hope that continued indulgence in the best in current literature would arouse the appetite for wider exposure. What is true of literature is also true of well-written and well-researched history and biography.

I am not as optimistic about the capacity of average reader, as a rule, to keep up with more theoretical humanistic disciplines. These disciplines—and I generalize; the lines are not always clear cut—unlike literature or narrative history, are built on detailed argument and description that stand at some remove from the world of immediate experience. If you are not prepared to follow these reasoning processes patiently, you are liable to lose track of what is at stake and emerge with vague generalities and bumper sticker slogans. It is not accidental that the books surrounding the would-be autodidact played by Tony Hancock in “The Bedsitter” are (except for Kafka) works of theory rather than narrative and that the volume he struggles manfully to comprehend and eventually falls asleep over is Bertrand Russell’s *Analysis of Mind*.

One illustration: The historian of philosophy Genevieve Lloyd recently published a book entitled *Providence Lost*. This book questions whether the eclipse of traditional notions regarding divine providence and human responsibility has severely damaged the spiritual wholeness of contemporary Western culture. A lengthy survey of ancient philosophy leads up to detailed investigation of Descartes, whose voluntaristic philosophy emphasized both God’s freedom and human freedom, and Spinoza, the champion of thoroughgoing determinism, with Spinoza’s impersonal concept of God and its anthropological correlative triumphing in contemporary secularism. Has she succeeded, or has she failed, either logically or through producing a persuasive account of intellectual history, to demonstrate that the traditional religious doctrine of divine providence is irreplaceably essential to human dignity?

Here is not the place to analyze the religious and cultural implications of Lloyd’s thesis. But to engage them seriously demands the ability and willingness to appreciate her detailed history and the fine logical distinctions and arguments. If you are not ready to do so, you may be able to concoct a nifty summary, suitable for a philosophical *Purimspiel*, at which Descartes is blessed and Spinoza execrated. The genuine intellectual return on this exercise in name-dropping is dubious.

These remarks are certainly not meant to imply that such investigations are unimportant for anyone who is not a professional. To the contrary, they contribute mightily to self-understanding and specifically

to the kind of self-awareness vital to religious-moral experience and to the work of liberating ourselves from the burden of secular conformism. Surely the role of divine providence, as a living experience, and its relation to human dignity, uniqueness, and moral responsiveness, speaks to the issues at the core of this essay. But these inquiries are harder to pursue in one's spare time without sufficient initial familiarity and without ongoing connection to the pertinent discourse. Precisely for that reason it may be even more important to acquire grounding during the years of formal education, in order to have the basis for sustained intelligent literacy.<sup>15</sup>

## VII

Let us consider several objections common in our community to the approach taken here:

From a religious point of view, the insight provided by liberal arts is dismissed as superfluous for individuals properly attuned to Torah. Setting aside local insights obtainable from the humanities, and addressing the general themes explored in this essay: if the unique value of the individual and human responsibility are threatened by secular culture, why fight fire with fire, by mobilizing the critical study of the liberal arts to liberate us from secularism, when all that is needed is simply to enhance our concentration on Torah?

A trenchant formulation of this idea occurs in the Rav's contrast of halakhic man and *homo religiosus*. The Rav observes that *homo religiosus* is prone to drastic oscillations in his self-assessment, veering from a sense of grandiose self-worth in his "high" moments to dejection when he confronts his insignificance. halakhic man, although he is not immune to this duality and its attendant psychological tension, always values his unique existence because he always experiences himself as standing before God, addressed by God.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Some outstanding teachers of analytic philosophy maintain that the content of the discipline is relatively unimportant for those who do not plan a positive contribution, so that the almost exclusive benefit it confers is the habit and capacity for close reasoning. From this point of view, it is even more urgent for students to gain mastery early in life. In this essay, by contrast, we are concerned with the content of philosophical doctrine as well and how it affects our existence.

<sup>16</sup> R. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Ish ha-Halakha, Galuy ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem, 1979) 62-70; English translation L. Kaplan, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia, 1983), 66-72.

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This idea is truly a powerful one; on occasion it may precipitate a transforming awareness. It is one that I have meditated on, especially in times of dejection, frustration, and failure. The fact that I am commanded by God, and perpetually summoned to do His work, is a faithful accompaniment in all the seasons of life. Yet even halakhic man contains within him the consciousness that characterizes *homo religiosus*. Beyond that, for me, and no doubt for many others, theological anthropology must negotiate and enter into dialogue with the personal and social particularities of modern life in all their complexity. Without conscious engagement in culture, that dialogue is liable to lack traction and liveliness. Our fine principles may be disconnected from the lives we actually lead.

