

In Search of Soul

Let us simmer over our incalculable cauldron, our enthralling confusion, our hotch-potch of impulses, our perpetual miracle—for the soul throws up wonders every second.

—Virginia Woolf¹

Fix every wandering thought upon that quarter where all thought is done; who can distinguish darkness from the soul?

—W. B. Yeats²

Now, my darling Nora, I want you to read over and over all I've written to you. Some of it is ugly, obscene and bestial, some of it is pure and holy and spiritual: all of it is myself.

—James Joyce³

THE LOSS OF SOUL IN THE MODERN AGE

As so many other ancient pieties are viewed in our times, the concepts of God and soul have increasingly become objects of suspicion, if not indifference. Where secularization has been most aggressive in the twentieth century, especially among European and American writers dubbed the “new atheists,” we have seen obituaries written on behalf of both ideas, as if they are now anachronisms, relics of days of old, when wonder and magic filled the air.⁴ In many of these accounts the story of the modern world is narrated in evolutionary terms, with secularization greeted as the morning sun, dispersing the murky fog of the night, and the age of Enlightenment welcomed as the conqueror of the dark ages of the past. As a corollary of a Eurocentric bias, measuring every corner of the globe by its own presumptions of cultural superiority, this story

measures and quantifies the development of world cultures by their adherence to Western norms of rationality and finds them crude when they deviate from these norms. It is a story that frequently casts religion in the role of the superstitious and primitive barbarian and reserves the civilizing and colonizing role for science. With a monopoly on truth established by scientific principles, the religious worldview is largely denied and dispossessed of any claim on the truth; this now belongs to the purview of modern rationality, a conception of knowledge stripped of archaic mysteries and primeval beliefs. In this paradigm, little, if any, tolerance is afforded a concept like the “soul.” It belongs to an antiquated age whose time is done.

While this narrative of intellectual and cultural evolution has remained an influential model, it has also stirred up swarms of opposition from various artists and intellectuals who dispute its value and credibility. Around the same time that the clouds of disbelief thickened the most (roughly speaking, the nineteenth century to the present), the principles associated with the idea of soul found advocates in numerous modern movements, from romanticism and modernism to African American and Latin American thought. In their own unique ways, these developments resuscitated and breathed new life into the concept of soul, making it stronger and richer, infusing it with the magic elixirs of poetry, myth, melody, and cultural style. In these cases, the various apologists for the idea of the soul revealed a certain degree of misgiving and skepticism about some of the new dogmas that the age of reason sought to enshrine in place of the soul and God. They tended to blame modern secularism for a small and monochromatic view of reason and culture and for a Eurocentric hubris that presumed to judge all that is true, good, and beautiful by its own parochial standards. For those who continued to believe in the power of the soul to claim and raise up a person’s life, the Enlightenment’s pantheon of new creeds—free enterprise and consumerism, materialism and bureaucratization, science and rationality, and not least, self-assured confidence in European superiority over all other peoples in this brave new world—offered a poor and paltry substitute for the values of old, and many modern artists withheld their devotion.

One might measure the breadth of discontent in modernity by the interest in the soul, by the palpable fear that the soul, once a star, is now in danger of collapsing into a black hole. For Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, advocacy on behalf of the soul—or what he called “soul force”—revealed a profound sense of discontent and disillusionment

with the modern world and tended to act as a spotlight on the numerous cracks and flaws lurking in the foundations of the Western world. His grammar of soul exposed these defects and showed how crushing the forces of modernity have been to many people of color.⁵ For millions of colonized and non-European communities, in fact, Enlightenment principles of freedom, rationality, and equality were a burlesque of the facts, so many looked elsewhere for alternative forms of liberation. In spite of pronouncements of the death of God, or the death of the soul, religious traditions remained desirable and meaningful options among African American and Hispanic communities and offered them resources for spiritual and cultural resistance to Western “progress.” The idiom and notion of the soul, as a precious fragment of the larger body of Christianity, became a trope of defiance, a prophetic and dangerous weapon of social justice. By tracking the fate of “soul” in this study, therefore, one might not only evaluate the transmutations of the idea at the hands of black and Spanish traditions—specifically, the antimodern and postcolonial gestures in these renditions of the idea of soul—but also assess the state of modernity as the soul increasingly finds itself in a starved and inhospitable landscape.⁶

In this chapter I define “soul”—its sacred and profane manifestations—but at this point I want to invoke Virginia Woolf’s reading of Russian literature in the 1920s, because in it she works on the same assumption that guides my study: namely, that the grammar of the soul has increasingly fallen into disuse in the Western world (she singles out the English context), yet it flourishes in other contexts, especially on the edges and margins of the modern world. In this regard, she turns to the raging spirituality of Russian literature to explore regions of the world or regions of her own self where the soul still pulsates with life. If modernity treats the soul as a museum piece, no longer an actor in the drama of modern society, Woolf directs us to places where the soul is still vibrant and alive, where the flicker is more like a furious flame, still leaping and dancing. Perhaps there is something of the exotic in this desire—like the taste of chocolate to a tongue that has only known insipid foods—but more generously, it can be seen as a measure of her discontent with modern European culture, on the one hand, and on the other her genuine willingness to explore the whole circumference of the soul, even parts of her being that her culture did not deem credible any more, parts of her that were inflamed by the Russians.

In England, Woolf argues, the soul is now an alien term and has been replaced by a more staid and rational concept, alone and aloof, flat and emotionless, something that we call the self.⁷ In the exchange of the self

or the brain for the deep-down caves and grottos of the soul, we have been left with an entity that lacks the numinous density of its older ancestor. If we want to find the soul at its meridian, where it still scorches and blackens, she advises us to look directly into the high-noon sun of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Lev Tolstoy, and Anton Chekhov. “Indeed,” she writes,

it is the soul that is the chief character of Russian fiction. . . . We are souls, tortured, unhappy souls, whose only business is to talk, to reveal, to confess, to draw up at whatever rending of flesh and nerve those crabbed sins which crawl on the sand at the bottom of us. But as we listen, our confusion slowly settles. A rope is flung to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy; holding us by the skin of our teeth, we are rushed through the water; feverishly, wildly, we rush on and on, now submerged, now in a moment of vision understanding more than we have ever understood before, and receiving such revelations as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest.⁸

In reading Woolf on the Russians, I get the feeling that her pen was dipped in the same feverish ink as her subject matter, because it flies off and rushes through her essays, plunging deep into the seething whirlpools and unfathomable depths of its characters, their beauty and vile-ness, their saintliness and licentiousness. In her reading, the Russian soul is a maelstrom of astonishing extremes, with its scurrilous sins and unexpected graces, its capacity for perversion as much as mysticism, self-deception as much as enlightenment, baseness as much as nobility. And through it all, there is an unmistakable ethical intensity, a throbbing pulse that alerts the reader to the plight of the distressed in our human, fallen world. She clings to the Russian writers’ dramatization of soul—like a rope that drags her through the water gasping for breath—because it seems to buoy her soul with the kind of oxygen lacking in her own modern, bourgeois world. She wants to imbibe deeply the Russian soul, soaking her liver in its alcohol like a Karamazov, because this literature is frequently drunk with surprises and wonders, tragedies and comedies, and yet is perfectly sober when it comes to compassion for our fellow sufferers in the world. “The simplicity, the absence of effort, the assumption that in a world bursting with misery the chief call upon us is to understand our fellow-sufferers, and not with the mind—for it is easy with the mind—but with the heart; this is the cloud which broods above the whole of Russian literature, which lures us from our own parched brilliancy and scorched thoroughfares to expand in its shade.”⁹

She summons Western readers to brood over the profound shades of Russian literature for its instinctual, unstudied ability to speak to the

heart on the matter of human suffering. If nothing else, it provokes, agitates, and even rubs raw the reader's conscience, calling us to solidarity with others and to a mode of perception and understanding that is more profound than the triumphs of intelligence. On this point, her sentiment is close to the famous line by John Keats: "Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?"¹⁰ Whether in Keats or Woolf, intelligence without soul is a singing voice without lungs behind it, a voice without pathos, pain, or depth.

Keeping in mind Woolf's assessment of Russian soul, this study follows a similar trail, but with African American and Latin American traditions as its guiding spirits. My study operates with an assumption related to the ideas of Woolf and Keats: that there is something wildly quixotic about its endurance in the modern world and something surprisingly revelatory in this foolish passion for the soul, something that can school the modern intelligence on the matters of the human spirit.

As mentioned in the introduction, I suggest we look at these themes and refrains on the soul in two major ways: first, with biblical and theological traditions in mind, and second, in the spirit of the profane, in which "soul" becomes synonymous with exuberant styles, cultures, literatures, and, above all, the powerful currents of music.

ON NAMING SOUL: AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE SACRED AND PROFANE

When reflecting on the idea of the secular in the mid-twentieth century, W.H. Auden made the perceptive claim that it had its origins in "the belief that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and that, in consequence, matter, the natural order, is real and redeemable, not a shadowy appearance or the cause of evil, and historical time is real and significant."¹¹ In this judgment the idea of the secular was a seed already entrenched in Christian thought, a seed that would mature in the course of Christian history and fully blossom in modern times. Because of the tangled intersections of the sacred and secular in Christianity, where historical time and the natural world are stages for the advent of the divine, the relationship between the sublime Word and the stuff of creation should be seen, Auden contends, in symbiotic rather than clashing terms. In contrast to Gnostic repudiations of time and space, the *saeculum* in Christianity is the womb in which God enters into time and space. In the unity of Christ, the sacred and secular are reconciled.¹² An

absolute repudiation of the secular is thus a theological mistake and heresy. It forecloses the infinite possibilities and surprising appearances of God in every facet of the human drama.

