

AMERICAN LITERATURE'S SECULAR FAITH

by

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American Literature's Secular Faith

Abstract

by

RAY HORTON

This dissertation argues for a new way to characterize the relationship between religious discourse and aesthetic attention in twentieth century American literature. The study of religion and literature has been dominated by two theses: on one hand, critics since Matthew Arnold have advanced a secularization thesis where art serves as a surrogate for religion; on the other hand, recent postsecular critics study how literature encodes religious convictions. In this study, I demonstrate that an important strain of twentieth century writing requires a third approach, showing how writers achieve the artistic goal of vivifying quotidian experience by incorporating faith as a formal element. For example, in Marilynne Robinson's fiction, we might ask why novels committed to a Calvinist belief in immortality are simultaneously enamored with material experiences and ephemeral images. Why does faith in eternity compel the narrator of *Gilead* to attend to the surfaces of ordinary objects, such as a cascade of bubbles that floats past his window while he contemplates his incipient mortality? I argue that Robinson is one of many writers for whom the background of religious conviction activates an aesthetic process that renders the finite as uniquely worthy of attention. For these writers, a robust engagement with religion makes the secular newly visible.

Writers as diverse as Robinson, Mark Twain, Willa Cather, James Baldwin, and Don DeLillo elicit new modes of aesthetic attention as they engage religious discourse. If modernist aesthetics are thought to be predicated upon finitude, as in Wallace Stevens's

famous assertion that “death is the mother of beauty,” then this tradition of American writers revises this premise, making the mundane newly visible by grappling with religious ideas. Where American literary history is traditionally conceived as a history of secularization, or as an archive of religious ideas that resist secularity, this study shows how religion’s persistence over the past century has served to instigate aesthetic attention to the ordinary.

Introduction

Religion as Device in American Literature

Religion stands accused of taking our eyes off of the world. Philosophers, writers, and critics have long warned against putting faith in whatever purports to be eternal, supernatural, or transcendent. We trivialize the immanent, such thinkers caution, when our imaginations are preoccupied with the infinite. A century and a half ago, the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach offered an influential version of this argument when he described Christianity as an alienating denial of this world for another. “God is the highest subjectivity of man abstracted from himself; hence man can do nothing of himself, all goodness comes from God” (31). His main concern is not whether such a God exists; rather, he asserts that the basic structure of the religious longing is incoherent, for it takes our attention off of the temporal by enrapturing us with dreams of eternity. More recently, literary critics such as Martin Hägglund have revived Feuerbach’s critique of transcendence, resisting the so-called “religious turn” in recent cultural theory on similar grounds.¹ “It is because one is invested in the survival of temporal life that one seeks to save anything from death,” Hägglund contends. “Yet the state of immortality cannot answer to the survival that is desired,” for such a state would annul the very contingencies that elicit our misguided longing for an “eternity where nothing comes into being or passes away” (*Dying for Time* 9). According to Hägglund, the world’s religions misplace our care for the world by disavowing the finitude on which that care rests. For these and countless others, religious faith eclipses our attention to the world before us. It

¹ For Hägglund’s overview of the religious turn in cultural theory and in continental philosophy, see *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. He challenges the view, advanced by thinkers such as Richard Kearney and John Caputo, “that there was an ethical or ‘religious’ turn in Derrida’s thinking” (1). I return to Hägglund’s argument in my fourth chapter, as part of my reading of DeLillo, religion, and postmodernism.

deadens our capacity to apprehend what is material, ephemeral, and finite. For it's because of the finitude of our experience, the ephemerality of our perceptions, and the lack of any transcendent guarantees, these thinkers explain, that we cultivate an attachment to the world in the first place. "Death," as one modernist poet declares, "is the mother of beauty." Or as a more colloquial American voice cautions: "You're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good."²

This dissertation uncovers a tradition of twentieth century American writers who reverse this charge. Writers as varied as Mark Twain, Willa Cather, James Baldwin, Don DeLillo, and Marilynne Robinson, each working under the auspices of a disenchanted age, reimagine religious faiths as aesthetic models which intensify, rather than annul, our perception of the material world. But in order to appreciate how these writers turn being "heavenly minded" into an "earthly good" (and in order to ask what such an "earthly good" might entail), we must first consider how deeply the critique of transcendence sketched above has permeated critical discourse, shaping a familiar story about secularization in literary theory and in American literary studies.

In the United States and in Europe, this iconoclastic warning was sounded as both a sociopolitical project and a scholarly method.³ This project and this method, woven into a master narrative of Modernity, came during the twentieth century to be called the secularization thesis. The secularization thesis provided a useful shorthand for the

² The first quotation is, of course, from Stanza VI, line 13 of Wallace Steven's "Sunday Morning." The second is from the Johnny Cash song titled "No Earthly Good."

³ Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of this project. The edited collection, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, by Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun provides an important range of responses to Taylor's analysis. Another important resource for this history is *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, a scholarly website maintained by the Social Science Research Council and named after Taylor's concept, outlined in *A Secular Age*, of modern secularity as an "immanent frame."

prescriptive arguments sketched above, but it also marshalled an overly hasty descriptive account of religion's decline. It presumed, for instance, that the shift from a religious to a secular frame of reference entailed nothing more than a system of one for one substitutions: heavenly aims replaced by earthly ambitions, divinity translated into popular sovereignty, theology transformed into philosophy, prayer sublimated into poetry. Literature, according to what Michael Kauffman calls the "Arnoldian replacement theory" (616), would emerge a "substitute for religion" (610) in a world where religious ideas had lost their cultural and moral authority. Through this rigorous cutting away, many hoped, we were clearing a path toward what Wallace Stevens calls "the plain sense of things."⁴ But that path no longer appears to be so clear cut, as the recent avalanche of

⁴ Although this dissertation does not address Stevens directly, his work—both his career long interest in theological thinking and his widespread popular and critical reception as a poet uniquely attuned to modernity's project of secularization—often hovers around the edges of this project. I am interested in Stevens, citing him occasionally, because his thinking invites us into a productive paradox akin to the phenomenon I am calling secular faith.

On one hand, some of Stevens's most famous lines, such as "Death is the mother of beauty," are readily quotable, crystalizing the critique of transcendence advanced by thinkers from Feuerbach to Häggglund. On the other hand, when in his later work he celebrates "the plain sense of things," he not only offers a memorable phrase for what is often construed as the desired outcome of modern secularization—he also offers an important insight into its limits, limits that I take up throughout this project. "After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things. It is as if / We had come to an end of the imagination" (1-3), the poem begins. "Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (13-14), begins the fourth stanza. To adopt a wholly secular vision of the world, to see, as Simon Critchley puts it in his eponymously titled book on Stevens, how "things merely are," requires more than the mere cutting away of religion's residual constructs—more than just a redaction, as it were, of Jove's "inhuman birth" ("Sunday Morning" III.1). Rather, the "absence" designated by the secular, to "come to an end of the imagination" and see what is as it is, nevertheless must "[i]tself...be imagined." This tension is itself central to this dissertation, which traces a surprising relationship between "Death is the mother of beauty" and "a plain sense of things" which must yet "be imagined." Throughout, I seek to illustrate how a wide range of twentieth century American writers return to the very religious imaginaries thought to interfere with "a plain sense of things" in order to make such a vision imaginable.

For two studies of Stevens that help to elucidate the argument I have begun to sketch here, see Matthew Mutter's "The Problem of a Secular Poetics" and Joshua Kotin's "Wallace Stevens's Point of View." Our attachment to the secularization thesis, as Mutter explains, has also caused us to oversimplify Stevens's lifelong fascination with religious thinking. "Stevens knew that a secular world is not simply what is left over after the gods depart, but a new imaginary that competes with an older one" (742). Despite Stevens's clear disaffection with Christianity, as exemplified by poems like "Sunday Morning," Mutter shows how Stevens was nevertheless deeply engaged with theological ideas. Yet "Stevens is a skeptic," Kotin insists, "embracing a series of increasingly extravagant experiments in an attempt to create a livable form of secularism" (65). His writing pivots around the interplay of "metaphysical need and failure" (59). The dynamic I am tracing throughout this dissertation is thus, in many respects, analogous to the

interdisciplinary scholarship in secularization theory has demonstrated. Many now recognize the waning influence of the secularization thesis as an opportunity for a renewed interdisciplinary project to account for the relation between religion and literature. “The contemporary political and cultural reemergence of religion is well known,” Susannah Monta explains; “the once dominant secularization thesis that cultures as they mature will inevitably become less religious is receding,” and “scholars are recognizing that we neglect religion at our peril” (2). Others make even bolder claims. “The secularization thesis is dead,” exclaim Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, summarizing a growing consensus across the humanities and social sciences. “There is no doubt whatever about that” (645).⁵

Dead though it may be, the secularization thesis held enormous influence over twentieth century writing, both its literature as well as its literary criticism. Following Max Weber, critics maintained that “the [modern] world is disenchanted,” and from this premise they inferred two significant assumptions about literary form and literary history. Taking their cue from Georg Lukács, most midcentury literary theorists agreed upon the distinctly secular character of Modernity’s quintessential literary genre, the novel. “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88), Lukács famously declares.⁶ And when scholars such as R.W.B. Lewis and Perry Miller began to

phenomenon that many critics have attributed to the career of Wallace Stevens: that his skepticism drives him to investigate religious imaginaries more deeply even as he searches for a language in which to imagine the “plain sense” for perceiving the material world, the kind of perception and attention which would be required for a wholly secular life.

⁵ In 2014 alone, three special issues of major literary studies journals sought to rethink the methods of contemporary literary studies in light of the growing distrust of the secularization thesis: *Religion & Literature* (Monta), *American Literature* (Coviello and Hickman), and *American Literary History*. The critical quotations excerpted above come from the introductions to the first two issues.

consolidate the most influential narratives of American literary history—those which we still reproduce in our anthologies and survey courses, often through sheer force of habit—they crafted the story of American literature around the plot of secularization.

Lewis and Miller each identified the Puritan theology of Colonial New England as a source of American identity that would, in the ensuing centuries, secularize to form the canon of American literature. R.W.B. Lewis famously describes the emergence of a dominant in American culture, an ideal which translated the familiar Christian doctrines of Adam, Eden, and the Fall into an archetype for America's collective self-understanding. According to Lewis, the Adamic myth invoked the "image of a radically new personality, the hero of a new adventure...emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry," and "most easily identified with Adam before the Fall" (5). Similarly, Perry Miller's Puritans embarked on a divine errand, a quest to build a New Jerusalem where "social gradations would remain eternally what God had originally appointed" (6). Having failed to achieve this divine errand, they pursued its worldly analogue; they sought "to fill it with meaning by themselves and out of themselves," and as they moved

⁶ Ian Watt offers a similarly influential version of the secularization thesis in his study of the rise of the English novel. "It is generally agreed upon," Watt observes, that "the uniquely individualist" ethos of "modern society" stems from "the rise of industrial capitalism and the spread of Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist and Puritan forms" (60). And it was these religious forms, for Watt, whose "secularization...was of considerable importance for the rise of the novel" (74). For a recent study of how the secularization thesis came to underpin twentieth century theories of the novel, see Vincent Pecora's *Secularization without End*.

While the secularization thesis is most noticeable in midcentury theories of the novel, it held a pervasive influence across literary studies, particularly in M.H. Abrams account of Romanticism. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams asserts that "the course of Western thought since the Renaissance has been one of progressive secularization." This secularization, however, "has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas," but rather "their displacement from a supernatural to a natural frame of reference" (13). Although "displacement" offers a more subtle account of secularization than "replacement," Abrams's account nevertheless retains the basic teleology that has come to define the secularization thesis: the assumption that Modernity, almost by definition, entails an inevitable transition from whatever we might call "religious" to whatever we might call "secular," a binary maintained by Abrams along axes such as supernatural vs. natural, eternal vs. worldly, divine vs. human.

from a spiritual to a worldly frame of reference, “they were left alone with America” (15). These critical narratives, American literature’s myths of origin, remain both influential and controversial. In recent decades, many critics have drawn attention to the ideological ramifications of these origin stories, exposing their tendency to reproduce American exceptionalism in both the teaching and study of American literature.⁷ These critiques have been timely and incisive, but it is not my aim to reproduce them here. Instead, I retrieve these critical narratives in order to highlight how two of their central premises continue to persist: their emphasis on American literature’s religious beginnings, and their commitment to the secularization thesis as the path American literature follows from the Puritans to “the plain sense of things.”

The secularization thesis underpinning these origin stories has lost its prestige of late. But despite its shortcomings, it harbors an intuition that I believe worth preserving when it invites us, as Simon Critchley puts it in his study of Wallace Stevens, to describe “life as it is, but with all the intricate evasions of as” (*Things Merely Are* 12).

Consequently, this study asks what happens to this version of the secularization thesis during what should, presumably, be the most disenchanted period of American literary history: the period from roughly 1900 to the present. What if, counterintuitively, several of the past century’s major American writers had discerned a way to engage with persistent religious ideas in order to model a mode of aesthetic attention which discloses

⁷ I refer to the work of critics such as Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan during the 1990s. In books such as *New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon* and *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, these critics contend that previous models of American literary history, many of which are built on the work of figures like Lewis and Miller, obscure the most unsavory social and political dimensions of American history in order to craft a cohesive story and produce the illusion of a unified “American” literature. For a recent reevaluation of the role religion plays in this critical debate, see Sarah Rivett’s 2012 article, “Religious Exceptionalism and American Literary History: *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* in 2012.”

the quotidian features of the material world in a unique way, investing with newfound significance what might otherwise be seen instrumentally or simply not seen at all?

Writers such as Mark Twain, Willa Cather, James Baldwin, Don DeLillo, and Marilynne Robinson demonstrate the same preoccupation with “the plain sense of things”—with the worldly, the finite, and the ephemeral—that one would expect to find in the writing of a wholly secular age. But if we have been taught that American literature’s secularity is inversely related to its religiosity, that its modern worldliness emerges either by subtracting or sublimating its earlier spirituality, these writers suggest how much we will have to unlearn. For Twain, Cather, Baldwin, DeLillo, Robinson, and countless others, the path to “the plain sense of things” passes directly through sustained engagement with religious beliefs, practices, and discourses. They neither abandon the worldly for the otherworldly, nor do they arrive at the secular by diminishing the role of the sacred. Instead, religion and theology saturate the phenomenological backgrounds that underwrite their prose. These religious backgrounds, in turn, operate as aesthetic devices for articulating a secular faith, for a redoubled commitment to looking upon the contingencies of the finite world with the intensity and wonder of an otherworldly vision.

Religion as Background, Religion as Device

A scene near the beginning of Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* provides a striking example of the dynamic I have begun to describe. The narrator, John Ames, is a minister who, upon learning that he suffers from a terminal illness, endeavors to provide his son with an account of his “begats” by writing him a long letter (the novel) to be read after his death. Early in his letter, Ames interrupts his narrative in order to call attention to a

commonplace event that he witnesses through his window. A series of bubbles float by, rising from the earth to the heavens, “fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst” (9). As this image absorbs his attention, Ames locates the source of these bubbles: a routine moment of fun and frivolity for the young family that he will soon leave behind. Never content to let a seemingly trivial moment pass without sustained theological reflection, he remarks:

Some of the bubbles drifted up through the branches, even above the trees. You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. They were lovely. Your mother is wearing her blue dress and you are wearing your red shirt and you were kneeling on the ground together with Soapy between and that effulgence of bubbles rising, and so much laughter. Ah, this life, this world. (9)

Ames casts his ministerial eye upon the “celestial consequences” of daily life’s many unremarkable scenes, on the satisfaction to be found within the corporeal universe, and most emphatically, on the short-lived temporality of the bubbles as they rise and burst at his window. But what does a minister like Ames, whose Calvinist worldview is ostensibly grounded in a transcendent deity and an unseen eternity, have to do with anything as flimsy and ethereal as a child’s bubbles?

If we rely upon an interpretive schema that restricts the religious imagination (that is, the American Protestant theological imagination) to an ontology of transcendence and an epistemology grounded in orthodox belief, the answer is predictably allegorical: Ames, like the bubbles, is not long for this world. He too, his faith tells him, will put on the immortality of spiritual salvation as his worldly life is expunged, absconding from the

temporality of family and frivolity for his true home in heaven. The bubbles would thus symbolize the way his own corporeal mortality prefigures his spiritual immortality. His temporal experience of the world will fade as his attention turns to eternity. As Ames's earthly life expires into the prose of his letter, he achieves immortality through the "celestial consequences" of his earthly life: heaven. But this allegorical interpretation misses the most crucial feature of this scene. Even as the bubbles provoke Ames to dwell on theological questions about eternity, the thought of eternity alerts Ames to the bubbles themselves in their very transience. Ultimately, Ames's faith in a decidedly Protestant immortality motivates a strikingly different perception of the ephemeral, enabling an acute aesthetic sensibility that draws his attention back from heaven and toward the bubbles, the family, and the world.

Admittedly, Ames's imminent death motivates the novel's epistolary form, and an interpretation focusing on transcendence would at first seem to resemble the counsel Ames routinely offers at the death-beds of his congregants. "I don't know how many times people have asked me what death is like" (3), he recollects, only a few pages prior to the scene with the bubbles. "I used to say it was like going home" (4). Despite this apparent division between the eternal and the finite, however, Ames quickly collapses any tension between a religious vision of immortality and the material world's irrepressible temporality: "then I'd walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee" (4), he quips, confessing a sense of being at home in the world, a sense of home that would seem to conflict what he often calls his pulpit speech—a discourse that consigns "home" to an eternity outstripping the present world. Soap bubbles and coffee pots seem a far cry from eternity, but it is precisely Ames's religious

vision of eternity that brings these objects and images before his unambiguous attention. For all his references to the transcendent, supernatural, and unseen, Ames's Protestantism, rooted in but also transforming the theology of Calvin, Edwards, and Barth, necessarily cycles him back to the immanent, the temporal, and the overlooked. When he concentrates on theological questions, questions rooted in his belief in a transcendent God and an immortal soul, he looks out at the world and watches as its most ephemeral, ordinary features show up with a vibrancy that he had never noticed before.

Chapter five will explore how this dynamic develops across each of Robinson's four novels. This scene, however, exemplifies not just an interesting anecdote from contemporary literature, but a persistent feature traceable across a century American literature which has been largely ignored or misunderstood within literary scholarship. As each chapter of this dissertation will demonstrate, this contemporary example is far from singular within the past century of American writing. Rather, it illustrates a relationship between the religious and the aesthetic that persists, with different variations, across a diverse array of twentieth century writers. In Twain's late fiction, supernatural characters harness the rhetoric of the jeremiad in order to elevate the mundane to the status of the transcendent. In Cather's work, Catholic faith transforms Kantian aesthetics into a model for the miraculous perception of form amid featurelessness. For Baldwin, Pentecostal ritual and theology intensifies ordinary perception, offering an aesthetic solution to midcentury debates about race and protest fiction by portraying the mundane world as charged with the menace of damnation. And for DeLillo, a devotional commitment to atheism offers an escape from postmodern simulacra by transforming the desire for eternity into an acceptance of finitude. In each instance, these writers achieve the artistic

goal of vivifying quotidian experience by incorporating some distinct version of religious faith or theological discourse as a formal element of their prose. If modernist aesthetics are thought to be predicated on the critique of religious alienation—the version of the secularization thesis which claims that religion takes our eyes off of the world—then the tradition that I uncover in this study inverts this familiar narrative, making the mundane newly visible by grappling with religious ideas.

For each of the authors I study, specific theological discourses and religious practices provide the works in question with a background, with a peculiar way of organizing experience and orienting attention. In each case, this background operates as an aesthetic device that gives renewed vivacity to quotidian experience. By “background,” I draw upon Charles Taylor’s reading of Heidegger, which explores the interpretive role of background as an “engaged agency,” where one is “embedded in a culture, a form of life, a ‘world’ of involvements” (“Engaged Agency” 318). Following Heidegger, Taylor contends that the phenomena of experience cannot be distended from their perceptual and interpretive background but, rather, that it is against such a background that experience is rendered meaningful. Elsewhere, Taylor explains that a “background” operates not as an explicit “theory” but as an implicit “imaginary.” It is, he contends, “that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense that they have” (“Afterward” 309). Thus, to argue that many twentieth century American writers draw upon religion as background is not to say that religion is, in the colloquial sense, “in the background,” relegated to some secondary plane and called upon from time to time to provide cultural context or thematic ornamentation. Rather, to describe religion as

background in works of literature is to assert that these works are thoroughly enmeshed within the “‘world’ of involvements” made available by the particular religious or theological traditions with which these works are concerned. They are so entirely caught up in the “engaged agency” of religious backgrounds that one must understand the religious imaginary at work in the text in order to fully grasp how “particular features” of their worlds “show up” as objects of perception.

Our earlier example from Marilynne Robinson’s writing provides an especially clear illustration of how religion might be understood as background within a work of fiction. When John Ames of *Gilead* looks out his window to see the bubbles rising toward the trees, he does not merely stop to explain how the bubbles symbolize human finitude within a Calvinist scheme of eternity. Though his mind and his writing are saturated with theology, he does not pause his reflection to impose an explicitly religious interpretation on this material event. Instead, his background orientation is such that the bubbles “show up” for him as immediately significant. His vision of a world where transcendence sustains immanence is what enables him to instantaneously recognize an analogous dynamic at work in the bubbles as they ascend heavenward. And it is this recognition that prompts him to look at them more carefully, to attend to their surfaces and perceive their shapes as they expire.

We can further elucidate this largely phenomenological account of religion as background by juxtaposing it alongside one of the twentieth century’s most persuasive interdisciplinary analyses of the relationship between religion and literature. Also writing in the phenomenological tradition, Paul Ricoeur argues that religion and literature are uniquely related insofar as both privilege narrative and mythopoeic modes of knowledge

and interpretation over instrumental and analytical epistemologies. Both share a capacity for opening “new possibilities for being-in-the-world” and novel “modes of redescribing life” (43). For Ricoeur, “religious texts” and “poetic texts” (43) cannot be cleanly separated from one another; both unfurl a “projected world” that a reader, a believer, or a practitioner inhabits, a world that both derives from yet seeks to differentiate itself from “our everyday reality” (44). For Ricoeur, and for the writers examined in this study, religious background is determined less by *what* authors, readers, or characters believe (even though, as I will explain at length, theological differences matter considerably for these writers) or by *how* they enact and negotiate that belief (even though, as the discourse of “lived religion” in Religious Studies has shown, one can never fully analyze religious belief of any kind without considering how it is articulated in *praxis*). It is more concerned, rather, with what conditions of possibility—what modes of seeing, perceiving, experiencing, and narrating—such worlds make available. For Ricoeur, religion and literature fall into each other’s orbit insofar as both revolve around the desire to project a world, to create a unique and compelling imaginary (or background) that can in turn provide new ways of attending to the materiality of everyday experience.

If religion as background enables the material world to “show up” (Taylor) in unique ways in works of twentieth century literature, and if the relationship between religion and literature more broadly is characterized by a shared effort to create new imaginaries, new “modes of redescribing life” (Ricoeur), then we must turn to another set of questions. What is it that shows up? How is life redescribed? If religion as background enables a peculiar range of effects, then how are those effects to be explained? Or, to return one last time to our example from *Gilead*: If Ames’s immersion in Calvinist

theology enables him to see the bubbles more clearly, then what exactly does this clarified vision entail?

We can better understand what religious backgrounds make available, in the tradition of American literature examined here, by considering how they operate according to the logic of enstrangement made famous by Viktor Shklovsky's essay "Art as Device." According to Shklovsky, the ordinary poses a problem for the artist. "Automization eats away at things," he complains. Through habit and routine, "all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously... If someone were to compare the sensation of holding a pen in his hand or speaking a foreign tongue for the very first time with the sensation of performing this operation for the ten thousandth time, then he would no doubt agree" (5). If figures like Weber and Lukács—and, indeed, most adherents of the secularization thesis throughout the twentieth century—propose that the world is disenchanted in the religious sense, then what Shklovsky describes is a disenchantment of a somewhat different order. This is an aesthetic disenchantment. We fail to perceive the surface of the world because we encounter it incessantly. That which is always before us—the quotidian, the ephemeral, and the finitude to which the contingencies of mundane materiality attest—often proves to be what we are most unable to notice. Its forms fade into featurelessness through the routines of everyday life. For Shklovsky, the task of the artist, when faced with the disenchanting tendency of familiarity, is to work out formal techniques that defamiliarize, to transform our attention and perception so that we can become absorbed in the object in question and see it afresh. "The purpose of the image," he claims, "is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a

‘vision’ of this object rather than mere ‘recognition’” (10). The aesthetic device of estrangement, for Shklovsky, is how art attunes our perceptions to what gets lost in the abyss of familiarity.

For writers like Twain, Cather, Baldwin, DeLillo, and Robinson, religious background provides the imaginary from which defamiliarized perceptions of the ordinary can emerge. The persistence of religion over the past century, in many different forms and expressions, furnishes their work with the phenomenological orientation that sets this process of aesthetic defamiliarization in motion. I am not, however, describing the conventional modernist trope of progressive secularization, wherein art either translates religious idioms into a secular key or dispenses with the religious altogether. Rather, I argue that these writers imbue their work with robust religious backgrounds in order to reinvigorate the surfaces of familiar experience. Instead of emptying religion of its ontological and metaphysical substance in order to repurpose its images as art, the writers that I study bring the entire background of their religious interlocutors to bear upon their work, backgrounds which in turn make available the renewed, defamiliarized attention to the ordinary which long stood as the desired outcome of the very secularization story that their work disintegrates. Just as Shklovsky contends that the purpose of art is “to make a stone feel stony” (6), a rich religious background is what gives a character like John Ames the eyes to see an image as familiar as the bubbles rising just outside his window. Religious background, in this peculiarly Shklovskian sense, thus operates as an aesthetic device. It serves as a formal catalyst for vivifying the surfaces of whatever is familiar, ephemeral, and finite. Counterintuitively, to be

“heavenly minded,” for many twentieth century American writers, is to train one’s eyes to look more closely at the world.