Another challenge comes from votaries of social science with a penchant for the bottom line. From their collective vantage point the humanities are subjective, expressing the experience of a small and often unrepresentative elitist segment of society, hostage to the past, and enshrine outmoded ways of thinking and irrelevant ways of life. In addition, they are labor intensive, frustrating busy people leading busy lives who need fast information that does not demand time, toil and personal involvement, for whom the difficulties of the human condition are not an invitation to self-examination but problems requiring efficient solutions. Social science, for proponents of this outlook, tries to supply the public with empirical, objective truths and well-engineered solutions, sensitive to present preferences and moods, and amenable to the imperatives of the executive summary and the sound byte.

It goes without saying that there can be no objection to knowing, and taking into account, the data and reliable conclusions of the social sciences. Accepting the implicit outlook on the human condition informed by popular ideologies stemming from social science, however, is another affair altogether. Eschewing serious philosophical reflection and criticism from an explicit ethical-religious point of view does not yield a “neutral” scientific outlook: there is no “view from nowhere.” More often the claim to such a stance enshrines the prejudices of the moment or the fallacies of the recent past. If the cult of high culture is overly enamored of the coterie’s “me,” the cult of scientism is frequently, and dangerously, enslaved to the professional deformations of its practitioners’ “we.”

But the deeper question is not about the comparative blind spots of scientists and humanists. It is about the entire frame of reference for grasping the human condition. As thinking religious individuals we are profoundly opposed to the dogma of presentism, the conviction that the

opinion of the supposedly enlightened cognoscenti of the present age carries moral authority and existential insight respecting which the rest of us have no choice but to bow in submission. The casual dismissal of all those who have lived, thought and imagined the human world differently than they is not a mark of their inherent superiority but the insignia of limited imagination and narrowness.

As thinking religious individuals we do not regard the strenuousness of the quest for self-understanding as a defect or an annoyance. On the contrary, we are rightly wary when social scientists promise to generalize about people, lest the will to generalization shrink the uniqueness of human individuals to the conformity and uniformity of statistics. If the unique destiny of every human being matters, and if the way we participate in creating our destiny is a matter of transcendent importance, then we, and the human beings we encounter, are not objects of market research and statistical tables but mysterious creatures. Exploring the human condition should be a voyage of endless discovery, revelation and concealment; it should be intensive and strenuous and it should be situated at the center of our existence, rather than being a necessary chore that can just as well be left to the authority of various experts. It is a quest for wisdom, not merely the accumulation of information or even knowledge.

Take one example: earlier we referred to a handful of the many ways in which the self-understanding of individuals with homosexual impulses has come to literary expression in the past hundred years. Within the Orthodox community public discourse has been dominated by ideologically driven clinicians. Some recycle the orthodoxies of liberal morality, proclaiming the inevitability of enlightened acquiescence as the verdict of science. They are countered by strident advocates of reparative therapy, almost universally dismissed as pseudo-science, who bolster their claim to authority by insinuating that only their views are compatible with normative religion. For the rest of us, the copious application of the word “sensitivity” is a modest and unsatisfying palliative, irritatingly “insensitive” in its vacuity.

Imagine an Orthodox discourse firmly anchored in the real dogmatic and experiential fundamentals of our theological orientation: the uniqueness of the individual, the intimate relationship of the individual to God, who addresses us with Torah and mitsvot, who knows us in our particularity and accompanies us in our quest to dedicate our lives in obedience, faithfulness and creativity. Such a discourse would not be oblivious to scientific research but would never lose sight of divine providence, the dignity of the individual, the absolute authority of the divine command.

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Such a discourse would know obedience and struggle and infinite loneliness; it would also know creativity and joy and infinite companionship. Would it not be more conducive to human dignity and *yirat Shamayim* than a discourse ruled by surveys, sentimentality and the latest theories, dressed up as eternal scientific truths?

Is the idea of building one's life on these realities a mere wish fulfillment, a heroic romance, good for sermons but unconnected to the weary days and endless nights of our lives? Not if we translate the ideal into the particularities of individual existence. Here the liberal arts, despite their avowedly partial and particular angles of approach, the subjective orientation that facilitates their imaginative scope, and despite their apparent inefficiency, negotiate the prosaic world of modern civilization more helpfully and more realistically than an exclusive reliance on the general results and shifting theories of the sciences.

