

REVIEW ESSAY

Whispers of Faith in
Contemporary American Literature

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Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison.
John A. McClure. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960. Amy
Hungerford. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry.
Norman Finkelstein. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010.

Shouting and Whispering

Religion in contemporary literature does not look like it used to, observes Paul Elie in a recent essay in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*. Religious belief has become “bewildering,” “a mystery,” “part of the matrix,” “a reminder of last things,” and “a social matter rather than an individual one.” It “acts obscurely and inconclusively.” He counts these qualities losses. By “mystery,” he does not mean The Unknown so much as an unknown. By “part of the matrix,” he means merely part. By “a reminder of last things,” he means “reduced to” that. Though Elie begins with the rather specific claim that no contemporary novelists write about Christianity the way that Flannery O’Conner, Walker Percy, and others did in the middle of the twentieth century, before long he slides into a more expansive obituary for “religion” and “belief” in literature altogether.¹ “Today,” he writes, “the United States is a vast Home Depot of ‘do-it-yourself religion.’ But you wouldn’t know it from the stories we tell.” As one example, he suggests that even though he finds Don DeLillo’s fiction “shot through with a mystical sense that ‘everything is connected in the end,’” “the religious belief” in such

work strikes him as “finally unreal.” Readers might wonder what more Elie wants. To answer just that question, he holds up Flannery O’Connor: “The religious encounter of the kind O’Connor described forces a person to ask how belief figures into his or her own life and how to decide just what is true in it, what is worth acting on.” He likewise affirms O’Connor’s famous, poignant comment about how she approached religion in her writing: “To the hard of hearing you shout...” In Elie’s view, writers no longer shout about faith.

Gregory Wolfe sees things differently. Responding to Elie with an essay in *The Wall Street Journal*, he calls the idea of the demise of serious faith-infused literature part of a “misguided” “ritual lament.” As counterexamples, he points to such figures as Annie Dillard, Elie Wiesel, Christian Wiman, Marilynne Robinson, Mark Helprin, Franz Wright, Mary Karr and Robert Clark, Christopher R. Beha, Alice McDermott, Nathan Englander, and Jonathan Safran Foer, serious writers who engage faith in serious ways.² But for Wolfe the “deeper matter” has to do not with whether one can list examples but rather with how one conceptualizes faith and literature in the first place. While he agrees with Elie that faith may be “obscure” and “mysterious” in contemporary literature, he sees these as positive characteristics that have “ancient” roots and that, just as importantly, speak meaningfully in our postmodern culture. As cultures change, “faith takes on different tones and dimensions.” Whereas O’Connor’s approach “made sense” in her time, other approaches make sense now. In support of this idea, Wolfe quotes the contemporary writer Doris Betts’ reversal of O’Connor’s shouting comment. In her own fiction, Betts feels compelled “to convey faith in whispers rather than shouts.” Wolfe concludes: “Today the faith found in literature is more whispered than shouted.” To hear it, we may need to listen “more closely to the still, small voice that is all around us.”

Elie and Wolfe concur that the changes in the nature of religion in contemporary literature carry meaning. Elie writes that “belief is a fixture on the landscape even as its significance changes.” But Elie and Wolfe disagree on how to understand that changing significance. Should readers view these changes as lamentable, laudable, inevitable, indispensable? Do these changes signal a “post-Christian” flight from faith toward skepticism, or do they, just the other way around, announce a “postsecular” return from disenchantment toward That Which May Be Luminous?

Three recent volumes of literary criticism take up these questions. John A. McClure in *Partial Faiths*, Amy Hungerford in *Postmodern*

Belief, and Norman Finkelstein in *On Mount Vision* look at the ways that religion, belief, or the sacred manifests in American literature in the wake of postmodernism, pluralism, and secularism in the past half-century. McClure, Hungerford, and Finkelstein argue convincingly that for many writers the need for that which might be called “religious” remains even after the foundations of traditional religion have been called into question. What Finkelstein proposes for the writers considered in his volume applies equally to those Hungerford and McClure consider. The “cultural work” these contemporary writers undertake “is derived from or in dialogue with what may be broadly understood as practices of faith and spiritual experience. Sometimes they address (or revise) specific religious doctrines or beliefs, but more often they participate in ... ‘the symposium of the whole’” (5). Understandably, this process of derivation and dialogue results in writing that is “heterodox, syncretic, and revisionary” (7).