In describing religious background as an aesthetic device, however, I am not implying that the relation is one of mere appropriation. I am not suggesting that writers find in religion only convenient stylistic features, metaphors, or images that they can in turn deracinate and employ in the service of their art.⁸ Rather, what makes these writers unique—and what, in many cases, accounts for my choosing them for analysis in this study—is the nuance and sophistication with which their texts treat the varied contents of their religious backgrounds. For example, Mark Twain’s satire of American Protestantism offers one of American literature’s most sophisticated adaptations of the American jeremiad tradition, and it also reflects the complexity of lifelong theological disputes that he held with his closest friend, the Congregationalist minister Joseph Twichell. Similarly, James Baldwin’s turbulent relationship with the Holiness movement of the African American Pentecostal church, the church in which he was raised as a child, enables him to craft characters and communities who are fully immersed in Pentecostal ritual and eschatology. These backgrounds, enmeshed in diverse, complex, and sometimes competing religious and anti-religious concerns, allow writers to integrate

⁸ Moreover, I am not advancing a theoretical statement which will anachronistically fuse the methods of phenomenology with the insights of the Russian formalists. But neither is my effort to put phenomenology and Russian formalism in dialog purely heuristic. Rather, I tie the concept of background to Shklovsky’s notion of estrangement because background offers the strongest model for understanding how these writers frame their work within a religious imaginary, and because Shklovsky’s essay provides one of the clearest articulations of post-Romantic literature’s ambition to vivify the world’s surfaces—to intensify images like the bubbles bursting in front of Ames’s window. I am not saying that the methods of phenomenology and Russian formalism are identical or even that they are philosophically compatible. I am showing, rather, that the way in which certain twentieth century American writers inhabit religious imaginaries (best explained as backgrounds) results in a series of aesthetic effects (such as estrangement and defamiliarization), effects which are classically analyzed by thinkers like Shklovsky but which take on new trajectories in the examples that I will discuss at length in subsequent chapters. And for both terms, background and device, the particular religious dimensions that are of interest to each writer will inflect how each is to be understood, as the following chapters will highlight.

highly specific, well-developed theological discourses and religious practices as models for new forms of aesthetic attention. By describing religion as a device in twentieth century American literature, then, I am not offering yet another version of the secularization thesis by insinuating that religion is merely a tool for art. Rather, I am suggesting that these writers, by infusing very specific and complex religious backgrounds into their work, offer a unique solution to a problem that the now defunct secularization thesis was meant to resolve. Instead of trading a religious for a worldly frame of reference, they inhabit particular forms of religion in order to invigorate attention to the worldly.

Rewriting American Literature's Myth of Origins: From Edwards to Emerson to Robinson

Of all the widely anthologized passages that literary historians have used to account for religion's centrality to American writing, few like the following seem to lend themselves more readily to the strong justification of the secularization thesis, the critique of religion on the grounds that it alienates us from the world.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight...there is no other reason to be given why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. (97-98)

The infamous spider passage of Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is arguably the most familiar selection of Edwards's work. To be a spider in God's hands is to be infinitesimal and insubstantial. It is the ultimate expression of the vanity of everyday, ordinary, secular experience in contrast to the infinite and eternal grandeur of divinity. The spider dangling from the clutches of Jonathan Edwards's angry God may as well be the "plain sense of things" which two and a half centuries of secularization in American literature have subsequently sought to recover from Puritan hellfire and theocracy. This, at least, is the story we have inherited from the critical tradition of scholars such as Perry Miller, whose "Edwards to Emerson" thesis, no matter how subject to criticism it has been over the last several decades, remains a bedrock of American literary history and criticism.

In order to appreciate the significance of twentieth century American writers who draw upon religious backgrounds as aesthetic devices for vivifying the ordinary, we must first consider how this tradition might compel us to rethink a longstanding axiom about American literature more generally. This axiom remains contemporary while reaching much deeper into American history than any of the writers examined at length in this study. The argument of Perry Miller's "Edwards to Emerson" thesis runs parallel to Weber's assertion that Modernity is disenchanted and to Lukács's claim that the novel is the quintessential genre of a secular age, and it committed the nascent field of American Studies to a peculiar version of the secularization thesis. According to Miller and many who followed him (especially Sacvan Bercovitch, whose secularization narrative I will address in my chapter on Twain), one can trace the emergence of a distinctly American literature through the progressive secularization of Puritan religious writing. Specifically,

Miller programmatically linked the literature of nineteenth century American Transcendentalism to the covenant theology of early American Puritanism. While “there is no organic evolution of ideas from Edwards to Emerson,” Miller admits, there is, nevertheless, a common thread that one can trace from early Puritan covenant theology, to Edwards’s sermons, to Emerson’s essays, and beyond: the individual subject’s “effort to confront, face to face, the image of a blinding divinity in the physical universe, and to look upon that universe without the intermediacy of ritual” (185). According to Miller, Edwards’s rhetoric of sensation, shorn of the Puritan’s doctrine of original sin, reappears in Emerson and his successors as the “ecstasy and the vision,” the “permanent joy of those who had put aside the conception of depravity” (198). No longer spiders dangling over the flames of hell, these New England “Mystics...could give themselves over, unrestrainedly, to becoming transparent eyeballs and debauchees of dew” (203).

How should we read Miller’s “Edwards to Emerson” thesis now that its underlying premise, the secularization thesis, has been pronounced dead? I suggest that we begin by returning, briefly, to Marilynne Robinson, reconsidering Miller’s claims about Edwards and Emerson in light of the extensive influence of both figures on a key feature of Robinson’s work: its employment of religious background as an aesthetic device for vivifying the ordinary. When John Ames looks out at the stream of bubbles, Robinson is reimagining the connection between Edwards and Emerson by amplifying a relationship between the religious and the aesthetic that is latent in much of their work. She extrapolates on Edwards’s and Emerson’s own instances of what I am calling religion as device. As the contemporary writer most trenchantly, if idiosyncratically, attuned to both the Calvinism of Edwards and the Transcendentalism of Emerson,

Robinson reclaims and revises Miller's "Edwards to Emerson" thesis by focusing, not on the transcendence of "blinding divinity" (Miller 185), but on what William E. Connelly calls "mundane transcendence" (131). Robinson thus emphasizes a phenomenology of the sacred that brings the aesthetic resources conferred by the concept of transcendence to bear upon the everyday and the ordinary.

"Edwards's metaphysics," Robinson argues, "is first of all an esthetics...Light for him is a virtual synonym for beauty, and the given world is saturated in it" ("Jonathan Edwards in a New Light"). Throughout her novels, as my fifth chapter will demonstrate, Robinson's rigorously theological pursuit demonstrates the aesthetic capacities latent in Calvin and Edwards for transforming our vision of "the given world." Robinson's emphasis on "the given world" similarly motivates her engagement with Emersonian Transcendentalism. In a 1987 *New York Times* essay, she quips: "I am an Emersonian. I think of language as the creature, and the genius, of a collective humankind. I subscribe altogether to the idea that every word is a poem at root." Expanding on her Transcendentalist leanings, she concludes: "It is fine that we produce and nurture more poets than we can ever hope to read, but it would be better if we could allow the use of interesting language for ordinary purposes." Just as Robinson's interest in Edwards stems from her intuition that Puritan metaphysics manifests as an aesthetics, her engagement with Transcendentalism stems from her hope that the aesthetic might bestow newfound care for the attention we give to ordinary language.

Although Robinson's adaptation of Edwards and Emerson (like her ongoing efforts to resuscitate Calvin as a liberal humanist⁹) may appear unusual, it nevertheless

⁹ See Robinson's essay "Puritans and Prigs" in *The Death of Adam*, as well as her introduction to the Vintage edition of Calvin's Institutes, which I discuss at greater length in chapter five of this study.

suggests a plausible revisionary afterlife for Perry Miller's foundational "Edwards to Emerson" thesis. This rereading of Miller, which I propose here, relies not on a defunct secularization thesis but, rather, salvages a suggestive precursor to a tradition that comes to fruition during the twentieth century. It suggests how American writers, fascinated by various religious understandings of transcendence, enable a renewed aesthetic commitment to the surface of quotidian experience.

While Jonathan Edwards's most infamous spider dangles over a candle flame in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," our first written record of his fascination with spiders evokes a much different tone. In "The Spider Letter," likely written to Judge Paul Dudley nearly two decades prior to the "Sinners" sermon, Edwards opens with a telling caveat to his reader. "If you think, sir, that [these observations about spiders] are not worthy the taking notice of, with greatness and goodness overlook and conceal" (1). Edwards recognizes that his object of scrutiny, the spider, can hardly be said to warrant extended attention; its plainness compares, perhaps, with the effervescence of a child's bubbles. But after admitting the quotidian character of his remarks, he then proceeds to describe "the wondrous and curious works of the spider," and to enumerate "phenomena relating to them more particularly wonderful" (1), such as "vast multitudes of little shining webs and glistening strings...that one would think...were tacked to the vault of the heavens" (2). Where the spider of Edwards's "Sinners" sermon is "loathsome," his spider letter implores its reader to take careful note of the "most despicable of animals," to attend to what may admittedly not be "worthy the taking notice of," and to ponder how "from [its] glistening webs so much of the wisdom of the Creator shines" (8). Edwards's theology, his belief in the Creator's wisdom, prompts him to translate his empirical

observation of a spider's routine activities into an opportunity for aesthetic absorption. In these passages of Edwards's early writing, religion provides the device that, in Shklovsky's terminology, enstranges the aesthetic encounter, shifting it from recognition to vision, much as *Gilead*'s John Ames takes notice of shimmering soap bubbles insofar as his thoughts are set on eternity.

Edwards's approach to the "wondrous" spider extends, in his later writings, to other quotidian features of the phenomenal world, including the silkworm and the sweetness of honey. In "Images of Divine Things," he remarks: "The silkworm is a remarkable type of Christ, which, when it dies, yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing. Christ became a worm for our sakes, and by his death finished that righteousness with which believers are clothed" (17). By using a silkworm to illustrate his soteriology, Edwards seems, on one hand, to indulge the "mystical and pantheistical tendencies of his teaching" (Miller 195) that so fascinate Perry Miller. On the other hand, however, he participates in the more orthodox rhetorical tradition of typology, which is based on the belief that natural phenomena resemble spiritual phenomena and thus aid in human attempts to understand the mysteries of the divine.¹⁰ In singling out the silkworm for careful observation, however, Edwards chooses yet another ostensibly "loathsome" and "despicable" creature, a worm whose activities—like the spider's web weaving—might otherwise fail to draw significant notice. If the silkworm helps us to understand the mysteries of Christ's salvation, one might reasonably assume that this typology will also provoke us to look more carefully at the silkworm itself.

¹⁰ Sacvan Bercovitch's discussion of typology in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* remains an important resource for further reading on this subject, as does chapter two of Werner Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity*.

What Edwards intimates in “The Spider Letter” and “Images of Divine Things,” he theorizes at length in “A Divine and Supernatural Light.” Spiritual light, Edwards asserts, is “no impression upon the mind, as though one saw anything with the bodily eyes,” and it is likewise “no imagination or idea of an outward light or glory...or a visible luster or brightness of any object” (109). Neither impression nor imagination, it bears forth no novelty: “it reveals no new doctrine, it suggests no new proposition to the mind...but only gives a due apprehension of those things that are taught in the Word of God” (110). In other words, divine light does not create new knowledge, but rather allows the one who perceives it to more fully apprehend the knowledge he or she already has. But of what does such apprehension consist? To explain this experience, Edwards has no alternative but to appeal to the domain of sensual perception—what Perry Miller calls his rhetoric of sensation—despite the great pains Edwards takes to contrast ordinary imagination from supernatural illumination. His examples thus draw largely on everyday perceptions of quotidian experiences. The difference between “an Opinion that God is holy” and “having a sense of” God’s holiness can be understood, for Edwards, only if we understand the difference between “having a rational Judgment that Honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness” (112). While such examples serve to advance Edwards’s distinctly Calvinist theology, he consistently depends on the most ordinary dimensions of worldly experience in order to explain his most otherworldly theological propositions. In doing so, his theology offers a compelling phenomenology of the quotidian as such. The religious background saturating his work proves to be, simultaneously, an aesthetic device which highlights spiders, silkworms, and the sweetness of honey as “worthy the taking notice of” (1).

One might wonder, however, whether Edwards is not simply writing allegorically or typologically. Don't the impressions conferred by the spider, the silkworm, and the sweetness of honey merely represent the abstract theological meanings which Edwards aims to produce for the theological instruction of his readers? Of course they do. Nevertheless, the process of illustrating these examples by way of his rhetoric of sensation shows how, for Edwards, the process of describing transcendence mobilizes a fuller apprehension of immanence. Even as he sketches his picture of an invisible, spiritual world, he must discern more carefully and describe more adeptly the features of the visible, material world that he and his congregation know all too well. Edwards's writing remains deeply ensconced in the process of allegory and typology, attending to the worldly only insofar as he believes that it provides clues about the heavenly. For this reason, it is not exactly operating in the domain of what I call secular faith. Nonetheless, we find in Edwards a dynamic, a process, a way of framing the relationship between religious background and aesthetic attention to the ordinary, which will manifest more fully as an aesthetics of secular faith throughout a wide array of twentieth century American writing.

Though quite far removed from Edwards philosophically and theologically, Emerson's aesthetics of quotidian objects and ephemeral perceptions synchronize closely with Edwards's expositions on spiders, silkworms, and the sweetness of honey. In his divinity school address, for instance, Emerson claims that the immediate encounter between the divinity that proliferates the world, and the subject who perceives it, emerges as "an intuition" (72), an "eternal revelation in the heart" (73). He continues, claiming that Jesus, belonging to "the true race of prophets," perceived this "harmony" and

“beauty” with “open eye” (72). It is this face to face, unmediated relation between divinity and nature that, for Emerson, affords to the ephemeral its revelatory capacity. By contrast, when the first-hand intuition of faith gives way to second-hand knowledge, the ephemeral world loses the sense of radiance that, for Emerson, is innate to it by virtue of its immediate correlation to the divine. When we accept only second-hand knowledge of the world (anticipating his theme in “Self Reliance”), we become “nearsighted” and “merely” left with our “senses,” shorn of the “primary faith” that enables us to see the world clearly (72). We are, in Shklovskian terms, shorn of vision and stuck with mere recognition. According to Emerson, “faith should blend with the light of rising and setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers” (75). Such faith, he maintains, illuminates our perception of ephemeral experiences and encounters, renewing their vivacity. To believe in the divinity inherent in nature is, for Emerson, to understand how the world’s most negligible, quotidian dimensions can elicit more perceptive modes of attention.

Yet for Emerson, as for Robinson and for Edwards, to render worldly experience with greater vividness is also to highlight its finitude and contingency. Emerson’s essay “Experience” expresses the evanescence of all experience by interpreting his own experience of grief against a Transcendentalist background. Written after the death of his son Waldo, Emerson concedes: “Divinity is behind our failures and follies also” (203). For Emerson, everything from the lives of our loved ones to the perception of images is subject to erosion: “each [picture] will bear an emphasis of attention once, which it cannot retain...How strongly I have felt of pictures, that when you have seen one well, you must take your leave of it; you shall never see it again” (202). Pictures lose their

radiance on the same principle that Waldo passes away, and even grief itself fails to hold the urgency and immediacy we think it should. Of Waldo's death, Emerson laments: "it does not touch me...I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature" (200). This particular expression of grief, alongside grief's insufficiency, exposes "the evanescence and lubricity of all objects" (200). Like John Ames in *Gilead*, who believes that his failing health will soon cause him to "put on imperishability" (53) and, consequently, feels like "a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things," things that are "mere apparition" but "only lovelier for that" (57), Emerson begins by asserting that an infinite divinity lies behind the finitude of phenomenal experience, establishing a background that clarifies the evanescence of that experience.¹¹ Emerson's religious vision of transcendence thus enables him to articulate the finite, secular frailty of the minutest perceptions and the most ordinary griefs.

By espousing theological convictions rooted in the eternal, the infinite, and the universal, Edwards and Emerson, like Robinson, render the mundane, the infinitesimal, and the particular with renewed intensity. I highlight this resonance between Edwards, Emerson, and Robinson not simply to resurrect Perry Miller's myth of American literary origins, but to suggest an alternative method equipped to take stock of how his "Edwards to Emerson" thesis still reverberates—and, in doing so, to reconfigure the logic of

¹¹ My brief reading of Emerson takes its cue from Theo Davis, who explains that Emerson's *oeuvre* is concerned not only with the "characteristics of experience" but with "universal experience—experience which does not depend upon the physical sense or even upon the individual subject" (111). "For Emerson," Davis contends, "when we see objects as representations of objects that are not there," consciousness turns back on itself, and "we grasp our apprehension of our experience" (113). Where Davis defines the nature of Emersonian experience as intrinsically universalizing, I add that Emerson's belief in a divinity, a universalizing principle "behind our failures and our follies," also serves to universalize the experience of finitude. It is this theological background, in other words, which puts the "lubricity" of images on the same experiential plane as both the untimely death of his son and the swiftness with which his own grief recedes from his consciousness.

teleological secularization that his thesis implies. I agree with critics such as Wilson Brissett, Joanna Brooks, and many others who have rightly cautioned against what Brissett calls the “continuity approach” to studying Edwards. Brissett insists that contemporary scholars must resist the temptation to read Edwards’s theology as merely “a step along the way to Emerson’s transcendental aesthetics” (173), and this is a caveat that I affirm. For as Joanna Brooks contends, “It is time for new stories” (441), stories that can thoroughly account for “the divergent fecundity of American faith traditions” (441) without being so rooted in American exceptionalism and, subsequently, so easily parodied: “A Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God goes into the woods and a century later emerges Man Thinking” (440).

What this study attempts, rather, is to craft one of these “new stories,” one that adapts a familiar critical tradition in American literary studies by reexamining its core assumptions about how religion and secularization influence literary aesthetics. By tracing religion as device through Robinson, Edwards, and Emerson, I am not suggesting that we revert to Perry Miller’s continuity approach. I am not offering an “Edwards to Robinson” thesis. Instead, I am arguing that Robinson’s fiction illuminates questions engendered by the way Miller portrays American literature’s secularization. These questions take on new urgency for the twentieth century writers discussed in the remainder of this study. Why does religion persist so tenaciously throughout much of American literature? What aesthetic resources might religion’s persistence provide for the literature of an ostensibly secular modernity? And in what way might American literature’s continued engagement with religious ideas, images, and practices serve to reinforce the ambition that underwrites our longstanding investment in the secularization

thesis—our desire, not for the “face to face” encounter with the “blinding divinity” upheld by Miller’s Edwards or Emerson (185), but for “the plain sense of things,” for a more vivid apprehension of this world in all of its ephemerality and finitude?

American Literature and Religion: A Brief Critical Genealogy

To answer these questions is to discern a new approach to the relationship between religion and aesthetics in twentieth century American literature. For while religion has been a subject of perennial interest in literary studies, its critical history is notoriously contested. In order to illuminate what is at stake in this study’s theoretical orientation, I first want to offer a brief summary of the three most common approaches to the interdisciplinary study of religion and literature: religious criticism, secular criticism, and postsecular criticism. In what follows, I provide examples that are roughly chronological. A more exhaustive account of this critical history would outline the complex genealogy through which each of these three approaches has emerged.¹² But because my aim here is more modest—I present this critical context in order to suggest how my own study intervenes, not to offer an authoritative history of religion in literary studies—I must offer one word of caution. Though I present examples of these critical approaches chronologically, none have necessarily surpassed or supplanted one another. Postsecular criticism may have emerged as a response to secular criticism, but secular criticism remains a viable contemporary project; likewise, secular criticism offers a stern rebuttal to religious criticism, but one need only attend a session of the Conference on

¹² For helpful introductions to how discourse around religion has shaped literary studies, see Lori Branch’s “The Rituals of Our Re-Secularization: Literature between Faith and Knowledge,” Dayton Haskin’s “Religion and the Rise of English Studies, and Michael Kaufmann’s “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in the History of the Profession.”

Christianity and Literature to realize that religious criticism remains widespread within literary studies.

For an older critical tradition, the answers to the questions above would seem self-evident. In his essay “Religion and Literature,” T.S. Eliot contends that the study of literature ought to proceed “from a definite ethical and theological standpoint” (97), a critical paradigm concerned not “with religious literature but with the application of our religion to the criticism of any literature” (98). Eliot’s advocacy for religious criticism helped to keep theological and religious discourse at the forefront of literary studies during the middle of the twentieth century, at a time when one might otherwise have expected religion’s salience within the humanities to be waning. As John Guillory explains in *Cultural Capital*, Eliot’s “desire for a literature that is ‘unconsciously Christian’” but which “serves no dogmatic function” (138) lent itself heavily to the New Critical program popularized by scholars such W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, whose religiously inflected essay titles (“The Verbal Icon,” “The Heresy of the Paraphrase”), and whose stalwart commitment to the language of paradox and ambiguity, suggest a peculiarly Christocentric orientation toward literary criticism. Religious criticism, which influenced but is not reducible to the New Criticism, asks how literary texts present theological or quasi-theological problems for their readers.¹³ From the viewpoint of religious literary criticism, any answer to the question of why religion persists in

¹³ Franco Moretti writes in the *New Left Review* to criticize the continued influence of formalist and New Critical methods in the teaching and study of literature in the United States. How he makes his argument helps illustrate the sense that religious criticism and the New Criticism, if not identical, are nevertheless closely related. According to Moretti, “the trouble with close reading is that it necessarily depends upon an extremely small canon.” Consequently, close reading is “a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously.” I will address a version of this criticism in my conclusion, suggesting why critics might wish to rehabilitate the idea of close reading as a “theological exercise” in a much broader sense, not as a slur, but as an example of what literary studies has to offer interdisciplinary scholarship within the humanities more broadly.

twentieth century American literature, or of why that persistence matters, must be tautological. Critics continue to care about the religious dimensions of literary texts because our institutional, methodological, and personal investments in literature are themselves originally, if not inherently, religious in nature. Or, many religious critics would argue, they ought to be.

Religious criticism, however, inevitably runs afoul of the Feuerbachian critique of transcendence with which I began this introduction. If the language of literature is the language of theological mystery, and if the study of literature entails what Eliot calls “a definite ethical and theological standpoint” (97) on the part of the critic, then the study of religion in literature quickly becomes an otherworldly enterprise. Nowhere has this problem been contested more vigorously in American literature than in the study of Flannery O’Connor, who is perhaps the twentieth century’s most notoriously religious American writer. John D. Chapin’s essay on O’Connor’s short story, “The River,” provides a representative example. When O’Connor’s Catholic symbolism asks readers to interpret a small boy’s drowning as a salvific baptism, Chapin contends: “O’Connor is not speaking about guilt or innocence, nor about ritual per se. Rather, she presents a metaphor for the process of salvation: it is the salvation not merely of a five-year old child, but of every sinner who lays his pain in the ‘River of Life’” (30-31). According to a religious reading of the story, the violence and suffering of worldly experience is compensated for by both its symbolic resonance and its transcendent meaning. But as later critics such as Joy Farmer have complained, the religious reading of O’Connor can be quite troubling. “Remembering that what matters for O’Connor is the action of grace in the soul of her characters,” she quips, “we are supposed to forget the body count” (59).

We can paraphrase Farmer's critique by reiterating what by now should be a familiar charge: religious criticism can be so heavenly minded that it ceases to be much earthly good.¹⁴

These debates over religious symbolism and violence in Flannery O'Connor's work, from Chapin's reading of violence as a "metaphor for the process of salvation" to what Patricia Yeagar describes as O'Connor's "aesthetics of torture," suggest, in microcosm, the debate between religious and secular criticism. The rise of critical theory during latter half of the twentieth century led to a steady decline in the cultural cache once wielded by religious criticism. Deconstruction, the new historicism, and postcolonial criticism dealt particularly stinging blows to any critical paradigm that sought, either explicitly or implicitly, to impose anything resembling a theological orientation upon literary texts. Edward Said's programmatic call for a thoroughly secular criticism offers a particularly salient example: "texts are worldly," Said insists, "a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located" (26). Responsible scholarship, in Said's view, must remain "constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems" (26), systems that, according to Said, have their bases in religious thought.¹⁵

Despite its nomenclature, the advent of secular criticism was more than just an assault on what figures like Eliot would have considered religious criticism, properly

¹⁴ As a caveat, I should note that I am not, myself, implying that religious critics are "no earthly good." I am, rather, paraphrasing a familiar critique of how the methods of religious criticism interact with what Said would call a text's "worldliness." I have learned a great deal from a number of religious critics, as my bibliography indicates, and indeed this study would not be possible without them.

¹⁵ In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said is less concerned with explicitly religious criticism that reads literature from a confessional standpoint (though he resists this as well) than he is with those whom he views as its Structuralist descendants: René Girard and Northrop Frye, in particular.

speaking. More significantly, it marshalled one of the most powerful critiques of what Terry Eagleton calls the “ideology of the aesthetic.” When Said insists that “texts are worldly,” he is not just chastising scholars for bringing unexamined religious assumptions to bear on their writing; he is asserting that the entire concept of aesthetic autonomy, the entire apparatus of literary study which celebrates the uniqueness of the literary work, reinforces a dialectic of sacred and profane—a dialectic that, sometimes unwittingly, turns literary criticism into a quasi-religious project.¹⁶

Over the past two decades, however, critics have questioned many of the baseline assumptions that underpin both the impetus for secular criticism in literary theory and the broader secularization thesis that frames American literary history. In her touchstone 1995 essay, “Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies,” Jenny Franchot chides her fellow Americanists for all but ignoring religion in their work despite the growing salience of religion in contemporary American politics and culture. “The country is in the midst of a conservative [Christian] revolt” (833) she claims, yet “Americanist literary and cultural critics have little to say” (834). “We are rich in studies that foreground gender, race, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity and class. But where is religion? Why so invisible?” (834). Religion today is far more visible within literary studies, partially thanks to a burgeoning critical program calling itself postsecular criticism.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Vincent Pecora’s *Secularization and Cultural Criticism* for a trenchant critique of Said’s “secular criticism.” Building on the work of Talal Asad and other recent theorists of secularization, Pecora warns that “what we may complacently understand as ‘secular’ about such criticism comes with certain historical and religious strings attached” (2), strings that are often tied to a Protestant, Eurocentric triumphalism and that perpetuate a false “religious” vs. “secular” dichotomy which, in actual practice, can be much more difficult to parse.

¹⁷ The postsecular turn has sparked special issues in a number of major journals, four of which are particularly noteworthy. In 2013, *boundary 2* (40.1) ran an entire special issue to oppose this development, inviting its contributors to write on the theme of “Why I am not a postsecularist.” In 2014, *American Literary History* (26.1, “American Literatures / American Religions”) and *American Literature* (86.4,

Postsecular criticism finds its roots in poststructuralist philosophy. In one of the first attempts to define the postsecular, the philosopher and Derrida scholar John D. Caputo observes: “The flower of religion is one of the blossoms in our post-modern anthology” (66). Caputo quips, “a surprising thing happened on the way to the death of God: Enlightenment secularism *also* got crucified on the same Cross, and that spelled the death of the death of God” (59). Applying a similar version of postsecular theory to American literary studies, John McClure’s study of postmodern American fiction examines the resonance between contemporary novelists, such as DeLillo, Morrison, Pynchon, and Momaday, alongside the renewed interest in religious themes among late twentieth century and contemporary Continental philosophers, including Jacques Derrida, Mark C. Taylor, Gianni Vattimo, and William E. Connelly. According to McClure, these novelists dramatize “partial conversion” into “ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones” (4). They reflect “a strong but selective disenchantment with secular values” (7), but they likewise reject “the comprehensive maps and scripts that are essential to sacred systems of domination” (17). Postsecular fiction, according to McClure, envisions hybridized religious subjects who dwell in the interstices of orthodoxy and heterodoxy; they express disenchantment with disenchantment, but they do so without retreating to any immediately recognizable religious belief, practice, or identity.

