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Reading as Spiritual Experience: Theological, Affective, and Cognitive Approaches

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Abstract

This article explores the often-overlooked question of how literary reading might give rise to experiences that readers themselves identify as spiritual. Framed by William James's account of "mystical susceptibility" and recent psychological models of spirituality as altered states of consciousness involving shifts in perception, affect, and cognition, the essay asks how engagement with narrative may occasion such states. Drawing from selected examples and critical traditions, it examines the conditions under which reading becomes spiritually resonant. Theologically, the piece considers the formation of attentiveness and imaginative receptivity in writers such as Teresa of Avila and Jessica Hooten Wilson. From affect theory, it engages Rita Felski's language of enchantment; from cognitive studies, it draws on empirical approaches to literary studies and Tanya Luhrmann's work on absorption and the cultivation of spiritual perception. By drawing attention to absorption as a psychological and aesthetic phenomenon, this article suggests a renewed interdisciplinary approach—one that connects empirical studies of attention and transformation with older theological and affective insights. In this way, literature may be examined not as a site of doctrinal meaning or subjective feeling alone, but as a form of engagement capable of opening readers to spiritual insight whose impact might be measured through qualitative means.

Keywords: spiritual experience; narrative absorption; cognitive literary studies; William James



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1. Introduction

In his effort to capture the "mystical state of consciousness" which lies at the root of his psychological appraisal of religious experience, William James elevates the arts as a particularly important mediator of mystical states. Sensitive to the clinical "suspicion" which typically excludes such a "vague and vast and sentimental" state from serious consideration, James nevertheless sets out to describe a state of consciousness which seemingly "defies expression" (James [1902] 1929, pp. 370–71). For James, the reception of art—and poetry and music in particular—serves as an experiential middle-ground of sorts where the skeptic and seeker alike might meaningfully inquire into the puzzle of religious experiences elicited by art:

> Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and

> inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility.
>
> (James [1902] 1929, pp. 373–74)

In the intervening century since James' foundational investigation into religious experience, empirical research into the psychology of spiritual experience—including the analysis of "spiritual" emotions like awe, which art commonly elicits (Keltner and Haidt 2003)—has legitimized inquiry into these "vague and vast" states while deepening our appreciation for art's capacity to elicit them. In their own updated account of the science of spiritual experience, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21st Century Research and Perspectives*, David B. Yaden and Andrew B. Newberg examine six "types" of spiritual experiences whose underpinning structure remains sufficiently Jamesian: spiritual experiences, regardless of type, are defined as "altered states of consciousness involving a perception of, and connection to, an unseen order of some kind" (Yaden and Newberg 2022, p. 24).[1] Grounding their inquiry within this more personal and psychological rendering of spirituality (a move that makes room for spiritual experiences apart from institutional commitments they identify as the domain of the religious), Yaden and Newberg discover the same overlap between spiritual and aesthetic experiences documented by James nearly 120 years earlier: "people write about aesthetic experiences when we ask them to report spiritual experiences, demonstrating that many people do indeed consider these experiences from art [to be] 'spiritual'" (Yaden and Newberg 2022, p. 86). Linked by a shared experience of self-opening which awakens the reader to a profound sense of connectedness—an experience which discloses, in James's phrasing, "depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James [1902] 1929, p. 371)—the spiritual and aesthetic experience are seemingly indistinguishable.

By investigating the cognitive and affective characteristics of spiritual experience, researchers in neuroscience, psychology, and spirituality studies have provided a number of methodological inroads whereby the "strangely moving power" of literary engagement might be more rigorously considered at the experiential level. This effort to define and operationalize spiritual experience, at once open to employing modern empirical means in the examination of spirituality while resisting the kind of "medical materialism" James himself lamented (James [1902] 1929, p. 371), reflects a broader interdisciplinary desire to render a traditionally ineffable phenomenon amenable to study.

