Amy Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* mounts an ambitious and important intervention into the study of postwar American literature and culture. Hungerford draws together two seemingly unrelated strains, postmodernism and religious belief, to show how a late-twentieth-century “belief in meaninglessness” became a significant form of religious belief in an increasingly secular, irrevocably pluralistic world. As she explains in her introduction,

> This book will argue that a century and a half later [after Emerson], with religious critique so firmly a part of our secular condition, belief without meaning becomes both a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions and a way to buttress the authority of the literature that seeks to imagine such belief. Belief without content becomes . . . a hedge against the inescapable fact of pluralism. (xiii)

Hungerford thereby sidesteps more familiar accounts of literature as either embodying or condemning religious belief in order to theorize how “belief in meaninglessness” may tell a different story about postwar literature and culture. Hungerford looks at numerous works of literature and literary and critical theory, and she ranges over Derrida and de Man (both key thinkers for her first book, *A Holocaust of Texts*) with the same confidence she displays when recontextualizing the New Critics or noting a renewed interest in the literariness of the Bible in the 1970s and 1980s; she offers similarly nuanced readings of writers such as J. D. Salinger, Allen Ginsberg, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson, among others. In each of these cases, Hungerford’s method is to place a work of literature or theory in new contexts, inventively reframing the work of individual writers in order to demonstrate the importance of belief in meaninglessness as a frame for understanding postwar American writing.

> Those coming to the book with backgrounds in critical theory may be most interested in how the argument reconfigures the relationship
between American literary and cultural production, and the postmodern. There was a time when postmodernism was seen as broadly apolitical, as turning inward rather than radiating out. Foundational work by Ihab Hassan, Brian McHale, and others emphasized postmodernism’s formal ingenuity and obsession with language, while later critics read it in economic (Jameson) or political (Hutcheon) lights. *Postmodern Belief* participates in the sort of historicist recontextualization pursued by Marianne DeKoven in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (2004), which links the development of postmodernism to sixties radicalism. Hungerford investigates the underexplored resonances between postmodern impulses and late-twentieth-century religious belief, challenging our standard accounts of postmodernism by demonstrating how sincerity overshadows irony as a literary mode when the ambiguities of language are imagined as being religiously empowered. Writers in this mode see fracture and materialism not as ends in themselves but as the conditions for transcendence. Cultural embeddedness—in the panoply of American religious contexts—comes to matter as much as transhistorical (or posthistorical) aesthetics even for the most formally ambitious of writers. (xix-xx)

The varieties of religious experience Hungerford has in mind turn out to have everything to do with language, for “American writers turn to religion to imagine the purely formal elements of language in transcendent terms” (xiii). *Postmodern Belief* examines various writers and critical theorists with two aims: “to show how belief in meaninglessness confers religious authority upon the literary, and . . . to show how such belief, and its literary vehicles, becomes important to the practice of religion in America” (xv).

Chapter One, “Believing in Literature,” begins with a great riff on Dwight Eisenhower’s vague faith as epitomizing American religious belief in the 1950s, then turns to Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, which according to Hungerford enacts the “performance of sacred human speech” (14) in a religious vision that “insists upon the specific content of religious wisdom but finds that content converging in a space of no-knowledge” (12). From Salinger, Hungerford traces a fascinating line through New Criticism to deconstruction to suggest how both invest literature with a kind of religious significance. “For the New Critics,” she reminds us,
one important fact about literary texts—and especially, about poems—was that they could not be paraphrased, that their form carried with it some unspecifiable, or unspeakably particular, literary quality that transcended pedestrian content. The New Critical poem qua poem is form without content imagined as transcendence. This bid for transcendence reproduces [Matthew] Arnold’s effort to make literature a substitute for religion, and is neatly encapsulated in Cleanth Brooks’s notion of the “heresy of paraphrase.” (16)

The elegant formulation “heresy of paraphrase” is useful for Hungerford’s purposes because she wants to demonstrate not only how writers like Salinger imagined literature as having a special religious capacity, but also that critical theorists as different as Brooks and Derrida explored this idea in varying ways: “Language in their [Derrida’s and de Man’s] hands becomes immanent in much the same way that the names of God are imagined to contain God’s presence in Hindu and in Jewish tradition and in the way Christ is said, in the Gospel of John, to incarnate the divine Word” (19). For Hungerford, then, the heart of the matter is that the power of language—and in some cases the very materiality of the Word—is its power to be mystical. As she shows in the rest of the book, writers from Allen Ginsberg to Cormac McCarthy view their writing as related in some way to religious belief, as pervaded by what she sometimes calls a “numinous” quality (83, 84, 86, 138).

