collectives, in evolving communicative situations. Home as a mental structure is thus generally fuzzier, and likely to be less internally consistent, than fiction – which means, conversely, that the pressure to find satisfactory compromises is much higher in the case of fiction, as fiction must give a much more clear-cut form to the compromise between the real and the imaginary than is the case for constructions of home. This, in turn, allows us to speculate that the need for fictions becomes particularly acute precisely in those moments when socio-historical pressures bring to the fore certain contradictions in the (usually implicit) spatiotemporal imaginary of home. Fiction’s formal compromise, though perhaps unable truly to resolve such crises, at least serves temporarily to dilute and reduce the contradictory stresses that threaten our sense of home and belonging – which is merely to reiterate, in slightly different form, that fiction itself is a home-making practice.

**The Metaphysics of Home: Religion, the Canon, and Existential Trauma**

As we have seen, home is a spatiotemporal imaginary, and as such it is concerned with our place in the world, both in the sense of our geographical location and of our position within the larger scheme of things. Accordingly, an inquiry into the nature of belonging may quickly lead us beyond questions of daily existence, toward the realm of metaphysical speculation. More specifically, inquiries into the nature of home are likely to spark questions of a religious nature because religions tend to hold forth the promise of a final, transcendental home. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance, humanity appears as tragically fallen: expelled from Eden, and exiled in the desert of earthly existence (an idea powerfully expressed, for instance, in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). As John Durham Peters observes, there is thus at least one similarity between Judeo-Christian and poststructuralist thought, for in both these traditions human identity is seen as inherently incomplete and discontinuous with itself (“Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora” 22). 13 According to Peters, Christian discourse in particular has come to be suffused with nomadic imagery, with St. Paul’s ideas being particularly influential: “The human body for him is a temporary, mobile dwelling in which mortals sojourn on earth” (27–28). In this view, humans are wanderers on the face of the earth, and only in death, when we have finally left our nomadic bodies behind, is it possible for us to recover our transcendental home in God, with whom we will forever rest in peace.

13 Note, however, Thomas Barrie’s important caveat that “estrangement from the world is found pan-culturally and trans-historically,” albeit with different inflections and evaluations (4). For Barrie, one of the functions of architecture may be precisely “to ameliorate humanity’s homeless condition” (6).
Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.* explicitly draws on this religious narrative of alienation and belonging in order to enhance the significance of little Elliott’s quest. As already noted briefly, Elliott’s own father is absent from the home; he has left the mother and moved to Mexico with his new partner. Elliott longs for the absent father, and E. T. assumes the role of a Messiah who will guide the boy towards a new sense of belonging. Indeed, as Thomas Sebeok has noted, *E.T.*’s emotional power depends to a large extent on its “subliminal religious infrastructure” (662). Spielberg’s film tells the story of an otherworldly being who, we will find, has the power to heal little Elliott’s wound when the boy cuts himself on a sawblade; a being who dies, is resurrected, and who, in the final scene, ascends once again to his heavenly home (Alexander 25; Tomasulo 275).

The film’s religious subtext is also apparent visually, as when E. T.’s glowing heart alludes to the iconographic tradition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Figure 2). In fact, even the film’s advertising campaign has incorporated this religious dimension, with official posters pointing to Michelangelo’s depiction of the creation of man in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel (Figure 3). In *E. T.* – as in many texts about home – a protagonist’s attempt to find a place in the world thus assumes a profoundly metaphysical dimension, and it is arguably for this very reason that the eponymous heroine of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) includes *home* in her list of the “great words” (the others being *love, joy, happiness, mother, father,* and *husband*; 62; ch. 6). At the same time, to say that Elliott’s quest gains in metaphysical depth, as well as emotional resonance, through the film’s use of religious imagery is not to argue that *E.T.* is in fact a religious film; the point is, rather, that intertextual references affect our reactions to the film. More generally, references to religious and other texts that are widely familiar can enhance the spectator’s sense of belonging, as they place the individual work of art within a larger system of meaning.

Historically, it was the literary canon – or in Matthew Arnold’s famous phrase, “the best that has been said and thought in the world” (*Culture and Anarchy* 5) – that was to provide men and women with a sense of belonging to a higher order that was not, strictly speaking, transcendental, but that at least...
transcended the spatiotemporal limits of these individuals. Indeed, the term *canon* – which originally referred to the list of biblical books “accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired” (OED) – itself bears witness to the quasi-religious function envisioned by Arnold for the monuments of high culture. In fact, Arnold and other Victorian thinkers (e.g. Thomas Carlyle) had quite explicitly conceived of ‘high culture’ as a means both to cultivate the soul and to ensure social cohesion in the absence of religious certainties (Philip Davis 133–134; Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 21). Agnes Heller has captured well the utopian hope embodied in this high-cultural home that, ideally, would form the basis for universal belonging:

This home is not private, everyone can join it, and in this sense, it is also cosmopolitan. The assurance that everyone can join, refers both to the works that this home entails and to the visitors who enter with nostalgia and a quest for meaning. [...] At the outset few works were admitted, now almost everything is. At the beginning there were also few visitors but later their number began to grow. Now, this, originally European [...] home is visited by millions with all possible cultural backgrounds. (9)
Figure 2: The iconography of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is reflected in E. T.’s glowing heart. (Screenshot from *E. T.*; © by Amblin/Universal Studios, used by permission)
Figure 3: Michelangelo’s depiction of the creation is echoed in official ads for E. T.
Heller herself notes, however, that the canon, as envisioned by Arnold and others, can only fulfill this function of creating a sense of universal belonging if it remains limited and exclusive; as soon as too many works are included, the canon’s ability to serve as a discursive home begins to crack and, ultimately, collapses (10). The Arnoldian ideal of the canon as home is thus in one sense inherently contradictory, for it can only serve as a discursive medium of universal inclusion if it simultaneously remains thoroughly exclusive in terms of the works it incorporates. Many will, in other words, not be directly represented in this assembly of high culture, and will therefore simply have to trust that those who are included will speak on their behalf. The logic of canonization thus resembles closely Victorian arguments for a limited franchise – a parallel that is arguably not accidental.

At any rate, those who happen to be unfamiliar with the canonical texts that, supposedly, form part of “a common cognitive background” (Heller 10) may find that intertextual references can also have a profoundly alienating effect. Comedies, for instance, are a highly allusive type of genre – and therefore they travel rather less well across cultural borders than other types of texts, for as Franco Moretti has observed, “laughter arises out of the unspoken assumptions that are buried very deep in a culture’s history: and if these are not your assumptions, the automatic component so essential to laughter disappears” (“Planet Hollywood” 99). When exposed to a comedy from a very distant time or place, we may thus not experience the relief of shared laughter, but instead find ourselves puzzled and disoriented. More generally, allusions to unknown texts may confuse rather than reassure, provided the allusion is nevertheless recognized as such. In E.T., for instance, the film’s religious infrastructure arguably does not feel particularly alienating for anyone because it remains largely subliminal; it is perfectly possible to watch the film without ever realizing that it draws on biblical imagery, so that even those who are unfamiliar with the story of Jesus are unlikely to feel excluded from the film’s intended audience. However, E.T. also contains a reference to Peter Pan (to which we will return later), and because this reference is more explicit, it is possible that those who have never heard of this text will, at least momentarily, feel alienated by its intertextual inclusion.

Let us briefly recapitulate the relation between religious transcendence and the literary canon as a secular attempt to replace a lost metaphysical home. Victorian intellectuals not only worried about statistics that indicated a sharp decline in religious observance, but also themselves suffered from a sense of metaphysical ‘unbelonging’ prompted, among other things, by Darwin’s theory of evolution; at the same time, they hoped that the secular religion of high culture, as encapsulated in the canon, might serve to alleviate the socially disruptive
effects of unbelief or agnosticism (a term that, tellingly, was coined by T.E. Huxley in 1869; see Philip Davis 57). This is not to suggest that there was, at some moment in the nineteenth century (or, indeed, in the century that followed), a total collapse of religious belief amongst each and every segment of the population. Rather, the point is to emphasize that those who have no faith in a transcendental home also lack that sense of metaphysical belonging that religion has, for many, been able to provide. Bereft of a metaphysical home, these unbelievers may therefore seek other, more secular types of spiritual shelter.

Following Georg Lukács, we may describe the condition that results from a loss of faith as “transcendental homelessness” (40–41): a sense that human existence is purely contingent, and that humankind is adrift in a universe that is indifferent to human happiness or suffering. Secular individuals can, in other words, no longer find comfort in the idea that life is securely anchored in transcendental meaning, but instead experience the Heideggerian anxiety of finding themselves thrown into being or Dasein (Being and Time 131): an existential angst that Heidegger explicitly describes as a sense of “not-being-at-home” (182; see Agnes Heller 4; Mugerauer 43; O’Donoghue 139). Dominick LaCapra has suggested the term structural or existential trauma to express the disturbing nature of this experience, though at the same time LaCapra is careful to distinguish this phenomenon from what he dubs historical trauma, which by contrast “is related to specific events, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb on Japanese cities” (History and Memory after Auschwitz 47). In the case of E. T., we might therefore say that the film threatens to elide the distinction between the existential threat of transcendental homelessness, and Elliott’s more limited, historical trauma of losing the comforting presence of his father. More generally, moreover, we may regard trauma as one of the most dramatic symptoms of not-being-at-home in the world, and the discussion of Herman Melville’s

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16 Indeed, C. A. Bayly argues that, from a global perspective, the nineteenth century in fact witnessed an expansion of the major world religions (7), and while secularization certainly gained ground in twentieth-century Britain (e.g. Turner 49), religion remains central in many other countries – very much including the United States (which, incidentally, would make it possible to read E. T.’s messianic subtext as simply a cynical attempt by Hollywood producers to convert Americans’ faith in religion into the more tangible stuff of box-office gold).

17 In the German original, the relevant passages are: (a) “Diesen in seinem Woher und Wohin verhüllten, aber an ihm selbst um so unverhüllter erschlossenen Seinscharakter des Daseins, dieses ‘Dass es ist’ nennen wir die Geworfenheit des Seienden in sein Da, so zwar, dass es als In-der-Welt-sein das Da ist” (Sein und Zeit 135); (b) “In der Angst ist einem ‘unheimlich’. Darin kommt zunächst die eigentümliche Unbestimmtheit dessen, wobei sich das Dasein in Angst befindet, zum Ausdruck: das Nichts und Nirgends. Unheimlichkeit meint aber dabei zugleich das Nicht-zuhause-sein” (188).