Postsecular criticism has proven to be a welcome and pathbreaking critical project, not least because it reminds us that religious and theological questions remain central to literary studies. But as I will argue at length in the conclusion of this study, it

“After the Postsecular”) each ran special issues on this topic. And a 2014 special issue of *Religion & Literature* (46.2-3) presented the findings of the Mellon Foundation Working Group on Religion and Literature.

rests upon several faulty assumptions which limit its effectiveness and influence. In my conclusion, I will explain how postsecular criticism often takes the same disenchanted, symptomatic approach to literature that it accuses secular criticism of taking toward religion. Here, however, I want to build upon a rather different problem in post secular criticism, best summarized by Tracy Fessenden: that postsecular criticism reinforces the very binary it claims to explode, cycling us right back to the Arnoldian secularization thesis from which we first began. For postsecular critics like McClure, Fessenden writes, “religion and the secular are presented as fixed alternatives, unassailable within their respective domains, with the region between them risky and uncharted, a Scylla and Charybdis strait to be boldly navigated by the postsecular protagonist or critic” (158). With a similar but perhaps more paralyzing critique, Khaled Furani asks a simple, destabilizing question in the title of his recent contribution to the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*: “Is There a Postsecular?” According to Furani, “Postsecular claims of going beyond the secular presuppose that the secular is outside the religious,” deepening the presumed schism between religion and secularism even though it is precisely this binary that postsecular criticism promises to transcend. By contrast, Furani proposes a different direction for humanities scholarship invested in questions of religion and secularity, a direction rooted in the etymology of the word “secular” itself and which inflects the attention I give to concepts like finitude and worldliness throughout this study. According to Furani, the Latin *saeculum* refers not to the absence or the replacement of religion, but to a particular domain of worldly experience. A valuable synonym for the *saeculum*, he suggests, would be “finitude,” that which “announced transience, above all in and of time” (10). Thus conceived, the secular is not what names

religion's opposite or its absence, but is rather what alerts us to "sheer presence in the world...a marker of finitude and a signal to its frailty" (17). Taking Furani's argument one step further, I want to suggest that the "secular" might be the name we give to the quotidian, the ephemeral, and the worldly—to "the plain sense of things" with which each of the writers examined in this study is principally concerned.

Given this critical history, what are we to make of writers whose commitment to the plain sense of things, to finitude and thus to the *saeculum*, passes directly through a sustained interest in religious practices and theological discourses? As I demonstrate in the following chapters, new possibilities for the interdisciplinary study of religion and literature emerge through a careful analysis of the way religious background operates as an aesthetic device in the work of Twain, Cather, Baldwin, DeLillo, and Robinson. Cather and DeLillo selectively employ features of religious traditions to which they themselves have little to no personal commitment, making them prime candidates for postsecular criticism; nevertheless, as one of DeLillo's nuns explains in *White Noise*, "Our [religious] lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief" (319). What first seems to suggest the "ideologically mixed" heterodoxies of postsecularism turns out to involve commitments, both to the religious and to the secular, which run deeper than those that are available within the ironic poststructuralist freeplay of postsecular thought. Similarly, Twain and Baldwin provide two of American literature's most excoriating criticisms of inherited religious traditions, suggesting a close affinity with secular criticism. Yet closer scrutiny reveals that the worldly skepticism of their texts is only possible because they understand these religious traditions so well and employ them in their writing so consistently. And Marilynne Robinson, an avowed liberal

Protestant who teaches at Iowa and inherits the legacies of Edwards and Emerson, could easily be studied through the lens of religious criticism. She, more than perhaps any other contemporary writer, seems best positioned to take on the role occupied by Flannery O'Connor during the middle of the twentieth century. Yet despite the demonstrable religiosity of Robinson's work, her symbolism and imagery consistently operate on the plane of immanence rather than that of transcendence, as the aforementioned example from *Gilead* demonstrates. Where O'Connor's figures for theological abstractions such as grace and salvation require readers to accept the "body count" (Farmer 59) of her prose, Robinson's figures for these and similar doctrines seek to embody the plainness of the world more acutely.

Where religious criticism, secular criticism, and postsecular criticism all prove unsatisfactory, the tradition of twentieth century American writers that I examine illustrates the need for a different approach to religion and literature—one that accounts for how complex religious backgrounds serve as aesthetic devices for illuminating the mundane world's secular finitude. We now need a method that can elucidate how American literature's fascination with religion emerges in the twentieth century as an aesthetics of secular faith.

Five Studies in Secular Faith

If I am going to examine how religious background serves as an aesthetic device that enables secular faith in the work of Twain, Cather, Baldwin, DeLillo, and Robinson, I must first account for three of this study's most contested keywords: secular, religion, and aesthetics. In choosing each of these terms, I make no claims to conclusiveness or

comprehensiveness, nor do I mean to imply that we should ignore their multivalent meanings, not all of which can be put to work in this study. While I recognize that each touches upon a disputed discourse, my primary concern in this study is to maintain a consistent vocabulary as I explore the variable ways in which the secular, the religious, and the aesthetic interact across the work of five very different writers and within five distinct historical and cultural contexts.

What is the secular? My critique of the secularization thesis in this introduction draws heavily from contemporary secularization theory, including but not limited to the work of Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, Saba Mahmood, José Casanova, William E. Connolly, and Vincent Pecora. Asad's work, in particular, offers an important introduction to the problems that emerge whenever one speaks of the secular, secularity, or secularism. "Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration," Asad contends. "It is an enactment by which a *political medium*...redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion" (5). Secularism, as Asad and others have shown, names not a discrete condition but a contested project; it is not just the absence or the withdrawal of religious discourses and practices from the public sphere, but a negotiation among numerous religious and non-religious discourses, each with competing and overlapping systems of signification. How I use the term "secular," then, will necessarily vary depending on the particular texts and contexts under consideration. Nevertheless, as I will explain more fully in the conclusion, I do have a specific understanding of the word "secular" in mind when I use the phrase "secular faith." This sense of the "secular" (which by no means exhausts other ways of delineating

the secular) draws upon Furani's claim that the *saeculum* identifies temporality, finitude, and worldliness. Secular, in this sense, refers to a desire for the "plain sense of things," for more vivid attention to the ephemerality of phenomenal experience as its immanent impressions manifest and pass away. It speaks to what Emerson, in "Experience," describes as "the evanescence and lubricity of all objects" (200), to what Reverend Ames, in *Gilead*, must confront in the failing health that alerts him to the "mere apparition" of the material world he is about to leave behind (57).

By associating the term "secular" with the Furani's discussion of finitude, I am only offering a provisional definition for the purpose of argument. My treatment of the word "religion" will be similar. In recent decades, the word "religion" has troubled scholars of religion in ways that resemble how the word "literature" has been contested by scholars of literature.¹⁸ Any attempt to classify what counts as religion, and to determine what does not count, proves to be inherently ideological. As many in the discipline of Religious Studies have shown, the older tradition of "comparative religion" often served to homogenize a diverse array of beliefs, practices, and discourses under an umbrella term, "religion," that is entirely Christian at root.¹⁹ I thus use the word

¹⁸ Consider, for example, the resemblance between the following claims. According to Jonathan Z. Smith: "'Religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon" (281-82). Likewise, Terry Eagleton remarks: "If there is such a thing as literary theory, then it would seem obvious that there is something called literature which it is the theory of. We can begin, then, by raising the question: what is literature?" (1). Eventually, Eagleton concludes that there is, properly speaking, no such thing; that "literature does not exist in the same sense that insects do" (14), but that when we are speaking of "literature" we are really speaking of "value-judgements" and "social ideologies" (14). Both terms, it would seem, inevitably place scholars in a false position, yet both terms are needed for maintaining what Smith calls "a disciplinary horizon."

¹⁹ For an overview of how this critical history has unfolded in Religious Studies, see the introduction of Tyler Roberts's *Encountering Religion*. For a helpful discussion of the problems of interdisciplinary

“religion” in this study with some trepidation, but I maintain that the term is necessary for the sake of argumentative coherence. Furthermore, the examples I have chosen for the following chapters each derive, to some extent, from a tradition rooted in an identifiably historical expression of Christianity. I have limited myself to Christian traditions, not because I doubt my argument could be applicable to a more diverse array of religious traditions, but because I recognize that the concept of religion itself is not as portable as it might appear through popular usage. My primary aim in this study is to illustrate a new approach to the interdisciplinary study of religion in literature, and to do so by sketching how religious background serves as an aesthetic device in several of the most prominent examples of the past century. My hope is that future scholarship, including my own, will elaborate and revise the argument presented here insofar as it might apply to other non-Christian and non-Western religious traditions. In this study, however, I follow Matthew Mutter, whose cautionary note about the word “religion” in his study of Wallace Stevens resembles how I believe we must understand the word “religion” when discussing Twain, Cather, Baldwin, DeLillo, and Robinson.²⁰ Religion takes on different valences and associations in each example, and each chapter will contextualize the most salient features for that instance.

Broadly defined, however, religion is virtually inescapable in the past century of American literature. And I do not use the word “virtually” as a disposable modifier, nor

exchange in the study of religion, see Timothy Beal and William E. Deal, “Theory, Disciplinarity, and the Study of Religion.”

²⁰ “The problem is that [Stevens] sometimes means more than Christianity and sometimes less. Religion for him can mean any or several of the following: Christianity, asceticism, Platonism, supernaturalism, theodicy, otherworldliness, mysticism, a desire to find a transcendent source of authority, an understanding of the world as a creation of some kind—even paganism, which is for Stevens an attractive ethos within the parameters of secular naturalism...Therefore, I will use the term “religion” in the hope that it will be clear which aspects of religious thought or feeling I have in mind” (Mutter 764).

do I mean to imply, with the word “inescapable,” that all such literature is in some sense religious or, even worse, that “religion” is any less troubled of a singular noun than is “literature” or, for that matter, “American.” Rather, this dissertation differentiates between the virtual and the actual; that is to say, it presumes that talking about the varieties of religion expressed virtually, in the pages of imaginative writing, is a somewhat different enterprise than talking about the varieties of religion that are practiced and discussed by actual communities in twentieth century and contemporary American history and culture. In my conclusion, I will draw out the implications of this claim for contemporary theoretical debates that have preoccupied interdisciplinary work in religion and literature. Here, however, I wish to emphasize how religion pervades American literature as an aesthetic device—not as a distraction from literature’s supposedly secular concerns, but as one of its integral formal features.

If religious background serves as an aesthetic device, then what is the aesthetic? In the most general sense, I maintain that to be “concerned with the aesthetic” is to be “concerned with the surface” (Clune 89).²¹ My use of “aesthetic” in this study, like my use of the word “religion,” is variable from example to example but is not altogether haphazard. I am not exclusively concerned with post-Enlightenment European discourses of aesthetic judgment and value, although my second chapter does connect Willa Cather to Immanuel Kant’s concept of purposiveness without purpose. I am more concerned,

²¹ Similarly, Weinstein and Looby argue that “aesthetic” is “a usable term precisely because its history involves the discipline of a careful attention to surfaces and appearances, to the sensible textures of things” (8). The 2009 special issue on “surface reading” in *Representations*, edited by Best and Marcus, also offers an important starting point for my approach to the aesthetic in this study. I concur with Best and Marcus when they contend: “Surface reading...might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are. We want to reclaim from this tradition the accent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value), for we understand that attentiveness to the artwork itself is a kind of freedom” (16).

rather, with how each writer seeks to model absorbed attention to the ordinary (in some cases the reader's attention, in other cases the attention of characters within the work) using processes that resemble what Shklovsky calls enstrangement. Furthermore, I follow Weinstein and Looby who, in their introduction to *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*, assert that the ideological nature of aesthetic discourse should not preclude critics from taking aesthetic questions seriously. Even though "the aesthetic cannot be understood apart from ideology," they explain, we do well to "revisit aesthetics with the methodological and theoretical knowledge gained from critics of the last several decades" (9). In each chapter, I explore how the virtual and imagined representation of historical and social phenomena (religion) in literature serves to sharpen aesthetic attention to the surfaces of everyday appearances.

Each chapter examines a different technique that twentieth century American writers develop for intensifying the aesthetics of ordinary experience against a background constituted by religious thought. The first chapter, "Mark Twain and the Gospel of Mundane Transcendence," argues that in Twain's late fiction, particularly his *Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, the familiar theological discourses that Twain excoriates in his essays, speeches, and letters—including the jeremiad, miracle stories, and theodicy—provide new ways to imagine a more compelling picture of finitude. In Twain's later writings, the way to reconcile oneself to the ephemerality of all experience is, paradoxically, to craft fictions that allow one to imagine what it would be like to perceive such experience from the vantage of eternity. Chapter two, "Willa Cather's Modernist Religion," demonstrates how Willa Cather's fiction, particularly *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, draws upon Catholic traditions to transform the central procedure of

Kantian aesthetics, revising what Kant calls “purposiveness without purpose” into a mode of miraculous perception. For Cather, form itself becomes a religious problem while religion becomes a formal problem. “James Baldwin’s Theology of Art,” the third chapter, contends that the contribution of Baldwin’s childhood in the Pentecostal church extends beyond the sermonic rhythms of his prose or the thematic content of his novels. Rather, in his first and final novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*, the modes of perception afforded by Pentecostal ritual provide Baldwin with an aesthetic solution to the problem of protest fiction.

Chapter four, “Don DeLillo and the Religious Meaning of Postmodern Atheism,” draws upon theological dimensions of DeLillo’s fiction to challenge the assumption that his work depends upon postmodern aesthetic categories such as the simulacra and the postmodern sublime. Instead, I argue that DeLillo’s writing pushes postmodern aesthetic categories to their breaking point, offering a devotional, theologically sophisticated commitment to atheism as an alternative to postmodern irony and solipsism. Chapter five, “Marilynne Robinson’s Aesthetics of Belief and Finitude,” completes the argument begun in this introduction, illustrating how Marilynne Robinson’s four novels tie Calvinist theology to an aesthetics of the quotidian. Finally, my conclusion, “Secular Faith: Beyond Postsecular Critique,” pursues the theoretical implications of this argument for the study of religion and literature more broadly. Examining how the resurgence of scholarly interest in religion and in aesthetics have emerged simultaneously, often running on parallel tracks, I consider how rethinking the relationship between religious discourses and aesthetic attention might help us to raise questions that can renew our faith in secular forms of life.

Chapter 1

Mark Twain and the Gospel of Mundane Transcendence

To illustrate what I am calling American literature's secular faith, I will begin with a figure who looks, at a glance, like its antithesis. Anyone who wishes to buttress the familiar secularization narrative through which twentieth century American literature is so often filtered could do worse than to propose a writer like Mark Twain. For it is Twain, after all, whose treatment of American Christianity flared from humorous satire into scathing castigation just as the twentieth century commenced. Ushering in the century with notable irreverence, Twain's later writing looms large against the notion that religious backgrounds could amplify aesthetic attention to the material world. Indeed, one of the most celebrated attributes of Twain's most famous protagonist is that he spurns religious authority for the dictates of his own conscience. "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (201), Huck Finn exclaims, an American Prometheus rejecting the abstract promise of eternity in order to reconcile himself to the demands of worldly, temporal life.

Twain's struggle with all transcendent or supernatural authority became perhaps the dominant motif of his last two decades. Having died only a few years before Max Weber would declare modernity "disenchanted," Twain is perhaps the American novelist most easily conscripted for the task of portraying the vision of a disenchanted world, the model of secularization that blossomed under Weber's considerable influence. My aim in this chapter is not to deny this premise, but to demonstrate how fully it makes the case for Mark Twain's secular faith. In what follows, I will show how thoroughly Twain depended upon familiar features of religious discourse in order to convey the very sense of disenchantment for which his later writing is so notorious. In doing so, I will

demonstrate that Twain's later writing did not merely reiterate the Feuerbachian hope that stripping the world of the gods would usher in a newfound care for the contingencies of worldly life. Rather, Twain's deeply theological critiques of American Christianity manifest concern for what Furani calls "sheer presence in the world," the "finitude" and "frailty" of secular experience (17). They do so, moreover, exactly insofar as they inhabit the backgrounds engendered through familiar features of mainstream American Protestantism: the rhetoric of the jeremiad, the point of view of a miraculous outsider, and the problem of theodicy.

Twain's later writings—his letters and speeches after 1900, his darkly humorous "Letters from the Earth," and, most pointedly, his unfinished "Mysterious Stranger" fragments—initially threaten to short circuit the story that I began to unfold in the preceding introduction. These texts don't just ignore religion, dismiss religion on empirical grounds, or attempt to replace religion with art. Rather, they obsess over the evils of American Christianity, offering some of American literature's most strident rehearsals of the critique of transcendence: the charge that religion, particularly religion which provokes us to imagine sources of meaning beyond the finite, material world, blinds us to the wonders of the world we inhabit. In "Letters from the Earth," Twain summarizes this complaint in a letter from Lucifer to his fellow archangels:

Man is a marvelous curiosity...he thinks he is the Creator's pet. He believes the Creator is proud of him; he even believes the Creator loves him; has a passion for him; sits up nights to admire him; yes, and watch over him and keep him out of trouble. He prays to Him, and thinks He

listens...The daily affront, the daily defeat, do not discourage him, he goes on praying just the same. There is something almost fine about this perseverance. I must put one more strain upon you: he thinks he is going to heaven! (15)

These illusory hopes, Satan goes on to explain, encourage human communities to disavow their interests and to misidentify their desires. “He looks at nothing as we look at it, his sense of values is quite different from ours” (15), Satan observes. “His heaven is like himself: strange, interesting, astonishing, grotesque. I give you my word, *it has not a single feature in it that he actually values*. It consists—utterly and entirely—of diversions which he cares next to nothing about, here in the earth” (16, emphasis added). Religion is embarrassing, “Letters from the Earth” suggests, not merely because it is empirically false, but because it is “grotesque.” The invention of religion is proof that something is wrong with our “sense of value;” the invention of heaven, moreover, is the ultimate devaluation of this world.

These charges should, by now, sound quite familiar, and it is this critique of Christian faith, and dozens just like it throughout Twain’s later writing, that guided several generations of Twain scholars in shaping our most familiar picture of his final years. For these scholars, Twain’s weakening grip on his writing process, as evidenced by his massive output of fragmentary, incomplete, and consistently polemical prose, mirrored his own personal descent from skepticism into nihilism. Roger B. Salomon, for instance, claims that Twain, during his final years, drifted “reluctantly from the party of hope...to the party of despair” (19). In doing so, Twain “embraced a whole revaluation in modern thought” (19) and “slashed at the Gordian knot linking the growth of knowledge

with moral progress” (48).²² Hamlin Hill paints a similar but somewhat grimmer picture when he attributes the acerbic tone of Twain’s later writing to the misery that unfolded in Twain’s personal life after the turn of the century. Twain’s family and friends died all around him, his writing process became halting and unsatisfying, and his body deteriorated into illness and pain. Consequently, Hill argues, Twain’s “desultory literary activity,” like his “fear of isolation” and his interminable games of billiards,” was one of “the geriatric manifestations of a personality that had never been quite able to endure itself” (273). The “junkyard of manuscripts” (273) that Twain produced near the end of his life, Hill concludes, could do little more than to “rage at the obscenity of life” (274). Where Salomon sees Twain’s collapsing faith in the American myth, and where Hill sees the blind rage of a disintegrating personality, a more recent study by Gabriel Noah Brahm and Forrest G. Robinson characterizes the later Twain as an iconoclastic visionary, a prophet who, like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, arrives on the scene too early for his message to be heard. According to Brahm and Robinson, Twain in his later years became America’s Nietzsche, and they base this assertion on the similarities between their critiques of transcendence, in general, and their critiques of Christianity, in particular.

²² Salomon’s reading of Twain’s *oeuvre*, in *Twain and the Image of History*, links Twain to what I have called the “origin myths” of American literary history, the version of the secularization thesis, popularized by Perry Miller and R.W.B. Lewis, which describes the emergence of American literature as the transposition of religious into secular ideas. The “Adamic idea” in American writing, which Salomon draws from Lewis, holds that “The American...was Adam reborn, the sire of a race of men beginning anew, though perhaps better prepared this time to resist corruption because of the increase in rational knowledge since the time of the first Adam. America represented the ultimate stage of human history...free forever of the suffering, sin, and death so characteristic of the Old World” (15). But, according to Salomon, Twain’s emergence on the American scene signals a declining faith in this myth of progress.

[T]ime had refused to stand still in Eden...Faced with the trauma of the Civil War, the moral breakdown of the Gilded Age, and, in general, the increasingly complex problems of an industrial society, the American writer [especially Twain] sensed that the native ideal of enlightened simplicity was disappearing. (17-18)

Twain’s image of history, for Salomon, is an image of the American Adam’s fall from grace in the American Eden. It extends R.W.B. Lewis’s secularization narrative by demonstrating how the biblical myth finally and fully gives way to a secularism resembling “the modern existentialist position” (206).

Both, they argue, shared the view that the “madness of the world was most broadly manifest...in hegemonic Christian civilization” (141). “Like Nietzsche,” they continue, “Mark Twain was increasingly persuaded of both the groundlessness and the destructiveness of the conventional Christian distinction between good and evil,” and Twain’s “bitter attack on what he called ‘the Moral Sense’” finds its analogue in Nietzsche’s analysis of “slave morality” (146).

One might summarize this critical tradition by saying that Mark Twain, the American Nietzsche, became in his later years the madman in the American marketplace, proclaiming not only the death of God but the death of the American myth, the death of the teleological vision of history, and the death, in his most cynical moments, of the prospect of narrative coherence itself. Like Satan in “Letters from the Earth,” his prose attested to the “astonishing” and “grotesque” (16) experience of the “daily affront, the daily defeat” (15). The groundless, fragmentary world to which the later Twain attests thus implies the total collapse of the providential order envisioned by someone like Jonathan Edwards. Whereas Edwards asserts, in “Of Being,” that if “God’s consciousness [were] to be intermitted...the universe...would cease to be” (11), the Twain described by these critics is the voice who attests to a universe unmoored from every providential guarantee, of a world, as Nietzsche’s madman declares, unchained from its sun. Indeed, in the final sentences of Twain’s career, the eponymous character of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* proclaims: “Nothing exists but You. And You are but a *Thought*.” (405).

If Twain is America’s Nietzsche, and if we follow Twain’s critique of transcendence all the way to its logical end, we might assume that he offers a simple

solution: let's rid ourselves of all this obscurantist religion and turn our gaze from the heavens to the earth. But this only tells half of the story. As this chapter will illustrate, the features which have earned Twain his iconoclastic reputation are the very same features that make him an important example of American literature's secular faith.²³ For although Twain's satire of religious faith is unremitting throughout his later years, closer scrutiny of his critique of transcendence reveals that there is another, more significant problem that haunts him, a problem that helps to explain why he must continually engage with religious discourses rather than allowing them to drift gradually off of the horizon. The problem, for Twain, is not just that our pictures of God, our promises of eternity, or our mystifications of progress stand in the way of our innate capacity to embrace the world; rather, Twain observes that all of Being itself, in its finitude, and all experience, in its ephemerality, dissolve into incoherence and yet demand our attention anyway. If the superficial problem, for Twain, is that religion's consolations take our eyes off the world, then the deeper problem is that the world itself dissolves under our gaze the moment we finally train our eyes upon it. When we read Twain's later work more carefully, we are confronted with a question that exceeds the one posed by thinkers such as Feuerbach and Nietzsche through their critiques of transcendence. If we were to rid ourselves of

²³ A handful of critics have taken the opposite approach to Twain's later writing, offering an interpretation of Twain as "a moralist in disguise." For Harold Bush, "a vast amount of Twain's work can be understood as an ongoing contribution to the long line of American prophets" (66), drawing on "the ethos of the Bushnellian social gospel" as a principal source of his social criticism. Dwayne Eutsey goes further, arguing that "*No. 44* portrays an essentially Christian insight into transcendent experience" and that the work "makes sense when read as a theological document" (46). Berkove and Csicsila offer perhaps the most ambitious account of Twain as a religious or quasi-religious writer, drawing from Twain's career a nine-point, nearly systematic "countertheology" (1) over the course of a book. I concur with these critics insofar as they help us understand Twain's later years outside of the long-dominant paradigm that works such as *Letters from the Earth* and the Mysterious Stranger stories merely reveal a growing nihilism and antipathy toward religion. But I am rather skeptical, however, of the sense that we can read Twain theologically. By situating Twain inside the tension of American literature's secular faith, I believe we are better able to see how Twain's complex theological thinking, his critique of transcendence, and his ideas about the creative imagination all interact and inform one another toward the end of his career.

religion's otherworldly hopes, Twain's later work wonders, would we find our situation the least bit changed?

Twain explains this problem most poignantly in a letter to his closest friend, the Reverend Joseph Twichell. In this letter, parts of which also served as an early draft for the jeremiad that concludes *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain mourns the recent death of his wife, Livy. He expresses his grief in language that echoes Satan's critique of theology, in "Letters from the Earth," yet he does so in a manner that is itself extraordinarily theological—a point that becomes crucial when these words from the letter reappear in the novel. From the grief imposed by Livy's death, Twain claims to have learned:

That there is no God & no universe; that there is only empty space, & in it a lost & homeless & wandering & companionless & indestructible *thought*. And that I am that thought. And God, & the Universe, & Time, & Life, & Death, & Joy & Sorrow & Pain are only a grotesque & brutal *dream*, evolved from the frantic imagination of that insane thought.²⁴

On the one hand, there is no God; but, on the other hand, there is no universe, time, or sensation either. The grotesquerie that Satan, in "Letters from the Earth," attributes to Christianity, Twain here attributes to all of Being itself, deflating the entirety of creation—including any divine creator, regardless of whether or not one exists—to an unmoored and "homeless...thought." Twain's trouble with religion thus extends beyond the reach of the critique of transcendence. The problem is not that we would experience the world afresh

²⁴ Later in this same letter (dated 28 July 1904), Twain alludes to a manuscript that may very well be the *Mysterious Stranger* novel which he never lived to complete. "I suppose this idea has become a part of me because I have been living in it so long--7 years--& in that time have written so long a story embodying it & developing it; a book which is not finished & is not intended for print."

if only we could be rid of the religious imagination and its otherworldly appeals. Instead, the problem is that our own subjective experience of finitude renders everything grotesque, no matter if it is God, the cosmos, or sensations such as “Joy & Sorrow & Pain.” Death, for Twain, is not the mother of beauty but the root of life’s absurdity, and it is through this core problem, the problem of finitude, that Twain devises new ways to put religious background to work in his prose.