The cognitive turn in literary studies reveals a shared interest in mapping the cognitive and affective characteristics of literary engagement while inquiring more directly into the narrative devices which elicit such altered states. Building upon the theoretical turn initiated by reader-response critics in the middle of the twentieth century (Iser 1974), cognitive literary criticism attends to the psychological and experiential processes of narrative engagement while moving beyond a hypothetical reader experience (an "ideal" or "implied" construct, typically) to engage actual readers (Culler [1975] 2002; Iser 1974). In making this turn toward a more material understanding of the cognitive activities literary engagement affords—activities which include the emotive and affective dimensions of reader experience—cognitive criticism draws upon advances in psychology to offer several promising approaches for investigating the means by which literature "transports" and "absorbs" readers into worlds which alter readers' sense of self and sense of reality in significant ways (Miall and Kuiken 1995; Green and Brock 2000; Djikic et al. 2009; Mar and Oatley 2008).

Yet, critical consideration of literature's role in eliciting experiences which readers attribute spiritual significance remains largely undeveloped in the growing field of cognitive literary criticism as well as literary criticism more broadly. Olivia Fialho's investigations into the phenomenology, preconditions, and underlying processes by which literature "transforms" the self stands out as one of the most promising ventures. With the stated aim

of "obtain[ing] a rich description of the phenomenon" she labels Transformative Reading (TR) (Fialho 2019, p. 7), Fialho extensively maps the self-modifying dimensions of reading across cognitive and affective realms while stopping short of any concerted inquiry to those experiences readers attribute spiritual significance.[2] In literary criticism, Rita Felski labors to produce a "lexicon more attuned to the affective and absorbing aspects of reading" (Felski 2008, p. 38), including those self-transcendent states of awe and wonder which psychologists identify as spiritually significant (Yaden and Newberg 2022, pp. 224–44), yet the language of spiritual experience is strangely absent from such a project.

The literary critical reluctance to take seriously those experiences readers attribute spiritual significance, I argue, at once flattens the multidimensional aspect of aesthetic experience while constricting cross-disciplinary progress toward understanding a trans-disciplinary phenomenon. Whether rooted in a benign ambivalence or part of a "fully secular and deliberate" rejection of an avowedly amorphic experiential realm (Taylor 2007, p. 25), the evasion of spirituality in the study of literary reception narrows the field of literary studies while depriving scholars the critical tools to make sense of the "irrational doorways" literature unlocks within the reader.

Such a critical reticence echoes the ambivalent status held by the arts within Western Christianity more generally. While the Church's historic suspicion of the arts might be regarded as an effort to preserve the spiritual from sensual experiences most often identified with pagan worship—a suspicion found in St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and John Calvin's writings on music, for example—attempts to restrict spirituality from the aesthetic realm has also tended to blind the Church to how "art can . . . be a means of the mind's apprehension of God" (Viladesau 2000, p. 13). Suspicion of the intersection of the aesthetic and spiritual realms, it follows, must allow room for earnest inquiry that makes possible alternative construals whether in an ecclesial or academic context.

What is it about the experience of literary reading that can provoke readers to perspectives, insights, and understandings marked by an openness to the ineffable? How might those approaches which attend to the phenomenological aspects of literary engagement illuminate the conditions within which readers experience shifts in understanding which they attribute spiritual significance?

Motivated by these questions, this essay sets out to explore several recent approaches to literature—what I will describe as theological, affective, and cognitive—which invite us to consider the spiritual dimensions of literary engagement anew. Adapting James' pragmatic approach to religion as "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s]. . .in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (James [1902] 1929, p. 31)—an arbitrary but clear starting point which anticipates contemporary turns to affect and cognition—I aim to highlight the differing vantage points from which literature's transformative power is currently appraised in hopes of deepening our understanding of the mechanisms by which literature elicits such states in the reader. Drawing upon recent empirical research which demonstrates the self-opening and self-modifying aspects of narrative engagement (Luhrmann 2020), I argue that it is precisely through these more material methods of measurement that the contested and theoretically fraught category of spiritual experience might be meaningfully engaged within the field of literary studies.