McClure describes how “religious innovation” works in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Michael Ondaatje. These writers, McClure notes, work with “new forms of religiously inflected seeing and being. And, in each case, the forms of faith they invent, study, and affirm are dramatically partial and open-ended” (ix). Similarly, Hungerford shows how belief, whether with or without content, marks the writings of J. D. Salinger, Allen Ginsberg, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson. And Finkelstein traces “religious revisionism” through the avant-garde, long-form poems of Robert Duncan, Ronald Johnson, Jack Spicer, Susan Howe, Michael Palmer, Nathaniel Mackey, and Armand Schwerner. Together, McClure, Hungerford, and Finkelstein make a strong case that contemporary literature has not abandoned religion so much as transformed it, conceptually as well as formally.

Between Religion and Secularism

In the contemporary era, McClure observes, many otherwise secular people feel pulled toward that which might be called religious, even while many religious people feel inversely compelled to let go of certain traditional aspects of religion. From apparently opposing backgrounds, such people meet somewhere in the middle between secularism and religion. McClure calls this place “postsecular,” borrowing the term from Jürgen Habermas and others who use it to write about the apparent resurgence of religion (or lack thereof) in many places in the world. For McClure, the postsecular

does not mean that secularism has come and gone but rather that secularism and religion coexist with each other and with options in between (8-10). Much of the literature that McClure, Hungerford, and Finkelstein write about emerges from and speaks to postsecular concerns, though Hungerford and Finkelstein use different terms to describe the same historical moment.

Finkelstein gets to the postsecular by drawing within American poetry a genealogy of the "conflict between poetry and the sacred" that runs through Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson for whom "poetry brings forth religion" and through Arnold, Eliot, and Stevens for whom "poetry replaces religion" (1, 8, 15). In this "vexed tradition," he writes, "the sacred always adheres itself to what may appear to be even the most resolutely secular poems" (1). Many contemporary poets thus seek the "hidden life" in the face of secularism and pluralism. Quoting Steven M. Wasserstrom, Finkelstein calls the phenomenon "*religion after religion*" (6). Quoting Zygmunt Bauman, Hungerford describes the same as "a postmodern 're-enchantment' of the world" (7). As McClure writes, postsecular literature seeks to "reconcile important secular and religious intuitions" (6).

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* illustrates well the religious/secular tension within postsecular literature. McClure interprets the novel as a womanist reading of Exodus. Morrison pushes back against two too narrow interpretations of the biblical narrative, the religious reading that sees only the freedom of the Hebrews from Egypt and the secular reading that sees only the genocides that follow. Morrison takes a fuller view. She understands that both "masters and slaves read the same holy text," and that the same text, depending on how they read it, "sponsors both liberation and fundamentalism" (105, 110). In the text where God tells Pharaoh to "let my people go," God also commands those people to "not suffer a witch to live" (110-11). McClure argues that Morrison uses the Exodus narrative to lay bare religious fundamentalism's "physical" and "hermeneutical violence" (112). While such a move could be understood in traditionally secular terms, he insists that Morrison opposes religious fundamentalism not only with secular ideals but also with spiritual ones. Morrison presents a "spacious spirituality" (114).

Exodus serves as the "controlling" narrative for the all-black town at the heart of the novel, Ruby, Oklahoma (111). McClure explains how through reference to the town's large public oven. On one hand, the elders intend the oven ("once used to bake the bread of daily life") to remind the community

of its "long march to autonomy and solidarity under God." The exodus of the town's ancestors from the South after slavery echoes the Exodus themes of freedom and divine provision. On the other hand, these same elders rule the town with a "fierce commitment to a sacred text," which justifies for them not only their abuses against women, children, and those with lighter skin but also the massacre they ultimately commit (112). In light of that massacre, McClure suggests that the oven also hints at the Holocaust and thereby echoes the other side of Exodus. The oven warns readers against "embrac[ing] that narrative uncritically" (111).

The oven also serves as an occasion for reading within the novel. An inscription on the oven reads: "... the Furrow of His Brow." The men of the town fight over how to fill in the missing word. Some read: "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." Others see: "Be the Furrow of His Brow." One of the community's patriarchs, Steward Morgan, violently insists on his own reading, paraphrasing a threat from the end of the book of Revelation: "If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake" (qtd. in McClure 113). However, the women of the town "reject the whole notion of single, inerrant readings" altogether. One woman "concludes that the text has 'multiple meanings,'" while another "accept[s] it as it stands, without the violence of any imperative" (McClure 112). Like her husband Steward, Dovey Morgan draws a connection between interpretation and violence with a reference to the bible, though to an opposite effect: "'Furrow of the Brow' alone was enough. ... Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross" (qtd. in McClure 112). For McClure, the implication of this passage is that by insisting on a single meaning, the men of the town "repeat the unspeakable violence of the crucifixion. In the name of religious rectitude, they murder Jesus, the Living Word" (113).