My study follows this theological intuition in searching for epiphanies in both sacred and secular guises, but this claim should not be misconstrued to mean that we should conflate or collapse the terms altogether. The distinction between the two is worth defending if only to remind us of the contributions of each domain of human experience. Richard Kearney puts it in these terms: “Only secularization can prevent the sacred from becoming life denying, while only sacralization can prevent the secular from becoming banal. . . . The secular involves the human order of finite time, while the sacred denotes an order of infinity, otherness, and transcendence that promises to come and dwell in our midst.”¹³ The careful balancing between the two dimensions can avoid the pitfalls of theocracy, holy war, and ecclesial imperialism, on the one hand, and the threat of nihilism, on the other. When an aggressive version of the sacred overwhelms and anathematizes the secular, as in some of the most violent fundamentalist reactions to modernity, the inclination is to bar the revelations that may occur outside the sacred realm, and that may happen unexpectedly in any number of experiences; when the profane is the sole and dominant motif, however, the inclination is to strip the human and natural world of mystery and to replace them with mechanistic and material ideas that are flat, predictable, and soulless.

The main lesson here is that such separations (“soul and body” and “supernatural and natural” can be added to the pairing “sacred and profane”) are products of contingent historical genealogies in modern Western Europe and should not predetermine how we understand the meaning of “soul” in Judaism or Christianity or its meaning in African American or Latin American traditions.¹⁴ This is an important point to keep in mind in my study, because conceptions of soul in African American and Latin American traditions, as in premodern Christianity, wantonly trespass across these borders, breaching the barriers that try to keep them apart. I insist, then, on the curious juxtaposition and intermingling of the sacred and profane in these Afro-Latin traditions and hope that the reader can see the redemptive possibilities of both ideas of soul. For this reason, the metaphors of the crossroads and a border are illuminating for my study, insofar as they demarcate regions in between the sacred and profane, somewhere on the transitional boundaries and open plains of these binary oppositions, where contrary and divergent winds breathe life into the idea of the soul.¹⁵

In this regard there is something richly suggestive about the Yoruba deity Eleggua, god of the crossroads, trickster figure, and patron of drumming and rhythm. As the god of the crossroads, he sits at the junction of divergent paths of the sacred and profane, in places where the pious and pompous would never venture, where Robert Johnson once promised his soul to the devil in order to learn how to make his guitar moan and wail. Church folks called a lot of these rhythms and rhymes “devil’s music”; so tempting, pleasurable, and ravishing these sounds must have seemed to their priggish ears. And similar aspersions were cast on Afro-Latin music. The term *diablo* was in fact a synonym for the mambo. (The word “mambo” derives from Congo religion, where it referred to the concluding chants of a spirit-possession ceremony.) In its secular incarnations, mambo came to mean the final section of a musical or dance performance, when the artist was given free rein to improvise and let loose with an “anarchy in tempo,” *a la diabla*.¹⁶ In these moments the artist was permitted to be unruly, excessive, and profligate in his flow and tempo, as if he, too, were suddenly possessed by wild spirits. Gustavo Perez Firmat writes, “The name connotes excess, outrageousness, lack of decorum. A mambo mouth is a loud mouth, someone with a loose tongue, someone who doesn’t abide by rules of propriety. The mambo is nothing if not uncouth, improper, its musical improprieties sometimes even bordering on the *improperio*, the vulgar or offensive outburst.”¹⁷

In the spirit of these uncouth flurries of emotion, I explore some of the creative possibilities of the music of the profane in this study. One might say that the consideration of soul in this book follows the passage from the sanctified soul of gospel music to the devil’s music of the blues, R & B, soul, and rap, the route from sacred to profane manifestations. The specific genre “soul music” (a term that originated in the late 1950s along with terms like “soul brother” and “soul food”) is an example of the bridge between the two: it was seeded by gospel music but watered and fertilized by the brazen sexual electricity of the blues and R & B.¹⁸ The grooves of Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Curtis Mayfield, Jackie Wilson, and Otis Redding muddied the stylistic, harmonic, and lyrical distinctions between gospel and R & B, making for soul sermons that were unlike anything heard before. These artists were, in the words of bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, “crying sanctified.”¹⁹

Although I defend this crossroads, it should be clear that I am not arguing that we skirt or run around modernity. While I want to preserve classic Jewish and Christian beliefs on the soul, I also contend that the

modern milieu of secularism enabled a degree of creative freedom and artistic inventiveness on this theme, specifically in its forbearing of cultural and musical revelries outside the churches, in the rowdy, disorderly, and bawdy underground of society, in juke joints, chitlin' circuits, and the like. The blues, R & B, funk, and hip-hop all have sacred influences and motifs, but they also challenge the monopoly of grace claimed by the churches and assume, á la Meister Eckhart, that one cannot muffle God and confine him to a church.²⁰ And the same holds for the literary and cultural creations of Ralph Ellison and Federico García Lorca, both of whom dress up their ideas of soul with a prodigal mixture of the sacred and profane. They surely would have conceded the intuition of John Keats when he defended the poet's freedom in exploring the darkness as much as the light, the mean as much as the elevated: "What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion [*sic*] poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one. . . . It enjoys light and shade, it lives in gusto, be it foul and fair, high and low, rich or poor, mean or elevated."²¹

On the matter of soul, then, I follow the intuitions of poets and mystics in their daring exploration of the fair and foul, high and low, light and shade, shocking as it might be for the virtuous philosopher or theologian. This Keatsian formulation, it seems to me, has inspired a wide variety of contemporary hip-hop intellectuals, such as Michael Dyson, Cornel West, Anthony Pinn, Imani Perry, Adilifu Nama, Paul Gilroy, and Adam Bradley, as well as numerous others. "Historically," Paul Gilroy writes, "black political culture's most powerful notions of agency have been figured through the sacred. They can also get figured through the profane, and there, a different idea of worldly redemption can be observed. Both of these possibilities come together for me in the traditions of musical performance that culminates in hip hop."²² Or take another example, from Adilifu Nama: "To hip hop's credit, this sensibility has lessened the artificial and often idealized separations between 'the good, bad, and ugly' aspects of the black and brown experience. Consequently, stringent and bifurcated notions of the sacred and profane have been jettisoned for a messy and fluid assessment of right and wrong."²³ In my exploration of the black and brown conceptions of soul, I thus follow the lead of these scholars but with a special focus on the crossroads between African American and Latin traditions in religion, literature, and music. Since Christianity proved decisive in the understanding of soul in these traditions, the yeast that allowed it to rise, I begin my study with the problem of definition, specifically how

the idea of the soul was named and interpreted in Christian thought, before moving on to the profane unfolding of soul.

THEOLOGICAL SOUL: IN PLACE OF THE MODERN SELF

Soul as Imago Dei, Icon of Divine Presence and Transcendence

To distinguish theological versions of soul from the modern self, I begin with the fundamental assumption that the human soul is made in the image of God, that it is an icon of both divine presence and transcendence. By virtue of an analogical likeness (similarity in difference), the soul participates in the beauty and goodness of God, though it remains infinitely other than God, weighed down by its heavy mortal coil. By the force of the soul's temporal condition, the soul is divided and dispersed, conflicted and distracted, twisted and distorted (*distentio animi* in Augustine's terms), but it forever remains an image of God, shot through with beauty, wild with divinity, the *imago Dei* distorted but not destroyed. The soul may be, as William Butler Yeats says about the human heart, a "foul rag and bone shop," but it still participates in the splendor of divine infinity and reflects the charged grandeur of God, the deep down otherness of God.²⁴

So yes, the soul is an icon of divine *presence*, of the grace that fills and yet exceeds the soul. Insofar as the soul mirrors the divine in its infinite mystery and resplendence, however, it also shares in the nocturnal depths of God; the soul is also an icon of divine *transcendence*. While the soul is holy like God, sacred and precious, of infinite worth and dignity (a fact that was revolutionary for slaves throughout the Americas), it is also shrouded by a cloud of unknowing like the G-d of Exodus. Unlike idolatrous portraits of the self, which leave no room for the Other and crowd out the presence of wonder, the soul is an icon of the Other, a portrait that is filled with light and shade like a chiaroscuro painting of the Renaissance. In the space of a unique singular person, the soul is an aura or trace of the infinite.²⁵

In Gregory of Nyssa's portrait of the soul, for example, the metaphor of icon is explicitly invoked: "The icon is perfectly an icon only so long as it is missing nothing of what is known in the archetype. Now, since incomprehensibility of essence is found in what we see in the divine nature, it must necessarily be that every icon keeps in it too a likeness with its archetype."²⁶ Since the soul is an icon of divine incomprehensibility, the argument goes, the soul shares in this incomprehensibility and formlessness, in that which is without shape or semblance. The soul

resembles “nothing”; it is denuded of all graven images, indeterminate and strange. What pertains to God—namelessness—also pertains to humankind. “Man remains unimaginable,” writes Jean-Luc Marion, “since formed in the image of He who admits none, incomprehensible because formed in the likeness of He who admits no comprehension.”²⁷