2. Reading as Spiritual Practice: Theological Perspectives

Theological appraisals of literature highlight the instrumental role reading plays within the spiritual formation of Christian believers. As a result of its foundation within a religious framework which presumes belief in the Christian God, narrative engagement is often rendered here as a *vehicle* for deepening one's prior commitments, beliefs, and

understanding of certain spiritual realities. This functionalist approach to literature as a type of spiritual training ground whereby one's cognitive and affective orientation may be aligned with the divine is rooted in the privileged place reading holds within religious tradition. Grounded in the recognition of reading's potential to lead believers into the realm of contemplative thought, the medieval practice of lectio divina formalizes the reading as a practice of intellectual and spiritual ascent. The Carthusian monk Guigo II articulates the stages of this ascent most memorably. In "The Ladder of the Monks," Guigo describes the stages of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation as four "rungs" on a "ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven" (Guigo II 2004, p. 67). As the first rung on this ladder, reading "stirs up [the] power of reasoning" within the reader and elevates the soul into a state of prayer. Far from a mere means of information exchange, the practice of lectio divina elevates reading as a "way of life that cultivates attention both to what is within the words of the texts we read and what is beyond them," Stephanie Paulsell writes (Paulsell 2019, p. 46). Whether figured as a ladder or food (Guigo also compares reading to "a grape that is put into the mouth"), reading refines the attention to ensure one's fitness for spiritual ascent.

St. Teresa of Avila clarifies in greater detail reading's importance for cultivating specific cognitive capacities required in the reader's pursuit of spiritual understanding. Teresa also makes a compelling case for the use of "good books" more broadly as equally beneficial in the cultivation of contemplative thought.[3] Teresa writes:

> The greater part of my time I spent in reading good books, which was all my comfort; for God never endowed me with the gift of making reflections with the understanding, or with that of using the imagination to any good purpose: my imagination is so sluggish, that even if I would think of, or picture to myself, as I used to labour to picture, our Lord's Humanity, I never could do it. (Saint Teresa of Avila 1565, p. 59)

Reading here becomes a vital means of cognitive engagement whereby Teresa's "sluggish" imagination is nourished and spurred onward in her effort to understand the humanity of Christ. Reading good books, specifically, provides Teresa a way of imaginatively reflecting upon a reality which exists in her mind conceptually but not as a reality which is fully understood or meaningfully experienced. Understanding, as an embodied form of knowing distinct from propositional knowledge and characteristic of contemplation, is not a given but something which must be achieved through imaginative engagement with something outside the self. Teresa's self-awareness of her cognitive limitations ("I never could do it"), coupled with her desire to "picture" the incarnate Christ, leads her to recognize the imaginative training provided by a good book. Situated within James' construal of mystical experience, Teresa's reading brings about a type of "noetic" insight—an illumination elicited through the imaginative labor reading affords (James [1902] 1929, p. 371). And while Teresa's reading is largely composed of the Church Fathers—though she also had a tortured interest in chivalric romances (Saint Teresa of Avila 1565, p. 49)—her turn to narrative underscores the importance of reading as a cognitive training ground.

Theological appraisals of literature's utility in guiding the religious reader into an experiential awareness of the divine at once affirm the spiritual vitality of the arts while often constricting them within a religious framework. In *Reading for the Love of God: How to Read as a Spiritual Practice*, Jessica Hooten Wilson offers an expansive analysis of literary engagement as a resource for spiritual formation for the religious reader. In Wilson's view, "Reading is a spiritual discipline akin to fasting and prayer and one that trains you in the virtues, encourages your sanctification, and elicits your love for those noble, admirable, and beautiful things of which St. Paul writes" (Wilson 2023, p. 91). Turning to works of fiction for "what they show us about the things we know to be good and evil