How, then, does Twain hope to resolve the problem of finitude? The challenge of Twain’s later years, as he grapples with the same philosophical and theological questions in text after text, is not to discern how he might replace a “grotesque” religious imagination with a more palatably secular one. Rather, his task increasingly becomes a challenge to work within familiar theological models and religious expressions. His aim, as he writes in his letter to Twichell, is to find a way to give form to “the absurdities that govern life,” to make “everything lucid & understandable” by revealing the chaos of a finite world—its “brutal dream” and “frantic imagination”—as its sole source of intelligibility. And in works ranging from “Letters from the Earth” to the anti-imperialist sketches and speeches to the “Mysterious Stranger” tales, Twain relies increasingly upon complex religious backgrounds, neither for consolation nor for a sense of escape, but for methods of arrangement that can turn transcendence toward the mundane by thickening the textures of transience.²⁵

²⁵ For a more detailed account of what I mean by mundane transcendence, see William E. Connolly’s distinction between radical and mundane transcendence in “Belief, Spirituality, Time,” Connolly’s critical response to the concept of “fullness” in Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. “By *radical* transcendence, I mean a God who creates, informs, governs, or inspires activity in the mundane world while also exceeding the awareness of its participants. By *mundane* transcendence I mean any activity outside conscious awareness that crosses into actuality, making a difference to what the latter becomes or interacting with it in fecund ways” (131). Unlike radical transcendence, Connolly claims, mundane transcendence is wholly compatible with a philosophy of “immanent naturalism” and yet can still “pay attention to those who hear a whisper of transcendence in the uncanny experience of duration” (129).

These methods amount to Twain's partial, incomplete resolutions to the problem of finitude. These fitful solutions take the form of three philosophical questions that Twain's later writing pursues at length, questions which this chapter will examine as follows. 1) Can the rhetoric of the Puritan jeremiad be repurposed to disrupt familiar theological pieties that obscure contingencies of worldly experience (such as suffering and grief) which cannot be assimilated to the reigning ideology? 2) Could a Christian conception of eternity and miracle provide a unique point of view from which these contingencies of human finitude come into sharper focus? 3) How can one learn to value contingency once all comforting theodicies of church and state—all explanatory narratives that give depth and meaning to chaos and circumstance—have proven to be hollow? Each of these questions is iconoclastic, rife with antagonism toward the established religious authorities of Twain's time. And Twain's answers to these questions, like all of his later work, are halting, tenuous, and fragmentary. But by bringing the background of religious imagination to bear on these problems, Twain attempts to defamiliarize what one of his characters would call the "dreams, visions, fictions" (*No. 44* 405) of everyday perception. In doing so, he tries to imagine how one might have faith in a finite, secular world, a world where everything succumbs, as Emerson puts it, to "evanescence and lubricity" ("Experience" 200). The culprit, Twain seems to think, is not illusion but inattention, not mystification but misplaced vision. And his solution, throughout his later writing, is not to roll back the religious modes of discourse that purportedly obscure our ability to perceive the material world, but to test how familiar religious forms might remedy the inattention that is often abetted by authoritative expressions of religious dogma. By doing so, he struggles toward a model of

transcendence that is utterly of the world, attempting—fitfully and inconsistently—to reconcile the “frantic imagination,” ever “wandering” and “homeless,” with the finitude in which it can find rest.

Throughout his later writing, Twain harnesses both the theological and rhetorical potencies of the jeremiad as a method for shattering pieties that obscure the contingencies of worldly life. He does so, however, in a manner quite incongruous with the standard narratives of secularization. In his “Mysterious Stranger” stories, his anti-imperial sketches, and “Letters from the Earth,” Twain does more than appropriate the jeremiad form as a vehicle to reorient attention from a religious, otherworldly perspective to one that is secular and worldly. Rather, his model of the jeremiad advances secularity’s ambition to “sheer presence in the world” (Furani 17) by committing to a wholly religious mode of discourse. The jeremiad, in its full Puritan sense, is the device by which Twain defamiliarizes the assurances of Christendom and confronts both readers and characters with the “finitude” and “frailty” (Furani 17) of their situations—particularly those situations, involving gratuitous suffering—which motivate Twain’s sociopolitical commentary.

In the conclusion of *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain’s final attempt at his last novel, the narrator listens to a jeremiad that leaves him both “appalled” and convinced of its truth (405). The preacher, as it were, is the eponymous stranger—named “Forty-Four” in this draft, but in the previous drafts (“The Chronicles of Young Satan” and “Schoolhouse Hill”) identified as Lucifer’s unfallen nephew, a juvenile angel named Satan. The sermon Forty-Four delivers includes a passage nearly identical to Twain’s

July 1904 letter to Joseph Twichell. “Strange, indeed,” declares the mysterious stranger, “that you should not have suspected that your universe and its contents were only dreams, visions, fictions!” (404). Ultimately, the stranger concludes: “there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell...It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but You. And You are but a *Thought*—a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!” (405).²⁶ This passage confronts both the reader and the narrator, August Feldner, with a strange paradox. A supernatural being proclaims that the supernatural, along with nature itself, is a hoax, that all sensory impressions are nothing but “puerile insanities, the silly creations of an imagination that is not conscious of its freaks” (405), and that everything we think we perceive in the material world can be summarized as “dreams, visions, fictions.” Instead of bringing unity, cohesion, and order, as a jeremiad is conventionally meant to do, Forty-Four’s message dissolves every pretense to these qualities, leaving the listener alone as “a vagrant Thought” drifting “among the empty eternities” (405). Instead of positing eternity as the guarantor of the world’s meaningfulness and the salve for time’s wounds, Forty-Four’s jeremiad offers the “empty eternities” as further evidence of the material world’s finitude—the root, in

²⁶ Although my focus in this chapter is on Twain’s later writing, it is important to note that Twain returned to a version of this idea many times throughout his life. As early as 1869, in a letter to his wife Livy before their marriage, he writes:

Did it never occur to you what a particularly trifling & insignificant breath of time this now long & vastly important earthly existence of ours will seem to us whenever we shall happen accidentally to have it called to our minds ten awful millions of years from now? Will not we smile, then, to remember that we used at times to shrink from doing certain duties to God & man because the world might jeer at us?--& were so apt to forget that the world & its trifling opinions would scarce rise to the dignity of a passing memory at that distant day? Brainless husbandmen that we are, we sow for time, seldom comprehending that we are to reap in Eternity. We are all idiots, much as we vaunt our wisdom. (40)

What changes in the decades that ensue between this letter and *No. 44* is not Twain’s obsession with the “trifling & insignificant breath” of human experience, but his willingness to resolve the overwhelming sense of human finitude with the consolations of what “we are to reap in Eternity.”

keeping with the tenor of Twain's later years, of the world's material suffering and metaphysical absurdity.

By characterizing Forty-Four's speech as a jeremiad, I am placing it squarely within the literary-historical tradition analyzed by Perry Miller and updated by Sacvan Bercovitch.²⁷ Miller defines the American jeremiad tradition as a "ritualistic incantation" central to the formation of a communal identity among the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (8). Miller argues that "under the guise of...this incessant and never successful cry for repentance, the Puritans launched themselves upon the process of Americanization" (9). For Miller, the content of the Puritan jeremiads—which rebuke the community for its worldliness and spiritual tepidness—belies their political function, which was not to draw the community back to a previous, more innocent condition but to goad the community onward, toward a new beginning. "Having failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on a hill, they were left alone with America" (15), a political challenge that mobilized the jeremiad as a literary form. In *The American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch challenges Miller's reading of the jeremiad's rhetoric as "castigating" or as purely a "mode of denunciation" (6). While "Miller rightly called the New England jeremiad America's first distinctive literary genre" (6), Bercovitch insists, Miller ignores the "pervasive theme of affirmation and exultation" (6). It is not "the vehemence of its complaint" but "its unshakable optimism" that, for Bercovitch, renders the jeremiad "distinctive" (6-7). The very rhetoric of denunciation described by Miller actually

²⁷ In doing so, however, I also aim to complicate yet another variation of American literary history's secularization narrative—Bercovitch's claim, which he emphasizes in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* but insinuates in *The American Jeremiad*, that "*sola scriptura* became *sola natura*" (*Puritan Origins* 152) and that Puritan eschatology secularized in order to generate "the national dream" (*Puritan Origins* 180).

confirms, for Bercovitch, the jeremiad's eschatological optimism: "The future, though divinely assured, was never quite there, and New England's Jeremiahs set out to provide the sense of insecurity that would ensure the outcome...their vision fed on the distance between promise and fact" (23). The jeremiad form, full of lamentations and rebukes, served not to denigrate the community but to mobilize it, spurring listeners to fill the gap between "fact" and "promise" (23), between the world one inhabits and the world one awaits. Thus does Forty-Four, in keeping with this tradition, begin his jeremiad with the "sense of insecurity"—"*Nothing* exists; all is a dream" (404)—before turning toward the fragile "optimism" of his "vision"—"Dream other dreams," Forty-Four insists, "and better!" (404).

I am by no means the first to characterize Forty-Four's concluding speech as a jeremiad; nevertheless, its role in establishing Mark Twain's model of secular faith warrants further analysis. In *The American Jeremiad*, for example, Bercovitch describes Forty-Four's speech as an "anti-jeremiad," a "denunciation of all ideals, sacred and secular, on the grounds that America is a lie" (191). According to Bercovitch, Twain revises the form's traditional emphases on "affirmation and exultation" (6) by rendering his mysterious stranger characters as "prophets of doom" (197) who lament and lambast the social ills of early twentieth century America. More recently, critics such as Joe Fulton and Harold K. Bush have shown that Twain's use of the jeremiad, especially in the closing speech from *No. 44*, echoes the prophetic tradition in Christian theology. According to Fulton, *No. 44* exemplifies "Twain's reliance on jeremiad as an effective vehicle for his own social commentary" ("The Prophetic Imagination" 180). This social commentary, moreover, imitates the social commentary of biblical figures such as

Ezekiel. “The way 44 speaks is in the manner of a prophet...Even 44’s words...so seemingly nihilistic, are tame in comparison to Ezekiel’s prophecy” (187-88). Bush extends Fulton’s analysis, arguing that “*No. 44* fits within the forms and conventions of the American prophetic tradition” (91). Specifically, Bush contends, Forty-Four inherits a tradition that most closely resembles the prophetic imagination as it is defined by the theologian and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, an expression “of both critique and promise” (92). Ultimately, Bush claims, Forty-Four’s jeremiad offers “an energizing celebration of the possibilities of the liberal self, coupled with cautionary assessment of its unspeakable potential” (102-03). By shaping Forty-Four’s words according to both the biblical tradition of prophecy and the American rhetorical tradition of the jeremiad, these critics explain, Twain draws upon some of Christianity’s most familiar modes of public address in order to marshal his most vehement admonitions of church and state.

Although Twain’s use of the jeremiad does serve a sociopolitical purpose, one can also discern other aims through careful scrutiny of the way Twain uses this form to levy social critique throughout his later writing. Twain’s use of the jeremiad, I want to suggest, often has as much to do with aesthetic and philosophical questions of attention and perception as it has to do with social commentary. Such questions can be easily missed, however, because they are often embedded within Twain’s more explicit use of the jeremiad for social commentary, leaving readers prone to noticing the social commentary without pausing to reflect on the concerns that underpin such commentary. For instance, when Forty-Four describes the entire range of human perception as “puerile insanities, the silly creations of an imagination that is not conscious of its freaks” (405),

he is certainly offering a critique of human vanity and hubris in the tradition of the biblical prophets, the Puritan jeremiahs, and an American prophetic tradition of dissent in which social commentary plays a significant role. But he is also, quite literally, declaring that everything we perceive is a mistake, that the entire material world consists of nothing but “dreams, visions, fictions.” What would it mean to take such claims seriously on their own terms? To begin with, it would imply that we must not only question the political and ethical pieties that govern our social commitments, as the jeremiad is traditionally meant to do, but that we must completely reappraise how we attend to the world we perceive. That is to say, if our perceptions of the material world are “the silly creations of an imagination that is not conscious of its freaks” (405), then the purpose of the jeremiad in Twain’s writing, with its concomitant religious and theological background, is to make one more “conscious” of the work of imagination in creating the surfaces of the world as we experience them.

Twain’s attacks on political Christendom offer particularly incisive examples of his use of the jeremiad to transform our attention to the world’s surfaces. In a sketch called “The Stupendous Procession,” written in 1901, Twain describes Christendom as

a majestic matron, in flowing robes drenched with blood. On her head, a golden crown of thorns; impaled on its spines, the bleeding heads of patriots who died for their countries--Boers, Boxers, Filipinos; in one hand a slung-shot, in the other a Bible, open at the text, ‘Do unto others,’ etc. Protruding from pocket, bottle labeled ‘We bring you the Blessings of Civilization.’ (405)

At first glance, this image merely extends Twain's social commentary. It chides the hypocrisy of a church that has served as a chaplaincy for American imperialism under the guise of bestowing "the Blessings of Civilization." But its stark visual imagery—"robes drenched in blood," "bleeding heads of patriots"—compels the reader not only to condemn these atrocities, but to visualize them. And in visualizing the "blood" that purchases an imperialist civilization's "blessings," the reader of Twain's jeremiad encounters those "blessings" from a defamiliarized perspective. Instead of simply condemning specific instances of US imperialist activity at the turn of the century, Twain varnishes his critique of the imperial ideology with a rhetoric of sensation which confronts the reader with an intensified perception of the suffering Christendom has inflicted.²⁸

Twain's satirical 1901 speech to the New York Anti-Imperialist League, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," follows a similar pattern. What, Twain quips, should we say to the colonized "Person Sitting in Darkness" after presenting him with "all the historical facts?"

They look doubtful, but in reality they are not. There have been lies; yes, but they were told in a good cause. We have been treacherous; but that

²⁸ While the "rhetoric of sensation" is not identical to the rhetoric of the jeremiad, the two have been closely linked in studies of American Puritanism ever since Perry Miller's essay by the same name. According to Miller, Jonathan Edwards learned from Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and Berkeley how to intensify the affective quality of his sermons. Adapting Enlightenment theories of language to his own teaching and preaching, Edwards sought "to attach every word to an idea, so that eventually the words would provoke the concept" (177). Moreover, Miller continues, Edwards believed that "an idea in the mind is not only a form of perception but also a determination of love and hate. To apprehend things only by their signs or words is not to apprehend them at all; but to apprehend them by their ideas is to comprehend them not only intellectually but passionately" (170). It is this passionate, emotive, affective apprehension that, I argue, Twain registers in his adaptation of the jeremiad tradition. His most vivid critiques of Christendom's imperialism are thus built from one of American Christendom's most familiar rhetorical strategies: the Puritan preacher's rhetoric of sensation.

was only in order that real good might come out of apparent evil. We know this...[yet] every legislative body in Christendom, including our Congress and our fifty State Legislatures, are members not only of the church, but also of the Blessings-of-Civilization Trust. This world-girdling accumulation of trained morals, high principles, and justice, cannot do an unright thing, an unfair thing, an ungenerous thing, an unclean thing.

Like the “robes drenched with blood” that Twain depicts in “The Stupendous Procession,” the litany of “unright...unfair...unclean” actions carried out in the name of “the Blessings-of-Civilization” disrupt the complacency imposed by the empty consolation that “real good might come out of apparent evil.” In his anti-imperialist sketches and speeches, Twain portrays Christendom as a system of assurances and consolations that blind its adherents to the grief and suffering of the world. Yet he does not propose that we ignore or abolish Christendom, nor does he insist upon a shift from the religious to the secular in order to mitigate suffering. Instead, he retrieves the rhetoric of a religious discourse, the jeremiad, in order to shatter those assurances and make visible the “blood” and “evil” that, though rendered invisible by their ubiquity in what he calls “the Blessings-of-Civilization Trust,” are nonetheless strewn across the surface of recent history. More than social commentary, Twain’s use of the jeremiad in these instances seeks to cure readers of their deadened attention, their failure to apprehend the contingencies of finitude and fragility that lie all around them. Or, in *Forty-Four’s* parlance, it is another attempt to make the “silly imagination” of the reader more “conscious of its freaks.”

Perhaps Twain's boldest attempts to expose the "freaks" of his reader's "silly imagination" occur throughout "Letters from the Earth," a text so hostile to Christendom that his daughter Clara initially forbade Twain's literary executors from publishing it after his death.²⁹ Here, the preacher of the jeremiad is Satan himself, banished to earth and reporting to his fellow archangels on the "sarcasms" of the human species (25). At one point, Satan remarks:

the vast bulk of the Creator's affliction-inventions are specially designed for the persecution of the poor. You could guess this by the fact that one of the pulpit's finest and commonest names for the Creator is 'The Friend of the Poor.' Under no circumstances does the pulpit ever pay the Creator a compliment that has a vestige of truth in it. (36)

Like Twain's earlier image of Christendom cloaked in bloody robes, Satan here portrays the church as complicit in compounding humanity's suffering. The church depicts God as merciful even while it credits him with creating a world ravaged by disease and pain.

While this passage riffs on well-worn themes, such as the problem of evil and the prophetic critique of ecclesial authority, it also adapts the jeremiad's capacity to highlight what Bercovitch describes as the gap between "promise and fact" (*American Jeremiad* 23). It calls attention not only to contradictions within the authoritative dogma of the church, but also to the way in which that dogma obscures the vast discrepancy between the "promise," of a God (and, by extension, of a church) who is a "Friend of the Poor," and the "fact," the ravages imposed on the poor by "the Creator's affliction-inventions" and compounded by Christendom's failure to adequately ameliorate them.

²⁹ Henry Nash Smith describes some of this publishing history in his 1962 preface.

By inveighing against labels like “The Friend of the Poor,” Twain’s Satan draws attention to the material afflictions endemic to poverty and sickness that the solemn assurances of conventional piety would render invisible. Again, however, it is this critique’s embeddedness within a religious form of address, the jeremiad, which gives the critique its potency, making these “affliction-inventions” cognizable after pious mystifications like “Friend of the Poor” have been stripped away. Near the end of “Letters,” Satan returns to this theme, describing the Beatitudes (“Blessed are the poor in spirit”) as “immense sarcasms” and “giant hypocrisies” in light of other, less savory biblical texts—those which “ordered the wholesale massacre” of the Midianites, for instance (54). Satan concludes: “The Beatitudes and the quoted chapters from Numbers and Deuteronomy ought always to be read from the pulpit together; then the congregation would get an all-around view of Our Father in Heaven. Yet not in a single instance have I ever known a clergyman to do this” (55). More than just a screed against clerical hypocrisy, this passage continues a pattern common to Twain’s habit of turning the jeremiad form against its familiar religious content. If the spider dangling over the flame in Jonathan Edwards’s famous jeremiad is the wayward Christian, then in the jeremiad preached by Twain’s Satan in “Letters from the Earth,” the dangling spider is the God of Christendom himself. By demanding, not that the biblical texts be abandoned, but that the Beatitudes and the Midianite massacre be read side by side, Satan brings the full theological force of the prophetic critique to bear upon aspects of religious authority that would obscure suffering and contingency, finitude and transience. Instead of dismissing Christianity as an obsolete machine whose purpose is to generate comforting illusions, Twain’s Satan walks directly off the pages of Christian scriptures and then cites those

very scriptures in order to paint a picture of the contingencies that, in Twain's view, Christendom renders its subjects unable to see.

In *No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger*, the anti-imperialist sketches and speeches, and "Letters from the Earth," Twain calls attention to the surfaces of worldly experience, especially unsavory experience such as suffering and grief, by turning the rhetoric of the jeremiad against its chief ecclesial exponents. Where Twain first seems only to satirize American Christianity on the basis of a familiar critique of transcendence—the complaint that religion obscures the worldly with its focus on the otherworldly—these examples show how Twain uses the jeremiad, one of the most familiar forms of American religious discourse, to renew one's perception of worldly experience. In doing so, he begins to articulate a secular faith, inhabiting a religious point of view while revitalizing a sense of "sheer presence in the world," the "finitude" and "frailty" (Furani 17) that, as I argue in the introduction of this study, best characterize secular materiality.

If the jeremiad furnishes Twain with a religious voice for his worldly messages, then we must also account for the theological bases of his supernatural messengers. In "Letters from the Earth" and the "Mysterious Stranger" stories, Twain draws upon supernatural Christian concepts such as eternity and miracle in order to shape point of view in a way that amplifies the contingencies of an entirely finite, immanent universe. In Twain's later writing, challenging the assurances and pieties of Christendom by way of the jeremiad is a necessary but not sufficient solution to the problem of our inattention. By focalizing much of his later work through the eyes of a supernatural outsider like

Satan or Forty-Four, Twain suggests that theological concepts of transcendence provide a valuable vantage from which to scrutinize the textures of the transient material world.

In “Letters from the Earth,” Satan’s jeremiads derive both their potency and their dramatic irony from the fact that Satan is himself a creature of Christian theology. The very existence of Satan’s satirical letters is predicated upon Twain’s decision to dramatize the biblical story of Satan’s expulsion from Heaven. In order for Twain to employ Satan for his critique of Christendom, that is, he must first write from a point of view that is only available within Christendom’s concepts of eternity, transcendence, and miracle. In order for Satan to complain that humanity “has invented a heaven out of its own head, all by itself” (17), he must do so in contrast to the text’s opening scene—the moment of creation, as seen from the perspective of the archangels in heaven. “The Creator sat upon the throne, thinking,” the text begins (11). “Behind him stretched the illimitable continent of heaven, steeped in a glory of light and color; before him rose the black night of Space, like a wall...At his feet stood three colossal figures, diminished to extinction, almost, by contrast—archangels—their heads level with His ankle-bone” (11). What makes humanity’s “invented” heaven truly pitiful, in Satan’s eyes, is not the concept of heaven itself, but the contrast in which humanity’s heaven pales in comparison to “the illimitable continent” from which Satan himself has been banished.

Of course, the “real” heaven that Twain posits as the narrative frame, in contrast to humanity’s “invented” heaven, is itself an invention. In describing the heads of the “colossal” archangels as “level with His anklebone” (11), Twain retains the humorist’s eye for incongruity. Presumably, the reader of “Letters from the Earth” will find the “real” heaven of the narrative frame as absurd as Satan finds the heaven that humanity

has “invented.” In arguing for the necessity of adapting an eternal, miraculous point of view, I make no claims about whether Twain did or did not believe in some form of eternity, transcendence, or miracle. As such, I am not as interested in pursuing the project, begun by Lawrence Berkove and Joseph Csicsila in *Heretical Fictions*, of systematically recovering the pillars of “Twain’s countertheology” (1).³⁰ Twain’s was indeed a “God-haunted mind” (12), but I maintain that asking exactly whether and what Twain believed about God, heaven, the Bible, and all the rest is a far less interesting question than asking how that “God-haunted mind” furnished its fictions with the background of religious beliefs available to him as aesthetic devices. The point of the eternal, miraculous point of view in “Letters from the Earth” is, therefore, not so much what it says about Twain’s private religious predilections but rather what it adds to the text’s formal technique, specifically, its narrative point of view. What makes Twain’s satire of Christendom so disarming throughout “Letters from the Earth” is not just the litany of “sarcasms” and hypocrisies that Satan enumerates, but the fact that he expresses them from inside a fictional universe that is almost entirely consistent with the cosmos imagined by the church that he lampoons.

In two of the three Mysterious Stranger fragments, “The Chronicles of Young Satan” and *No. 44*, Twain contrives a similar relationship between the miraculous point of view and the immanent, material world that this point of view makes visible. “It was in

³⁰ In their ambitious (if somewhat counterintuitive) approach to Twain’s interest in religion, Berkove and Csicsila set out to induce, from Twain’s entire *oeuvre*, precisely what Twain believed about religious matters. Their most persuasive claim, as I will explain later in this chapter, is that “Twain’s literature arises out of his attempt to discredit theodicy, the justification of divine tolerance for evil,” and that in fact the problem of evil did not cause Twain to disbelieve in God, but that it gave him a heretical vision of God as the one who should be blamed for the world’s evil (9). “Although he tried not to,” they assert, Twain “believed in the existence of God” (12). This belief, they continue, can be understood through nine discrete tenets of Twain’s “countertheology” (15-17), and it is this extraordinary effort to systematize Twain’s theological thinking that I find impossible to sustain.

1490—winter,” *No. 44* begins. (“Chronicles” begins identically, but in 1702). “Austria was far away from the world, and asleep...it was still the Age of Faith in Austria. But they meant it as a compliment, not a slur, and so it was taken, and we were all proud of it” (221). Twain sets his “Mysterious Stranger” fragments in the throes of Medieval Christendom, a sleepy “Age of Faith” which sets the stage for the arrival of the miraculous outsider who will jolt each of the stories narrators from their slumber.³¹

Throughout the “Mysterious Stranger” stories, the presence of the miraculous stranger seems commensurate with the text’s setting—the “Age of Faith.” The arrival of a divine interlocutor during the “Age of Faith” fits neatly with the story Charles Taylor tells, for instance, about the “porous selves” of the “enchanted world” (“Disenchantment” 58), where people experienced “the boundary between the self” and a spiritual world of “spirits, demons, moral forces” as permeable (58). Yet the stranger’s miraculous point of view, once shared with the stories’ focal characters, accomplishes something peculiar beyond confirming characters’ sense that an eternal or transcendent world subsumes and intersects with the material world. Rather, the enhanced point of view provided by the mysterious stranger characters serves to reshape their vision of the worldly, amplifying

³¹ Twain’s opening sentences, in “Chronicles” and in *No. 44*, are particularly interesting when read in light of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. For the narrator, on one hand, participates in the “Age of Faith” that he attributes to the village in Austria, yet on the other hand he also seems surprisingly aware of what Taylor calls secularism’s “immanent frame,” the notion that, in a secular age, one can only hold religious convictions with the knowledge that not all believe and that others believe very differently. Moreover, the arrival of the miraculous stranger within the mundane, material world resembles the world of “spirits” that Taylor attributes to the “porous” selfhood of an Age of Faith. The extent to which Twain’s “Mysterious Stranger” texts seem to playfully and, at times, disruptively anticipate the historical transformation that Taylor describes in *A Secular Age* is uncanny. Moreover, the tensions produced by the miraculous presence within the supposed “Age of Faith” undercuts the clear, ontological distinction between an “Age of Faith” and a “Secular Age” in much the same way that Steven Justice questions this distinction in his essay “Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?”

their sense of the material world's frailty and intensifying characters' awareness of the immanent, finite world's limitations.