Elsewhere in the novel, Steward Morgan drives home the connection between interpretive violence and physical violence by, in effect, making good on his threat. Women in a convent not far from Ruby not only govern themselves but also practice an alternative spirituality, drawing on rituals and understandings outside of Christianity (101, 114). This will not do for Ruby's patriarchs, so they attack the convent and kill the "unholy women" (112). Secularism has long levied charges against fundamentalist religion for spilling innocent blood in the name of religion. It is a crime against women, against reason, and against human rights. What these secular charges leave

out that Morrison makes clear, McClure argues, is that such violence is also a crime against the spirit. When Steward Morgan prepares to shoot the convent's leader, Consolata, McClure suggests that in addition to her life "something else is at stake." Facing death, Consolata smiles and calls out, "You're back," perhaps addressing "the god who visits her regularly." But Steward Morgan kills her before she can say what she sees. In McClure's reading, this scene demonstrates how the physical and interpretive violence of religious fundamentalism closes off "other realms, those of the very gods or God with whom it is humans' destiny, and delight, to be reconciled" (114).

In their "attempt to limit revelation, cut off interpretation, seal scripture, and formulate its doctrine of the one and only God or set of gods," the men of *Paradise*, adherents to fundamentalist Christianity, sin not just against reason and human rights but also "against the spirit and the spirits" (114). The women, those within and outside of Christianity, remain open to multiple spirits or, at least, multiple interpretations of one spirit. In this way, the novel encourages pluralism while also acknowledging the possibility of "fresh upspringings of the spirit" within Christianity (116-17). McClure argues that Morrison exemplifies postsecular fiction by rejecting "dogmatic Christianity" as well as dogmatic secularism and by celebrating more open ways of seeing and being in the world (104).

Between Content and Form

Contemporary literature contains not only postsecular themes but also postsecular forms. While McClure, Hungerford, and Finkelstein each note the significance of form in understanding these texts, Hungerford and Finkelstein consider it at considerable length. As the title of his book indicates, Finkelstein looks for not just the sacred but the *forms* of the sacred. Similarly, Hungerford takes up the question of how certain "writers turn to religion to imagine the purely formal elements of language in transcendent terms" (xiii). She argues that many contemporary writers practice "belief without meaning" or "belief in meaninglessness," that is, they practice a sort of "belief that does not emphasize the content of doctrine" but that nonetheless counts as belief through formal means (xiii, xv). The key semantic distinction is between *beliefs* as mental assent to specific theological doctrines and *belief* as religious practice, feeling, forms, and a way of living. For those who find this distinction odd, Hungerford points out that the "very notion that beliefs are at the heart of religion" is

largely a Western Christian idea, whereas other traditions often put greater emphasis on other dynamics of religion, such as experience, practice, ritual, behavior, and communal participation, "often independent of theological beliefs" (21). But form and content do interact, often through "tension" (25). For Hungerford, the fullness of belief falls somewhere between content and form.

Hungerford offers Allen Ginsberg as an example. In his poetry and his poetry-based political activism, Hungerford explains, Ginsberg practices sound as belief (sound being an element of form) through incorporating chants, mantras, and aspects of yoga. He draws voraciously from such religious sources as Jewish scripture (33), "the Bible and Christian mystics" (42), "the incarnate word of St. John's Gospel" (43), "Hare Krishna chants" (30), and "Hindu and Buddhist mantras" (37). What he takes from these sources is not primarily content but formal practices, most importantly, the use of the sacred Sanskrit syllable "Om" (41). Building on the familiar poetic construct, Hungerford writes that for Ginsberg "language would not mean but do" and "its doing would be above all supernatural" (49). More specifically, "the literal form of the sound" (including "the particular assemblage of 'syllables'") does the work of the poem (43, 37). Ginsberg believes that "vibrations produced in the body" through breathing, through chanting, or through the sound of poetry infused with chant "can transform the consciousness directly, bypassing the intellect" (38).