Ginsberg in fact provides Hungerford’s first object lesson, and she devotes a whole chapter, “Supernatural Formalism in the Sixties,” to his poetry and politics, especially as they developed after he returned from India in 1963. In India Ginsberg engaged deeply with Hindu and Buddhist meditative practices, and in a section called “The Politics of Om,” we learn how he appropriated the theory underlying Hindu chanting, which supposes that mantras themselves are imbued with mystical meaning that goes far beyond their semantic content, to develop a poetics that invests words themselves with spiritual power (hence Ginsberg’s desire to “make Mantra of American language now”). Hungerford first illustrates this point through a masterful reading of Ginsberg’s testimony and cross-examination during the Chicago Seven Trial, in which Abbie Hoffmann, Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden, and others were accused of intending to incite a riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Ginsberg was called to testify because the prosecuting attorney, Thomas Foran, viewed
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him as “kind of the Yippie religious leader” (quoted on 29), and wanted to demonstrate that Ginsberg’s frequent recourse to chanting was “part of a repugnant and sexually perverted hippie religious practice” (30). As Foran attempted to prove the perversions of the Om chant, he connected it to Ginsberg’s poetry; yet Ginsberg’s responses show, in contrast, that he endeavored to write “poems that aim (in theory, at least) to evacuate the kind of referential content that proved so useful to Foran. In doing so, Ginsberg uses the kinship between poetry and chant to advance an idea of poetry that moves beyond meaning into . . . a fantasy of supernatural efficacy centered on the power of sound” (31).

The idea that “a fantasy of supernatural efficacy centered on the power of sound” had currency among the counter-culture of the 1960s is familiar to anyone who has listened to George Harrison’s All Things Must Pass (1970) or the recording of the “Hare Krishna Mantra” he produced the year before, but Hungerford takes this observation a few steps further. Her larger point is not that Ginsberg ought to be read as a religious writer (which others have done in more depth; the most thoroughgoing recent example is Tony Trigilio’s Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics), but rather that the way

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. . . .Ginsberg’s spiritual poetry intersects with beliefs about language common to poststructuralism . . . and to a popular form of religious renewal that transformed American churches during the sixties and seventies. . . .His use of a supernatural formalism for political purposes . . . demonstrates, further, the social and philosophical implications of the conjunction between religious belief and language upon which his work relies. (28-29) The “popular form of religious renewal” that Hungerford describes is the Charismatic movement, which interests her because of its ability to intensify religious belief while still being open to a variety of specific doctrinal content. This is relevant for understanding Ginsberg—and Hungerford’s reading of 1960s religious culture—because it reflects the belief, as she says in reference to Alan Watts’s ideas, that “propositional content was the
enemy of true religious experience” (44). In other words, for Ginsberg as for the Charismatics, the religious experience was the linguistic experience of either chanting or speaking in tongues, an experience that is remarkably accommodating to America’s entrenched pluralism—and which in turn makes it possible to read political critique in Ginsberg’s work in this strain. For example, discussing a poem that wishes Merry Christmas to an apparently indiscriminate list of political, cultural, and religious figures, Hungerford argues that “the poet’s hail of cosmic good will” evinces a political “critique of a peculiar kind, in keeping with the version of pluralism on display in the Charismatic movement. It is critique that allows opposing voices to continue speaking and that does not argue against, seek to unite, or seek even to interpret, opposing points of view” (50-51).