In "The Chronicles of Young Satan," the narrator and his friends encounter a youthful, unfallen angel named Satan in the woods. The presence of this angel (Lucifer's nephew, they soon learn) opens their eyes to how an eternal perspective might transform their limited experience of finitude. This transformation, to put it mildly, proves disruptive and disorienting. Just as Satan, in "Letters from the Earth," uses a heavenly eye to expose the contradictions in the heaven "invented" by humanity's "sarcasms," the Satan of "Chronicles" helps the narrator and his friends to reencounter the contingency and frailty of their worldly experience precisely insofar as Satan's eternal point of view precludes him from fully appreciating it. For example, when the boys ask Satan whether God predetermines a person's destiny, Satan offers a surprisingly materialistic response: "Foreordain it? No. The man's circumstances and environment order it" (115). To demonstrate the deterministic path that orders a person's life, however, Satan intervenes, miraculously but almost imperceptibly, in the chain of cause and effect that determines the destiny of their friend Nikolaus. By prompting Nikolaus to get up in the middle of the night and close his window Satan "will change his career entirely," precipitating a sequence of events which ends with Nikolaus's death by drowning in only twelve days (117-18). Satan, however, claims that he has done Nikolaus a kindness. If he had not interfered, Satan insists, then Nikolaus would have been pulled from the river in time but would, instead, have lain "in his bed a paralytic log, deaf, dumb, blind, and praying night and day for the blessed relief of death" for forty-six years (118). Reflecting on Satan's reasoning, the narrator observes: "He had such strange notions of kindness. But angels

are made so, and do not know any better. Their ways are not like our ways; and besides, human beings are nothing to them” (119). In other words, Satan’s eternal, miraculous point of view enables him to calculate the best out of a range of bad outcomes for Nikolaus, yet because he is an angel he cannot “know any better” when the boys react with anger and sorrow. As they wait for the impending calamity, the boys discover that Satan’s transcendent viewpoint has forced them to confront their own finitude anew. “We always prized him,” Seppi says of Nikolaus, “but never so much as now, when we are going to lose him” (123). The religious background imposed by the miraculous stranger’s eternal vision serves to sharpen the boys’ attention to their circumstances and surroundings, drawing them closer to their memories of Nikolaus and dilating their attention to his presence among them each day before his preordained death.

This contrast between an eternal and a finite point of view, which results in a heightened awareness of the material world’s contingency, comes into sharpest relief near the end of Twain’s last “Mysterious Stranger” story, *No. 44*. In the penultimate chapter, immediately prior to Forty-Four’s famous jeremiad, August and Forty-Four watch a procession of the dead. Throughout this scene, the difference between the immortal point of view and the finite perspective is striking, and it is by contrast with Forty-Four’s immortal viewpoint that August is able to grasp the importance of giving his full attention to the passing specters. Forty-Four, “the flightiest creature that ever was,” is incapable of focusing on the scene he has conjured: “He summoned those forlorn wrecks from all the world and from all the epochs and ages, and then, when everything was ready for the exhibition, he wanted to flit back to Moses’s time and see the Egyptians floundering around in the Dead Sea” (400). Even an immortal stranger, it seems, cannot but succumb

to “the evanescence and lubricity of all objects” (Emerson 200). As the procession continues, the narrator observes, “All visible things gloomed down gradually, losing their outlines little by little, then disappeared utterly” (400-01). Forty-Four looks on, utterly bored. As the boys in “Chronicles” say of Satan, “angels are made so, and do not know any better” (118). But August, by contrast, becomes fully absorbed in what the vision causes him to sense all around him.

That deep stillness continued, and continued, minute after minute, and got to be so oppressive that presently I was holding *my* breath... Then a vague twilight suffused the place and through it and drowned in it we made out the spidery dim forms of thousands of skeletons marching! It made me catch my breath. It was that grewsome [sic] and grisly and horrible, you can't think. (401)

Forty-Four's indifference intensifies August's horror at the sight of the marching skeletons, for the consequence of this miraculous vision is to confront August with the finality of his own mortal transience—that is, to witness with his own eyes the revelation that Forty-Four will dictate to him in the following chapter: “You are but a *Thought*” (405). As is so frequently the case throughout Twain's later writing, what the eternal point of view inhabited by Forty-Four offers is not an escape from the world and its lubricity, but a fuller realization of it. And what the religious background of *No. 44* enables, at the very end of Twain's career, are perhaps the sharpest and most vivid images of what Twain, in his letter to Twichell, calls “the absurdities that govern life.” Instead of displacing the religious imagination with a secular one, Twain concludes his career and anticipates his own impending death by wading ever deeper into a religious

milieu, adopting the miraculous point of view in order to reveal how, as his last narrator puts it, “All visible things gloomed down gradually” (400).

Throughout his final years, Twain’s writing comes to resemble the restless demeanor he ascribes to Forty-Four during the procession of the dead.

Forty-Four was the flightiest creature that ever was! Nothing interested him long at a time. He would contrive the most elaborate projects, and put his whole mind and heart into them, then he would suddenly drop them, in the midst of their fulfillment, and start something fresh. (400)

Twain’s personal letters, his essays and speeches, his “Letters from the Earth,” his innumerable short sketches, and, most prominently, his abandoned drafts of a “Mysterious Stranger” novel all revisit the same problems, recycling many of the same characters and images while stopping short of clear resolution. But while Twain, and many Twain scholars, might have seen this as an artistic failure,³² this perpetual lack of closure reflects Twain’s attitude toward another of his religious preoccupations: the failure of theodicy, understood as the attempt to make either theological or political sense of the problem of suffering.³³

³² See Hamlin Hill’s *Mark Twain: God’s Fool* for an oft-cited account of how Twain’s personal difficulties during his later years mirrored his increasingly fragmentary literary output. For a persuasive account of the fragmentary quality of the “Mysterious Stranger” stories, the “alternating rhythm of collapse and recoil that emerges as the dominant pattern” (233), see Forrest Robinson’s *In Bad Faith*. Michael Kiskis likewise draws upon Twain’s biography to argue that the Mysterious Stranger stories “grow out of a storytelling binge tied to Clemens’s identification with Job’s suffering” (114).

³³ As part of their ambitious effort to devise a systematic, constructive account of Twain’s “countertheology,” Berkove and Csicsila assert that “Twain’s literature arises out of his attempt to discredit theodicy, the justification of divine tolerance of evil” (9). “Twain,” they continue, “blamed God for evil” and his “quarrels were with... Calvinism’s take on the problem of evil” (9). Insofar as I base my reading of Twain in his “attempt to discredit theodicy,” I follow Berkove and Csicsila in their analysis of Twain’s later writing. Nevertheless, I maintain that the very fact of Twain’s resistance to theodicy is what precludes

Theodicy, traditionally understood, is a theological strategy for resolving the problem of evil. Why do we suffer if God is both omnipotent and loving? It is, in Milton's words, the effort to "justify the ways of God to men" (I. 26). Twain's critique of transcendence extends, in his later writing, to a vigorous rejection of theodicy; yet like his use of the jeremiad and his interest in the miraculous point of view, Twain devises his anti-theodicy by coordinating his formal strategies with his theological concerns. The failure of Twain's narratives to resolve mirrors his inability to reconcile a world of evil with a God of love. For Twain, particularly in his later writing, the contingencies of everyday circumstances must be valued on their own terms. To stitch them into a higher plane of significance, to resolve "the absurdities that govern life" by appealing either to God's providence or history's progress, is to compound the violence and suffering of worldly experience, not to ameliorate it.³⁴

Perhaps the starkest instance of Twain's resistance to theodicy occurs in "The War Prayer," written in response to the Spanish-American war but left unpublished, like "Letters from the Earth," until after his death. As in so much of his later writing, "The War Prayer" begins with the arrival of a stranger, this time an "aged stranger" who claims: "I come from the Throne—bearing a message from Almighty God!" The stranger then informs his listeners that God "has heard the prayer of His servant" and will answer

any attempt to render his "countertheology" in a systematic way, for the very basis of theodicy lies in its desire to make sense of contradictions, justify outliers, and stitch together loose ends.

³⁴ Thomas Peyser offers a somewhat different analysis of how *No. 44* unsettles a particular form of theodicy. For Peyser, *No. 44* thematizes not just Twain's "metaphysical despair" but his sense that a harsh, unwelcoming US immigration policy at the turn of the century meant "a farewell to what seemed an entire phase of American culture" (1014). "For Twain," Peyser concludes, "the stranger, the foreigner, the immigrant, plays an important role in revealing the fragility, the merely contingent character, of the world we know" (1033).

both prayers, the “one uttered, and the other not.” He then proceeds to elucidate the unuttered prayer, to explain what those who pray for victory in battle and resolution to conflict have implied but disavowed through their prayers. “O Lord our God, help us tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells... help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief.” More than just a polemic against U.S. imperialism, “The War Prayer” unravels the contradictions inherent in the task of theodicy itself. To demand your own safety and security, and to appeal to a divine providence which guarantees a deeper meaning for suffering and pain, is to compound the very suffering that theodicy is meant to assuage.³⁵

“The War Prayer” ends with a sentence that closely resembles the final sentence of *No. 44*: “It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.” Similarly, *No. 44* ends as August reflects: “He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and I realized, that all he had said was true” (405). In both cases, the prophetic stranger might be thought of as a figure for Twain himself, a gadfly who

³⁵ Twain’s ongoing resistance to theodicy, particularly political forms of theodicy which seek to justify violence and suffering with the promise of some teleological futurity, strangely anticipates Slavoj Žižek’s recent Chestertonian reinterpretation of the book of Job. According to Žižek, “the book of Job strikes a dissonant chord in the Old Testament” insofar as “God performs what Lacan calls a *point de capiton*: he resolves the riddle by supplanting it with a more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle, by transposing the riddle from Job’s mind into the thing itself—he comes to share Job’s astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe” (48). In Job, Žižek concludes (following G.K. Chesterton): “God is here no longer the miraculous exception which guarantees the normality of the universe, the unexplainable X who enables us to explain everything else. On the contrary, He Himself is overwhelmed by the overbrimming miracle of his creation. Upon closer look, there is nothing normal in our universe...every normal thing is a monstrosity” (50). I compare Twain to Žižek here because I believe Twain’s later work, insofar as it takes up the question of theodicy, offers precisely the same insight. If the universe is composed of “dreams, visions, fictions,” then there is nothing to normalize or justify suffering. Everything is a “monstrosity,” and yet its monstrous character, far from implying a rejection of religious concepts of transcendence, is in fact made visible by transcendent figures, like the quasi-angelic figure of the mysterious stranger, which are drawn from a religious imaginary.

attempts to expose contradictions and hypocrisies and discredit every theodicy but who vanishes into oblivion, leaving without stitching back any of the threads that he has unraveled. The point of “The War Prayer” is that “there was no sense” in the stranger’s words, no clear sense of closure, no attempt to “justify the ways of God toward man.” But what makes August, of *No. 44*, different from the listeners of “The War Prayer” is his willingness to accept as “true” a picture of the material world—of its transience, absurdity, and finitude—that nevertheless lacks “sense.”

Why is August so much better equipped to acknowledge the truth of the mysterious stranger’s final revelation of the senselessness and absurdity of the world? Perhaps it is because his own experience with Forty-Four’s transcendent viewpoint has taught him that the demands of theodicy, the effort to make sense out of senseless contingency, result not in resolution but in even greater fragmentation: “*can ’t* you extinguish time? *can ’t* you comprehend eternity?” (332, original emphasis), Forty-Four asks August during one of their most probing conversations. To which August replies: “Don’t! I’ve tried it a hundred times...It makes my brain whirl just to think of it” (332). This incommensurability between Forty-Four and August, Forty-Four concludes, is because mortal humans are “built out of *thought*” (332, original emphasis).

A man *originates* nothing in his head, he merely observes exterior things, and *combines* them in his head—puts several objects together and draws a conclusion. His mind is merely a machine, that is all—an *automatic* one...[which] cannot conceive of a *new* thing, an original thing, it can only gather material from the outside and combine it into new *forms* and patterns. But it always has to have the *materials* from the *outside*, for it

can't make them itself. That is to say, a man's mind cannot *create*—a god's can, and my race can. That is the difference. (332-33, original emphasis)

Forty-Four's unlimited creative powers reveal to August the severe limitations on his own capacity to understand his condition, to make sense of his own finitude, or to create something meaningful out of the material world's fragments and contingencies.³⁶ He is limited to "new *forms* and patterns," limited, as Forty-Four will assert in his concluding jeremiad, to a life lived according to "dreams, visions, fictions."

Nevertheless, the failure to create and the inability to resolve—like the continuous recombining and lack of resolution we find throughout Twain's later writing—does not leave August entirely stranded. Forty-Four leaves August with one responsibility. One could argue that this is the task which Twain's later work leaves to his readers, as well. Where scholars of Twain's later years contend that the "real theme of *The Mysterious Stranger*...is not the literal unreality but the meaninglessness of life...its lack of stable and enduring values" (Salomon 207), the mysterious stranger himself offers one value that Twain appears to find meaningful, though not stable or enduring. Against the false promises of theodicy, we must "Dream other dreams, and better" (404). If our minds cannot create sense out of nonsense, and if our efforts to arrest the passage of time or to resolve the apparent meaninglessness of suffering only result in compounding these "absurdities," then we must make the most of the one tool that is available to us: to create

³⁶ E.H. Eby claims that, for Twain, "Satan is the ideal artist" (257), and he concludes that the Mysterious Stranger stories present "imagination" as humanity's "salvation," whereby the artist "can produce a dream or a work of art which transcends and transmutes his deficiencies" (262). I believe that Eby touches on an important strain in Twain's thought—the relationship between religiosity and the creative imagination—which more recent studies of Twain's interest in religion have left largely unattended. Part of my aim in this chapter has been to develop this relationship more fully.

“new *forms* and patterns,” as Forty-Four puts it, out of the forms and patterns that are already available. For Twain, especially in his later years, many of the most generative forms and patterns proved to be those he discerned within American Christianity. By a surprising turn, the writer who is best known to critics as an “alienated, grief-ridden curmudgeon shaking his fist at God” (“Moralist” 79)—as Harold Bush paraphrases the “standard reading”—turns out to be among the American writers most consistently preoccupied with the affective, aesthetic, and philosophical power of religious discourse for disclosing the contours of the material world in a disenchanted age.

The writing of Twain’s final years confronts its readers like a puzzle missing all of its edge pieces. Patterns are unmistakable, dominant images and motifs stand out immediately, and central themes quickly come into focus. But the more one reads of manuscript after unpublished or unfinished manuscript—the more one assembles of the puzzle—the clearer it becomes that there is no outer frame. What begins as a clear through line, an organizing principle that will allow the critic to collate these fragments, ends abruptly, pointing the way forward like a severed hand directed at nothing in particular. One cannot approach Twain’s later work hoping to account for it systematically. Given Twain’s resistance to theodicy, perhaps that is the point. One can, however, outline the *oeuvre*’s most prominent patterns while attempting to chart a phenomenology of the void into which they point, as I have endeavored in this chapter. By reclaiming the Puritan jeremiad to replace the consolations of Christendom with more palpable figures of material suffering, by building his narratives around supernatural characters whose eternal points of view vivify the ephemerality of all perception, and by

unwinding the logic of theodicy from within in order to bestow value on the contingencies of ordinary experience, Twain's later writing draws his lifelong struggle with religion to an uneasy *détente*. In texts like the *Mysterious Stranger* stories and "Letters from the Earth," Twain's critique of transcendence is as fervent as any; yet his critique depends, almost in its entirety, upon a secular faith, a dogged engagement with religious backgrounds and beliefs which draw attention to the everyday "dreams, visions, fictions" on which the desire for secularity depends. Riddled with contradictory impulses, recurring character types, gnomic parables, and scattershot sermons, these texts read not so much like the realism of Twain's earlier years, but like unfinished, outsized gospel narratives. If gospels, however, they are gospels of the worldly for a disenchanted age, unthinkable without the most otherworldly tenets of American Protestantism and yet committed to the mundane.

Chapter 2

Willa Cather's Modernist Religion

“Art and religion,” declares Godfrey St. Peter of *The Professor's House*, “are the same thing in the end” (54). The relationship between the religious and the aesthetic which I am calling secular faith makes it possible to take this seemingly reductive statement seriously. Despite the resurgent critical attention to religion in literature, the two most common ways to account for this relation, what I describe in the introduction as secular criticism and postsecular criticism, are equally ill-equipped to find anything in Godfrey St. Peter's words but a naïve tautology. For secular criticism of the kind advocated by Said, art and religion are only equivalent insofar as both mystify our experience of the worldly, shrouding historical contingencies in idealist, universalist appeals to some sort of chimerical transcendence. If the equivalence works at all, we should reject it. For postsecular thinkers like Caputo, by contrast, art and religion share a deconstructive logic which is “unhinged” (*On Religion* 13) and which listens for the call of “the impossible” (92). Religion, for Caputo, attests to an event which language fails to capture, to an alterity “where things do not bend to our knowledge” (13). The aesthetic, by this account, offers one of many domains where a “religion without religion” (110) can be discerned, but to so confidently identify the aesthetic with the religious would be as impermissible within a postsecular framework as to name God. In either case, for secular and postsecular criticism alike, one side of this equation proves to be the other's epiphenomenon. The problem is that our efforts to look simultaneously at religion and aesthetics inevitably end with one cancelling out the other—either the religious is secularized into the aesthetic, or aesthetic concerns are rendered secondary to the project

of recovering a text's religiosity. Willa Cather's later fiction, however, imagines a relationship between the religious and the aesthetic where this boundary dissolves.

In this chapter, I will examine Godfrey St. Peter's fusion of art and religion in the novel where Willa Cather develops this dynamic most fully: *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In this novel, Cather brings the aesthetic and the religious to bear upon one another in a way that elegantly resolves one of the chief tensions we observed in Mark Twain's later writing. Where Twain struggles, in fits and starts, toward a model of mundane transcendence which will more vividly disclose the finitude of the material world, Cather captures a similar dynamic by centering much of her later writing on the relation of the religious and the aesthetic more broadly. Moreover, I will show that by examining how Cather's mature fiction fuses art and religion, we can discover more than an important framework for understanding her later writing in the context of twentieth century American literature and religion. We also gain insights into questions that persist in the aftermath of Kantian aesthetics: questions of belief, intention, and form. For Cather, form itself becomes a religious problem while religion becomes a formal problem.³⁷

Death Comes for the Archbishop, the culminating work of Cather's career-long exploration of art and religion, begins twice. Its two openings, the prologue and the opening chapter, posit two distinct religious images, images keyed to two different

³⁷ While my argument focuses principally on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, for the purpose of cohesion, a similar case could be made for several of Cather's later novels. Here I follow Merrill Maguire Skaggs, who identifies Cather's fiction from 1925 to 1931, comprising *The Professor's House*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Archbishop*, and *Shadows on the Rock*, as "a quartet of novels that centrally address questions about religion" (66).

models of aesthetic attention, one which obscures the material world, and another which renders it more lucid. The prologue unfolds with a glimpse of nineteenth century Rome while three European cardinals and an American bishop recline in a luxurious villa that overlooks the city. The narrator portrays the landscape beneath them with painterly perspicuity: “Beyond the balustrade was the drop into the air, and far below the landscape stretched soft and undulating; *there was nothing to arrest the eye* until it reached Rome itself” (3, emphasis mine). With the sun shining on the “low profile of the city,” the city’s skyline is “indistinctive except for the dome of St. Peter’s” (3).

The cathedral commands the viewer’s attention; by providing something to “arrest the eye,” it wrests the otherwise featureless landscape into a coherent and intelligible form. Just as the hills appear to be formless until the city orders their topography, the city itself is redundant until St. Peter’s Cathedral breaks through the skyline’s monotony. The landscape’s form, in other words, depends upon the order imposed upon it by the cathedral.

Is this what Godfrey St. Peter means when he links art with religion? If so, then the opening image of St. Peter’s Cathedral would suggest that this formula is just one more iteration of the familiar story we tell about secularization. For despite being a religious object, the cathedral’s aesthetic function can be fully appreciated without recourse to religious belief. You don’t need to be a Catholic to find your attention absorbed in a cathedral’s architecture. Cather’s narrator frames the image of the undulating landscape around the cathedral’s architectural purpose: to ascribe formal unity and coherence to the city and its surrounding countryside. In this instance, art and religion are the same because religion, depleted of its ontological and metaphysical

presuppositions, turns into art. This insight is not particularly new, either to Cather scholarship or to the history of literary theory. For example, Marcus Klein's 1961 introduction to Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* aptly summarizes what has been, for decades, a truism of Cather scholarship: "Catholicism is not a dogma for her...it is an aesthetic" (xxiii).³⁸ More than just a common refrain for Cather scholarship, this relationship between religion and aesthetics replicates what Michael Kauffman calls the "Arnoldian replacement theory," a version of the secularization thesis in which "poetry/language replaces a religion that had become too dogmatic, and thereby takes on the cultural function of transmitting moral and spiritual values" (61). Hollowed of its previous metaphysical authority, the object of religious devotion becomes an object of aesthetic transfixion. St. Peter's Cathedral, in the prologue, is a religious object only through an accident of its history. Its aesthetic effects—specifically, its capacity to give form to the featureless landscape—are available to the observer entirely independent of the observer's religious persuasion. From the aesthetic point of view, belief ceases to matter. If this is all Godfrey St. Peter means when he proclaims art and religion to be "the same thing," then the statement sounds a bit more reasonable, even if its dependence on an outmoded, teleological picture of secularism renders it rather banal.

³⁸ For at least a dozen articles and chapters published over the past three decades, Cather's primarily aesthetic interest in religion has served as either the principle insight or the underlying problem. I address the majority of this scholarship in subsequent endnotes. To generalize, this basic orientation toward Cather's fiction takes two dominant stances. The first, suggested by John Hilgart, contends that references to the supernatural empower a vision of beautiful or culturally significant objects that are themselves enduring and autonomous. "Jean Latour is Cather's surrogate," Hilgart argues, "and his Catholicism is tailored to match her aesthetic [modernist] inclinations" (384). By contrast, others such as Leona Sevvick insist that Cather's interest in "pre-industrial religious rituals" bespeaks "a yearning for a simpler time" (191). That is, Cather's turn to religion deepens her work's commitment to the "aesthetic mystification" (197, original emphasis) of industrial capitalism and U.S. imperialism. Both approaches, however, take religion to be merely a novel means to very familiar ends. By contrast, this essay aims to more precisely examine how religion thoroughly constitutes Cather's aesthetics and, consequently, how it provides Cather with a unique path for revising central modernist concerns.

Cather, however, was rarely inclined to be merely reasonable. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* promptly undercuts the prologue's fusion of art and religion by offering an entirely different kind of aesthetic encounter. In the encounter offered by the novel's first chapter, Bishop Jean Latour perceives form that arranges the undifferentiated natural world, form that would be impossible to discern without the religious commitments that elicit his attention and sharpen his gaze. The novel's opening chapter thus draws religion and aesthetics, miraculous revelations and mundane perceptions, together in a manner utterly different than the cathedral that orchestrates the landscape's form in the prologue.

Like the prologue, the first chapter opens with a repetitive landscape made legible by a religious object. But unlike the cathedral, this object's form solely manifests as a consequence of religious belief. Bishop Jean Latour, the novel's focal character, has "lost his way" in a New Mexican desert (17). Unlike the luxurious landscape of the prologue, the desert is "arid," a shapeless "geometrical nightmare" (17) that rebuffs every effort to render it intelligible.³⁹ For Latour, the narrator explains: "The difficulty was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless—or rather, that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike" (17). The landscape Latour must navigate is so full of random shapes and haphazard features that it appears to him exactly as would a landscape entirely bereft of features. Much as the Roman countryside had "nothing to arrest the eye" (3), the "monotonous red sand-hills" (17) obscure Latour's vision of the desert, turning his confusion into an aesthetic problem. He is lost because he cannot grasp the desert's form.

³⁹ Two studies of *Archbishop* identify the influence of other important theological sources to this passage. Latour lost in the desert, as Murphy explains, echoes Dante lost in the woods. Furthermore, Skaggs connects this passage's "geometrical" problem to Cather's longstanding interest in the theology and philosophy of Pascal.

Latour eventually discovers form in a remarkable way. His religious belief activates his aesthetic perception, and the sudden fusion of art and religion causes him to regain his sense of direction. No ordinary wanderer, Latour is “sensitive to the shape of things” (18). He wears a priest’s cassock but possesses a painter’s eye. He is both cleric and aesthete, personifying Cather’s ambition to fully collapse the boundary between art and religion. Doubly sensitive to shape—to both the contours of the world’s surface and the content of its theological resonance—Latour suddenly sees the featureless desert transfigured, mysteriously animated by form. Though all of the surrounding juniper trees look exactly alike, one suddenly stands out: “Living vegetation,” the narrator remarks, “could not present more faithfully the form of the cross” (18).

A familiar image in an unlikely place, this cruciform tree seems like a miracle. Upon witnessing the shape of the cross amid the “geometrical nightmare” of juniper trees, Latour becomes absorbed in the image even as he kneels to pray. Made legible by the cruciform tree, the landscape ceases to be a featureless puzzle. Like St. Peter’s Cathedral, the cruciform tree gives form to the featureless landscape; but here, religious belief is the determining factor. It is what makes Latour capable of recognizing a key to the landscape’s form and, subsequently, orienting himself within the landscape. For one could appreciate the cathedral as an art object without faith, without even the knowledge that it serves a religious function. But without the belief that predisposes one to discover the shape of a cross in the world, the cruciform tree would remain another mundane object, completely undifferentiated.

As Latour reflects on what transpired, he imagines the difference between how he and his vicar, Father Vaillant, would interpret this sign. Vaillant would insist on the tree’s

divine authorship, that it reveals a supernatural intention that intervenes in the material world: “his dear Joseph must always have the miracle very direct and spectacular, not with Nature, but against it” (29). Vaillant’s understanding of the miraculous requires an image that signifies an unambiguous divine intention, an image that transcends all confining material contingencies. For such an image, the world’s quotidian surfaces are merely the parchment on which God inscribes supernatural signifiers. His miracle is of the kind that might lead, unchecked, to a political theology of the exceptional sovereign—what Carl Schmitt describes when he declares that “the modern constitutional state...banished the miracle from the world,” but that “the sovereign’s direct intervention in a valid legal order” might take its cue from the sovereign God’s “transgression of the laws of nature through an exception” (36-37). Vaillant’s belief in the exceptional, supernatural authorship of miracles is thus dogmatic, in the Kantian sense, proceeding from his *a priori* concept of the divine. This prompts him to interpret whatever he perceives by presupposing divine intention.