Augustine’s consideration of the conundrum of memory only deepens this *via negativa* of theological anthropology. As he wanders through the hinterlands of the human psyche, his language gropes for metaphors and images that intensify, rather than eliminate, our perplexity and surprise. For Augustine, to put it plainly, the soul is an enigma, and the human person is an “immense abyss.”²⁸ In his winding, circuitous path into the soul, Augustine never discovers an unchanging ground of identity or any essence of subjectivity in the center of the soul’s labyrinth. If anything, his discovery entails the dizzying, vertiginous realization of an infinite panorama within, one whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere. As for self-knowledge, he can only concede that he knows *that* he is, but not *what* he is; his existence is not in doubt, but his essence confounds him enough for him to say that he has become a great question to himself.²⁹ When considering the great mysteries of memory in particular, he tells us that he is suddenly lost in astonishment, and a great stupor seizes him.³⁰ Like any poet addressing an inscrutable question, he reaches for metaphors that describe the wonder of it all: memory is a wide plain, a spacious palace, a storehouse of images, a vast cloister, a cavern and crater, a vast and infinite sanctuary: “Who can plumb its depths? And yet, it is a faculty of my soul.”³¹

So as a faculty of the soul, memory poses an insurmountable problem for self-consciousness and makes the search for soul an existential ordeal. “I have become to myself,” he confesses, “a land of difficulty over which I toil and sweat.”³² If the terrain of the soul in Augustine is a land of difficulty with numerous caverns and abysses along the way, travel through this territory is like spelunking in subterranean depths, advancing by touch and feel, living by faith not sight. And without a fixed essence at the core, human identity is subject to constant variations, changes, and upheavals, as is evident in so many biblical characters (the subject of the following chapters). The soul is an ever-expanding vessel, one that constantly grows and swells, contracts and stumbles, advances and retreats. For Augustine, though, the keys to the soul’s growth and not its ruin are the biblical values of dispossession over possession, *caritas* over the *libido dominandi*, self-renunciation over self-

gratification.³³ If the soul is to be true to its divine nature—its fathomless and shoreless being—it must embody these values with the same wanton generosity as the sun over the desert.

In spite of these apophatic moments in classical theology (the moments of unsaying in theological discourse), however, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine clearly assumed that we can in fact achieve some wisdom about God and the soul, even if that is a revelation in obscurity, seen through a mirror dimly. Augustine did believe that we encounter God in the labyrinth of the soul, that God graces us with an understanding, however partial, of who we are, who we can be, and who we ought to be. It is obvious, then, that knowledge of God is revelatory and revolutionary for the meaning and purpose of our lives. Even if our grasp of God—and the human soul—is evanescent and imperfect, like Moses’s glimpse of God as he passed by, it is enough to stun and transform us (Exod. 33:17–23). And even if the soul is as elusive as a phantom (“Few catch the phantom,” as Woolf writes; “most have to be content with a scrap of her dress, or a wisp of her hair.”), the Christian tradition dresses up the soul in radiant colors and voluptuous profiles, which makes the soul into something a lot more sensual and alluring than a bloodless ghost.³⁴

The Aesthetic Contours of Soul: Mysticism, Music, and Festivity

To speak of the soul as an icon—in which God is simultaneously revealed and concealed, present and absent—is to inevitably invite the question of aesthetics. At least in classic Christian theology, especially in the analogical tradition, the experience of beauty is a seductive ruse of God to charm and beguile the soul and hence a confirmation of what is true and good. Nicolas of Cusa said that we can taste eternal wisdom in everything savored, feel eternal pleasure in all things pleasurable, and behold eternal beauty in all that is beautiful.³⁵ In the myriad forms of creation, everything is saturated with grace, thus compromising the divisions of sacred and profane, spirit and flesh, the transcendent and worldly. God’s presence teems and overflows in the cosmos, bathing and penetrating everything, large and small. The human soul, as a result, is indivisible from the elegant tapestry of creation, and a microcosm of the larger pattern of the universe. In this world of grace, a “house made of dawn, house made of the dark cloud,” the soul walks surrounded and steeped in beauty (“Navajo Night Chant”).³⁶

In David Bentley Hart’s assessment, this classic vision of the soul was eventually forsaken for the modern self:

But before modern subjectivity had fully evolved and emerged from the waters, a person was indeed conceived as a living soul swimming in the deeps, participating in the being of the world, inseparable from the element he or she inhabited and knew; and the soul, rather than the sterile abstraction of an ego was an entire and unified spiritual and corporeal reality; it was the life and form of the body, encompassing every aspect of human existence, from the nous to the animal functions, uniting reason and emotion, spirit and flesh, memory and presence, supernatural longing and natural capacity.³⁷

In this enchanted cosmology, the soul is submerged in the being of the world and is related to the whole of creation; it is the brother of the sun, the sister of the moon, and the child of mother earth.³⁸ And it is of course related to the verbal and musical artistry of the cosmos: When the soul is attuned to and synchronized with grace, it rises into being at the sound of creation's sonata-like summons and moves and dances to the gravitational pull of the heavenly spheres. In fact, as the ancient Pythagoreans, Neoplatonists, and Christian theologians believed, everything is formed with the cadence and rhapsody of poetry and song. God created the universe by the artistry of language like a great orator or musician, filling the silent void of the earth with melody and sonority, producing music from the rotation of the heavenly bodies, so that all of creation became an ode to beauty: the chiming of the planets in their orbits, the splashing voices of the sea, the caroling air, whistling winds, warbling birds, buzzing cicadas, and groaning and pealing thunder.

The concept of the soul in the Middle Ages was a reaping of this Greco-Roman and Jewish-Christian vision, in which music was the food of the soul and a medium of transcendence. Many medieval theologians saw music as both edifying and elevating. They discerned in music a unique mode of perception, one that draws the soul into ethereal spheres of truth. In reference to the musical ear of Gregory of Nyssa, Hart remarks: "According to Gregory of Nyssa, creation is a wonderfully wrought hymn to the power of the Almighty: the order of the universe is a kind of musical harmony, richly and multifariously toned, guided by an inward rhythm and accord, pervaded by an essential symphony."³⁹ In appealing to this great symphony of creation, Gregory of Nyssa clearly resonated with the rich pedagogical culture of early Christianity, in which the sequence of the liberal arts gradually moved in an ascending pattern through grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.⁴⁰ The liberal arts were spiritual exercises that worked to elevate the mind beyond the bedlam of noises

in the world to the perfect consonance of the stars and the beauty beyond them. (Augustine's tract *De musica* is an example of this and culminates in the sixth book with a meditation on the mystical number patterns in music.)⁴¹

Since music is revelatory of the pattern of the universe, not to mention the divine pattern within the human person, sin might be seen as a note of cacophony and discord that suddenly disturbs the soul's rhythm, pace, and sense of time. Thrown off balance and dazed by sin, the soul is now a dancer without grace, knocked awry and tangled up. As the Lord of the dance, however, Christ enters the world to reform, inform, and transform the soul. Christ recovers the soul's dexterity and converts it from the graceless condition of a will that is curved in upon itself to a condition of charity and self-abandon, lost in the arms of the other—the ecstasy of Teresa of Ávila is nothing else.⁴²

While Teresa's ecstasy may be a particularly intense and special case of mysticism and seemingly remote from the experiences of modern man and woman, music has a way of making us all into mystics of sorts, of spreading to us the peace, joy, and knowledge that surpasses all the art and argument of the earth.⁴³ No wonder that Nietzsche considered the intoxicating appeal of Dionysus to be indistinguishable from music.⁴⁴ His own experience of modern music confirmed what the ancient Greeks had understood: that music could seize and shake one's soul in moments of pleasure, and that it is incomparable in its revelatory possibilities. "Compared with music," he wrote, "all communication by words is shameless."⁴⁵ Just as Aquinas considered everything he wrote to be like straw compared to what God had revealed to him, Nietzsche considered music in a similar mystical sense, as a spiritual phenomenon with a unique ability to penetrate the secrets of life.⁴⁶ Western civilization is filled with testimonies of music's mesmerizing and transporting power, its ability to raise the temperature of the soul to feverish highs. Music can hypnotize, as Biggie says, or it can cause us to lose ourselves in it, as Eminem and T.S. Eliot say, or it can simply make us say "uhhhh," to summon Master P.⁴⁷

In following this stirring signature inherent in music, I want to insist that these kinds of spiritual raptures were not just encased in marble and confined to theological circles during the Middle Ages. One would have witnessed a feast of beauty in myriad rituals, carnivals, festivities, and theatrical performances. Unlike the disembodied forms of Christianity that emerged with the modern world like a late-born heresy, Gnostic in inspiration, premodern Christianity was deeply corporeal. One

might say that it had some of the same features as Cervantes's characters in *Don Quixote*: the bodily and sensual sensibilities of Sancho Panza and the magic, marvel, and mysticism of Don Quixote. This Christianity knew the longings of transcendence; the urges of the flesh and *panza*; and the delights of drama, rite, and farce. A rich and round figure, the Catholic baroque soul would increasingly show signs of fragmenting and coming apart, but Cervantes kept it together the way he kept together the bosom friends of his novel: the dreamer and pragmatist, the idealist and realist, the transcendentalist and sensualist.

In other cultures of early modernity, however, the strained ties holding together the "great chain of being" (a vision that integrated divine transcendence and immanence, spirit and flesh, reason and emotions, theory and practice, asceticism and pageantry) increasingly showed signs of rusting and breaking. Under the reforming passion of Protestant Christianity beginning in the sixteenth century, cultures of festivity were gradually replaced by cultures of discipline, leading to forms of Christianity that were more suspicious of ritual, aesthetics, and festivals than the prevailing vision of the Middle Ages.⁴⁸ As early as the Reformation, if not earlier, there was a shift in Christianity from corporeal and ritualized practices toward a disembodied and disenchanted form of Christianity, with heavy emphasis on doctrinal propositions, catechisms, and mental states. Though this trend is also evident in the concerns and mandates of the Counter-Reformation, the Puritan variety of these reforms developed a particular concern with discipline and punishment, as it sought to repress the festive, ecstatic, Dionysian expressions of Christianity with a work ethic of self-regulation, restraint, and order. Modern capitalism, as Max Weber famously argued, would be built of such things.