from scriptural revelation," Wilson makes a convincing case for the spiritually formative resources works of imaginative literature contain for the religious reader (Wilson 2023, p. 64). Interpreted from a tropological perspective, whereby the moral lessons embedded within fictional worlds may be discerned, works by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Flannery O'Connor, and J.R.R. Tolkien attune the reader to biblical truths in ways which engender a greater love of God. In line with prominent accounts of literary engagement as a source of moral self-development (Eldridge 1989; Nussbaum 1990; Carroll 2002; Prior 2018)—including empirical measurements of fiction's role as a "moral laboratory" in the lives of real readers (Hakemulder 2000)—Wilson's approach to reading as "spiritual practice" links moral development to spiritual formation while restricting the applicability of her claims to religious readers. Far from an unsettling and strange intrusion of alternative modes of being which William James evokes in his own account of art, such moralizing approaches to reading often hinge upon the prior commitments of "pious" or "spiritual readers" (Wilson 2023, p. 89). While such accounts helpfully foreground literature's capacity to amplify and refine virtues rooted in a reader's religious tradition, the fixed category of a religious reader, in Wilson's case at least, subordinates literature as a practice-space for spirituality rather than a potential arena for spiritual discovery. But are the spiritual affordances of literature ultimately determined by the religious commitments a reader brings to the text? If not, how are we to consider the spiritual dimensions of narrative engagement apart from moral enforcement?

There is a disruptive dimension at the core of psychological understandings of spiritual experience absent from theological appraisals of literature such as these. Whether described as defamiliarization, dehabituation, or decentering, the self-modifying dimension of narrative engagement is often elided in theological appraisals in effort to underscore a moral alignment between literature and reader. To be sure, the deepening of one's self-understanding is a proven form of self-implication within literary engagement, triggered by character identification and linked to increases in empathy in readers (Kuiken et al. 2004); however, the conditions which determine such a deepened self-understanding as spiritually significant—whether a result of one's religious socialization, interpretive framework, or textual triggers—remains largely unaddressed.

Literature's capacity to *unsettle* the religious convictions of readers even as pious as Wilson's, as documented in Philip Salim Francis' *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind*, warns against any univocal embrace of "spiritual" reading as a morally affirming practice awaiting anyone with a religious sensibility (Francis 2017). Indeed, art's capacity to elicit experiences of "transcendence," "real presence," "power and depth," and "wonder, awe, mystery," as Francis' research confirms, is precisely what unsettles many of his religious readers who "[come] to find in the arts what they had lost of religion" (Francis 2017, p. 3). Such divergent accounts of the self-modifying dimension of literary engagement among religious readers reveals at once the complexity of the phenomenon under consideration as well as the value of attending more closely to the experiential dimension of narrative engagement.

Rather than assessing how works of fiction morally align with one's religious orientation, a tendency within theological appraisals of literature which neglects the more disruptive and self-modifying dimensions of literary engagement, how might a more concerted inquiry into the *feelings* literature elicits provide a more capacious framework within which the spiritual dimension of narrative engagement might be assessed? Such a framework would take seriously the extent to which a reader's pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and even personality type function as predictive variables in reader's engagements with literature without presuming the spiritual affordances of literary engagement are universally self-affirming events preserved for pious readers.[4] The relevance of feeling

as a viable indicator for assessing the amorphic nature of spiritual experience is at the heart of William James's project as well: "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion," James writes, "and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue" (James [1902] 1929, p. 422). It is precisely this turn to feeling—the self-opening experiences of wonder, awe, and absorption which reading provides—that contemporary literary critics foreground when assessing the affective dimension of literary engagement.

Weary of critical postures whose emphasis upon maintaining a detachment from the text overlooks the ways in which texts move readers in significant ways, affective appraisals of literary engagement at once encourage a renewed attentiveness to the profound experiences reading affords while often overlooking or dismissing outright the potential spiritual significance these states might provide. With these theological appraisals of literature as a source of imaginative and moral refinement in place, I want to look briefly at the affective appraisal of literature as an experiential arena of self-modification. By considering more closely the literary critical treatment of those readerly experiences which entail shifts in cognition, affect, and perception, I hope to highlight the importance of the affective realm as a material means by which the spiritual dimension of literary engagement may be assessed in religious and irreligious readers alike. The literary critical formulation of *enchantment* as an experiential state marked by "a quasi-religious sense of being caught up in something greater than the self" indicates the relevance of affective appraisals for more concretely considering literary engagement as a source of spiritual experience (Felski 2008, p. 70).