Bishop Latour, by contrast, brackets Vaillant’s recourse to the supernatural. Latour suspends supernatural explanations even as his faith causes him to anticipate the miraculous wherever he looks. He finds the tree to be miraculous not because he is convinced that its meaning transcends the featureless landscape, nor because he presupposes that he must read it with an *a priori* belief in divine intention. The miraculous, in Latour’s vision, is not the arbitrary incursion of a supersensible agency. Instead, the miraculous derives from looking at the landscape *as if* it were the product of a divine intention. This is not to say that Latour’s concept of the miracle reduces the religious to the aesthetic or secularizes a religious belief into an aesthetic perception by

screening out religion's ontological claims. Rather, it is to say that what matters for Latour is how the background brought into being by his religious faith, a faith which includes his belief in a God who performs miracles, makes his aesthetic attention uniquely alert to the shapes and surfaces that are already present around him, invisible because they are everywhere. Thus, where Vaillant's understanding of the miraculous supersedes his finite surroundings, Latour's vision of the miraculous—a vision which neither negates nor affirms the ontology of divine intervention but rather looks out at the world *as if* such intervention might always be happening. This vision, in turn, prompts absorbed attention to those very surroundings, attuning him to the shape of the image at hand. Absorbed in the landscape's ordinary features, Latour's faith predisposes him to actively seek form amid the featureless desert.

To a degree, the tree that captures Latour's reverent attention mirrors the prologue's image of St. Peter's Cathedral. Both orient their observers to the form of a seemingly featureless setting. They do so, however, with a significant difference—a fundamental difference that reflects the central device of Willa Cather's later fiction. This difference hinges upon the ontological gap between the cathedral and the cruciform tree. Both display a religious image as aesthetic form, and both make legible the contours and patterns of their surroundings by way of such form. But while the cathedral imposes form on the landscape, the tree derives form by eliciting engaged perception; and while the former articulates the landscape's shape by asserting its solidity, its ambition to architectural immortality, the latter arranges Latour's vision of the desert while remaining an ephemeral, everyday object. The cathedral, a built artifact as well as a symbol of clerical and political authority (the sovereign exception that so fascinates thinkers like

Schmitt), commands the viewer's attention and thereby fixes the surrounding landscape into an intelligible unity. By contrast, the cruciform tree is a natural object that discloses the shape of its surroundings when a predilection for the miraculous causes the tree to catch Latour's eye. The cathedral commands attention but doesn't require belief in order to elicit form. Vaillant's vision of the cruciform tree ignores the tree's shape in order to decipher its miraculous meaning. But Latour's impression of the tree, an impression which at once sees its material shape and its theological significance, rests upon his looking at the world *as if* it is composed by a divine hand. His is an aesthetic faith, a modernist religion which allows him to perceive form in the natural world's most mundane material surfaces.

The difference between the cathedral and the cruciform tree anticipates the contrast between how Latour and Vaillant model the task of interpretation and, by extension, how each understands the role of the miraculous in shaping the limits of interpretation. Where Vaillant would see the tree *as* a cross, an unambiguous sign of God's intervention in the world, Latour specifically sees the *shape* of a cross. This is not a trivial distinction. Vaillant's understanding of the world as supersensibly ordered ultimately alienates the observer from the landscape's contingencies. Like the cathedral that renders its surroundings intelligible precisely because it is alien to its surroundings, Vaillant's way of seeing the tree *as* a cross prevents him from seeing the tree at all. It diminishes the immanent features of the desert landscape by inserting a divinely authored sign as its transcendental signifier. One might say that it models the type of religious belief from which proponents of the secularization thesis, dating at least as far back as Feuerbach, sought to retreat. By contrast, Latour's tendency to look at the landscape *as if*

it bears a purposive design allows form to emerge through careful attention to the shapes themselves. Synchronously perceiving the world through the sensorium of a priest and an aesthete, “sensitive to the shape of things,” Latour discovers that his religious point of view is what makes the form of the quotidian newly visible.

By juxtaposing the cathedral with the cruciform tree, and by contrasting Latour’s understanding of the tree with Vaillant’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* illustrates a central preoccupation of Cather’s later fiction: it models two disparate ways of drawing form out of apparent featurelessness, one of which imposes and commands, the other of which elicits and calls forth. Furthermore, it models two different efforts to demonstrate Godfrey St. Peter’s (and Cather’s) ambitious, even hyperbolic proclamation: that art and religion are ultimately the same. Cather’s fiction thus invites a renewed attentiveness to what happens when we fuse religion and aesthetics in the same object and the same process of interpretation. It strives to defamiliarize the ordinary, the quotidian, and the finitude to which the quotidian attests, rejuvenating attention to the world’s mundane surfaces—surfaces like Latour’s cruciform tree. In Cather’s modernism, religion gives form to the featureless textures of everyday shapes. But it goes a step further. Neither secularized nor postsecular, Cather’s modernist religion refigures the mechanics of Kantian aesthetics, drawing on religion as a way of revitalizing features of ordinary, secular experience.

To converge the figure of the cleric with the figure of the aesthete, for Cather, is to craft characters whose concepts of the miraculous and the beautiful are fused together, a synthesis that alters their disposition toward everyday experiences and perceptions. The

way that this process unfolds, for Latour and throughout much of Cather's later writing, provides us with more than a new way to read Cather and, in fact, more than a different account of the relation between religion and aesthetics in American modernism. It cuts all the way back to basic questions within the legacy of Kantian aesthetics, reimagining what Kant calls the purposiveness of form as a mode of miraculous perception, a mode made available in Cather's fiction by the processes of religious belief. This is not to suggest that Cather self-consciously sought to resolve a problem in Kant's aesthetics. Instead, novels like *Death Comes for the Archbishop* provide a compelling way to rethink the relationship between religious belief and aesthetic perception, a relationship for which the modernist legacy of Kantian aesthetics provides an important philosophical antecedent. Cather doesn't directly respond to or conclusively resolve Kant; rather, Kant helps us see more vividly what Cather's work contributes to questions about faith and form, belief and intention, in the aftermath of a defunct secularization thesis.

In his third *Critique*, Kant famously contends: "Purposiveness can thus exist without an end, insofar as we do not place the causes of this form in a will, but can still make the explanation of its possibility conceivable to ourselves only by deriving it from a will" (105). According to Kant, when we look closely at the features of a landscape we judge to be beautiful, relating the parts to the whole as if they are designed to elicit the viewer's pleasure, we cannot help but ascribe intention. We thus perceive the landscape *as if* it is purposively composed, even if we do not actually suppose it to be consciously designed according to our own cognitive or perceptual needs. Consequently, when Kant asserts that purposive purposelessness is "conceivable...only by deriving it from a will," he allows that the "will" governing the intention we perceive will always be a fiction,

albeit a necessary fiction. To speak of the intention governing form, in Kantian aesthetics, is not to attribute or discern an actual will governing such form—a divine agent, for instance. It is merely to say that our perception of beauty causes us to suppose a hypothetical intention behind the unity and order we perceive. The application of Kant’s *as if*, while fundamental to our acts of aesthetic judgment, is nevertheless weak. It makes no ontological claims about the existence or identity of the intention we presume when we recognize form in art or nature.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, what separates Father Vaillant from Bishop Latour, what distinguishes the figure of the Roman cathedral from the image of the cruciform tree in the New Mexican desert, and what emerges from Cather’s efforts to reimagine art and religion as “the same thing,” is a distinction one finds sketched in Kant but enriched by Cather. More precisely, Latour’s propensity to see the shape of the cross in a juniper tree splits the difference between the weak *as if* of Kantian aesthetics and the dogmatic, cognitive assent reflect in Father Vaillant’s strong belief. By seeing the cruciform tree as bearing the *shape* of a cross, Latour suspends the possibility that Vaillant would immediately assert: the possibility that the tree’s shape attests to God’s intervening agency in the natural world. Latour, however, never wholly refutes Vaillant’s desire to “have the miracle very direct and spectacular” (29); instead, Latour suspends his judgment about the supernatural in order to locate “the miracle” in the act of attributing purposiveness to the form he ascertains. Although more tentative than Vaillant’s dogmatic assuredness, Latour’s bracketing of the cruciform tree’s supersensible composition offers a theological transformation of Kant’s concept of purposive form.

I am not implying that Cather was directly influenced by Kant. I contend, rather, that the way Latour transforms the basic dynamic of Kantian aesthetics provides a compelling way to take seriously the fusion of religion and aesthetics, a fusion that scholars otherwise keyed into the recent return to religion have overlooked. The relation between Kant and Cather, illustrated in Bishop Latour, is not primarily one of influence or imitation. For while the resemblance between Kant and Latour is significant, the difference between them is even more instructive. Where the Kantian observer perceives the world *as if* it were designed to provoke a feeling of pleasure, Bishop Latour looks at the world *as if* it is in fact shaped by God. Focusing on the shape of the cross, rather than a merely pleasing order, prompts Latour to fuse religious faith and aesthetic perception in the same image; as Godfrey St. Peter would put it, it renders art and religion momentarily the same. Latour's faith does more, therefore, than translate Kantian aesthetics into theological language. Instead, it animates and amplifies the principle feature of Kantian aesthetics so that quotidian phenomena, like a featureless desert landscape, reappear both as miracle and as art.

Interpreters of Kant's third *Critique* have often debated the religiosity of purposiveness without purpose. Reviewing two of these interpretations will serve to illuminate the provocative path opened by Cather's peculiar fusion of art and religion. Henry Allison, in his authoritative commentary on Kant's aesthetics, explicates the purposiveness of form as follows: the "purposiveness of nature" is "operative only in its reflective rather than its determinative capacity" (14). Through reflection, "we look upon nature *as if* it had been designed with our cognitive interests in mind; though, of course, we have no basis for asserting that it was in fact so designed" (30). Allison continues,

cautioning against a possible misreading of Kantian purposiveness: “the claim is not that nature is purposive, that is, that we have some sort of *a priori* guarantee that it is ordered in a manner commensurate with our cognitive capacities and needs. *Nor is it even that we must believe it to be purposive in this sense*” (39, emphasis added). Kantian aesthetics, as Allison explains, hinge upon our perceiving the world *as if* it is purposively ordered, a perception in no way coterminous with a determinative belief or an empirical proof that the world actually is ordered as such. According to Allison, therefore, we must understand “Kant’s conception of beauty as a symbol of morality” (236), but not as an appeal to a supersensibly intended moral or aesthetic order. For Allison, there is no room in Kantian purposiveness for Father Vaillant’s desire “to have the miracle very direct and spectacular” (*Archbishop* 29).

Unlike Allison, Adina Davidovich argues that Kant’s aesthetics serve as the foundation for a robust moral theology. She argues:

Kant’s analysis of judgments of taste aims to demonstrate that there are subjective judgments that are universal...Kant argues that the highest transcendental condition of our ability to discern beauty in natural objects is a thought about a supersensible will who designed nature in a way which pleases us...This analysis strives to show that in contemplating beautiful natural objects we gain an awareness of something beyond nature (70).

Davidovich understands Kant’s third *Critique* to be making strong claims in favor of the link between aesthetic perception and its transcendent, religious grounds. Such a reading contradicts Allison’s insistence that “the concept of the beautiful” in Kant does not lead

“inevitably from something sensible to its supersensible ground” (249). Instead, Davidovich concludes: “Having found the transcendental ground of judgment of taste in the purposiveness of nature we now look back and examine the judgment of taste in light of these conclusions...In undertaking this task the *Critique of Judgment* transforms itself into a philosophical theology” (98). Where for Allison the weak *as if* of Kantian purposiveness serves a purely symbolic function, Davidovich’s reading of purposiveness asserts that Kant’s vision of design in nature lends itself to a fully formed theological project.

Death Comes for the Archbishop resolves this apparent impasse by placing religious belief at the center of the purposive *as if*. Davidovich’s Kant would likely interpret the cruciform tree the same way Father Vaillant does, claiming that the perception of form in the landscape ultimately reveals a divine intention, a purposiveness that guarantees a transcendent, supersensible will or ground. Allison’s reading, by contrast, would reject Vaillant’s position because it exaggerates the purposive *as if*, making it more than just a necessary fiction for the way we intuitively perceive form. But while Allison’s reading of Kant resists Father Vaillant’s dogmatic supernaturalism, it does not quite capture Bishop Latour’s vision. Were Bishop Latour merely a stand-in for Allison’s Kant, he might see the tree’s form as a symbol for moral judgments or as reminders of a universal *sensus communis*. He would care that the tree gives order—perhaps even an austere beauty—to the landscape, but he would not care about what its shape signifies. Like the cathedral in the novel’s prologue, the relation of form to belief would be coincidental. As Allison argues, we do not have to believe for to be purposive in order to experience it as such. And one need not, we might extrapolate, be a Catholic

to appreciate the pleasure one takes at the sight of St. Peter's Cathedral. But Bishop Latour, despite bracketing Vaillant's supernatural explanations, does believe. If he did not, the cruciform tree would only be one more formless juniper tree in the "geometrical nightmare" of the desert. Without belief, Latour's apprehension of form would not be possible, he would never find his way through the desert, and the novel would come to a rather abrupt and disappointing end.

For Jean Latour, looking at the world with faith amplifies and animates the basic procedure of Kant's aesthetics. The stakes of the purposive *as if* heighten drastically, causing Latour to seek form in the landscape *as if* the world's mundane features testify to an unseen order, *as if* these shapes form patterns that are waiting to be discovered. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the cruciform tree provides the most precise example of this aesthetic process. Its full formulation is made clearer in a later conversation between Latour and Vaillant, who debate the theological significance of a regional legend about an artwork that appeared miraculously in the desert. "What a priceless thing for the poor converts of a savage country!" (49), Vaillant remarks, "wiping his glasses, which were clouded by his strong feeling" (49). The miracle story matters to Vaillant because it reassures "these poor Catholics who have been so long without instruction" (50). "Doctrine is well enough for the wise," he concludes, "but the miracle is something we can hold in our hands and love" (50). Latour, however, gently but characteristically disagrees. "Where there is great love there are always miracles," he begins. "One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love" (50). He concludes, explaining:

The Miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always. (50)

Vaillant's insistence upon the divine intention behind art and nature ultimately clouds his vision, but Latour's conception of the miraculous expands ordinary vision. Faith, for Latour, is not about the guarantee of transcendent meaning. It is, rather, the process of "our perceptions being made finer." Like art, it orients us to the mundane textures of the material world that, always before us, otherwise fail to elicit our gaze.

This dynamic, "our perceptions being made finer," is Cather's religious solution to a formal problem, the manner in which she amplifies and animates Kantian purposiveness with radically heightened theological stakes. To take Latour's way of looking seriously is thus to understand how the aesthetic dimensions of religious belief give Cather the means to revise key features of post-Kantian aesthetics. When looking at a tree shaped like a cross, perceiving form in nature doesn't merely alert Latour to a beauty that appears designed for his pleasure. Rather, this perception prompts him to see a non-human order, to discern a supersensible intention that gives the possibility of form to every single shape, and to grant each mundane object and experience a renewed capacity for aesthetic vivacity.

Having established how *Death Comes for the Archbishop* amplifies Kantian aesthetics by religious means, we should pause to consider what this dynamic offers to another relevant and longstanding question within aesthetics: the problem, germane but

not exclusive to literary criticism, of intention and interpretation. This is the problem that concerns Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's programmatic argument against literary theory. Before fully returning to Cather's text, I want to call attention to how Cather's cruciform tree addresses shape, meaning, and purposiveness in a way that complicates the famous thought experiment outlined by Knapp and Michaels in "Against Theory." For Latour and Vaillant's fundamental disagreement over how to interpret the miraculous meaning of a sign that appears unsolicited in nature poses roughly the same question as the example that Knapp and Michaels propose in their reading of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal."

"Suppose," Knapp and Michaels begin, "that you're walking along a beach and you come upon a curious sequence of squiggles in the sand" (727). Those squiggles look exactly like the first stanza of Wordsworth's poem, but are they? When a wave washes up to reveal the poem's second stanza, you are confronted with the problem of whether meaning presumes intention. As Knapp and Michaels put it:

Are these marks mere accident, produced by the mechanical operation of the waves on the sand...? Or is the sea alive and striving to express its pantheistic faith? Or has Wordsworth, since his death, become a sort of genius of the shore who inhabits the waves and periodically inscribes on the sand his elegiac statements? (728)

Unless we believe there to be a supernatural agent inhabiting the sea, Knapp and Michaels conclude, we must concede that the squiggles merely *look like* Wordsworth's poem; absent intention, however, they have no meaning.

What would Knapp and Michaels make of a tree shaped like a cross, a naturally occurring object that, for an observer like Latour, bears religious significance and appears to give form and intelligibility to a redundant, featureless landscape? They would likely offer the same two choices. Either the tree has no meaning at all and it merely looks like a cross, just as the sea squiggles merely look like a Wordsworth poem, and its capacity for turning nature into art is Latour's private illusion. Or else, as Vaillant would have it, God put the tree there to convey a discernable message, much like (as Knapp and Michaels facetiously suggest) we might posit a pantheistic sea that happens to have an inordinate fondness for Wordsworth.

We could also map these choices onto the two most common scholarly methods for dealing with religion in literature. To say that the tree merely looks like a cross, or that the squiggles on the sand cannot possibly be composed by an unnatural agent, is to recapitulate the old secularization thesis. Whereas to see the tree as a sign from God, to read the squiggles as evidence of a pantheistic sea or to see in these markings the trace of what Caputo calls "the impossible" (*On Religion* 92), is to wade into the postsecular model of interpretation, an approach that foregrounds nontraditional, heterodox belief, skimming past the form of these objects in order to investigate the belief that produces such form. But Latour refuses both of these options. He suspends the supernatural interpretation but does not reject it outright. Instead, his belief in a divine, unseen order makes it possible for him to see tree's form in the first place. His perception, as he would put it, has been "made finer" by his belief. He is a bit like the beach walker in "Against Theory," the protagonist of the essay who nevertheless receives little attention from

Knapp and Michaels. Just as a particular background,⁴⁰ a background shaped by religious belief, enables Bishop Latour to perceive the tree, the person on Knapp and Michaels's beach asks whether the sand squiggles are meaningful or merely shapes because of the background that makes it possible for him to ponder such a question: an understanding of language as a signifying system, and perhaps a basic familiarity with British Romanticism. But where Knapp and Michaels's beach walker is limited to two choices—either the shapes in the sand are poetry, or their resemblance to poetry is entirely accidental—Latour is able to look at the shape of the tree in a way that enables the landscape itself to appear to him as meaningful.

Readers familiar with Michaels's more recent work may suspect that I am now about to commit what is, to Michaels, a form of critical heresy: to say that the identity of a reader or observer reader (or that the subject position more generally) is what counts for interpretation.⁴¹ For Cather, however, the subject's identity is not the point. What matters for Bishop Latour is not his identity as a priest or as a Frenchman but rather the beliefs and practices—in phenomenological terms, the background—that these identities are meant to signal. Latour does not say, "Because I am a priest, I see God's hand in the natural world." Nor does he say, "Because I am a Frenchman, I read the world as I would a canvas." Instead, Latour's belief erases his sense of identity and prompts his absorption in the image of the tree. "Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself

⁴⁰ Here I continue to use "background" in the explicitly phenomenological sense outlined in my introduction, building off how this term defined and used in Charles Taylor's chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*.

⁴¹ I refer here to Michaels's thesis in *The Shape of the Signifier*: "Hence the commitment to the primacy of the materiality of the signifier (to shape) is also a commitment to the primacy of experience (to the subject position). Because what something looks like must be what it looks like to someone, the appeal to the shape of the signifier is at the same time an appeal to the position and hence to the identity of its interpreter" (60).

out of his own consciousness and...meditated upon the anguish of the Lord” (20).

Likewise, the characteristics Cather employs to depict Latour as a Frenchman serve not to explain his subjective interpretation of the image, but rather to alert the reader to the aesthetic sensitivity enabling Latour to pay attention to the image in the first place. “His manners, even when he was alone in the desert, were distinguished. He had a kind of courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing” (19). A religious vocation sets Latour’s aesthetic judgment into motion, while his sensitive taste prompts the occasion for his faith to find intelligible expression.

This not only reiterates the fusion of art and religion by which Cather amplifies Kant. It also redirects the focus recent critics have taken to characterize the role of religious belief in literary interpretation, such as Michaels’s largely secularist complaint that we treat religious belief as a form of cultural identity and Amy Hungerford’s rather postsecularist account of postmodern “belief in meaninglessness” (xv). “We treat religion on the model of culture,” Michaels complains, “which is to say, we treat people who belong to other religions not as if they have false beliefs but as if they have different identities” (170). Postmodern American writers, Hungerford argues, dramatize “a rich and intense faith in faith, imagined as faith in the sign ungrounded by meaning” (20). Michaels describes a secularism in which identity, not belief, is what matters for religion; Hungerford describes a postmodern, post-secularism wherein belief itself is so entirely the point that its predicates cease to matter. But Latour’s perception of form is a consequence of his religious belief, not merely a description of his identity, while his ability to recognize a particular form in a particular shape derives from the fact that the

objects and contents of his faith remain thoroughly significant. Belief that motivates prayer to a particular God within a specific theological system is what enables Bishop Latour to see, and to care for, the juniper tree shaped like a cross, just as Knapp and Michaels' beach walker must first look to the ground with a background awareness of language's communicability in order to wonder if a series of seaside shapes are, indeed, the lines of a Wordsworth poem. Thus, the modernist religion Cather conjures with Bishop Latour, her figure for the fusion of art and religion, is neither a reflective observation about the believer's identity nor a determinative belief of a dogmatic kind. It is, rather, a compelling formal dynamic that the process of believing initiates. And the aesthetics of this dynamic, let us not forget, remain a dynamic of faith. Here, again, art and religion are fused, caught inextricably in each other's webs.

Two further examples from *Death Comes for the Archbishop* will illuminate this dynamic more fully. In the first example, Latour and Vaillant discuss the origins and effects of a silver church bell in terms quite similar to how they debate the miraculous composition of the cruciform tree. In the second example, Latour returns to the central contrast that Cather establishes between her prologue and her introduction, building his Santa Fe cathedral on the model of the cruciform tree.

Emerging from a deep sleep, Latour feels himself miraculously transported by the sound of a ringing church bell:

He recovered consciousness slowly, unwilling to let go of a pleasing delusion that he was in Rome. Still half believing that he was lodged near St. John Lateran, he yet heard every stroke of the Ave Maria bell,

marveling to hear it rung correctly...Before the nine strokes were done Rome faded, and behind it he sensed something Eastern, with palm trees,-- Jerusalem perhaps, though he had never been there. (43)

Passing from sleep to conscious wakefulness, Latour's vision of the holy cities of Rome and Jerusalem blends, through the precision of the carefully crafted and assiduously rung bell, into more immediate conscious perceptions of his surroundings in Santa Fe. Upon waking to discover that he was dreaming, he observes to Vaillant: "I thought I heard the Angelus...but my reason tells me that only a long sea voyage could bring me within the sound of such a bell" (43). Vaillant explains, "I found that remarkable bell here...They tell me it has been here a hundred years or more. There is no church tower in the place strong enough to hold it...But I had a scaffolding built in the churchyard" (43-44).

For Vaillant, the bell's presence in Santa Fe, like its seemingly pure tone, symbolizes the unbroken ties between this humble clerical outpost in New Mexico and the grandeur of the European church. Vaillant is particularly interested in its origins and its composition, in what he understands to be the clear, discernable purposiveness that went into its composition. The bell's Spanish inscription is dated 1356, he notes, and he is particularly taken with the silver that produces its tone. Latour, however, is intrigued by an ambiguity germane to the bell's craftsmanship, an ambiguity that Vaillant would rather overlook. He asks: "the silver of the Spaniards was really Moorish, was it not?" (44). This strikes Vaillant as scandalous. Having conceived of the bell's preservation and subsequent discovery as a rather miraculous affair, he retorts: "What are you doing, Jean? Trying to make my bell out an infidel?" (44). Latour, by contrast, expresses gratitude for

the syncretic quality inherent in the bell's craftsmanship.⁴² "Belittling? I should say the reverse. I am glad to think there is Moorish silver in your bell... The Spaniards handed on their skill to the Mexicans, and the Mexicans have taught the Navajos to work silver; but it all came from the Moors" (45).

At first glance, one might wish to read Latour's discussion of the bell as a celebration of the rich historicity of cultural artifacts, much as John Hilgart does when he claims that, in *Archbishop*, an artifact is not regarded as "an eternal and autonomous thing" but as "miraculous because it is an impactation of a particular history" (386). Nevertheless, despite the deep history that Latour discerns in the bell, his account of the craft's genealogy only strikes him as significant retroactively. The bell's origins only matter to Latour after the initial aesthetic encounter that produced his sense of being "carried out of the body" (43) when hearing the bell struck. Furthermore, Latour and Vaillant's efforts to historicize the bell immediately take on the speculative quality of a legend or a myth of origins.⁴³ As Vaillant remarks, "Nobody knows where it was cast. But the do tell a story about it" (44). Thus, in considering the bell's craftsmanship and in speculating over the intentionality behind that craftsmanship, Latour ultimately shows that the bell's exact purposive origins are inaccessible, leaving him with his own absorbed attention to the sensations produced by the bell itself, his wakefulness sharpened by the manner in which the bell guides him back to the immediacy of everyday

⁴² See Stich for a study of how an intricate religious syncretism is likewise central to *Archbishop*'s composition. Stich describes the way in which Catholic imagery overlays Dionysian symbolism and Medieval architecture throughout the novel.

⁴³ Legends and myths of origin are a central concern of Cather's later fiction. For example, Sarah Mahurin Mutter provides a compelling analysis of *Archbishop*'s dramatization of the Edenic creation myth. She contends that "the ethos of betweenness works towards an ethos of creation" (73), and this "betweenness" (characterized by the recurrent motifs of pathlessness, wandering, and desert spaces) unfolds "within the confines of the novel itself" (91), demonstrating how both "the desert Eden" and "the experiential moment of the text" are "fragile" and "ephemeral" (91).

perceptions. Unlike Vaillant, for whom the bell's quasi-miraculous craftsmanship and longevity depends upon the theological purity of its origins, Latour suspends his concern over the bell's original craftsmanship in order to emphasize the miraculous quality he perceives in its aesthetic effects. Just as Latour privileges the *shape* of a cross over the actual presence of the cross, he highlights the syncretic composition of the bell's *sound* against Vaillant's misgivings about its historical or cultural origin. Vaillant wants the bell to confirm both the aesthetic unity of the prologue's cathedral and the theological orthodoxy of a determinative, dogmatic belief in transcendence; Latour, by contrast, is satisfied with the way the bell as a material object, like the cruciform tree, causes the diffuse phenomena of featureless perceptions to coalesce into a discernable form.