The forms of culture, religion, and custom that did not conform to the new ideals of self-control and restraint became tantamount to indolence, moral torpor, economic debility, and religious barbarism; in North America, Catholic, American Indian, and African behavior and forms of worship were considered cases in point, specifically prone to idolatry, futility, and dereliction of duty.⁴⁹ To forge a more perfect union of disciplined, rational, and professional modes of life, cultural and religious traits that did not match Calvinist and neo-Stoic values were to be repressed and colonized into submission; they didn't have a future in a well-ordered society. In the case of Catholics, almost everything they did smacked of unproductive and primitive values: sacramental rites and popular festivals, feasting at cemeteries, dancing around the maypole,

the veneration of saints and angels, shrines associated with paganism and the natural world, the aesthetic extravagance of carnival, baroque architecture, and so forth.

Excess and ostentation would fall on hard times in the modern world, leading to a more incorporeal conception of the soul. In someone like René Descartes, this seems clear: his embrace of neo-Stoicism led him to redefine the meaning of “soul,” making it resemble the soul of the philosophers more than the soul of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to paraphrase Blaise Pascal. In my reading, this led to a damming of the torrential tributaries of the soul, to a more sedate and staid view. Here is how Descartes described a “great soul”: “The greatest souls . . . are those whose reasoning powers are so strong and powerful, that although they also have passions, nonetheless their reason remains sovereign.”⁵⁰ What would have he said about the holy madness, flaming eroticism, and emotional rapture of Teresa of Ávila or of the black church that W. E. B. Du Bois later described? “A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize us—a Pythian madness, a demoniac possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word. The people moaned and fluttered, and then the gaunt-checked brown woman beside me suddenly leaped straight into the air and shrieked like a lost soul, while round about came wail and groan and outcry, and scene of human passion such as I had never conceived before.”⁵¹ The congregation’s sensual, aesthetical drama, described here—the guttural murmurs and shouts, the rushing to and fro, waving and clapping of hands, pounding of feet, weeping and laughing, all the eroticism—surely would have been far too profligate and passionate to suit Descartes’s standards. This behavior would have represented the drowning of reason in a deluge of emotion, the rush of blood to the heart that in effect deprives the brain of oxygen. The acquisition of soul demands sobriety, moderation, and reason. For Descartes, black religion, and for that matter the Catholic baroque, would have been quintessential examples of the fall of reason into the undisciplined body of excess and intemperance; they would have been seen as the sudden invasion of a Pythian madness into the sane company of philosophers, or the revenge of Dionysus on the Enlightenment of Descartes’s day.

As I consider throughout this study, there is a shared indulgence in the beauty and sensual delights of the human experience in African American Christianity and a Latin baroque Christianity. Though the former tended to be far more auditory (a stress on the spoken Word), while the latter was more visual (a stress on the Logos in visual and

ceremonial forms), they converged on a deeply felt incarnational theology, one that electrified the body and aroused the festive, mystical energies of religion. In these instances, the representation of soul was deeply aesthetical and ran afoul of modern attempts to rationalize, bureaucratize, and sanitize the human soul, whether in philosophy, civil society, or the new world order of capitalism.

The Ethical Contours of Soul: What Does It Profit a Man . . .

In the new bourgeois marketplace of the early modern period (especially in Protestant countries from the eighteenth century forward), the integrity of the soul was increasingly endangered. The idea of the soul would have to fight for its livelihood in the face of forces that depreciate its value, that barter and exploit it for its economic worth. Like a parable out of the “prosperity gospel” in North America (the conviction that God rewards enterprising behavior with financial blessings), the new capitalist version of the soul likened the Christian message to the values of free enterprise and effectively consecrated the pursuit of wealth. In severing itself from many of the moral fetters of old—the troublesome injunctions to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoner—the modern self was given free rein to pursue material progress without restriction, to pursue self-gratification with impunity.⁵² Classic vices like acquisitive self-interest and greed were magically transformed into benign self-regard, a fundamental right of a modern human person and a guiding principle of the public realm of economics and politics. As Brad Gregory argues, the capitalist society required this new construction of avarice, an ideological about-face that upended the Gospels’ negative view of greed and sought to prove Jesus wrong: you can, after all, serve God and money.⁵³

Of course the classic Christian position on ethics disavows these principles, this entire alchemical business that would commodify and transform the values of the soul into products of gold. We cannot speak of the soul and not address the exorbitant cost of gaining the whole world: namely, the loss of one’s soul (a comment found in all three synoptic Gospels). In assessing this famous adage by Jesus in modern times, it is difficult not to be struck by its relevance and prescience. In contrast to versions of Christianity that hallow the capitalist economy of desire (for fashion, consumer products, fetishes, wealth, etc.), the cultivation of the soul implied in the biblical tradition requires a prophetic, oppositional stand to the sinful drive to possess and dominate the world. It

requires a drastic conversion from self-regard to other-regard, a love that is infinite in scope and more lavish and ostentatious than its competitor's values of limitless consumption.⁵⁴

Those who adhered to this classic reading of the concept of the soul and resisted the temptations of the new continued to shepherd many of the grievances brought against the most vulgar and defiling aspects of capitalism. Already at the dawning of modernity, in the early eighteenth century, a figure like Soren Kierkegaard expressed his befuddled dismay at the seeming ease with which Christianity embraced the new bourgeois world. He called this new order "Christendom," a term that signified the betrayal of Christianity and victory for the gods of profit and shameless self-interest (there are no Christians in Christendom, Kierkegaard famously remarked). Christendom represented for him an unmistakable calamity, the parade of glory and power instead of abasement and abnegation, the promotion of sentimentality and mawkishness in lieu of the message of the cross, philanthropy instead of true agape.⁵⁵ In these betrayals and others, Christendom was for Kierkegaard a secular order entirely devoid of Christian principles, a civilization now ruled, secretly, by the golden calf or the great beast of Revelation. As the lowly hidden God, a man of sorrows, despised and rejected by all, Jesus is a stranger to Christendom, his teachings discarded, discounted, and unheeded.

In confronting his readers with the strange wisdom of the cross, Kierkegaard reminds us that any Christian rendition of theology begins and ends with the full scope of Jesus's incarnation, born into humble circumstances and fated to die in humiliating and ignominious circumstances. Christendom was a target of so much of Kierkegaard's fury because it recoiled from this difficult message, preferring a theology of triumph to the desolation and absurdity of the cross, aligning itself with the rich and powerful instead of the poor and destitute, preferring Easter over Good Friday. In its glaring discomfort with suffering and death, with human finitude and frailty, Christendom retreated from these realities the way the priest and Levite cringed at the wounded man on the way to Jericho.

The American Self

North America, of course, established its own variety of Christendom, complete with many of the same characteristics identified by Kierkegaard. If we recall, for example, that the early Massachusetts Bay emigrants were largely members of the entrepreneurial and professional

middle classes (tradesmen, merchants, lawyers, artisans, and clerics), we can understand Carl Degler's comment that capitalism came to America in the first ships and Max Weber's argument that the capitalist spirit arrived before the capitalist order.⁵⁶ It's difficult to dispute the powerful conjunction between Puritanism and capitalism in the American experiment; it was the wind behind the *Mayflower's* sails. Supported by the divine right of possession and buttressed by the biblical stories of exodus and conquest, this experiment soon achieved combustible, explosive success in the domains of industry and free enterprise. It was not long before this new Israel was designated by John Winthrop "the city on the hill," a light of free enterprise and unlimited material and spiritual progress.⁵⁷

By the nineteenth century the powerful union of Protestantism and capitalism had picked up steam, as many preachers turned the pulpit, in the words of Sacvan Bercovitch, "into a platform for the American Way. The great crusades of Lyman Beecher and Charles Grandson Finney brought 'Gospel tidings'—rugged individualism in business enterprise, laissez-faire in economic theory, and constitutional democracy in political thought."⁵⁸ The religious revivalists of the period were fusing Protestantism and American patriotism, Christian morality and capitalist economics, all in the interest of consecrating the Christendom of the New World. With piety and prosperity welded together in this way, every instance of visible success, moral or material, confirmed God's providential designs for America.

For Kierkegaard, as for the classic Protestant reformers, this amounted to a pagan or secular morality, nothing remotely close to the dark wisdom of the cross, where God appeared incognito in the distressed face of the beggar and vagabond.⁵⁹ As a betrayal of Christianity's difficult message, Christendom seemed to insist on the opposite: God's presence in the gilded facades of worldly success. In this scenario, the poor and powerless were abject instances of moral bankruptcy and spiritual failure. In fact, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the poor and unemployed, vagabonds and prostitutes, orphans and delinquents were depicted in such terms, examples of failed values and failed lives. But more ominously, as Michel Foucault has argued, these groups—especially those of a darker shade of brown—were turned into pathological subjects and in many cases criminalized.⁶⁰

Because of new legislation directed at poor, vagabond, and colonized subjects in both Europe and North America, in the nineteenth century a whole new class of illegalities was created, and prison populations

began to swell as a result.⁶¹ This repressive climate, in Foucault's reading, "increased the occasions of offenses, and threw to the other side of the law many individuals who, in other conditions, would not have gone over to specialized criminality."⁶² Whether through travel restrictions, greater demands for productivity in the workplace, discrimination in the judicial system, or vicious practices of displacement, exclusion, and incarceration, many new laws and regulations gave free rein to practices of ruthless injustice, the hand of naked power held out in gestures of benevolence.⁶³ An example is the benign-sounding California Act of 1850 (An Act for the Government and Protection of Indians), which permitted officials to arrest and sell to the highest bidder Indians who were found intoxicated or vagrant or were accused of crimes. The act even gave whites the power to purchase Indian children by making available certificates for the custody of these children. (Over the next approximately thirteen years, an estimated twenty thousand American Indian children were held in bondage.)⁶⁴

Bourgeois ideals of freedom, in short, coexisted with violent measures that denied liberty to many. Republican ideals were plainly mocked by the existence of chattel slavery, wage slavery, and other methods of punishment and abuse. It was culture well practiced in the sophistry of freedom, but with a sanctimonious eloquence that rang hollow for many Americans. For those who lived in the underground of American society, such as blacks, American Indians, and Mexicans, life remained confining and restricted, as if, to invoke Foucault once again, they were "the lepers of old."⁶⁵

For the reader curious about the relevance of this discussion to the sublime matter of the soul, I recall the devil's offer of world dominion to Jesus: "All this I will give to you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me. Jesus said to him, away from me, Satan" (Matt. 4:8-10). In the Christian mind, the matter of worldly dominion has everything to do with the well-being of the soul. When power and wealth become the ruling principle of one's life, the soul is dethroned and replaced by something unworthy of its name, something that dons a crown of self-aggrandizing vanity instead of a crown of thorns. By considering the shadowy opposite of the soul, its rival and alter ego, we hope to deepen our understanding of the terms and implications involved in this regime change.