3. Reading as "Quasi-Religious" Experience: Affective Approaches

The literary critical turn to the affective realm of narrative engagement deepens our awareness of literature's transformative capacities while broadening our understanding of spiritual experience beyond the confines of religious belief. Just as James highlights the need to "understanding something about the cognitive systems [and] feelings" association with spiritual experience, affective literary critics like Rita Felski argue for the importance of assessing reading "experiences of engagement, wonder, [and] absorption" as key to the literary critical enterprise (Felski 2015, pp. 179–80). A shared interest in the excavation of cognitive, affective, and perceptual processes at work within transformative encounters unites the spiritual and aesthetic projects. Indeed, the turn to affect in literary studies brings with it the recognition of literary engagement as a productive site of spiritually inflected experiences which critics scramble to translate into non-theistic terms. "Literature seems akin to sorcery in its power to turn absence into presence," Rita Felski writes, "to summon up spectral figures out of the void, to conjure images of hallucinatory intensity and vividness, to fashion entire worlds into which the reader is swallowed up" (Felski 2008, p. 52). Such renderings of reading as an "incarnated as well as a spiritual act" seemingly detect in literary experience the "strangely moving power of passages" evinced by James while remaining cautious of attributing any religious significance to such states (Hillis Miller 2002, p. 20). In contrast to psychological investigations which categorize spiritual experience by measured *outcomes* rather than supernatural *origins* (James [1902] 1929, p. 21; Yaden and Newberg 2022, p. 9)—a posture which permits a pragmatic (and empirical) appraisal of lived spirituality apart from religious debates—affective appraisals of literary engagement, at least in the case of critics like Rita Felski, ground themselves in a resistance to the religious which requires any intimation of spiritual experience to be rendered in "quasi" form.

But unlike secular dismissals which perceive any appeal to the spiritual as a doomed attempt to fill a "God-shaped void" in a thoroughly disenchanted era (Landy and Saler 2009, p. 2), Felski's resistance to religious readings of literary engagement is at least partially

rooted in a genuine frustration with how such readings' "other-worldly" fascinations fail to adequately account for literature's material impact on the reader in this world. "Applauding the ineffable and enigmatic qualities of works of art," Felski writes of such theological appraisals, "they fail to do justice to the specific ways in which such works infiltrate and inform our lives" (Felski 2008, p. 5). Felski's sensitivity to a certain type of theological obscurantism is a helpful corrective, in my view, to those appraisals of literary engagement which evade the material aspects of aesthetic experience in their eagerness to affirm the "vague vistas" poetry provides susceptibility (James [1902] 1929, p. 374). Even the most impassioned experience of transcendence, it follows, must pass through the messiness of immanence. Affective appraisals of literary engagement, at least when uncoupled from an unreflective suspicion of the spiritual, attend to these immanent processes in ways which enrich our understanding of reading as a spiritually significant event even as they typically remain removed from real readers.

Felski's formulation of the reader's "total absorption in a text" as a type of "enchantment," a phenomenon which makes possible "encounters with the numinous, the transfigurative, the inexplicable," at once recognizes the spiritual dimension of literary engagement while ensuring that dimension remains linked to material processes. Experiential shifts in cognition, affect, and perception are all part of the onset of this state within the reader: "Colors seem brighter, perceptions are heightened, details stand out with a hallucinatory sharpness," Felski writes, "There is no longer a sharp line between self and text but a confused and inchoate intermingling" which "offers rapturous self-forgetting." Cognitively, the reader discovers the "analytical part of [their] mind recedes into the background" as they "are pulled irresistibly into [the text's] orbit" (Felski 2008, p. 55). Furthermore, there is a previously unseen "plenitude of meaning" which comes into view for the enchanted reader, in Felski's phrasing (Felski 2008, p. 70), echoing those theological appraisals of art which argue for art's capacity to "attune the soul to God" and "make us alive to the tremendous mystery of being" (Merton [1955] 1983, p. 36). In both instances, the reader experiences a form of self-transcendence through aesthetic engagement which awakens them to their connectedness to unseen but sensed realm of meaning. The experiential overlap between the aesthetic and the spiritual expands even further when enchantment is conceived as a type of wonder, as Felski suggests it should be.

