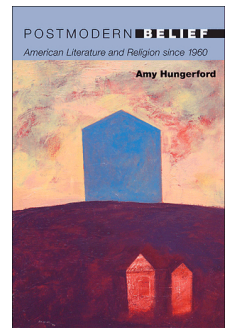


Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960, by Amy Hungerford

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Perhaps the most immediately impressive thing about Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* is its ease; Hungerford moves between methodologies, genres, disciplines, and decades with an admirable lack of visible effort, and, even more importantly, without drawing any undue attention to her considerable interdisciplinary chops. There is a complex—if not neces-



sarily flawless—theoretical enterprise behind Hungerford’s argument that is all the more striking in that she never succumbs to the temptation to show off this complexity, or to overburden the reader with her own cleverness. Importantly for a book that is largely about literary style, her prose is equally and refreshingly free of the excesses of so much writing in confessedly “postmodern” literary criticism. Her finely tuned sentences are full of surprising turns of phrase—“continually inventive pretense” (13); “its literary density hustled offstage” (128); “the divine meaninglessness of language” (135); “evokes Job not as a verbal icon but as a guy we know from high school” (138); “the fish are flexibly miraculous” (140)—but are very rarely showy or self-conscious.

The fifth volume in Princeton’s 20/21 series, Hungerford’s book opens with a subtle double reversal that does far more to illuminate the book’s central concerns than the book’s lacklustre (and vaguely misleading) title: “This book is about belief and meaninglessness, and what it might mean to believe in meaninglessness” (xiii). Working from a detailed exploration of work by authors as diverse as the poet Allen Ginsberg, novelists like Toni Morrison and Cormac McCarthy, and academic writers from Frank Kermode to Mark C. Taylor, Hungerford argues that there has been a tendency in late twentieth-century American religiosity to imbue meaningless language, what she calls “nonsemantic” language, with religious value and at times with a religious function. Hers, then, is an argument about how literary form and style can come to carry more religious meaning than the simple content of language. For Hungerford, such nonsemantic aspects of language include “the sound or look of words, the tone and level of diction that accompanies word choices” as well as “narrative or poetic form, style, figurative language, or allusion” (xviii). Furthermore, Hungerford argues that this belief in language without meaning is a crucial site of resistance to the declining cultural power of both religion and literature. These highly varied iterations of language without meaning are, for Hungerford, nothing less than a collision of the literary and the religious: “[these] literary beliefs are ultimately best understood as a species of religious thought, and their literary practice as a species of religious practice” (xvi). From a number of different angles, Hungerford explores what turns out to be a fascinating *absence* of meaning, not a facile nihilism but rather a lack of meaning in which she finds “a whole world of belief.” This is a form of belief “that does not emphasize the content of doctrine,” a “belief without meaning” (xiii) that is in no way meaningless, a belief in belief itself. Her exploration of this diverse cast of writers—and her understanding of what constitutes “literature” is pleasingly broad—seeks

to demonstrate “how and why writers become invested in nonsemantic aspects of language in religious terms and how they thus make their case for literary authority and literary power after modernism” (xiii).

Though this remains largely implicit, Hungerford’s argument is sociological as well as hermeneutic: “this book demonstrates how belief in the religious qualities of meaninglessness can be found among novelists, poets and critics, and among the common practices of contemporary American religion in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond” (xiv). That she meets the first of these two interrelated goals far more convincingly than the second is perhaps inevitable given that book is not, as she admits, “a sociology of literature in the period, but an account of how an important strain of American thought comes to imaginative terms with pluralism in the late twentieth century” (xvi).

The first chapter, “Believing in Literature” takes the reader back to the 1953 inaugural speech of American President Dwight Eisenhower to address the importance of what she sees as a “faith in faith,” rather than a faith in any specific doctrine, in late twentieth-century American religiosity. Building on this, she offers a perceptive and engaging reading of J. D. Salinger’s short 1961 novel, *Franny and Zooey*, focusing on its mannered and highly theatrical style, which becomes fraught with meaning in the context of Hungerford’s larger theoretical framework and leads her to the startling but entirely plausible conclusion that “perhaps the most powerfully endorsed mode of religious art in the novel is not writing or drama but something like Vaudeville” (13).