The shifting connotations of pride are further evidence of this altered state of affairs in the modern world. In Andrew Delbanco's reading, the American self—self-made, calculating, overweening—became increasingly

heedless of traditional warnings of pride until it became a god in its own right (the promise of the serpent in Genesis). “Pride of self, once the mark of the devil,” writes Delbanco, “was now not just a legitimate emotion but America’s uncontested god. And since everyone had his own self, everyone had his own god.”⁶⁶ Just as avarice, once a mark of sin, became a legitimate and vital force in modern economics, pride of self was cleansed of the devil’s shadow and made into a staple of American individualism. The American self thus came into its own in the nineteenth century. By fiercely asserting itself against all odds, dangers, and aboriginal rights, pride of self grew to monstrous proportions and validated the expansionist urges of land-grabbers, settlers, businessmen, whalers, and forty-niners. As S. C. Gwynne puts it in his powerful narrative of the westward push of Americans, the main players in North America, in contrast to the presidio soldiers and missionaries of the Spanish New World, were rugged and obdurate pioneers; the “vanguard was not federal troops and federal forts, but simple farmers imbued with a fierce Calvinist work ethic, steely optimism, and a cold-eyed aggressiveness that made them refuse to yield even in the face of extreme danger. . . . They habitually declined to honor government treaties with Native Americans, believing in their hearts that the land belonged to them. They hated Indians with a particular passion, considering them something less than fully human, and thus blessed with inalienable rights to absolutely nothing.”⁶⁷ Needless to say, the compulsive belief in manifest destiny, reinforced by the American civil religion of exceptionalism and triumphalism, led to numerous calamities, if not outright genocide, for American Indians.⁶⁸

In a Christian assessment, these attitudes smack of idolatry: an anthropomorphic god fashioned out of the material of the human ego, and driven by an insatiable appetite for the world’s goods. Those in previous ages had names for this behavior—blasphemy, sin, idolatry—but Americans gave a new spin to this approach, labeling it enterprising, pioneering, and dauntless. This was a conceit so brazen that not only would this expansionist behavior annex Texas, swallow parts of Mexico, seize American Indian lands, and enslave Africans, but even the heavens seemed vulnerable to its oversized willfulness. Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* sized up the attitude perfectly: “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man. I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.”⁶⁹ If that century of extraordinary economic and territorial growth apotheosized the self in this way, the principles associated with the classic soul were at risk of going the way of the bison on the Great Plains.

One may choose to embrace the concept of the modern self over the old creed of the soul (this choice itself is one of the hallmarks of modernity), but I am interested in the growing feeling of alarm and foreboding, even outrage, about this decision in favor of the modern self. In nineteenth-century America, dissenting voices—warning of vanity like the preacher of Ecclesiastes—were heard from a host of American isolatoes, from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain. Whether or not they were “voluptuaries of the soul”—Theodore Parker’s description of Transcendentalists—there was a palpable concern among all of them about the survival of the soul in an age of positivism and “gilded” dreams.⁷⁰ In some cases, showing a clear sympathy for Christian socialism, writers sketched grand capitalists as swindlers, confidence men, and vampire-like creatures, thirsty for the blood of the innocent. In Melville’s novel *Redburn*, for example, a man of this sort appears in all of his deformed and grotesque glory: “He was an abominable looking old fellow, with cold, fat, jelly-like eyes; and avarice, heartlessness, and sensuality stamped all over him. He seemed all the time going through some process of mental arithmetic; doing sums with dollars and cents; his very mouth, wrinkled and drawn up at the corners, looked like a purse.”⁷¹ There is something about this figure that conjures the image of Satan, with his deformed body mirroring his deformed soul. The spell of money has become a trance in the man’s life, and his soul is now comatose, dead to any higher values. If this grim apostle of money is a representative capitalist, Melville’s sketch is a cautionary tale of capitalism gone terribly wrong, a system without humaneness, without beauty. He registers the same concern that his mentor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, had about the United States: “a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, not anything but a commonplace prosperity in broad and simple daylight.”⁷²

Though evident in most of his novels, the aspersions Melville cast upon capitalism achieve their finest formulation in *Moby Dick*, especially, in my view, when the author makes an explicit connection between slavery and the business of moneymaking. When Pip, the black cabin boy, is thrown overboard, Stubb can only think of the financial forfeiture if the whale is lost: “We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama.” Ishmael’s response captures the species of being that Stubb represents: “Though man loves his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence.”⁷³ In recognizing

human ambiguity—the capacity for both love and greed—Melville pays some attention here to the noble nature of humankind, but the stronger strain is the animal-like impulses that degrade the human spirit and transform our nature into that of a predatory shark or wolf: *homo homini lupus*. In business and politics, as in life, these latter propensities have a way of shipwrecking the higher aspirations of the soul.

As the twentieth century set in, the climate for the soul became even more inclement and severe, leading many writers of the age to warn of the soul's wizening or disappearance altogether. F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* can be read in this vein, as a cautionary tale about the high price that the pursuit of fortune exacts from one's moral character and spiritual integrity. Jay Gatsby has been consumed by the romance of money, and his life has been given to the service of a "vast, vulgar, meretricious beauty."⁷⁴ However dazzling and magnificent this dream of wealth appears in his eyes, the novel shows how specious and cheap this mirage of beauty is, how much it can entice and ruin at the same time. Though Fitzgerald never displayed "the conviction of a revolutionary" in his work, he certainly channeled the "smoldering hatred of a peasant" toward the moneyed, leisured classes in America—the beautiful and the damned—in much of his fiction.⁷⁵ Marius Bewley sums up *The Great Gatsby* thus: "In the end, *The Great Gatsby* is a dramatic affirmation in fictional terms of the American spirit in the midst of an American world that denies the soul."⁷⁶

This denial of the soul is by no means a temptation of the secular realm alone; for Fitzgerald, the malady had a long reach and spread like contagion into the heart of the church. The words of Beatrice Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* have much of Fitzgerald in them: "Often she deplored the bourgeois quality of the American Catholic clergy, and was quite sure that had she lived in the shadow of the great Continental cathedrals her soul would still be a thin flame on the mighty altar of Rome."⁷⁷

This character wants the warmth, incandescence, radiance, and burning colors of a darker, more mysterious variety of Catholicism. Thus the novelist pines for alternatives to American middle-class values (the cheery optimism, the family values, the worship of financial success, the triumphant God) and at one point declares an attraction to the "Mexican God," who would be something strangely different, more like a baroque God from a land of "sad, haunting music and many odors . . . where the shades of night skies and sunsets would seem to reflect only moods of passion: the color of lips and poppies."⁷⁸ In this exotic mood—describing a dream of the pageantry of the soul—the

novel closes with the protagonist throwing his pen and soul to the side of socialism, that most frightening idea for the bourgeois American. The implication is plain in Fitzgerald's first novel: the soul flickers and falters in America, and he dreams of other fields and meadows in which his soul can grow, roam, and rebel.

If it is not obvious, I am arguing that the idea of the soul in the classic Christian tradition is bathed in sunsets and twilights of this sort, and many of the artists discussed here sought to preserve this vintage, dusk-like representation. In fearing the betrayal of the soul in America—where the soul is confused with commonplace prosperity without shadow, antiquity, mystery, or the cross—they raised their voices in foreboding and forewarning.

Many black and Hispanic writers would join this chorus of discontent. In Latin America the budding movement *modernismo* arose as a critical reaction to scientific positivism and economic materialism. (José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* and Rubén Darío's poetry are classic examples, later followed by the avant-garde and so-called magical realism.) In North America African American writers cried out against assaults on the bodies and souls of their community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both cases, Latin Americans and African Americans largely embraced Christian ideas, adding their own signatures and styles to classic views of the soul and consequently fashioning fresh iterations of the "moods of passion"—haunting music, ostentatious pageantry, existential burdens—that are the stuff of the soul. Though often buried under the landslides of economic and political success in America, their perspectives are fresh riffs on the priceless value of soul in our modern or postmodern world. W. E. B. Du Bois held one such perspective; I begin with him because he is a powerful example of the kind of soul that burns brighter than a thin flame, more like a conflagration that swept across the plains and hills of America: the soul of black folks. Though Du Bois's understanding of the soul was deeply informed by the black religious experience in America, it was also indebted to the romantic tradition, and for that reason I consider him in the second part of this chapter, with an emphasis on the cultural, stylistic, and profane understandings of the soul.