By specifying enchantment as a narratively mediated state of wonder, affective appraisals like Felski's affirm the spiritual valences specific literary affects carry while highlighting the capacity for critics and readers alike to deny such valences through alternative construals. "Novels," Felski writes, "infuse things with wonder, enliven the inanimate world, invite ordinary and often overlooked phenomena to shimmer forth as bearers of aesthetic, affective, even metaphysical meanings" (Felski 2008, p. 70). As an affective state which provides access to the "depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect," as James describes it (James [1902] 1929, p. 371), wonder opens the individual to a sensed surplus of meaning whose significance is seemingly left to the individual to parse. The detection of a latent metaphysical "moreness" within one's material surroundings is central to theological considerations of wonder as well. As a result of our sudden confrontation with "a reality beyond ourselves whose significance is felt as far exceeding what can be contained by that reality," Jeremy Begbie writes of wonder, "we are *almost inevitably* led in a theological direction" (Begbie 2022, p. 105). Begbie's appraisal of wonder as an affect which carries a proximate but non-compulsory connection to spiritual significance surrenders the wonder-struck reader at an interpretive impasse. Confronted with the "vague vistas" which wonder welcomes us into, we are left with the arduous task of assimilating such "shimmering" meaning into sensible terms. The effort to accommodate the experience of wonder into existing mental structures—a process which parallels the experience theorized

by theorists as "defamiliarization"[5] and which is measured in contemporary psychological research on awe (Keltner and Haidt 2003; Yaden et al. 2019)—commences a kind of cognitive labor in the reader. The avowal or disavowal of spiritual significance within an experience like wonder, or its literary critical cognates like enchantment, relies in large part upon the pre-existing schemas one brings to the text as well as one's willingness to develop new schema when necessary.

Literature's capacity to expand and reconfigure the categories through which readers confront reality is argued to represent one of its chief cognitive values. Whether in yoking disparate realms together through figures of speech like metaphor or the productive disruption of habitual modes of cognition through poetic language, literature affords alternative modes of thinking which facilitate genuine intellectual discovery. As Catherine Elgin argues, "The non-truths that constitute a fiction are cognitively valuable because they equip us to discern truths that we would not otherwise see or would not otherwise see so clearly" (Elgin 2007, p. 48). So, too, by eliciting an experience like wonder which "cannot be contained by our systems of representation," literature challenges readers to assume an openness toward realms of meaning beyond comprehension. The re-configurative thrust of such experiences, at least in the case of a theological critic like Begbie, "naturally presses us to ask if the world has a significance and origin that lies beyond itself—in an extra-worldly agency, such as God" (Begbie 2022, p. 105). Yet, for a reader with a less religious schemata in place, the inevitability that such experiences lead to spiritual inquiry is less certain. In his own analysis of the "presence effects" produced by poetic forms, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht concludes:

> There is nothing edifying in such moments, no message, nothing that we could really learn from them . . . what we feel is probably not more than a specifically high level in the functioning of some of our general cognitive, emotional, and perhaps even physical faculties. The difference that these moments make seems to be based in quantity. (Gumbrecht 2004, p. 98)