Her standout second chapter, “Supernatural Formalism in the Sixties,” manages to offer an innovative reading of the poetry of Allen Ginsberg without reducing him to a generic cipher for a simple self-determinism (as does the recent documentary film *Howl*, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman) or painting a simplistic hagiography of his decade and its political activism. Ginsberg developed what Hungerford calls his “supernatural formalism” in the highly politicised context of the 1969 trial of the Chicago Seven: “the ways Ginsberg imagined his poetry as spiritual, in the context of the trial and in the years leading up to it, reveals a set of beliefs about language and the supernatural that have remarkable affinities with, and also raise a challenge to, understandings of language emanating from other sectors of American culture in the sixties” (28–29). Hungerford’s analysis of Ginsberg’s work and its relationship to William Burroughs’ revolutionary experiments in cut-and-paste poetry manages to be informative, dense, highly readable, and subtly playful all at the same time, but what is perhaps most

striking here is her analysis of Ginsberg's public chants, and the supernatural ability—rooted in Indian religious practices—to bring about harmony that he attributed to them: “Ginsberg uses the supernatural structure of mantra to make a ‘white-magic’ poetry—a poetry efficacious even (or especially) in the moments where narration and traditional structures of meaning ... fall away” (42). Finally, she draws a thought-provoking comparison between Ginsberg's public performance of meaningless language and the emergence of charismatic forms of Christianity, with its attendant focus on glossolalia, among the white middle classes. Following a rough chronology, her next chapter, “The Latin Mass of Language,” explores the cultural impact of the move away from Latin in Catholic churches following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) by way of a tour through the novels of Don DeLillo, who, she argues, preserves in his formalism something of the lost meaning (or lack thereof) of the Latin liturgy, embodying nothing less than a “Catholic sacramental logic” in a fictional form.

Hungerford's fourth chapter, “The Bible and Illiterature,” is arguably the most interesting from the perspective of reception history, offering a detailed reading of Cormac McCarthy's searing, blood-soaked 1985 masterpiece *Blood Meridian*. The Bible is granted a further life in McCarthy not in the citation and re-use of its narratives or characters, but in his imitation of the familiar style, voice, and rhythms of the biblical text, a form of reception that allows for the Bible's status as an object of authority to be transposed onto another text. For Hungerford, the speech of the menacing, incomprehensible Judge Holden, who sits at the very heart of *Blood Meridian* in all his perverse glory, echoes “the familiar Biblical structures of scenario, simile, and rhetorical question found in the Bible's wisdom literature and in Jesus's teachings in the New Testament” (91). She details, for example, one of the Judge's parables about war, in which he concludes that war is nothing less than God. The *meaning* of the parable is not important, she argues, or is at least not *as* important as the act of trying to penetrate its meaning: “to leave the reader thus questioning is the point of the parable; it is what the parable is about” (91). Approaching the matter of the Bible and meaninglessness in another way, Hungerford also engages in a brief but illuminating discussion about the fact that the protagonist of *Blood Meridian*, known first as “the kid” then as “the man,” who is illiterate, carries with him a copy of the Bible. In his inability to make the book the carrier of doctrine or meaning, Hungerford argues that the Bible, in the kid's hand, becomes more rather than less powerful, becoming “an icon of divine authority” (95). In the same

chapter, she also takes up this conjunction of style, literature, illiteracy, and authority in Toni Morrison. Like McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*, in novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison underlines the power of the Bible as a sacred object by placing it in the hands of illiterate characters. Here Hungerford finds Morrison levelling a critique of traditional processes of literary meaning-making, which is at the same time a critique of ethnicity and class in American culture: “Morrison seeks to replace white possession of the Bible, and its cultural and spiritual authority, with an authority based in the illiterate’s possession of that sacred book, in the process maintaining—and, more importantly, deploying—the ultimate privilege accorded to the Bible in Western culture” (96).

In “The Literary Practice of Belief,” the fifth, final, and arguably weakest of Hungerford’s main chapters, she moves on to discuss how the dynamic of meaninglessness and belief plays out in “writers who are invested in particular belief” (108), examining the work of liberal Protestant novelist Marilynne Robinson and the work of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the best-selling authors of the *Left Behind* novels, which are nothing less than fictional re-readings of conservative evangelical apocalypticism. Again, it is to form that Hungerford’s analysis turns, and again she draws out the ways in which Robinson’s work again trades on the Bible’s authority. Unlike either McCarthy or Morrison, Robinson uses the Bible to give a largely orthodox Christian gloss to novels like *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008). Performing the not inconsiderable feat of taking LaHaye’s and Jenkins’s religious ideas seriously, she turns to *Left Behind* (and for the first time to popular, rather than high culture texts), offering an intriguing analysis of the ways in which silence and meaninglessness play into such didactic, openly confessional narratives whose generic core is rather different than Robinson’s: “The action-adventure movie becomes a religious form in the hands of LaHaye and Jenkins because it embodies the simultaneous insistence on action and passivity that characterizes their theology of conversion” (123). In analysing this simultaneity, she makes a very trenchant and damning critique of the novel’s attitude towards women and offers some very astute comments about the ultimately self-contradictory attitudes that the authors hold towards the mass media; indeed, she brings these two concerns together to reach a striking conclusion: “What is perhaps remarkable about the *Left Behind* series is the way fears about mind control have less to do with modern media than they do with modern gender relations, and, indeed, with the gendered aspects of the believer’s relationship to the Protestant God” (129).