PROFANE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SOUL

Romantic Soul: Herder and Du Bois

Du Bois's life echoes many of the themes we have explored thus far, especially the construction of the soul as antibourgeois, a weapon of

protest against the vulgar drive for material fortune. This theme emerges most explicitly from Du Bois's notorious arguments with Booker T. Washington. As is well known, their relationship became strained and sour over fundamental definitions of success in America. In Du Bois's estimation, Washington's vision for education, in its concrete manifestation at the Tuskegee Institute, was far too conciliatory to the American idioms of triumphant commercialism and material prosperity and disappointingly silent when it came to black civil rights. To Du Bois and others like him, the model of industrial training at Tuskegee implied that black liberation would hinge on blacks' success in the marketplace and adoption of the American dream, with all of its glittering promises and fantasies, its cornucopia of goods. The success of the black community would be assessed by how it capitalized on its opportunities and on its diligence, thrift, and industry in the American economy.⁷⁹ For Du Bois, sounding like a classic biblical prophet, this particular dream smacked of fanaticism and misplaced reverence, as it reduced the purpose of education to economic advancement and worldly success. Du Bois of course withheld his allegiance to such a vision, arguing that the examined life had an infinite worth beyond its cash value.

Even when black folks baptized themselves in the rivers of commerce, Du Bois complained, it did not end blatant violations of human rights, the systematic acts of terror and violence against the black community. The black man had often cried "amen" to the principles of commerce and duly done obeisance to them, "but before that nameless prejudice that leaps beyond all this he stands helpless, dismayed, and well-nigh speechless; before that personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy, the all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black. . . . Before this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom 'discouragement' is an unwritten word."⁸⁰ In these eloquent lines and others, Du Bois left no doubt where the fault lay. Even while navigating the tempestuous waters of American life, black Americans were subject to vicious undercurrents and tides that sank many of their endeavors and hopes. For America to advance on this matter, laws would have to change, rights would have to be defended, and justice would have to be reinforced. As the years went on, Du Bois only strengthened his prophetic commitment to these things, and he always believed that the stuff of liberal education—the training of the mind, heart, and soul—was imperative in the struggle for equality and justice. The ideals of good,

beauty, and spirituality were anything but idle, metaphysical matters; they would enliven the search for human dignity and inspire prophetic denunciations of the “dusty desert of dollars” in America.⁸¹ He claimed Socrates, Jesus, and St. Francis of Assisi as allies.⁸²

Besides echoing religious and philosophical themes, Du Bois’s depiction of the soul no doubt expressed the worldview of many romantics. His years of graduate study in Berlin (1892–1894) affected him deeply. Besides having the opportunity to learn from thinkers like Friedrich Schiller and Wilhelm von Humboldt, the imposing ghosts of Johann Goethe, Karl Marx, and Johann Herder were everywhere, and they haunted and instructed him on the matter of soul. During those years he swam in deep rivers of romanticism, and this clearly saturated his thinking. Considering the widespread discontent that many romantics felt with the Enlightenment—especially over its instrumental, syllogistic uses of reason and its alliance with market values and industrial capitalism—the influence is obvious. Almost all romantics took aim at the soul-deforming impact of modern culture, especially in its most sordid incarnation in the industrial world, and sought to recover the value of art, music, poetry, and religion. In a sense, God’s grandeur was at stake in a world where, to quote Gerard Manley Hopkins, “all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil.”⁸³ Du Bois certainly fit into this pantheon of renegade dissidents who raised their pens and paintbrushes in protest against the financier and capitalist, the man who “feels no poetry and hears no song.”⁸⁴

But there were other romantic innovations surrounding the question of soul that left their imprint on Du Bois, in particular the concept of soul as *Volksgeist*, or the spirit/soul of a people. In this reading, “soul” belongs to an entire culture and is synonymous with the spiritual life of a nation. Kwame Anthony Appiah describes it thus: “We can think of the soul here not as an individual’s unique possession, but rather as something she shares with the folk to which she belongs.”⁸⁵ As a communal possession, soul is a product of the finest achievements of a culture, especially its folklore, poetry, myth, and music. By taking aim at the arid rationalism, elitism, and materialism of the Enlightenment, the romantics saw themselves as protecting the endangered life of the spirit, especially its full-bodied, aromatic richness in the culture of a people.

Just as Du Bois imbibed this spirit as a protest against U.S. expansionism and capitalism, a host of Latin American writers and artists would follow suit and embrace the language of soul in opposition to the most base and ignoble of North American ambitions. Hispanic literati came to consider themselves priests of the eternal imagination or, in José Enrique

Rodó's words, "keeper of souls" at war with the spiritual philistines of modern mass society and capitalism. (Besides Rodó, others in this camp include José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Francisco Calderón, Alejandro Korn, and Rubén Darío.)⁸⁶ For both African Americans and Latin Americans, the romantic vision of "soul" proved elastic and malleable enough to reconfigure in light of each distinct ethnicity and noble enough to confer dignity on each of their traditions. When denied political or economic power, the cultures on the edges of Western modernity adopted "soul"—and its spiritual manifestations in dance, music, folklore, and myth—as an idiom in their struggle for equality and justice.

In seeking to resuscitate the ailing, bedridden notion of myth and soul in this way, the romantics of various stripes, in Europe and beyond, saw themselves as physicians of national well-being (the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were an era of nationalism, after all). By recovering the lost stories, legends, epics, vernacular languages, and songs of a *Volk*, they would infuse a feeling of pride in cultures and traditions that had been devalued, exploited, and dismissed. "Mythic poetry," writes Bruce Lincoln, "which the Enlightenment disparaged as a form of primitive irrationality, had been re-theorized under the signs of authenticity, tradition, and national identity."⁸⁷ What was trampled upon by the Enlightenment became something like buried treasure for romantics, and every effort was made to excavate and preserve such precious relics. Romantic artists thus hunted for these folk treasures in an effort to shore up cultural nationalism: James MacPherson (1736–1796) published poetry that was purported to be the ancient voice of the Scots; epics like the *Nibelungenlied*, *Kalevala*, *El Cid*, and *Chanson de Roland* were released as testaments to the greatness of their respective cultures; and later, as the twentieth century arrived, many poets and modernists turned to the cultural reserves of their national traditions. Yeats turned to Celtic legends and myths, Miguel Ángel Asturias looked to Mayan myths, Alejo Carpentier recovered Afro-Latin religions, Gerard Manley Hopkins focused on the Anglo-Saxon vernacular, Lorca celebrated Spanish ballads and "deep song," Du Bois turned to black spirituals, and the list goes on. Recall in this vein James Joyce's definition of his literary purpose: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."⁸⁸

For the romantics, the "uncreated conscience" of each unique culture was at stake in the war with the defilers of soul. Though their dispute with the Enlightenment was unmistakably modern and new, we can also trace the issues involved here back to the ancient Greeks. As early

as Heraclitus and Plato, poets were often slighted by philosophers, such as when Heraclitus heaped scorn on the *hoi polloi* (common people) for their intellectual shortcomings and affection for poetry: “What understanding or intellect have they? They trust in poets of the common people and treat the mob as their teacher, not knowing that ‘the masses are bad, the good are few.’”⁸⁹ And Plato followed the basic outline of this model, thinking that *mythoi* and music appealed to the basest part of the human soul (the emotions more than reason) and to the baser forms of humanity, like women, children, and the lower classes.⁹⁰ If he conceded the value of poetry, myth, and music, it was largely for those who were unable to follow the subtleties of philosophical argumentation or, more interestingly, on occasions when philosophical certainty could not be established, such as in the fate of the soul after death or on the nature of the gods. (This is obvious in *The Timaeus*, in which he resorts to myth to make sense of the creation of the universe.)

Whatever the case, it is clear that the romantics wanted to recover the Greek poets (Homer, Hesiod, the tragedians) more than the philosophers and to disturb the hierarchical privileging of prose over poetry, logos over mythos, analytical reason over eros, theory over music, and propositional argumentation over narrative. They were challenging the disembodiment of language from oral inflections, rhythms, and timbres, and they were challenging the rupture and bifurcation of language and music, reason and emotion, form and content, and theory and practice. By reuniting these dimensions—a search for the other half in this dualism, in the manner of the myth of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*—they would nurse the fractured soul back to health, restore humanity’s original nature, and return people to a time when wordsmiths were singers and mythmakers, rhymers, and signifying poets.

Du Bois’s deeply felt identification with the folk songs and spirituals of African Americans can be seen as a note in this larger cultural score. In choosing to adopt Herder’s popular understanding of folk-soul, he placed his work in the romantic context of *Sturm und Drang*: “So dawned the time of *Sturm und Drang*: storm and stress today rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and rending of soul.”⁹¹ Here Du Bois clearly catches the wave of romanticism’s emotional unrest and turmoil—storm and stress—but he also gives it a distinct meaning, fraught with the stress of being black in America. Rocked on all sides by violent waters, he says, the black soul is torn in two and unreconciled, striving, on the one hand, for participation in America, and on the other,

for the preservation of African identity in a nation that smells of burning black flesh.⁹² Besides implying that one can belong to two different *Volkgeists*, an African and an Anglo-American (a significant point itself), the most striking element of these ruminations has to be the glaring portrait of the psychic torment and physical rupture of black lives. Du Bois's reflections on black soul are always close to a threnody, dirge, or jeremiad, and they translate the raw forms of racism and terrorism into the idioms of high culture, converting the screams and sobs of slave ships, auction blocks, and cotton fields into the stuff of literature. Similar to the way the writers of the American Renaissance sourced and refined native preaching styles in the nineteenth century, Du Bois transformed the popular sentiments and idioms of black America into a more polished literary art.⁹³ This is nowhere more evident than in his powerful analysis of the "sorrow songs" of Afro-America; it is in their melodies, born of the dust of toil, he remarked, that the soul finds its most articulate and exuberant expression.