## VIII

I have privileged literature and narrative out of concern for the limitations of readers. Some, however, fear that even the serious reading of a contemporary novel or historical work is too much for our community. Attention spans are short; the ability to read from a religious-moral point of view is undeveloped and scarce; the critical capacity to place a work in context, simultaneously respecting and inspecting the insights of its author, is beyond us. One gets the impression, among many in our community, that education is acquired, once and for all, by taking a certain number of courses and collecting certificates, so that continued growth through reading and self-education is redundant.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it is suggested, in an Orthodox culture where thick, relentless socializing is more important than breadth and depth of knowledge or integrity of character and conviction, devoting time to such reflection is a virtual betrayal of the tribe. These difficulties also pose obstacles to the quality of Torah study as well.

If these criticisms are valid, one can only ask whether this is the end product of the thousands and thousands of hours that constitute a Jewish education, and the substantial administrative apparatus that goes along with it. One cannot avoid feeling that the problem is not in our lack of

<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Jeffrey Saks reminds me that my January 15, 2008 lecture "The Challenge of Fostering Lifelong Religious Growth" (<http://www.atid.org/events/07-12-19.asp>) deals with the need for continued intellectual growth as part of a religiously committed life.

intellectual muscle or inferior teaching alone. There must be some deeper cause for such desperation.

Terry Eagleton explains why realistic literature is more popular among the educated than among the lower classes:

The common people do not wish to see their own faces in the mirror of art. They have quite enough ordinary life in their working hours without wanting to contemplate it in their leisure time as well. Labourers are more likely to resort to fantasy than lawyers... It is really only the cultivated elite who prefer their art to be plausible and true to nature.<sup>18</sup>

This is a crude generalization: Among the laboring classes who raised me there were not a few who tolerated reality enough, and cared for truth enough, to read serious books and think about them seriously, in spite of their meager or non-existent formal education and the necessity of earning a living through physical labor. Millions, conversely, who boast advanced degrees and lifestyles to match, are anxious to escape from such reality they cannot avoid. Wealth of spirit does not always correspond to social distinction or external credentials. One can live like the rich and educated and think like the poor.

In his masterly essay cited at the outset, R. Lichtenstein writes that, after thirty years of promoting the study of the liberal arts within a framework dedicated to the primacy of Torah, his “sense of the need for *Torah u-Madda* has sharpened, particularly in light of public events throughout the Jewish world.” My own sense of the need for serious engagement with the liberal arts has also sharpened, not only as a result of public events but due to the exigencies of day to day living that often escape public examination. R. Lichtenstein goes on to confess that with his greater sense of need has also come a greater awareness of difficulties, many self-induced. Having worked in the field for close to four decades I am forced to recognize not only potential ideological conflicts and tensions caused by the scarcity of time, but also seemingly intractable barriers associated with failure of will and poverty of spirit.

One recurrent theme of this essay is that Judaism requires a robust, vivid experience of freedom: as we are now is not the only way to be<sup>19</sup>. Thus, a wholesome education that opens the door to imaginative

<sup>18</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel* (Blackwell, 2005), 5.

<sup>19</sup> When the sections of this essay dealing with Tóibín were published in *First Things* (November 2011), I was taken to be advocating the value of imaginative literature in fostering empathy. How literature educates to empathy is an empirical question I don't take up here: see, for example, Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford,

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and thoughtful spiritual emancipation can help prevent or overcome the impoverished lethargy that impedes it. This can be an occasion for pessimism—if the cure presupposes itself, how can it commence? Or it may be the cause for optimism, if, once we get started, the appetite may increase with the eating. The choice is ours and we shall be held accountable for it: If we choose the pessimistic option, we shall surely fail. If we choose the optimistic road, we are unlikely to produce the kind of glib, sweeping, triumphant narrative that Modern Orthodoxy deems so necessary to its self-image. Yet we will surely make some modest progress, for ourselves and for others, navigating our way as thinking religious individuals through the prosaic world of modern civilization.<sup>20</sup>

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2007). One problem is whether any kind of character education significantly alters behavior, which is denied on experimental grounds by John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge 2002), in favor of the overwhelming influence of situations; and see the psychological and philosophical critique of Doris by John Sabini and my colleague Maury Silver, “Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued” *Ethics* 115, 535-562. Ideologists of the left tend to look down on instances of empathy that do not lead to political involvement and that do not extend one’s sympathies to members of disadvantaged groups (see also, *inter alia*, Carolyn Betensky, *Feeling for the Poor: Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action, and the Victorian Novel* (University of Virginia, 2010). Needless to say, Judaism, like common morality, recognizes the importance of face to face interpersonal relations among family, friends and so on. In fact, my goal is to increase understanding, whether or not it succeeds in the laudable goal of increasing empathy.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to David Shatz for several comments on the wording of the first draft.