The book closes with a brief, elliptical conclusion, locating a fundamental “emptiness” at the heart of some of the work she has been analysing:

Among these writers, the most frustrating (to me) uses of belief without meaning dehumanize literature, the writer, or both.... And all the while, these writers want for literature, and sometimes for themselves, what religious belief underwrites: submission on the grounds of religious feeling (McCarthy); supernatural power and wisdom (Morrison); ordinary life as sacrament (DeLillo); poetry as transformational prayer (Ginsberg); meaning so transcendent it appears as sheer radiance (Kermode). In other words, they want the fruits of religious power—or at least, they want to help us imagine compelling versions of religious power—without having to answer for the assumptions of the world, and about writing, upon which such visions are built. (133)

Given that she holds a great deal of respect for many of the works discussed here (and *Left Behind* seems to be the notable exception), the critical attitude she adopts here is both largely unexpected and rather more meaningful than it may have been otherwise. To articulate this critique, she offers a stark and strangely moving reading of McCarthy’s 2006 bestseller *The Road*: “The novel ... splits between two characters the twin engines of McCarthy’s art: on the one hand, McCarthy loves ... sensual, concrete words that can describe and name and build every possible thing, that can create a world out of nothingness; and on the other, he is enchanted by the transcendent, numinous space of nothingness” (135). Here also she finally explicitly addresses the postmodernity of her title, arguing astutely that “These writers balance a commitment to modernism with a response to forces within modernism—such as the difficulty of its aesthetic forms—that by century’s end had come to threaten its success. They reject the most extreme stylistic obscurities of modernism, preferring as the source of prestige the obscurities of belief without content, belief in meaninglessness, belief for its own sake” (137).

She also steps outside of the analytical and addresses the ethics—or at least the social function—of literature: “The question is whether we need that religiously inflected belief in meaninglessness, or the belief in form for the sake of form, in order to believe in literature. Does literature need to be

somehow religious or to cast its power in religious terms in order to assert its value and move its readers? Is literature something to ‘believe in’ at all?” (137). Her answer to these questions, filtered again through McCarthy’s *The Road*, remains ambivalent; however, it is impossible to escape the feeling that her answer to this question is an affirmative one. Such an apologia, subtle as it is, comes as something of a surprise at the end of this complex, provocative work: why, the astute reader might ask, does literature “need” to do anything? Here Hungerford seems to adopt an attitude towards literature that has echoes of T. S. Eliot’s seminal work in the field, which makes several appearances in these pages and which insists that literature has a duty to meet certain forms of religious responsibility.

This book provides an innovative approach to both religion and literature, which has the potential for wider applicability in the field of reception history. Firstly, Hungerford’s tracing of histories of influence and reception across genres, media, and disciplines, supported as it is by close readings of particular texts, provides an effective model for the study of the emergence of a “belief in meaninglessness” in the American context. It should be noted, however, that there are a great many examples of this sort of thinking—and the work of the late cultural critic and philosopher Jean Baudrillard comes immediately to mind—outside of the United States. Indeed, the elevation of non-instrumental language is an important aspect of Romantic thinking both past and present, something that again suggests a broader field of study for further studies of the conjunction of religion and meaninglessness. Secondly, Hungerford’s decision to focus on form and style rather than on content allows her to point to intriguing, even counterintuitive ways in which religious and textual authority can be handed down over time and across vast gulfs of cultural forms. The chains of influence and re-iteration she traces are by no means as clear-cut and uncontroversial as a simple cataloguing of references and quotations would have been; however, this sort of bold theoretical and structural speculation is valuable in its own right, particularly in the ways in which it firmly embeds matters of reception, transmission, and transformation within the concrete realm of lived human culture.

Despite the very evident strengths of *Postmodern Belief*, it is difficult to lay to rest entirely the suspicion that Hungerford’s connection of formal meaninglessness with religion is anything other than a simple assertion, not unlike the one that forms the core of Paul Schrader’s classic 1972 book *Transcendental Style in Film*, with which *Postmodern Belief* shares a very strong affinity, despite the fact that Schrader is writing about film rather than about litera-

ture. Hungerford seems to recognise this, writing in her conclusion: “I aim to show what discourse—about belief and about other things—looks like when understood as religious practice; the specificity of such discourse allows us to see what sort of cultural work belief still can do” (139). Here she seems to understand her analysis more as a thought experiment than a coherent argument about a tangible aspect of lived American religion. Indeed, her analysis is far more effective as an exploration of the terrain that can be mapped when taking this particular approach to the question of religion and literature than it ever could be as a sociological argument, given how broad, and occasionally how vague the landscape she surveys truly is. Quite apart from its purely academic and theoretical merits, Hungerford has something intriguing and ultimately comforting to offer the reader, especially those dwindling numbers of serious readers of serious literature. What she offers is the exploration of a rarely glimpsed side of the ever-more-prominent and ever-more-troubling anti-intellectual tendencies in American culture. While there is very much, and very much of great value, being lost in the public repudiation of reasoned argument and the suspicion of erudition and learning in the contemporary United States, perhaps, Amy Hungerford tells us, there is also something, perhaps something of great value, to be gained.

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