After leaving Ginsberg behind, Hungerford provides a chapter-length study of Don DeLillo, “The Latin Mass of Language.” This chapter is especially interesting—and, to my mind, correct—because it suggests that for too long DeLillo’s work has been conflated with the textbook postmodernism of White Noise (1985). While White Noise is no doubt an achievement, and handy for American novel surveys or postmodernism courses, Hungerford rightly suggests that it is atypical of DeLillo’s larger career. For the most part, she argues, his work is invested in literature’s “immanent transcendence” in ways that do not exactly mirror Ginsberg’s, but that make DeLillo look quite different from a cartoon postmodernist that blanches at any shred of foundationalism. Whereas she reads Ginsberg through his interest in Hinduism, Hungerford points to DeLillo’s Catholic background, which she invokes not to cast him as a religious writer on the order of Flannery O’Connor or Walker Percy, but rather to help explain how he “ultimately transfers a version of mysticism from the Catholic context into the literary one” (53). DeLillo’s novels, she claims, “translate religious structures into literary ones without an intervening secularism,” a thing they can do “because they imagine language in a way that preserves a specifically Catholic understanding of transcendent experience while drifting far from Catholic traditions and themes.” In order to elaborate what she means by a “Catholic understanding of transcendent experience,” Hungerford reads DeLillo’s novels within the context of 1960s controversies about whether mass should be held in Latin or the vernacular. In Hungerford’s account, one argument against the vernacular mass was that the Catholic religious experience was centered not on the
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content of the mass—knowing what the words mean—but on the sounds and experience of the mass: “For those who opposed the use of Latin, lack of comprehension was simply that and necessarily bad . . . [but] for those in favor of the Latin, the barrier to understanding facilitated a mystical relation to the language, a relation that reinforced the transubstantial, incarnational logic of other elements of the mass” (57). Lest readers find such debates “literally parochial,” Hungerford connects them to some major currents in 1960s thought, notably Marshall McLuhan’s oft-repeated dictum “the medium is the message”—after all, his idea was that the

modern media have their effects on American culture not because of what they say, but because of how they say it... .McLuhan’s analysis of media and, secondarily, of religion and liturgy, locates a mystical reality both within the media of human communication and also, importantly, beyond media’s communicative functions. (58)

It is within this context that Hungerford analyzes DeLillo’s novels—principally Libra, Mao II, The Names, and Underworld—to explore how a “mystical understanding of language” (59) operates in them.

For Hungerford, DeLillo shares with Ginsberg an interest in the “materiality of language” (60), so that Mao II recovers “an analogy between the Latin mass and the novel” that is accomplished “by virtue of the linguistic freedom DeLillo imagines can arise out of the formulae of cult speech once fanatical beliefs have been replaced by the sheer capacity for belief” (66). Likewise Underworld, whose ending features not the atheist nuns of White Noise but a nun whose “embrace of a mystical vision . . . is rewarded with a very Catholic-looking afterlife on the Internet” (xx), exemplifies DeLillo’s broad question regarding the religious power of language: “how religion that is abandoned in most respects can persist in a literary form” (74).

Following her close analysis of the works of Ginsberg and DeLillo, Hungerford’s fourth chapter, “The Bible and Illiterature,” first explores how debates about teaching the Bible in public schools foregrounded the idea that it could be variously interpretable. From there she notes the renewal of interest in the Bible by major literary critics in the 1970s and 1980s, and then offers readings of Cormac McCarthy and Toni Morrison that demonstrate how they appropriate Biblical language to confer that “numinous” sense so hard to articulate in conventional terms. As she writes:
In their dealings with the Bible, literary critics and novelists in this period work out the relationship between literature and the sacred in ways that make literature akin to scripture. To imagine literature as scripture is not the same as imagining it as supernaturally powerful on the model of the Hindu chant, as Ginsberg does, or as transcendent on the model of the Latin mass, as DeLillo does, though all these impulses share a recognizable desire to connect the religious to the literary. (76)

In working through these connections, Hungerford offers numerous moments of insight, one of the most compelling of which concerns Frank Kermode’s *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979). As Hungerford writes, Kermode “postulates a hermeneutic practice revolving around the ‘secrecy’ of texts, a practice that always privileges latent over apparent meaning” (82). She connects this idea to *Postmodern Belief*’s larger claims about how the sacred is made manifest in literature: “For Kermode, secrecy is what makes literature literary” (83), an idea that links him to DeLillo because both find “spiritual mystery at the heart of the literary enterprise.” Ultimately, then,

*The Genesis of Secrecy* connects the Bible with modern fiction through an interpretive mode that is more numinous than rational, that equates the “business” of writing modern fiction with that of writing scripture, and that is driven by a late-twentieth-century interest in opacity and latent meaning. (84)

Such moments stand among the surprising pleasures of *Postmodern Belief* because they offer alternative explanations for the undeniably strident interest in “opacity and latent meaning” we find in a range of critical and literary texts of the late twentieth century.