To illustrate the interplay of form and belief in Ginsberg's work, Hungerford offers a reading of his poem "Hūm Bōm." On one hand, "Hūm Bōm" has a clear anti-war message. The poem repeats "actual English words": "whom bomb." The lines "whom bomb? / we bomb you" shift to "whomb bomb? you bomb you." On the level of semantic meaning, the poem uses a pun to make the case that "one should abandon modern nuclear violence (because to bomb the other is really to bomb yourself)." On the other hand, the poem simultaneously suggests that readers should not read for meaning but for sound. In particular, Hungerford suggests that title's "phonetic spellings" and "diacritical marks" ("marks that originate in Sanskrit") "underline the centrality of sound and align the poem with Hindu and Buddhist mantras." Ginsberg means for the poem to work like "a resonant chanted mantra," with the sounds of words working to "transform the listener into a person of peace" (37).

But if the religious power of language operates even in the *absence* of religious meaning, what happens in the *presence* of religious meaning? Even

as Hungerford makes the case that form functions without content in the work of writers who have an “oblique relation” to the religious, she also acknowledges that content still matters to contemporary writers who are “traditional believers” (xvi, 112). To examine the relationship between the content of religious discourse and the forms of religious practice, Hungerford turns to the work of Marilynne Robinson, “that very literary Calvinist” (121, 26). Though content matters for Robinson, Hungerford argues that she still writes as “a formalist.” That is to say, “form stands at the very heart of what she imagines religious life and literature ... to be” (113). If the experience of religious form can take on a significance distinct from religious content, *the experience of the content* can likewise take on a significance distinct (but not wholly separate) from the content of the content (116).

In Hungerford’s reading, Robinson casts belief in terms of “both discourse and practice.” More specifically, she presents “the mental discourses of religious persons while also spinning stories that situate those persons within religious life.” Thematically, her novels stress the religious belief “that ordinary people have rich and complicated interior lives, that they embody a silent discourse of thought that, if we knew its voice, would astonish us.” Narratively, her novels enact this religious belief as a religious practice, among other ways, through careful attention to the inner voices of characters and to their relationships with one another. In this way, Robinson imbues “formal structures” with “religious significance” (114).

Robinson brings inner voices, relationships, and belief together nowhere more profoundly than with respect to two characters in her novel *Gilead*, the brothers John and Edward Ames. The beloved older brother, Edward, goes off to college to train for the ministry but comes back “reading Feuerbach and Marx and renouncing his faith” (114). Out of love for his brother, John listens to the arguments he has with their father, reads all of the texts he refers to, and determines “to say nothing about belief that would sound insincere to the beloved but skeptical listener” (114). John affirms their relationship through thoughtfulness, open-mindedness, and attentiveness to his brother and his brother’s ideas, rather than, say, looking down on him or trying to reconvert him. Though John Ames remains a believer, he also remains “profoundly aware of the possibility—even the plausibility—of unbelief” (114). Hungerford argues that John Ames’ inner reflections on theology and atheism, for the sake of his brother and others, bring together content and form, belief as doctrine and belief as practice. She writes that his “reflection itself is [a] kind of holy act, finding a theological meaning

that comes as the sum of a whole life of attending to the different thoughts of other persons” (115). In this process, theology emerges from and flows back into “the lived experience of difference and reconciliation in the home” (121). Thus, as with Ginsberg and others, for Robinson, the full measure of belief resides between theology and lived experience, between content and form.

Still Smaller Voices

Postsecular literature often ruptures common categories for discussing what is and is not religious. But sometimes postsecular texts engage with what could be considered religious *so* quietly or obscurely that one might wonder whether they *should* be considered religious. One may wonder, at some point, whether terms such as *religion*, *the sacred*, *belief*, and so forth are still the most accurate and appropriate ones.

The work of Ronald Johnson offers one case in point. Describing how he borrows religious concepts of all sorts, Finkelstein call Johnson’s collection *ARK* “a hymnal and prayer book of the cosmic orders” (90, 88). Finkelstein nominates one particular word as a “microcosmic moment” in the poem that reflects “the cosmic order that is *ARK*” (89, 67). The word is “*scrupture*.” A pun and portmanteau of Johnson’s invention, it appears in the lines: “if Gods there be to address, / read our *scrupture* / released planet’s snare” (qtd. in Finkelstein 89). The word contains multiple religious references, which Finkelstein breaks down as follows. First, *scrupture* includes *scrap*, which refers to the scraps of the material world and to the scraps of other texts (including religious ones) on which the poem is built. Second, the word includes *rapture*, which refers to the doctrine of the rapture and to the idea of poetry as rapturous. Third, the word also includes *scripture*. The poem is a “scripture of scraps.” Altogether, Finkelstein argues, the line suggests that “the poem can help us see through earthly, material being to perceive the spiritual orders.” Accordingly, the poet serves as “priest, evangelist, and scribe” (89-90). This perceptive reading emerges from Finkelstein’s careful attention to the details of the text and his deep familiarity with Johnson’s broader work. At the same time, readers would not be unreasonable for wondering whether the case has been overstated. The religious or sacred qualities of these lines remain deeply ambiguous.