Du Bois considered the spirituals—"the rhythmic cry of the slave"—the most beautiful expression of human experience born on this side of the sea.⁹⁴ For him, these folk songs were eloquent proof that slaves had an undeniable capacity for grandeur in ideas and emotions. They were evidence of artistic genius among the oppressed and despised in America, proof of black folks' deep well of spirituality, their hidden springs of magnanimity. Sometimes muted and weary, then ecstatic and effervescent, sometimes broken with trouble but still dogged in hope, they were almost always live wires of emotion that burned through pain and despair. With pitches and pulses that caused the mercury of the soul to rise to its summit, this musical folk poetry poured over the listener in tides of emotion, spilling light and harmony into a world of darkness and dissonance, breathing grace and fire into every nook and cranny of the soul. Where blacks had to "roll through an unfriendly world," Du Bois saw these songs as something like the crooning of a mother's alto voice: "Mary, don't you moan, don't you weep."⁹⁵

As many writers have noted (Albert Raboteau, James Cone, Eddie Glaude, and others), Du Bois may have overstated the otherworldly emphasis of the spirituals (claiming that they could be religiously fatalist and escapist), but he saw with great insight their aesthetic value, that they were fundamentally ennobling of black dignity and transformed the Babel of suffering into a liturgy of song, dance, and ecstasy.⁹⁶ Like a religious incantation and ritual, these canticles beseeched God with body and soul, wail and moan, complaint and supplication, and gave

the human spirit a chance to catch the Holy Ghost, to be seized and baptized by fire. Whatever else would happen, for Du Bois this music was a tangible example—in contradiction to the Enlightenment’s disdain for the masses—of the rich poetry of the humble slaves, the embodiment of their most primal instincts, desires, affections, fears, dreams, and hopes.⁹⁷

The key to Du Bois’s analysis of black folk-soul is the simple yet radical claim that these cultural liturgies were the equal of any other artistic achievement in Europe or elsewhere. On this point he followed Herder’s refusal to rank the *Volkgeist* of various nations. (Terry Eagleton refers to Herder, accordingly, as the father of cultural studies.)⁹⁸ In contrast to some other German thinkers, including Heinrich von Treitschke, a teacher of Du Bois in Berlin, Herder championed a tolerant cultural and linguistic pluralism, without any presumption of cultural inferiority on the part of these national spiritualities; for Herder, cultural differences were incommensurable, not tiered.⁹⁹ He viewed cultural and linguistic variety as something like a great orchestra of humanity, with each culture contributing different sounds and instruments, each gifted and worthy of a seat in this ensemble of musicians, none better than the other.

In spite of Herder’s pluralistic vision, however, the concept of soul was later desecrated by the German Nazis, South African Afrikaners, and other racist regimes of the twentieth century. In their hands, as George Fredrickson has demonstrated, folk-soul became indistinguishable from an obsession with the purity of bloodlines and thus was synonymous with a version of cultural identity cleansed of all foreign contaminants.¹⁰⁰ Used as an ideological ruse in the battle with all “inferior” races and cultures, folk-soul was increasingly stained by fantasies of racial essentialism and cultural dominance. Since the history of “soul” includes this vicious legacy of racism, these facts should give us pause. Racism was born out of an impulse similar to, though wildly perverted from, that which led to the formation of folk-soul: namely, the desire to create cohesion, belonging, and national identity. In the case of racism, however, essentialist categories of race and identity led the proponents of folk-soul to create pyramids of domination, with their own racial group at the peak.¹⁰¹

As I see it, this leap into the mire of modern racism represented an idolatrous caricature and misrepresentation of soul. When the soul is dragged through the dirty waters of racism, we end up with a perversion of the concept, a notion that shares hardly anything with the classic

view of the soul in Christianity and very little with the views of soul among the best of the romantics and modernists. In these latter instances, as in the work of Du Bois, Lorca, or Ellison, folk-soul is the scourge of materialism, possessive individualism, cultural elitism, and discrimination.¹⁰² It is a communal value that seeks to preserve the spiritual treasures of culture even as it invokes a radical and transformative future.

The Power of Blackness

In the best understandings, the vision of soul avoided the crude disfigurements of racism and instilled a healthy sense of pride in cultural traditions that had been relegated to the dungeons of history. It tapped into subterranean rivers to water the roots of one's cultural traditions, turning something once uprooted into a healthy family tree. As Yeats put it, this sort of work amounted to the "calling of the Muses home."¹⁰³ When invoking the Muses (daughters of Zeus and the goddess Mnemosyne, or "Memory"), the epic poet was recalling and preserving the stories of old; and when the bard sang his poetry with a lyre—the particular instrument associated with Apollo—the poet effectively joined knowledge of the past (a gift of the Muses) with a seer-like knowledge of the future (associated with Apollo).¹⁰⁴ In this construction, words and odes, melodies, and stories all play a key role in defining a people's past and future: where they have come from and where they are going.

It was a "homecoming" of this sort that motivated Du Bois—and later cultural nationalists—to write essays paying homage to what black folks had endured and overcome in America. Resisting attempts to silence and bury black memories in an unmarked grave of dishonor, he exhumed the memory of the dead not only to rewrite the American past, but also to prophesy a more just future. Through this reconstruction of American identity—now with the souls of black folks haunting any portrait of life in the United States—Du Bois gave the American experiment a new element to test: the "power of blackness." Though this was Melville's expression—spoken in tribute to Hawthorne's tragic sensibility—Du Bois called this element "home" and made it epitomize the plight of African peoples throughout the globe. In so doing, Du Bois rebaptized the "power of blackness," plunging it into dark waters and branding it with the mark of the runaway slave, exploited sharecropper, or urban indigent. The meaning of "soul" was transfigured, not in dazzling lightness, but in darker shades, as if it had been suddenly pulled through the mud and dirt like the face of the blind beggar when Jesus

smear mud on him (John 9:1–7) or when Jacob wrestled with God in the dirt by the river Jabbok (Gen. 32:24–32).

Whereas in Hawthorne’s and Melville’s writings “the power of blackness” was synonymous with a seer-like vision of evil, passed on to them by their sin-obsessed Puritan ancestors, for Du Bois it was the power of actual black lives to scale mountains of injustice and oppression. Du Bois did not deny the existential account; he simply broadened it to include the untold stories of those on the dark side of the veil; in effect, he added a “thick description” to Melville’s vision. Through his eyes this concept became a trope of artistic and cultural achievement in the face of centuries of abuse and enslavement. Black soul was the rising phoenix out of the ashes of conquest and affliction, the strange fruit that bloomed in the most blighted of conditions. By fleshing out the meaning of “soul” and “blackness” in relation to the specific experiences and achievements of black folks in America, Du Bois added a certain depth and richness to these terms that was lacking in even the best American Gothic writers.

At the same time, there is something more to this portrait of blackness that takes us beyond the urbane and highbrow genius of Du Bois, deeper into the heart of the profane. In honor of Leslie Fiedler or Melville, we might call this the Faustian path of soul, or in honor of Lorca, the way of *duende*, or for hip-hop, the raw, vernacular version of soul.¹⁰⁵ In each case, the path of soul requires us to swerve from piety and polished erudition to travel into more dangerous and forbidden domains of human experience. In straying from orthodox paths in this way, we open ourselves to the wilder, funkier, and more eccentric possibilities of soul, something closer to the streetwise imagination of Jean-Michel Basquiat than the classic mind of a Michelangelo, closer to the gritty, vulgar insights of hip-hop than a Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, or Richard Wagner. In confining our search for soul to conventional piety or classical music and art, we risk lulling the creative imagination to sleep and consequently neglecting the moments of clarity and beauty that happen in surprising and unexpected locations: in the boisterous and crowded realities of urban life, in riotous and insolent music, in forbidden dances, and in strange and raucous thoughts. It could be that the blasts of noise in orthodox traditions—dreary dogmatics, hypocritical piety, and repressive righteousness—drone on and prevent us from hearing new sounds or from seeing the pined beauty in “all things counter, original, spare, strange.”¹⁰⁶

In the modern era the legacy of spiritual, aesthetic, and moral revolt—inspired by the example of Jesus in his agitation with religious

authorities—finds many disciples in America, including figures as disparate as Melville and Du Bois, Howlin' Wolf and Tupac. In their flirtations with blackness, the traditional patterns of soul are battered and smashed, then suddenly reconstituted again to make something truly original and unforeseen. Based on their examples, exile from society and conventional institutions is not only a handicap; it may lead to unique possibilities in perception, vision, or experience. Melville's Ishmael describes these possibilities thus—"a long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery"—and then adds, "I myself am a savage."¹⁰⁷ By identifying a dimension of savagery within his own being, he essentially establishes his likeness to everyone beyond the pale of the civilized world. Like his namesake in the Bible (the biblical Ishmael is exiled along with his African mother, Hagar), Melville's Ishmael will wander the earth with other exiles and savages and come to the realization that they all share the same humanity. In the course of his unlikely relationship with Queequeg (the tattooed heathen called "Son of Darkness" by Captain Bildad), Ishmael reaches the conclusion that this "wild idolater," worshipper of a black god, is nothing less than his fellow man, to whom his respect and love are owed: "Consequently," he concludes, "I must unite with him in his (religion); ergo, I must turn idolater."¹⁰⁸ Rebellious syllogisms of this kind—a mutiny against the legal and moral laws of his day and an embrace of outcast lives and estranged sensibilities—are the basis for Melville's own judgment that he had written a wicked book.¹⁰⁹

In this reading, if one attained the power of soul, it would be achieved by mirroring the human cargo of Melville's ship, freighted as it was with the meanest sailors and savages, renegades and castaways, maroons and rogues (including an American Indian, a Zoroastrian, a Polynesian, an African, black Americans, Quakers, etc.). Soul in Melville would thus contain the whole cosmos; it would be one of the roughs and have its helm and rudder steered by tattooed heathens and sons of darkness. In archetypal American fashion, the soul would become a melting pot for the lives of many people, refined and coarse, graceful and rowdy, with this legion of styles gelling into one, while still allowing space for each one's unique flavor.