Here the absorptive dimension of aesthetic experience is reduced to its most material form, the "moments of intensity" elicited by literature appraised not for their metaphysical possibilities but for their embodied impact alone. Gumbrecht's eschewal of signification, part of a broader defense of the "nonhermeneutic gaze" which resists the interpretive search for meaning, elevates experience as an end in itself (Gumbrecht 1999, p. 358). Preserving the cognitive, affective, and perceptual shifts afforded by literature while denying any significance to such shifts (spiritual or otherwise), Gumbrecht brings the affective unease with "other-worldly" construals of experiences like wonder to a terminus of sorts. Whether deemed a "disenchantment" (Felski 2008, p. 58) or a "secular strategy for re-enchantment" (Landy and Saler 2009, p. 2), within literary studies, the critical evolution of affective experiences like wonder from self-opening encounters with the numinous to self-contained moments of insignificance signals a devaluation of literary engagement as a spiritually valanced enterprise. Far from elucidating the complex narrative and experiential variables whereby a work of literature might open readers to spiritual experiences as depicted by James, we seem to have lost the "mystic susceptibility" required to even perceive such states.

With this apparent impasse in view, I would like to consider briefly the emergence of *absorption* as an experiential state empirically linked to spiritual experience and fostered by aesthetic engagement. As a widely used psychological metric for studying episodes of "total attention," absorption studies attend to the cognitive, affective, and perceptual shifts at the core of both literary engagement as well as spiritual experience. By turning toward the empirical measurement of literary engagement rather than an alternative theorization of literature's spiritual dimension, I hope to foreground the potential value of more cognitively

driven research in connecting theological and affective critics who might otherwise presume to stand at an interpretive crossroads.

4. Reading as Absorption: Cognitive Approaches

The elevation of art as an engine of absorption which invites the receptive individual into a state of self-transcendent openness is present across theological, affective, as well as cognitive appraisals of literary engagement. If theological appraisals reckon with reading's capacity to deepen prior religious commitments within the reader and affective critics awaken us to the significance of feelings outside of religious commitment—suspending us between the twin dangers of "over-belief" and "false reductionism" (Hunt 2000, p. 390)—absorption stands out as a helpful construct by which believer and skeptic alike might converge in their respective inquiries into the transformative dimension of literary engagement.

In his book *Absorption and Theatricality*, art critic Michael Fried defines absorption as "the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling" (Fried 1988, p. 7). It is this cognitive state which underpins Rita Felski's "quasi-religious" enchantment and which theological critics like C.S. Lewis advise readers to enter into when engaging any work of literature: "The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way" (Lewis [1961] 2000, p. 18). Within the cognitive turn in literary studies, absorption has provided a vital construct for parsing the self-modifying dimensions of literary engagement. Originally defined as a psychological disposition for having episodes of "total attention" (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974, p. 268) or "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), absorption has emerged as an experiential state in which readers feel transported to the world of the story through increased attention, mental imagery, and emotional engagement (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009). The development of absorption scales measuring shifts in each of these domains has enriched both literary critical as well as psychological understanding of the ways works of literature impact individuals. For example, through the use of a questionnaire targeting the core constructs underpinning narrative absorption (attention, enjoyment, and mental imagery especially), Don Kuiken, Paul Campbell, and Paul Sopčák positively linked narrative absorption with qualitative shifts in self-understanding accompanied by new categories of thought (Kuiken et al. 2012, p. 253). Furthermore, individuals who rate high in absorption demonstrate increased openness to experience (McCrae and Costa 1985), experiential involvement (Wild et al. 1995), and desire to read literature for insight (Miall and Kuiken 1995). While each of these studies indicates a viable research direction in its own right, of particular interest are those studies which empirically link narrative absorption to an increased capacity to sense spiritual realities.