The ambiguity of the sacred stands out all the more in the case of Michael Palmer’s poetry, which Finkelstein describes as “apparently dedicated to ... a radically secular worldview” (3). Admitting that looking for the sacred in

such work “might appear odd to some readers,” Finkelstein proposes that “if we know the sacred only through the mediating power of poetic form, then, conversely, the poem will always and unavoidably remind us of its religious heritage and associations, even if it seeks to deny them” and even with “the most resolutely secular” poetry (138, 2, 1). Finkelstein points to the opening words of one poem as singularly important for understanding Palmer’s work. Written several decades into his career, these words read: “Or maybe this / is the sacred” (qtd. in Finkelstein 3). Finkelstein interprets these lines as follows. The pronoun *this* refers to the poem itself. The words *or maybe* indicate that the lines begin in the middle of a conversation. Palmer has been having this conversation about poetry and the sacred for many years. These lines do not introduce the sacred but rather articulate the already ongoing engagement with it that has long been “simmering below the surface, partially repressed” (3). Again, this is a careful reading on Finkelstein’s part. Still, cautious readers may wonder whether this passing reference to the sacred supports such an interpretation of an entire oeuvre or whether it actually undermines it. Wouldn’t the idea that the sacred has been actually absent explain its apparent absence just as well as the idea that it has been present but “simmering below the surface”? As the poem says, maybe. But maybe not.

To understand why Finkelstein reads these poems as sacred, readers need to know that, for both Finkelstein and Palmer, the sacred comes through not in content but in form. Palmer invokes the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart to compare poetry to heresy. Quoting E. M. Cioran, he argues that Eckhart “sinned on the side of form,” that is, not in *what* he said but in *how* he said it. The poetic *how* of his sermons points beyond the semantic *what* of all language. Palmer claims that poetry works the same way (qtd. in Finkelstein 138). Building on that idea, Finkelstein puts forth that the very “act of *poesis*” counts as heresy because of poetic form. Poetic form “challenges all types of orthodox discourse” because it “charges ordinary language with powers beyond itself” (139). Through the use of charged language, poetry contests sacred and secular and engages “agencies of desire, meaning, truth, and yes, ‘Spirit, with that troublesome, rebarbative capital letter’” (139, 141). Finkelstein asks readers to expand their understanding of what such terms as *sacred*, *secular*, *desire*, *meaning*, *truth*, and *spirit* may mean and of how literature may engage, however imperfectly and quietly, with that toward which such terms point.

Like Jacob Wrestling with the Angel

McClure hopes his book will prove useful for scholars as well as for “anyone trying to negotiate the difficult terrain where the spiritual and the secular meet in our time” (25). The evolving relationship between literature and religion has scholarly and personal implications for him. Hungerford, Finkelstein, Elie, and Wolfe express similar sentiments. Of readers who feel likewise about the significance of religion and literature, some will celebrate the shifts in how contemporary writers talk about faith, while others will find cause for concern. But we should not uncritically accept or reject the postsecular. We should take up the invitation to wrestle with texts and the questions they raise. In doing so, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we may be scarred or blessed. Or both.³

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NOTES

¹Elie writes superbly about those earlier writers he holds up as exemplars, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day, in his book *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*.

²Wolfe could also mention several recent collections of, or that include, contemporary writing, especially poetry, engaging seriously with religion. One such collection would be his own *Bearing the Mystery*, an anthology of work originally published in *Image: Art, Faith, Mystery*, the literary journal he has edited for twenty-five years. Others include Bloom and Zuba, Hopler and Johnson, Kaminsky and Towler, Hankins, and the annual *Best Spiritual Writing* series edited by Philip Zaleski.

³Opengart invokes the story of Jacob wrestling the angel to describe the spiritual in contemporary American poetry. I do as well in my dissertation in progress, with the working title, “Wrestling with Angels: Postsecular Contemporary American Poetry.”

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