Bishop Latour's sensitivity to the sound of the bell once again highlights how his belief enables his perception of form. His religious aesthetic reaches its apex, however, as he constructs his own cathedral. This cathedral, unlike the image of St. Peter's that opens the novel, will elicit the observer's perception using the same principles that drew Latour's eye to the cruciform tree. He wants it to look *as if* God himself had composed it, to be as startling as a poem that has washed ashore *as if* by miraculous means. The "first Romanesque church in the New World" (241) will not reproduce the aesthetic grandeur of Rome, as Vaillant fears. "I had no idea you were going in for fine building," Vaillant objects, "when everything about us is so poor" (241). Latour's aestheticism strikes Vaillant as impudent, even irreligious. But "the Cathedral is not for us," Latour rebuts, correcting Vaillant's failure to understand why the aesthetic should matter to the religious. "We build for the future," Latour concludes. "It would be a shame to any man coming from a Seminary that is one of the architectural treasures of France, to make

another ugly church on this continent where there are so many already” (241-42).

Vaillant, once again, cannot grasp how art and religion might be fused, how the two might be “the same thing, in the end.” Latour, by contrast, wants each priest who arrives after him to encounter the cathedral just as he encountered the cruciform tree in the desert. He wants them to witness this fusion of art and religion, so that they, too, will undergo the miraculous process of “our perceptions being made finer” (50) by a fuller apprehension of the material world.

Describing how Latour sees the mesa on which his cathedral will be built, the narrator notes that the landscape has “an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness.” It seems as though “with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together” (94). “The country,” the narrator concludes, “was still waiting to be made into a landscape” (94).⁴⁴ By drawing together this half-formed image, Latour’s cathedral will be

⁴⁴ I would be remiss not to acknowledge a troubling attribute to this passage, and to the novel as a whole, that many readers will have already noticed. When the narrator of *Archbishop* describes the New Mexican territory as “country...still waiting to be made into a landscape” (94), contemporary readers are justifiably uneasy about the link between Latour’s role as a missionary priest and the way that dissolving the boundary between art and nature in a particular place, at a particular time, and in a country inhabited by a particular people betrays a latent imperialism. *Archbishop* is, after all, a historical novel set in mid-19th Century New Mexico during the height of American manifest destiny. It is unsurprising, then, that many critics find that this image of incomplete creation paradigmatically illustrates theological justifications which routinely underwrote U.S. imperialism. God began the creation, this passage seems to imply, but it is up to us to fulfill, with divine sanction, the terrestrial construction project. Several critics, especially Enrique Lima and Leona Sevvick, offer powerful critiques of how Latour’s aestheticism belies and mystifies an ideology of capital and nation-state, and critics such as Dyck and Hilgart have levelled similar complaints about the mystical primitivism of Tom Outland’s story in *The Professor’s House*.

Such a reading is not necessarily wrong; but like the standard approach to Cather’s engagement with religion (the claim that she tinkers with religion for secular, aesthetic purposes), it is insufficient and incomplete. Indeed, one might successfully argue that the political criticism of religion in Cather’s work closely resembles a common refrain in the political criticism of Kantian aesthetics more generally, particularly insofar as it manifests as a precursor to modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy. To fully elaborate this would be the task of another essay, but one might begin by considering how the difference between the Roman cathedral and the cruciform tree reappears toward the end of *Archbishop* as the difference between the way the Navajo people are characterized by the Roman cardinals and Bishop Latour, respectively. For the cardinals in Rome, “redskins,” “scalp-takers,” and “wigwams” are perfectly acceptable terms. “I see your redskins through Fenimore Cooper,” one cardinal explains, “and I like them

miraculous in the same way that the cruciform tree is miraculous. It will amplify and animate the sense of purposiveness one already derives from looking out at the landscape. Contiguous with the material world, immanent to its surroundings rather than transcendent from them, it will be an object whose shape against a featureless background elicits the viewer's absorbed attention. Once built, the cathedral achieves the desired effect: "only in Italy, or in opera, did churches leap out of the mountains and the black pines like that" (270). The cathedral perfectly "sounded the note of the South" (269). The cathedral's perfection, for Latour, lies neither in its craftsmanship nor in its utility but in the way it can "arrest the eye" (3) of the observer. It is not an objectively miraculous object, by Vaillant's standards. But neither does its form fully reproduce Kant's *as if*, for its purposiveness does not derive solely from the pleasing feeling it produces in Latour. Instead, Latour's cathedral "sounded the note of the South," arranging the landscape so future priests arriving in Santa Fe will discern it the way Latour saw the cruciform tree. In discovering the cathedral amid the featureless landscape, they will perceive the key to an unseen, mysterious order which confers a new apprehension of the visible, material world.

so" (13). They belong, as Lima says of Cather's portrayal of the Navajos throughout *Archbishop*, to "a mythical past of Creators and Creation, in which the historical depth of human society plays no part" (189). Contrast this picture with the last words that Bishop Latour speaks in the novel, conversing with his friend, Eusabio, shortly before his death. "I have lived to see two great wrongs righted; I have seen the end of black slaver, and I have seen the Navajos restored to their own country" (290). He concludes with a statement of religious belief, not unlike the belief that amplifies his sense of the purposiveness of the cruciform tree. "I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him" (296).

Admittedly much of Cather's fiction, especially *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*, serves to aestheticize Native American cultures rather than allowing subalterns to speak. This cannot be ignored or downplayed, and the critique of this imperial discourse ought to remain a central feature of Cather scholarship. Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that the fusion of art and religion that Cather tests through Bishop Latour offers other possibilities for reading and evaluating these troubling passages.

“Religion and art,” Willa Cather writes, “spring from the same root and are close kin” (“Escapism” 27). If secular and postsecular criticism have left us ill-equipped to explore this ambitious claim, Cather’s fiction offers a fruitful path forward. Unlike many of her contemporaries,⁴⁵ whose integration of art and religion subordinated one to the other, Cather shows how literature can cause each to fully inform and transform the other. Nevertheless, a final question remains unanswered. If Cather’s writing rejuvenates the logic of Kantian aesthetics as a model of miraculous perception, what happens to the unmiraculous, the mundane, and the worldly? Doesn’t Cather’s modernist religion merely return us to the same alienated condition that critics have decried for centuries, to an obsession with the miraculous, eternal, and immaterial at the expense of the quotidian, ephemeral, and finite?⁴⁶

According to Godfrey St. Peter, it doesn’t take religion to distract us from finitude. Before asserting that religion and art “are the same thing in the end” (55), he complains: “I don’t think much of science as a phase of human development. It has given

⁴⁵ One could, for example, contrast Cather’s modernist religion with two other modernist writers whose juxtaposition of art and religion is well known: T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. In fact, Eliot and Joyce align art and religion in a way that is not unlike the postsecularist and secularist dichotomy that we see in contemporary criticism. Eliot, whose ideas about art and religion were influential for the New Critics, particularly Cleanth Brooks, insisted that the study of literature should come “from a definite ethical and theological standpoint” (97). Eliot’s model foreshadows the way postsecular critics seek to uncover the theological standpoints of various writers and their milieu, even as it resembles the dogmatic positions that Father Vaillant offers in *Archbishop*. Joyce, by contrast, offers a particularly vivid model of the secularization thesis in the character of Stephen Dedalus: “The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or beyond his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, paring his fingernails” (157). Like the Cathedral that opens the prologue to *Archbishop*, Dedalus’s vision of aesthetic autonomy depends on a model of triumphant secularism that many critics also misidentify as Cather’s.

⁴⁶ See Lynda Sexson’s *Ordinarily Sacred* for a fruitful discussion of how scholars of religion now seek to overcome dichotomies such as miraculous vs. mundane, sacred vs. profane—dichotomies that Sexson attributes to the wide reaching influence of Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*. “The sacred,” Sexson claims, “is nearer to something we call the aesthetic. Both the religious and the aesthetic are informed by and produce an effect on the worldviews from which they arise. In some sense then, art and religion can be described as the notation of moments which discover or rediscover one’s worldview, create or re-create one’s philosophical depth” (3).

us lots of ingenious toys; *they take our attention away* from the real problems” (54, emphasis mine). Disenchantment, St. Peter reflects, carries an unexpected consequence. “We were better off,” St. Peter continues, “when even the prosaic act of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin” (55),⁴⁷ when “[e]very act had some imaginative end” and even “[t]he cutting of the fingernails was a religious observance” (56). For Godfrey St. Peter, these statements are less about nostalgia for the consolations of a hegemonic Christendom than they are bold assertions about the relation between religion and aesthetics. They are propositions about the imaginative capacities of both for attuning our attention to ordinary experiences and everyday perceptions, propositions which Cather works out most fully in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Looking at the material world as if its features were miraculous, he suggests, is one way to prevent the quotidian, ephemeral, and finite contingencies of worldly phenomena supposed to constitute secular life from slipping out of focus. In this way, Godfrey St. Peter, like Bishop Latour and like Cather herself, proposes a model for secular faith in a disenchanted age. Cather’s figures of modernist religion, her version of secular faith, offer the fusion of art and religion as the key to “our perceptions being made finer,” as a mode of attention that might revive our vision of the materiality that rests at the heart of what we call secular life.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See Ferraro for a more thorough account of relation between sensuality and sin in *The Professor’s House*.

⁴⁸ My argument, which connects Cather’s investment in religion with her portrayal of the ordinary, is indebted to—and seeks to extend—two recent studies of the modernist novel, studies from which Cather’s omission is rather noteworthy. I refer to these studies in order to highlight my understanding of both Cather’s “modernist” religion and her interest in the ordinary as an important concern for modernist writing. In *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Pericles Lewis demonstrates how writers such as Henry James, Proust, Kafka, and Woolf engage with religious experience as a resource for modernist formal experimentation. In *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Liesl Olson challenges the axiom that modernism privileges heightened interiority and startling moments of epiphany by showing how several canonical modernist writers dwell extensively, even laboriously, on the everyday. Both arguments seem ideally suited

Chapter 3

James Baldwin's Theology of Art

Depending on whom you ask, James Baldwin was either a visionary progressive whose writing anticipates later developments in queer theory and critical race theory,⁴⁹ or else he was a retrograde liberal aesthete. Either he was a vanguard figure whose writing serves overtly political ends, or else he was more interested in etching his writing into the canons of American realism and modernism than in lending his prophetic voice to the emancipatory political struggles of his time or ours. Thus Baldwin finds himself in the peculiar position of being the black writer most frequently compared to contemporary activists like Ta-Nehisi Coates,⁵⁰ while only a generation ago critics from Irving Howe to Houston Baker had criticized Baldwin for evading social concerns in favor of what Baker describes as “a bold existential individualism” rooted in “transcendent idealism” (Baker 60).⁵¹ The term Baker gives to Baldwin's “existential individualism” is particularly

for Cather's work, but, as with so many similar studies of modernism, both give Cather's writing little attention. For more on Cather's contested relationship to modernism, see Middleton, Jabbur, and Stout, respectively.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Washington, Martinez, Brim, Elam, and three influential essay collections: McBride's *James Baldwin Now*, Miller's *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, and Carol E. Henderson's *James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain: Historical and Critical Essays*, especially essays in Miller's collection by Carson and Feldman and, in Henderson's collection, by Csapó, Crawford, and Singleton. Peter Kerry Powers aptly summarizes this critical tradition when he defines Baldwin's career as “an effort to parse the complicated intersections of race, racism, and sexuality and to describe the various strategies, failed and successful, that African American men have employed to survive that crossroads” (800).

⁵⁰ The most obvious example is, of course, Toni Morrison's endorsement emblazoned on the dust jacket of *Between the World and Me*: “I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died,” Morrison writes. “Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates.” Michael Eric Dyson's review of *Between the World and Me* in *The Atlantic* makes a similar comparison, noting that it is not any stylistic similarity that brings “Coates into Baldwin's orbit,” but rather their “forensic, analytical, cold-eyed stare down of white moral innocence.”

⁵¹ For a full treatment of Baldwin's reception history, with particular emphasis on the response of Howe and Baker to Baldwin's critique of the “protest novel,” see the introduction and first chapter of Lynn Orilla Scott's *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: A Witness to the Journey*.

telling. According to Baker, Baldwin's picture of "the black artist as intellectual rebel...leads, ultimately, to a kind of *theology of art*" (61, emphasis added). Baker uses the word "theology" loosely. He does not analyze the particular theological discourses at work in Baldwin's fiction. Instead, he uses the term to suggest how Baldwin's vision for "the black American literary tradition" (61) values "the claims of literature itself" over "all social or political concerns" (61).

By labeling Baldwin's aestheticism a "theology of art," Baker tacitly commits himself to a critique of religion that should, by now, sound very familiar. To be a writer of theology is to be unconcerned with the world. Baldwin's preoccupation with form, technique, and characterization—and his indebtedness to figures like Henry James—thus implies that he never truly lost the religiosity that he claims to have abandoned when he stopped being a storefront preacher at the age of seventeen. Baldwin the preacher, Baker seems to suggest, becomes Baldwin the secular priest; lost in the transition from religion to art, however, are the contingencies of immanent, material experience that saturate the politics of race and sexuality. To follow this reasoning all the way through is to insinuate that Baldwin's childhood Pentecostalism infects his mature theory of prose. Each reifies the spirit while ignoring both the body and the body politic.

My aim in this chapter is to describe the worldly ramifications of Baldwin's theology of art in light of what I am calling American literature's secular faith. Like Mark Twain and Willa Cather, Baldwin's sustained engagement with religious ideas serves to amplify, rather than obscure, his investment in quotidian material concerns. Echoing Bishop Latour of Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Baldwin's theology of art is predicated upon "our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see

and our ears can hear what is there about us always” (50). Yet where Twain’s secular faith probes the otherworldly features of American Protestantism for insights into mundane mortality, and where Cather’s models a mode of belief whereby form can be ascertained amid featurelessness, Baldwin’s strikes a more dissonant chord. Far from evading the material conditions that comprise sociopolitical injustice, Baldwin’s theology of art intensifies characters’ perceptions of their everyday, phenomenal experience, and in doing so, discloses the invisible menace that lurks amid the visible mundane.

Baldwin offers his clearest account of this mode of perception in the second section of *The Fire Next Time*. “I underwent, during the summer that I turned fourteen,” Baldwin explains, “a prolonged religious crisis. I use ‘religious’ in the common, and arbitrary, sense, meaning that I had discovered God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell” (296). Baldwin continues, explaining how his “religious crisis” simultaneously sharpened his vision of the world’s ordinary features and transformed his imagined relationship to those features. “I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid—afraid of the evil within me and the evil without. What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; nothing had changed. But now...the Avenue had become a personal menace” (296). If, for Cather’s Bishop Latour, religious belief enables us to see “what is there about us always” (*Archbishop* 50), then for Baldwin it goes a step further. For Baldwin, the “religious crisis,” the discovery of “God...and His blazing Hell,” reveals the “menace” that inundates the surface of the world.

What Baldwin describes in *The Fire Next Time* is more than just a notable autobiographical anecdote regarding his religious childhood. It proves, rather, to be one

of his most lucid insights into the kind of work that religion enables his fiction to undertake. For although Baldwin renounced his childhood faith long before he began to publish his writing, one could just as readily describe the fear, the evil, and the menace he ascribes to his “fourteenth year” as one of the most recognizable features of his fiction. Both encapsulate Baldwin’s intertwined preoccupation with religion (in Baldwin’s case, the belief in a transcendent God, a timeless eternity, and the damnation of Hell) and with aesthetics (that is, with forms, surfaces, and appearances, with the textures of “what I had always seen”). It offers a more precise way to understand the paradox that Houston Baker calls James Baldwin’s “theology of art.” For where Baker’s casual use of the phrase suggests his implicit dependence on the secularization thesis and its clear bifurcation of a religious spirituality and a secular materiality, Baldwin’s writing challenges the assumption that the religious and the worldly stand at odds with one another.

In Baldwin’s prose, the secular and the religious contain one another’s energies and commitments through the concept of eternity and the concomitant fear of damnation. This fear, as Baldwin explains, draws him closer to what he “had already seen.” Far from disengaging him from the world, Baldwin’s childhood religion draws him closer than ever to the material features of the Harlem avenue that he had already known throughout his life. And in Baldwin’s fiction, most notably in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and his last, *Just Above My Head*, it is these images of “God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell,” images shaded by Baldwin’s intimate knowledge of Harlem’s Pentecostal Holiness churches, that enable his characters to apprehend the menace of the world around them more acutely. From his first novel to his last, and throughout his essays, Baldwin’s writing is charged with the Pentecostal rhythms,

images, and doctrines that shaped his adolescence. Baldwin's childhood faith served him simultaneously as a source of inspiration and abhorrence. But while many attest to its thematic and stylistic influence on Baldwin's prose, its most striking feature remains to be explored: the aesthetic effects, forms of attention, and possibilities for perception that Baldwin's Pentecostal prose makes available.

Baldwin identifies the beginning of his "prolonged religious crisis" with the summer of his fourteenth year (*Fire* 296). Similarly, when John Grimes awakens on his own fourteenth birthday, near the beginning of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he encounters an overwhelming sense of shame that intensifies with his growing fear of damnation. John, the novel's protagonist, "awoke on this birthday morning with the feeling that there was menace in the air around him—that something irrevocable had occurred in him" (10). Much as Baldwin himself discovers "the evil within me," John "remembered that it was his fourteenth birthday and that he had sinned" (11). As John listens for signs of his family throughout the house, he is met with an ominous silence, silence that he interprets, momentarily, as a sign that he is about to reap the eternal consequences of his sin. "He could believe, almost, that he had awakened late on that great getting-up morning; that all the saved had been transformed in the twinkling of an eye, and had risen to meet Jesus in the clouds, and that he was left, with his sinful body, to be bound in Hell a thousand years" (11). John's faith in eternity remains steadfast, but he fears that he has fallen outside the grace that permits him to imagine eternity as a heavenly reward. Instead, "he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak" (11),

and that transformation, that falling into sin and shame, subsequently transforms the promise of eternity into the terror of damnation.

When John eventually gets out of bed, he quickly discovers that his first thought, his fear that his family “had risen to meet Jesus in the clouds,” was premature. He steps into the kitchen and finds everyone in his household, except his father, preparing for an ordinary Saturday. But just like the sleep that still lingers in his eyes, John’s discovery of his “transformation” into sin continues to inundate his imagination, shading his impressions of everything he notices about the room he is entering. “The pale end-of-winter sunlight filled the room and yellowed all their faces,” and John “saw them for a moment like figures on a screen, an effect that the yellow light intensified” (14). After transforming the family’s faces, the sunlight then exposes the room’s endless squalor.

The room was narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could ever make it clean. Dirt was in the walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where roaches spawned; was in the fine ridges of the pots and pans, scoured daily, burnt black on the bottom... was in the walls against which they hung, and revealed itself where the paint had cracked and leaned outward in stiff squares and fragments, the paper-thin underside webbed with black. (14)

John’s gaze absorbs each of the scene’s filthy objects, each defamiliarized object given a menacing aspect by John’s consciousness of sin and his fear of damnation. He notices how the walls, the floorboards, the sink, and the pots and pans all succumb before a putrescence that feels as intractable as original sin. And when his glance shifts from the walls to the windows, the narrator’s naturalistic description suddenly gives way to the

theological register of John's early morning misgivings. "The windows gleamed like beaten gold or silver, but now John saw, in the yellow light, how fine dust veiled their doubtful glory" (15). The light gleaming into the windows becomes, in John's imagination, God's light—the light of eternity. But when that light reveals the world John has always known, it offers him no escape from these material conditions; rather, it absorbs his attention more fully in the dust and the darkness of the room, the troubling textures of his own immediate circumstances which he would rather not see.

This motif of "doubtful glory" persists throughout Baldwin's writing, and the phrase itself can serve as a useful heuristic to encapsulate Baldwin's secular faith—both what places Baldwin within the tradition of twentieth century American literature that I examine throughout this study, and what sets him apart. Made tactile by the image of "fine dust" streaking a sunlit window, the concept of "doubtful glory" is what sutures Baldwin's childhood Pentecostalism to his mature theory of prose. And it aligns three of the most prominent issues in Baldwin's fiction: his preoccupation with the African American Pentecostal church, his Jamesian aestheticism, and the vexed political questions of race and sexuality, three concerns that warrant further attention and that I will shortly introduce in turn. For John Grimes, however, the "doubtful glory" of dust merely reminds him of a Bible verse. "John thought with shame and horror, yet in angry hardness of heart: *He who is filthy, let him be filthy still*" (15, original emphasis). Still unable to separate his glimpse of the filthy room from the fear of damnation that visits him upon waking, he perceives the room's filthy yet utterly ordinary features as hostile, each mundane object an invincible symbol of his damnation and shame. Between John's immediate perception of dust commingling with sunlight and his eventual cognition of

this everyday image, an entire theological background intervenes to shape his interpretation. John's glimpse of dust's "doubtful glory" suddenly acquires the intensity of divine revelation, sharpening his vision of his surroundings by absorbing his attention. And what does this theologically charged perception reveal to John? It reveals damnation without the promise of redemption. He is the one who is filthy; no matter what he does, he will be filthy still. The spiritual quality of John's shame, however, does not withdraw him from the world. Instead, it puts him in closer, more immediate contact with the objects around him, intensifying his vision of the grime he may have otherwise overlooked—the dirt in the floorboards, the roaches in the sink, the "burnt black" caked into the cookery, and the "doubtful glory" of the morning sunlight.

John instantly perceives the "doubtful glory" of dust from the vantage of eternity and damnation because of the way Pentecostal theology and ritual saturate the phenomenological background of nearly all of Baldwin's writing, particularly *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. This background, in turn, serves as an aesthetic device for transforming the mundane textures of daily experience into objects, as Shklovsky would put it, of "vision" rather than mere "recognition." Moreover, examining the way religion operates both as background and as aesthetic device in Baldwin's writing can resolve a cyclical interpretive pattern that has dogged recent studies of Baldwin and religion. At least two decades' worth of Baldwin scholarship has sought to explain the thematic and biographical importance of religion to Baldwin's writing, but it has largely ignored the aesthetic questions that make his theologically charged images, like the "doubtful glory" of dust, so compelling.

There is a predictable pattern to the way critics have examined Baldwin's interest in religion. The critic first laments how previous studies failed to take seriously the influence of Baldwin's religious childhood upon his career as a novelist. The critic then claims to correct previous scholarship by studying more carefully the sources of Baldwin's religious preoccupations.⁵² Despite, or perhaps due to, this tendency for critics to repeat the accusation that Baldwin scholarship tends to ignore Baldwin's interest in religion, it would be more accurate to accept Keith Byerman's conclusion: "Religion and spirituality have been among the most commented upon of themes in the works of James Baldwin" (187). Yet despite this steady commentary, religion remains among the most vexing subjects of Baldwin's writing.

Why would this critical gesture, this need to identify religion as a neglected topic in Baldwin studies despite its demonstrable centrality, become such a predictable marker of this body of criticism? To answer this question is to begin to understand what the narrator of *Go Tell It* describes as "doubtful glory," which in turn is to gain clearer insight into Baldwin's theology of art. For no matter how repeatedly we revisit Baldwin's interest in religious themes, no matter how regularly critics remind us of Baldwin's roots

⁵² For example, in a 2008 article, Douglas Field suggests that "a critical era that is dominated...on areas such as gender, masculinity and sexuality" may be "ill-equipped or simply unable to grapple with the religious" in Baldwin's writing (438); yet in 2006, James W. Coleman grants Baldwin exceptional status among African American writers who are concerned with religion, arguing: "To a greater extent than any other novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* foregrounds the Bible as an intertext, and Christian faith and practice as the main features in the lives and cultural traditions of its characters" (44). If we trace the recent critical history further, Field's complaint is prefigured in 2003, when Clarence Hardy (whom Field cites extensively) charges that "most critics largely ignore Baldwin's peculiar relationship with Christianity" (*James Baldwin's God* 110). Nevertheless, in 1996, Michael F. Lynch writes: "In spite of the profusion of biblical allusions and Christian symbols and themes throughout Baldwin's writing, the scholarship, aside from a brief mention of the residual Christian imagery, his preacherly rhythms, and his role as an Old Testament prophet, has offered no sustained treatment of his religious thought or theology" (32). Given the critical history I have just outlined, it should come as no surprise to note that only one year earlier, in 1995, the journal *Religion and Literature* published Joseph A. Brown's article on Baldwin in a special issue on African American spirituality and literature, an article that offers precisely the "sustained treatment" that Lynch claims has been missing.

in the black Pentecostal church, there always seems to be some significant feature of Baldwin's engagement with religion that evades analysis. I suspect, therefore, that the critics' quarrel may in fact be with something different than what they explicitly target. For while nearly every study of Baldwin speaks to the influence of religion on Baldwin's life and writing, fewer studies venture to explore what religion makes possible in Baldwin's prose. So focused on the biographical, social, and theological contexts that enable Baldwin's writing, critics continue to miss what the religious aspect of his writing, in turn, enables: the way John Grimes's fear of damnation turns his vision of his family into "figures on a screen," for instance, or the way theologically charged sunlight can turn the dirt streaking a windowpane into "doubtful glory." That is to say, a critical approach that emphasizes how religion provides context for Baldwin's texts necessarily struggles to ascertain what is peculiar about the religious dimensions of Baldwin's writing. What so many Baldwin scholars have recognized, but what so few have fully articulated, is that Baldwin's interest in Pentecostal Christianity gave him more than just thematic ornamentation or a sermonic syntax. Rather, by integrating Pentecostalism into the phenomenological background of his writing, Baldwin develops a unique aesthetic device for figuring the textures of everyday experience in new ways, giving form to the subtle, often invisible menace pervading such experience.

Like all of the writers examined in this study, Baldwin's work engages religion not just as a set of contexts, creeds, or practices, but as a robust phenomenological background. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* begins to establish this background from its opening sentences. "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking

about it, had come to believe it himself” (3). Here the narrator outlines a framework for thinking about religion, not just as a belief system, a cultural identity, or a set of images and symbols, but as the world into which John is thrown and as the background through which he perceives his experiences. His future as a preacher seems to emerge organically from the world he inhabits, and his awareness of this future precedes any cognitive assent. He is oriented toward it, through what Dreyfus and Taylor would call his “preconceptual” understanding (71); he is held by it before he consciously articulates it or believes it. Shortly thereafter, the narrator expands this sense of religion as background beyond John, showing how it manifests within the entire congregation of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. As John listens to the congregation’s exuberant singing, the narrator explains: “This moment and this music had been with John, so it seemed, since he had first drawn breath. It seemed that there had never been a time when he had not known this moment” (6-7). John tries to separate his memories of the church, its songs and its rituals, from the rest of his experience. But he finds that he cannot imagine doing so. His daily life is too completely entangled with the songs of the churchgoers, who “sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy” (7). The narrator continues:

Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed, it was no longer a question of belief, because they made that presence real. He did not feel it himself, the joy they felt, yet he could not doubt that it was, for them, the very bread of life...Something happened to their faces and their voices, the rhythm of their bodies, and to the air they breathed; it was as though wherever they might be became the upper room, and the Holy Ghost were riding on the air. (7)

As with the novel's opening sentences, this scene shows how John lives immersed within the background of the religious community, a background that orients his perceptions before giving rise to anything so propositional as belief. John thus encounters "the presence of the Lord" as a tangible feature of the world he inhabits, rather than as a concept to be believed in or doubted, by witnessing the material manifestations of that presence. He "did not feel it himself," the narrator explains, but as he looks around at the worshippers, he takes note of what "happened to their faces and their voices." These mundane transfigurations occur with enough frequency, the novel's opening suggests, that John is, by his fourteenth year, primed to attend carefully to ordinary perceptions like the "doubtful glory" of sunlight on a dirty windowpane, and to perceive such mundane encounters, almost automatically, through a theological schema that includes the dynamics of eternity and damnation.

