

Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960.

Amy Hungerford

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At first glance, Amy Hungerford's second book might seem literary criticism's answer to Robert Wuthnow's *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, which shows how Americans have drifted away from institutional religious commitments and toward more informal, syncretistic spiritualities. However, Hungerford reveals not just a loosening and recombination of doctrines and practices, but the return of a "belief in meaninglessness" (xiii) rooted in transcendentalism and Romanticism. *Postmodern Belief* is an examination of faith without content, trust in the nonsemantic, belief as itself a form of ritual, all as discerned primarily through the work of writers rarely identified as religious themselves, but who still "live in oblique relation to the structures and discourses of institutional religion" (xvi). Rather than concerning herself with these authors' theologies, Hungerford investigates their convictions about literature. In fact, "their literary beliefs are ultimately best understood as a species of religious thought, and their literary practice as a species of religious practice" (xvi).

The first chapter's analysis of an impressively diverse array of subjects—President Eisenhower, Peter Berger, J. D. Salinger, Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Myla Goldberg, and Thomas Pynchon—provides rich context for later, lengthier examinations of particular authors. Here Hungerford exposes "not simply the coexistence of doctrinal and nondoctrinal faith, but...the mutual dependence of one upon the other" (3). She shows that since 1960, American writers and critics have sought not only to evoke faith in faith, but also to maintain specific convictions, and to manage that combination in private and public alike. Chapter two then provides an initial test case, the balancing act by which Allen Ginsberg makes form into his own content. Mixing the Beat poet's literary efforts with his political action (e.g., chanting "Om" with Chicago demonstrators in 1968), the chapter conveys both the humor and seriousness of his protests. Yet Hungerford avoids hagiography, quietly observing ironies like Ginsberg's effort to "reproduce in the reader

the exact state of consciousness in which the poem was composed" (38), even as he symbolized a countercultural movement to replace coercion with tolerance.

In chapter three, *Postmodern Belief* turns to Don DeLillo's peculiar allegiance to Catholicism, which he values more as ethnic identity than creed. Examining *Libra*, *Mao II*, *The Names*, and *Underworld*, Hungerford finds DeLillo visualizing "how religion that is abandoned in most respects can persist in a literary form." Perhaps most compellingly, she establishes that he "imagines an enlightenment that consists not in doctrine, but in prayer; not in instruction, but in vision; not in reason, but in rapture; not in knowledge, but in mystery" (75). Chapter four ups the ante by engaging that most sacred and canonical of literatures, the Bible, though less as a text than "as a closed object, an object at once aesthetic and sacred, an object that becomes a talisman, rather than an example, of literary authority" (79). In the novels of Cormac McCarthy and Toni Morrison, we then perceive how literature comes to function much like scripture, but also how "the process comes full circle: the Bible supplies to literature its sacred status, which literature then offers back to the Bible in the form of modernist style" (86).

Finally, chapter five shifts direction, concentrating on works whose authors explicitly identify with Protestantism, but in very different ways. Resisting the movement in religious studies to prioritize "lived religion" above doctrinal issues, Hungerford acknowledges the significance of practice, but insists it cannot be separated from belief. For her, "the shift away from interest in religious meanings in favor of thick description or efforts to track the workings of power, assumes already a secular point of view" (111). Here she juxtaposes the fiction of Marilynne Robinson and the *Left Behind* series, a pairing that proves as fruitful as it is unlikely. In Robinson's case, we see how in *Gilead*, John Ames mistakes theology for a source of answers rather than a means of relationship, "a discourse that could *produce* individual belief rather than a discourse that *enacts* shared belief" (118, emphasis original). Instead, Robinson signals that difference emerges not as "a problem to be solved but rather the occasion for living a religious life" (121). By contrast, *Left Behind* relies on television and action-adventure movie motifs to picture conversion as "a theology not of difference but of the erasure of difference" (122). Here one submits first to a medium, and only then to theological claims.

Postmodern Belief is likely to be taught and referenced for many years, not only because of its arguments' perspicacity, but also their efficiency. This is not a book that wastes space, nor is it a collection of claims that might have been published equally well as separate articles. It is a sustained, selective demonstration that late twentieth-century authors often considered signifi-

cant for discussions of race, gender, and class deserve equal attention for their slanted treatments of religion—and literature *as* religion. Some readers may object to minor points, as when Hungerford draws what may be an unnecessarily thick division between DeLillo and more traditional “Catholic novelists” like Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy. But by the time one reaches the book’s conclusion, where Hungerford returns to McCarthy and *The Road* (2006), she has accomplished her goal: we are wondering anew whether and why “literature need[s] to be somehow religious or to cast its power in religious terms in order to assert its value and move its readers?” (137). Ultimately, she defers to the pre-apocalyptic trout in McCarthy’s final paragraph, which are “flexibly miraculous, as we are religious or secular readers, as we read in religious or secular ways. The fish may be quick beauty in a mortal world, or God’s creation still reflecting the divine in a fallen world, or just—just!—verbal art. We catch them as we can” (140). Indeed.

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