In rummaging through the nether parts of the human soul in these ways and allowing ourselves to be schooled by the renegades and castaways of social and religious life, we naturally enter a battleground on which a life and death struggle ensues with the problem of evil, or in

Job-like fashion, with God; this, too, is part of the power of blackness. In this case, the most profound quests of the soul depend on the spirit's capacity to scrutinize the wreckage of history and to face God in the style of the biblical patriarchs who defied him, moments of the deepest spiritual sublimity, when grace drips into the deepest basins of the soul, only, it seems, in the midnight hours of anguish.

And now, in our own modern context, these examples have multiplied in direct proportion to the troubles of our age, so that such ordeals have become the signs of the most credible kind of soulfulness. In American musical traditions, whether the blues, jazz, R & B, soul, funk, deep song, son, or salsa, the power of blackness surely includes refrains of agony and quarrels with God. As American musicians found their voice, they channeled their experiences of marginalization through their music and directed some of their "blues" against the guardians of the sacred. In many cases their art appeared to many as a delicious but dangerous, demonic power, a dark enemy of societal and ecclesiastical norms. As if to feed this judgment, many of these artists channeled the trickster or "bad man" temperament by bringing the noise to genteel society, wreaking havoc in their lyrics and dances and in general playing their music for the demonized others of society. Considered vulgar and coarse, many of these artists would be accused of making deals with the devil at the crossroads or ghettos of American society.

Worship as Defiance

In weighing the nature of "soul" in this study, I devote considerable space to black humors, the products of untamed and raw power, prophecies that unsettle the prevailing rules of society. If it's true, as music critic Jon Pareles writes, that most music "implies that a set of rules is in effect, governing where notes can be placed in pitch and time, and what the acceptable timbres might be,"¹¹⁰ then we can say that the most memorable of American musical styles have challenged these rules, allowing the right amount of anarchy and dissonance to make something unexpected and new, for example, the introduction of an Otis Redding rasp, a Billie Holiday quiver, a flamenco's piercing cry. In the scarred, trembling timbres of these voices, a surfeit of pain seeps into the music and interrupts the orthodox rules of music or society, making for the perfect, dissonant music of the soul. To the ears of genteel society, this is all some kind of black magic, but for those who can appreciate a broader range of creativity, there is a blessed rage for order in these howls of the human voice.

If anything, black musicians in this vein have only proliferated in the post-civil rights generation. The hip-hop generation has brought together a host of trickster figures and organized a coup of civil rights etiquette and propriety. In its mutinous postures, hip-hop took the soul and funk music of earlier generations and made it harder and edgier, deep-fried the funk, so to speak. In “funkifying” this older tradition, hip-hop introduced the speech patterns of street hustlers, thugs, and pimps to the smooth grooves of R & B. With the street vernacular as its medium, hip-hop picked up the scraps of language that other, more refined styles had discarded and disdained; tattered and frayed words seemed more fitting symbols of the lives they lived in the alleyways and projects of the ghetto. So rap music culled the “shunned expressions of disposable people,” as one critic put it, and made beats and rhymes out of these castaway vocabularies.¹¹¹ By using prohibited idioms in a revolutionary manner, hip-hop sought to break free of the prison of language. (Adam Bradley reminds us, after all, that “vernacular” originates from the Greek word for a slave born of his master’s house, *verna*, so hip-hop represents the liberating energy of the vernacular, breaking free of incarcerating conventions and realities.)¹¹²

And if hip-hop is not always revolutionary, it is almost always crafty, astute, and wily. It uses logos—reason, speech—in both modern and ancient ways. As Bruce Lincoln points out, long before the word became synonymous with reason in the age of the Socrates and his disciples, logos was primarily a speech of cunning and guile, employed by the weak and the young against the strong. Homer and Hesiod associated the term with the ruses of deception and duplicity used by trickster figures to compensate for their relative powerlessness (e.g., Hermes, called master of guiles, used his “seductive *logoi*” to trick his older, stronger brother, Apollo; Odysseus is given the epithet “clever” or “cunning” throughout *The Odyssey* as he is shown outwitting stronger opponents).¹¹³ In the case of hip-hop, whether rappers are conjuring Greek or African tricksters, their sly skills can be considered a rendition of this ancient view of logoi, in which subversive slang, outlaw expressions, and irreverent counternarratives are employed by the poor and young to outwit the enemy. In these instances, the playfulness of the trickster, or the Faustian pact as I have described it, is a symbol of defiance, a prophetic disturbance of the repressive aspects of the Puritan American sociopolitical order.¹¹⁴

I think of J. Cole’s description in “Dead Presidents 2” as a combination of the kind of profane cunning and sacred inspiration I have been

discussing here: “my flow like a devil spit it, and heaven sent it.”¹¹⁵ In this compact sentence, J. Cole encapsulates many of these disparate experiences in black music. His lyrics, he suggests, are gritty and slick like the devil’s language or perhaps twisted like a serpent’s tongue, but finally inspired by God. At its best, the genre of rap is a forked tongue in this way, sometimes venomous and poisonous, biting hard at social decorum and political perfidy, but then, in the same breath, spitting faith and hope, transforming the poisons of ghetto life into a cure. With traces of both poison and potion, hip-hop turns music and lyrics into a wily form of speech (*logoi*), against the black holes of the bourgeois capitalist order that suck light from the lives of the poor and disenfranchised. “I pay the toll fighting for my own soul,” Lauryn Hill remarks, “’cause the bourgeois type of mental sucks like a black hole.”¹¹⁶

In these examples the meaning of “soul” swings back and forth between the sacred and profane, high and low culture; it can signify spiritual complexity as well as a culture’s street wisdom and cool aplomb, especially in music, dance, and verbal virtuosity. In her reflections on soul and hip-hop, Imani Perry clarifies the issues: “By soul I mean that which has some spiritual depth and deep cultural and historical resonances to be felt through the kind of music and sounds made by the vocalists. . . . Soulful music is music of joy and pain, unself-consciously wedding melody and moaning, the sound of the dual terror and exultation of being black in America.”¹¹⁷ In this reading soul gives voice to many layers of style and substance—struggle and suffering, terror and jubilation, vulgarity and sublimity—and stitches them together like an auditory collage or mix-tape of various sentiments, beliefs, and values.¹¹⁸ The product, as Nas once said about his own style, is a wild arrangement of poetry, preaching, and straight-up hustlin’.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, then, I view the power of blackness through the eyes of these spiritual and cultural styles, in which flirtation with the profane, vulgar, and foul is an instrument of salvation and a disguised form of love and justice. One might say that this construction of blackness contains a heavy amount of irony, in which blasphemous and forbidden thoughts conceal a virtuous interior and saintly soul. In other words, as Kierkegaard and Melville tried to warn us, looks can be deceiving: Beneath the glitter and glamor of Christendom, beneath all of its moral rectitude and sanctimoniousness, there may be hidden sin, a charnel house underneath clean white sepulchers (Melville’s image). Conversely, it could be that true goodness remains unrecognized by the rulers of the world or the guardians of holiness, so that if we want to search for God,

or search for soul, we need to turn to the parts of our world where poverty and desperation are rampant: in the trials of the streets, in the crowded despair of prisons, and in the crosses of the hood. This is to say that the path to redemption in Judaism or Christianity is never a straight line but rather something more rambling and unpredictable, like the trail of a vagabond, or the shuffling, whirling, and winding of a break-dancer, or the sly contrivances of a rapper. Yeats was right, in this sense, to call good and evil “crude analogies,” because sometimes the path of soulfulness requires the intrepid and bold daring of a soul rebel in the mold of Bob Marley, Dr. King, or Cesar Chavez, and sometimes it requires the impiety of a blues or rap artist in the mold of Billie Holiday, Jelly Roll Morton, or Tupac Shakur.¹²⁰ It seems to me that this is what Emerson meant when he said that the soul *becomes* when the saint is confounded with the rogue, or what Melville meant when he channeled Job’s defiant roar: “I now know that thy right worship is defiance.”¹²¹

Sometimes right worship is indeed defiance, and sometimes, to cite Melville again, it is to kneel and revere. If anything, this study explores the ideas, sounds, and styles that include moments of both, that know when it is fitting to negate and defy and when we must affirm in a loving embrace. If there are moments when we must deviate from the crudest versions of “good,” when we must, as Simone Weil says, turn away from God, it will not be long before we fall back into his arms.¹²² The jazz great Louis Armstrong expressed his own version of this sentiment. When accused of turning away from God and embracing the devilish delights of blues and jazz, he would respond in words penned by W. C. Handy (though in his own rasping, gravelly voice): “Just hear Aunt Hagar’s children harmonizin’ to that old mournful tune. It’s like a choir from on high broke loose, amen. If the devil brought it, the good Lord sent it right on down to me.”¹²³ In generations to come, Aunt Hagar’s children will find new mournful occasions to sing and rap about, and the products of their efforts, however infused with hellfire, will remain a gift that has broken loose from the heavens.