This diversion through postwar literary criticism sets up the analyses of McCarthy and Morrison later in the chapter. After a brilliant reading of a scene in McCarthy’s *Child of God* in which a blacksmith tells in detail how to form an axe-blade (“We have been shown,” Hungerford writes, “how to make something out of words, how to forge something from the stubborn material of language, from the obscure words, archaisms, and vocabularies of technique that McCarthy excavates here and throughout his writing” [88]), Hungerford moves on to *Blood Meridian*, the novel which secured McCarthy’s place in the postwar American canon. Taking up the challenge of those critics who see in the novel’s style “something
close to nonsense," Hungerford argues that “the meaninglessness of its metaphysical and philosophical discourses . . . reveal[s] the counterintuitive way the novel aspires to the authoritative status of scripture” (90). According to Hungerford, “Blood Meridian is designed to make us feel, above all, like God is speaking . . . This is Bible as style, as a tone of authority as opposed to authoritative argument or history or supernatural claim” (95). Blood Meridian has always been a head scratcher for me personally, but Postmodern Belief has given me a new way of understanding that book, if not a new appreciation for it—something that is one of the best things one can hope for from literary criticism.

Hungerford’s argument also helps explain why the supernatural has proven a recurring element in Morrison’s writing. Working through novels such as The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, and Beloved, Hungerford argues that

the notion of supernatural reading effaces the work of the author, [while] at the same time the resulting mystification of the author suggests an otherworldly expertise or access to the spiritual. . . . 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)

For readers who have wondered how Morrison’s ghosts and mystical happenings jibe with a postmodern sensibility, this argument turns her novels into another powerful example of Hungerford’s general re-reading of postmodernism.

Her final chapter, “The Literary Practice of Belief,” looks at writers “invested in particular belief” (121). To this end, she examines Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping, Gilead, and Home to show “how discourses of belief become religious practices, and how literature—both the novel as a narrative form and various poetic structures [Robinson] uses within narrative—comes to catalyze this communion between approaches to religion currently held apart in scholarly work on religion.” Hungerford holds Robinson’s novels up against another, more popular way “the literary” has “reimagine[d] belief as practice,” the best-selling Left Behind novels written by evangelical Christians Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins,
which explicitly describe a post-Rapture world with the ultimate aim of winning converts. Bringing together readings of Robinson and the *Left Behind* books offers a necessary complication to Hungerford’s argument because it helps bring into focus how “the Christian practitioner in America . . . cannot live religiously without on occasion trying to articulate that knowledge,” insofar as “articulating the knowledge is part of the practice” (112).

In her brief conclusion, Hungerford reflects on what it means that her chosen writers “aim to ‘reenchant’ the literary world, urging it away from rationality and realism even when working in realist modes, insisting on a species of meaning that is not reducible to historical context and cannot be fully perceived even by the most sublimely literate reader” (132–33). This understanding of literature would help us not only rethink the postmodern, but also question more generally how we value and evaluate literature as we work through the legacies of postmodernism. “Poststructuralism,” Hungerford writes,

questioned the literary artifact as such, the power of the author, the metaphysical capacities of literature, the grand narrative, and the possibility of meaning; the culture wars questioned the aesthetic and ideological assumptions assumed to underlie the traditional literary canon; the reading public, even that segment educated to appreciate modernist literature, began to fall away from reading—from reading books, at least. The writers I have considered here, both novelists and critics, seek a version of literary authority closely allied to the ambitions of modernism—to reveal in art the large-scale structures of the world as well as the very texture of consciousness, to make literature a secular religion and critics its priestly caste. (136)

This account does the double duty of reinvesting both literature and criticism with a signal importance that is hard to describe—a lingering difficulty that is part of the point. In the course of rethinking postmodernism, proposing fresh readings of key postwar writers, and arguing for a new conceptualization of late-twentieth-century religious belief, *Postmodern Belief* also tackles one of the trickiest projects of all, theorizing—and then defending—those slippery “somethings” that make literature literary.
Steven Belletto

Works cited