In her own recent analysis of the cognitive and aesthetic practices linked to spiritual experiences, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others,* anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann similarly highlights absorption as one of the central cognitive mechanisms by which spiritual presences are made manifest. Based on extensive qualitative research with individuals who claim to experience a sense of divine presence, Luhrmann arrives at the following conclusion: "There is a human capacity for absorption—a capacity to be immersed in the world of the senses, inner and outer—and those who have a talent for it and who train to develop it are more likely to experience invisible others as present" (Luhrmann 2020, pp. 71–72). A central method by which individuals "train to develop" this capacity for absorption is through literary engagement. Rather than providing moral affirmation or mere moments of affective intensity, narrative absorption "facilitates the sensory-like experience of the unseen" which Luhrman sees at the heart of religious prayer as much as fictional engagement (Lifshitz et al. 2019). How might these empirical investigations

into the spiritual resonances of absorption help us better understand not only our own experiences with literature but the formative role reading played in the lives of those within a particular religious tradition? Reading considered in this light is a dynamic process whereby the reader's understanding is deepened and their relation to reality reinvigorated.

5. Conclusions

This essay began with William James's evocation of the "strangely moving power" of lyric poetry and music—those moments in which the mystery of life seemed to steal into the heart and awaken something beyond ordinary understanding. In returning to this phrase, we arrive at a question that runs through every section: what is it about literary reading that allows it, at times, to function as a spiritually significant experience?

Across theological, affective, and cognitive frameworks, literature's power to move, reorient, and open the self to transformative experience emerges in a manner that both illuminates and obscures—whether willingly or not—the means by which such experiences become spiritually significant. Theological critics call us to a posture of attention and humility rooted in a recognition of reading as spiritually formative; affect theorists illuminate the importance of feeling as an arena of quasi-spiritual states, while cognitive scholars offer models for how absorption in narrative can reconfigure our relation to reality—both materially and conceptually. When held together, these approaches point to the possibility of a more capacious and interdisciplinary account of reading as a spiritually resonant act.

Absorption, I have suggested, offers a shared framework whereby scholars across disciplines might constructively investigate these experiences in tandem. As empirical studies continue to map how narrative engagement shapes our sense of self and reality, literary scholars across ideological spectra stand to benefit from considering the capacity for such tools to recover and further clarify the affective and spiritual intensities that have always animated the reading experience. Doing so not only honors the lived experience of real readers who discover in a book a mode of being they regard as spiritually significant, but also encourages an awareness of the limits to any singular framework that fosters an interdisciplinary orientation rooted in humble curiosity.

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Notes

1 See (Yaden and Newberg 2022). The primary types of spiritual experience (including their key cognitive or affective signature) addressed by Yaden and Newberg are: Numinous Experiences (Encountering Divinity); Revelatory Experiences (Voices, Visions, Epiphanies); Mystical Experiences (Unity and Ego-Dissolution); Aesthetic Experiences (Awe and Sublime); Synchronicity Experiences ("Everything Happens for a Reason"); Paranormal Experiences (Ghosts, Angels, and Other Entities).

2 See (Kuiken et al. 2012). The "Experiencing Questionnaire," a measurement tool developed to measure experiential outcomes from reading fiction, includes measurements for feelings of Disquietude, Wonder, Spiritual Enlivenment, Discord, and Finitude—feelings the authors identify as possessing "existential/moral implications" (Kuiken et al. 2012, p. 260).

3 (Saint Teresa of Avila 1565, p. 59) Teresa cites *The Third Alphabet* by Francisco de Osuuna, the Epistles of St. Jerome, and Augustine's *Confessions* amongst other texts.

4 (Michelson 2014) In his article "Personality and the Varieties of Fictional Experience," David Michelson demonstrates how readers who score high in the "openness to experience" personality trait (one of the Big-5 personality traits in the Five Factor Model of Personality) are more prone to experience the types of altered states William James identifies as spiritually significant (marked by experiences of the sublime or awe). He writes, "Many of the prized processes associated with reading fiction, like self-reflection, empathy, and drawing on fiction for models of identity construction, may be much less pervasive and significantly more mediated by personality than realized" (Michelson 2014, p. 77).

[5] See (Shklovsky [1917] 1988). In his essay, Shklovsky develops the notion of *ostranenie*, a neologism in Russian, which can be rendered as "making strange." In English it is usually translated as "defamiliarization.".

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