Yet by establishing religion as background, the opening of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* also portrays religion operating as an aesthetic device, defamiliarizing John's ordinary perceptions so that he encounters his surroundings afresh. "His father's face, always awful...was transformed into prophetic wrath. His mother, her eyes raised to heaven...made real for John that patience, that endurance, that long suffering, which he had read of in the Bible and found so hard to imagine" (7). As the congregation sings and dances in the reverie of Pentecostal worship, John's parents are temporarily transfigured; their ordinary countenances give way to something more vivid, and although he only sees in their faces what he already knows—his father's wrath, his mother's "long suffering"—he witnesses these qualities in a way that makes them suddenly noteworthy and new.

Understanding the way religion operates both as background and as device in Baldwin's writing, however, requires some attention to specific features of the Pentecostal Holiness church that Baldwin depicts. If religion helps Baldwin's fiction to vivify the "menace" of what one has "always seen," then it is Baldwin's grasp of the peculiar link between Pentecostal eschatology and Pentecostal ritual that makes this dynamic possible. More than an idiosyncratic vestige of his years as a child preacher, Pentecostal theology and ritual help Baldwin to forge his theology of art.

One key feature of Pentecostal theology is particularly relevant: the porous boundary between the eternal and the temporal, between divine revelation and immanent perception. For Pentecostals like the adolescent Baldwin, or like John Grimes, the world of eternal life, eternal damnation, "God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell," has everything to do with the world of gleaming sunlight and dirty windows. The two are intermingled, and the believer understands that the latter may be interrupted, displaced, or illuminated by the former at any time.

Religious historian Harvey Cox provides a helpful account of this theology. In the selection below, Cox describes what he found when studying firsthand accounts of the earliest Pentecostal churches in the United States. He might, however, just as well be offering a close reading of the opening church scene in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*:

As I pored over these archaic accounts, it became clear to me that for these early converts, the baptism of the Spirit did not just change their religious affiliation or their way of worship. It changed everything. They literally saw the whole world in a new light. Spirit baptism was not just an initiation rite, it was like a mystical encounter. That is why they

sometimes sounded like Saint Teresa of Avila or Saint John of the Cross, although they had probably never heard of either one... Their own tingling flesh convinced them that a whole new epoch in history was beginning and that they were already living in it. (70-71)

In his study of Pentecostalism in the United States, Cox illuminates two features of Pentecostal Christianity that are particularly salient to Baldwin's writing. First, its basic ontology collapses the barrier between transcendence and immanence. For the many expressions of Pentecostalism that have disseminated since its birth on Azusa Street, Los Angeles in 1906, heaven and earth are intermingled, the mundane is charged with the miraculous, and supernatural encounters are so expected as an everyday feature of one's routine life that the binary between "natural" and "supernatural" ceases to be a meaningful opposition. Second, Pentecostal ritual is often structured around what practitioners call "signs and wonders," moments of sudden, unanticipated revelation—moments, as Cox puts it, where one's "tingling flesh" signifies "a whole new epoch in history."

In the century since Azusa Street, variants of Pentecostalism have spread globally, and it now ranks as the fastest growing Christian denomination in the world.⁵³ Its impact, as Field explains, was particularly important for Baldwin, who served as a child preacher in a Harlem storefront church from age fourteen until disavowing his faith at age seventeen.⁵⁴ The Harlem Holiness church familiar to Baldwin, much like the Azusa Street

⁵³ For a recent analysis of this phenomenon, see Olivier Roy's *Holy Ignorance*.

⁵⁴ "When I was fourteen I became a preacher, and when I was seventeen I stopped" ("Autobiographical Notes" 5).

depicted in Cox's study, understood itself as "a marginalised denomination" that "encouraged a move away from traditional Protestantism, seeking what believers see as a more authentic spirituality" (439). While the same could, perhaps, be said of virtually every Protestant congregation—that it broke away from its traditional moorings in pursuit of "a more authentic spirituality"—the Pentecostalism that lingers in Baldwin's work seeks this authenticity in a unique way. Field summarizes the work of religious historians, such as E. Franklin Frazier, James Tinney, and Joseph Washington, as well as that of Zora Neal Hurston, who was "one of the earliest commentators on the Pentecostal Church" (441), to show how the search for authenticity in early Pentecostalism can be both "traced to much older African religions" (442) and identified with "a complicated relationship to blues and jazz" (443).⁵⁵ Much of its appeal, moreover, derives from its emphasis on sound, song, and embodied expression, its insistence on material experience as the vehicle for spiritual experience. As Baldwin explains in *The Fire Next Time*:

The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will...I have never seen anything equal to the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church...to 'rock.' Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon,

⁵⁵ As Field correctly indicates, however, none of these relationships are uncontested, and the relationship of Holiness Pentecostalism to traditional African religions—and to contemporary artistic forms commonly associated with African American culture—remain highly disputed. Field's article provides a helpful introduction to these debates.

I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, ‘the word’—when the church and I were one.⁵⁶ (306)

A complicated genealogy lies between the Azusa Street revival of the early twentieth century and the storefront Holiness churches of Baldwin’s mid-century Harlem.⁵⁷ But there is a common thread that links Cox’s historical description of Azusa Street, Baldwin’s autobiographical account of his childhood church, and the Pentecostal faith portrayed in Baldwin’s fiction. Pentecostal eschatology, its promise of “a new epoch in history,” manifests in the “excitement” of “visceral” perception. You articulate faith in eternity not through detailed creeds but by entering into the “fire and excitement” of the congregation. That faith, in turn, intensifies your attention to your immediate experience as you tarry for the movement of the Holy Spirit, watching closely for signs that the eternal is manifesting in time.

Baldwin’s writing, most notably his first and final novels, absorbs the eschatology and ritual of Pentecostal Christianity, refashioning religious experience as a mode of aesthetic perception. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*, such perception reconfigures characters’ attention to phenomenal experience. Through its otherworldly impulses, it intensifies the seemingly trivial qualia of the everyday, revealing the unseen menace—the “doubtful glory”—which lingers amid the

⁵⁶ Baldwin is not alone in his description of the “excitement” of the Pentecostal church. Ashon Crawley suggests that one way to understand the split between African American expressions of Pentecostalism and mainstream twentieth century Protestantism would be to compare their sensory and aesthetic qualities. “Within mainstream Protestantism, to be a proper spiritual subject was to be...deeply reflective and meditative *in opposition* to noisy...But here are the Blackpentecostals, making noise in the service of deep reflection and meditation...Here are Blackpentecostals, using noise as a way of life, as spiritual tradition.”

⁵⁷ For further reading on this history, see Harvey Cox’s *Fire from Heaven*, as well as Grant Wacker’s *Heaven Below*.

contingencies of the material world. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* models this mode of perception synchronically, through momentary flashes of vivid imagery and symbolism. Images of dust particles illuminated by beams of light, for instance, are freighted with theological symbolism, revealing the bleakness of John Grimes's material conditions while hinting at the ephemerality of the materials which comprise such conditions. Whether the narrative point of view trains its attention upon the dirt streaking a window pane or the alienating grime that litters Harlem's streets, the novel develops Baldwin's theology of art by way of protracted, individual perception. By contrast, *Just Above My Head* expands the imagery and symbolism of Baldwin's first novel by extending it diachronically across the duration of the novel. It accrues such images into more expansive themes, crafting a dialectic of sacrilege and sacrament and juxtaposing the theology of gospel music with the aesthetics of blues. By doing so, *Just Above* shifts Baldwin's theology of art from the realm of individual perception, as emphasized in *Go Tell It*, toward an aesthetics of intersubjective perception. Where *Go Tell It* exhibits Baldwin's theology of art by depicting intense moments of individual consciousness, *Just Above* extends such moments from the personal to the interpersonal. In both cases, however, Baldwin's theology of art draws upon Pentecostal Christianity to transfigure the aesthetics of mundane perception, magnifying how characters encounter ordinary phenomena while revealing, in such phenomena, the menacing aspect of what lingers in plain view.

The motif of dust mingled with light, the image of "doubtful glory" that John Grimes witnesses as he observes the sunlit, soot-streaked window in his parents' living room, persists throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. For John, this persistent image

registers a dissatisfaction even more elemental than the frustration overtly ascribed to his racial and sexual marginalization, although, as I will later demonstrate, it takes on these political valences as well. Instead, the image itself proves oppressive to John, charging his everyday encounters with a mysterious valence of fear. This image recurs, for instance, when John enters his family's storefront church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized:

In the air of the church hung, perpetually, the odor of dust and sweat; for, like the carpet in his mother's living-room, the dust of this church was invincible; and when the saints were praying or rejoicing, their bodies gave off an acrid, steamy smell, a marriage of the odors of dripping bodies and soaking, starched white linen. It was a storefront church and had stood, for John's lifetime, on the corner of this sinful avenue, facing the hospital to which criminal wounded and dying were carried almost every night. (45)

The narrator's description of "saints...praying or rejoicing" situates the congregation in the ecstatic fervor of Pentecostal ritual. By juxtaposing the lively aspect of the church against the somber picture of the hospital, with its "criminal wounded and dying," the scene seems to offer the church as a refuge, a site of solace and redemption where civic efforts to redeem an impoverished neighborhood have failed. But like his home, the church is itself overrun with dust and decay; even the "praying and rejoicing" bodies of the "saints" are shown, in their filth and their stench, to resemble those of the "criminal" wards of the neighboring hospital.

John's acute sense of the church's filth belies the tendency among many critics to read Baldwin's employment of religion, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, as explicitly redemptive. Clarence Hardy, for instance, conflates the theological and political valences of Baldwin's fiction, interpreting Baldwin's ongoing investment in Pentecostalism as a quasi-secular commitment to the Christian ideal of the "New Jerusalem," the city where God's justice will replace the wanton suffering of worldly experience.⁵⁸ Despite Baldwin's "demand to see the world as it is without God," Hardy contends, Baldwin nonetheless "believed in the possibility of a new sacred reality" even "despite his own calls for a secular judgment" (*James Baldwin's God* 97). Alluding to the utopian vision of the Christian apocalypse, a vision that shaped the early mythos of early American history dating back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony,⁵⁹ the "new sacred reality" symbolized by a "New Jerusalem" speaks to an emancipatory hope, a hope inspired by religious faith but, according to Hardy, "made with human hands" (97). But does *Go Tell It on the Mountain* share Hardy's salvific optimism?

⁵⁸ Hardy is far from the only critic to interpret Baldwin's interest in religion as an attempt to imagine the Protestant doctrines of salvation in a more worldly register. Joseph A. Brown, for example, asserts that "Baldwin follows the structure of religious conversion" throughout *Go Tell It* (61), using religious themes "to reveal how salvation is possible to anyone, even to a manchild imprisoned in a house filled with abuse and hate" (64). Similarly, Josiah Ulysses Young, III, argues that Baldwin's "understanding of God" models an intrareligious debate "setting 'God' as a purifying love against 'God' as hell and damnation" (197). Contrary to these critics, I am contending that Baldwin is far too committed to the pervasiveness of "doubtful glory," of the dirt and grime that renders even the most trivial circumstances oppressive, for us to say with any confidence that Baldwin's writing recapitulates the drama of salvation triumphing over damnation.

⁵⁹ Perry Miller's "Errand into the Wilderness" provides the most famous analysis of the New Jerusalem trope in American literature and culture, and Werner Sollors describes its impact on the typological tradition in American immigrant literature. Considering this tradition in light of Baldwin's fiction, Joanna Brooks argues: "It is possible to read American literature across the centuries as an archive of heterodox, marginal, dissenting, and emergent theologies" (449), of which Baldwin's "discontinuous continuity with his faith" (446) serves as a particularly potent example.

The “perpetual” “odor of dust and sweat” that links the storefront church to the hospital on the “sinful avenue” shows the church to be no less immune to the “doubtful glory” of menacing grime than the living room John faces near the beginning of the novel. Far from being salvific, this scene echoes Dostoevsky’s famous scene, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the putrid stench emanating from the corpse of the Elder Zosima causes the novice Alyosha to doubt his faith. In *Go Tell It*, the dirt that fills the church operates much like the stench of Dostoevsky’s decaying Elder. Throughout this scene in the church, John’s attention is drawn not to the promises of salvation and consolation, but to the sweat stains that mark the “starched white linen” of the churchgoers. Where the exuberance of the church promises John redemption, John’s aesthetic perspicuity, his penchant for perceiving the “doubtful glory” of mundane qualia, calls this promise into question. His foreboding sense of damnation alerts him to phenomena that he would otherwise fail to perceive, and it helps him to interpret these quotidian visions with a measured unease. By refusing to allow the promise of a New Jerusalem to wash away the stench and the suffering of his characters, Baldwin joins Mark Twain as one of the twentieth century’s most formidable critics of theodicy.

John’s encounter with the church’s dust intensifies later in the novel, when he falls to the “threshing floor” in a trancelike state that Pentecostals often call being “slain in the spirit.” As he lays on the floor, transfixed and immobile while the rest of the church prays and sings, John’s attention is absorbed by the intractable grime that follows him throughout the novel. “He knew, without knowing how it happened, that he lay on the floor, in the dusty space before the altar which he and Elisha had cleaned; and he knew that above him burned the yellow light which he himself had switched on” (195).

Instead of being enraptured by a transcendent spiritual experience, and instead of having his attention turned from the material to the spiritual, John once more encounters the church's filth in a particularly acute way. "Dust was in his nostrils, sharp and terrible, and the feet of the saints, shaking the floor beneath him, raised small clouds of dust that filmed his mouth" (195). John's rendezvous with the infinite intensifies his ability to perceive the "doubtful glory" of these infinitesimal particles of matter, particles that belie his own dissatisfaction with the confining and oppressive world to which he feels damned. Although the dust alerts him to a shame he has earlier associated with his sexuality, and although the darkness of that dust—brought into relief by its juxtaposition with the light he had turned on—symbolizes the deprivation associated with racism, it is the mere fact of the dust itself, its texture and its taste, not just what it represents, that drives John to disgust. Pentecostal ritual, in this scene, enhances John's disquiet with the world by intensifying his perception of that world's most mundane, superficial features.

Toward the novel's conclusion, John's perception of dust's "doubtful glory" troubles his ongoing struggle to reconcile himself to the hostile city. Early in the novel, John looks out at Manhattan from a hill in Central Park, "like a giant who might crumble the city with his anger" (27), only to realize, with "humiliation" (28), that the city with its gleaming spires "was not for him" (31) due to racist and heterosexist structures that he can neither see nor explain. As John lays on the floor of the church, however, he discovers that the city he longs for is an unreal city, a "city out of time" (207). While John lays transfixed under the power of the Holy Spirit, the congregation sings, alluding to the biblical book of Revelation: "*I, John, saw a city, way in the middle of the air*" (207, original emphasis). This song describes a vision of heaven, but what is peculiar

about John's Pentecostal tradition is that virtually no distinction is made between heaven and earth. The seemingly out of body, visionary experience on the church floor thus ripples into the way John perceives the city streets upon exiting the building with his family. He leaves, not only with the impression that he has been subjectively transformed by his supernatural encounter, but that the city itself has been transformed as a result of what happened to him on the church floor. "Tears came into his eyes again," the narrator observes, "making the avenue shiver, causing the houses to shake—his heart swelled, lifted up, faltered, and was dumb. Out of joy strength came, strength that was fashioned to bear sorrow: sorrow brought forth joy. Forever?" (221). Startled once more by the qualia of mere appearances, John looks out through his tears to witness what looks like the heavenly "city out of time" (207) converging supernaturally with the earthly city that "was not for him" (31). This sudden burst of revelation momentarily illuminates a world where every stricture and constraint—including the strictures of racial and sexual oppression which John, throughout the novel, is vaguely aware of but unable to articulate—might loosen its grip.

But this eschatological vision of Harlem as a New Jerusalem promptly fades into the same ambivalence of the narrator's one word question: "Forever?" As he walks home, John's vision of the city becomes yet another instance of "doubtful glory." Where at first, following his vision, he saw the promise of an "avenue" that "lay changed under Heaven, exhausted and clean," he now sees the menacing mundanity of the street's actual material condition. It is strewn with "paper, burnt matches, sodden-cigarette-ends; gobs of spittle, green-yellow, brown; the leavings of a dog, the vomit of a drunken man, the dead sperm, trapped in a rubber, of one abandoned to his lust" (220). Despite his glimpse of what

Hardy calls a “new sacred reality,” there remains neither a new reality “made with human hands” (*James Baldwin’s God* 97) nor a promise that the “New Jerusalem” of Christ will descend upon these sodden city blocks. Instead, like the “doubtful glory” of dust in John’s home, and like the sweat-stained shirts of the “saints” in his church, John must contend with the material circumstances of the earthly city that confronts him, its “leavings,” “vomit,” and “dead sperm,” accepting them with the same mixture of resignation and measured optimism one finds throughout Baldwin’s writing. “I’m on my way” (226), John declares. Having passed through a “religious crisis” (*Fire* 296) of his own, John bears witness both to his beleaguered neighborhood and to his own unacknowledged fears and desires; and although he has no clear sense of what he will do about either, the novel’s aesthetics of quotidian perception—its engagement with Pentecostal ritual to illustrate secular faith—is such that neither the menace without nor the evil within (*Fire* 296) can be disavowed. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* thus manifests its social, political, and material concerns, not through a direct or didactic expression of protest, but by committing to a theology of art.

Where *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reveals the menace of the material world through the way its focal character perceives patterns of theologically resonant images, *Just Above My Head* amplifies this dynamic into an elaborate theme: the intermingling of sacrament and sacrilege. This theme emerges intersubjectively, in the relationships forged between characters rather than within the subjective consciousness of individual characters, and it manifests most prominently at the intersection of gospel music and blues.

The novel's inciting incident portrays the blending of sacrament and sacrilege much as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* depicts the motif of dust commingling with light—as a “doubtful glory” whereby religious background calls the detritus of the material world into focus. When Hall, the narrator, learns of the death of his brother, the gospel singer Arthur Montana, he ponders the paradoxes of Arthur's life by ruminating over what gospel has in common with blasphemy. “Maybe all gospel songs begin out of blasphemy and presumption,” Hall reflects (6). That is, they begin with “what the church would call blasphemy and presumption: out of entering God's suffering and challenging God Almighty to have or to give or to withhold mercy” (6). Where John, in *Go Tell It*, perceives his unease with the world through his fear of damnation, Hall imagines how the gospel song might issue a challenge, confronting both the fear of damnation and its attendant worldly suffering through “blasphemy and presumption,” by refusing the limitations imposed by conditions that mere passive perception might otherwise accept. As he remembers Arthur's troubled life, Hall continues to consider the way belief and blasphemy converge in the gospel song, admitting first that “no one was happy...in that world of the gospel singer” (14), then demonstrating this observation by riffing on the relationship between gospel music and blues. Hall digresses into a blasphemous imitation of a song that simultaneously resembles gospel and blues: “*Jesus is all this world to me motherfucker hold on this little light of mine oo-ba shit man, oo-ba oo-ba if I don't get my money haly-ay-lyu-yah! I don't want to hear that noise Jesus I'll never forget you going to have a brand-new asshole you can't crown him till I oo-ba oo-ba boom-boom-boom yeah,*” and so on (14, original emphasis). Although juxtaposing “motherfucker” and “brand-new asshole” alongside “Jesus is all this world to me” at first seems like

gratuitous sacrilege, Hall's blasphemous song crescendos with a surprising conclusion. "Lord. And yet: they walked by faith" (15), Hall remarks, reaffirming a sense of the sacred. Throughout *Just Above My Head*, such gestures toward the sacred converge with the sacrilegious in precisely this way. Gospel and blues intermingle to render sin and salvation indistinguishable from one another, and faith proves inseparable from blasphemy in order to give substance to the most invisible forms of suffering, much as light illuminates dust to reveal the "doubtful glory" of the menacing mundane throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Although *Just Above* does not concentrate as fully on the Pentecostal church as *Go Tell It*, its many musical scenes—black gospel singers touring the south to perform at civil rights rallies, an American expatriate blues singer enlivening a Paris nightclub, or the intimate hymn shared by Arthur and Jimmy as they fall in love—are consistently keyed to the religious rituals that Hall remembers from his childhood. These rituals, in turn, resemble both the "threshing floor" of John Grimes's "Temple of the Fire Baptized" and the "fire and excitement" that Baldwin recalls from the storefront churches in which he used to preach. In other words, *Just Above* establishes Pentecostal religion as background in much the same way as *Go Tell It*. "If we did not believe, precisely, in the power of the Holy Ghost, the speaking in tongues, the ecstatic possession, the laying on of hands," Hall reflects as he recalls his childhood in the church, "neither did we doubt it, nor did we know anyone who doubted...Each prayed the way he could. We simply took it for granted that everybody prayed—sometime, somewhere" (151). In Hall's explanation, the religious features that saturate the background against which they perceive the world (belief, prayer, and the "power of the Holy Spirit") offer a key to the

novel as a whole. Another way to explain the way religion operates as background in Baldwin's fiction—the sense in which characters are immersed, preconceptually, in a religious world that orients their subsequent perceptions—is to consider a community where everyone “took it for granted that everybody prayed.” Like the opening church scene in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Hall's description of the church puts religion beyond the dichotomy of belief and doubt and reiterates how religion orients its characters to the world throughout so much of Baldwin's writing.

The “power of the Holy Spirit,” in Baldwin's final novel, is so deeply ingrained, so taken for granted, that it permeates how characters encounter everything else. This is not to say that the secular is secretly made religious or that religious tropes are shorn of their theological content and secularized for merely aesthetic purposes. In Hall's gospel-blues riff, for instance, gospel doesn't merely give way to blues. Rather, a sense of religious enchantment, closely aligned with Pentecostal faith, animates every mundane experience of disenchantment, giving these experiences a vivacity that they might not otherwise have. Rather than simply instrumentalizing religion for aesthetic ends, novels like *Just Above My Head* inhabit a background saturated by religion and, in doing so, configure the quotidian, material, secular world in a unique way. Gospel, in *Just Above*, is what gives the blues its feverish intensity; sacrament is not supplanted by sacrilege but instead gives sacrilege its defamiliarizing potency.

The novel's most sustained picture of this mode of secular faith occurs in an early scene where nine year old Julia, a child evangelist being exploited and abused by her father, mesmerizes a local congregation with her sonorous preaching. Hall and his family look on, and Hall recalls: “The church was packed, for a child evangelist was, after all,

something in the nature of a holy freak-show, and also, something more than that, something which spoke of the promise and the prophecy fulfilled” (64). Describing the scene as a “holy freak-show” repeats the trope of sacrament and sacrilege. But what is most striking to Hall is the difference he perceives in Julia’s voice as he hears it, as if for the first time, while sitting in his pew. Such a voice “could not be issuing from a tiny, nine-year-old girl” (66), he concedes. According to Hall, hearing Julia preach was like “hearing the dumb stones speak, or being present at the raising of the dead...but who wants, really, to be present when the dead rise up?” (66). Where the miraculous quality of Julia’s voice inspires the congregation’s faith, “the promise and the prophecy fulfilled,” it strikes Hall as troubling and uncanny. By speaking without irony of “when the dead rise up,” Hall grants the church its redemptive doctrine. But he is nevertheless disturbed by the overtones of “yearning and fear and pain” (64) that he hears in Julia’s speech, overtones he had not heard during their daily interactions, which belie the abuse she is suffering at the hands of her father, and which prompt him to dwell, not on what she is saying, but on the racial injustices their community has suffered for generations and that now seem mysteriously animated by the tenor of her voice. Something in the mere sound of Julia’s voice, for Hall, blends the sacredness of resurrection with the sacrilege of Southern racism. Hall observes that “this child came from the Deep South...which all our parents remembered” (64). Her voice, like the dust that smears John Grimes’s window, carries its own form of “doubtful glory.” It promises a “New Jerusalem,” but that promise is tainted by the same undercurrents of shame and oppression—and the same unnamed memories of violence and of sociopolitical injustice—that inundate John with his unrelenting fear of damnation.

Near the end of the novel, Hall once more mingles sacrament and sacrilege by placing a famous hymn at the center of Arthur and Jimmy's budding love affair. Jimmy, Julia's brother, has traveled to Florida in order to give piano accompaniment to Arthur's gospel performances. As they rehearse in an empty church, Jimmy "very deliberately, with great impertinence, and looking Arthur straight in the eye, banged out the opening of 'Just a Closer Walk with Thee'" (561). Just as Hall notices a disconcerting gap between the redemption in Julia's message and the pain in her voice, he likewise observes a peculiar relationship between the content of the traditional hymn and the salacious form it adopts on Jimmy's piano. Hall notices, on one hand, "how direct, and sacrilegious, Jimmy was being," but he also notices how "his call was very direct and moving, and brought from Arthur a response which seemed to ring out over those apocalyptic streets" (562). "The song became for them," Hall continues, "a sacrament," and he concludes:

It was a wonder, a marvel—a mystery; I call it holy. It caused me to see, in any case, that we are all limited, and, mostly misshapen instruments, and yet, if we can, simultaneously, confront and surrender, extraordinary fingers can string from us the response to our mortality. (562-63)

The song's spiritual intensity, derived from its origins in the church, charges it with an unmistakable sense of holiness. It is the "holy" "mystery" that responds "to our mortality." But the context in which Jimmy sings it, one man seducing another, is one that this church, in particular, would deem blasphemous. Yet it is precisely this blending of sacrament and sacrilege, of holiness and blasphemy, which reinforces the aesthetic pattern that persists across Baldwin's fiction. This pattern begins with the "doubtful glory" of images like dust illuminated by light, in his first novel, and ends, in his final

novel, with characters' renewed intersubjective perception of themselves and each other as "misshapen instruments"—misshapen, the novel hints, by the world's everyday patterns of racism and heterosexism, trauma and abuse. And yet, notwithstanding the menace that leaves them "misshapen," the characters of *Just Above My Head* discover, much as John Grimes discovers at the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, that the concepts of "sacrament," "mystery," and the "holy" enable them to perceive their "mortality" with the renewed clarity which characterizes secular faith.

In *Just Above My Head*, Hall Montana offers a telling revision of Bishop Latour's claim, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, that the miraculous involves "our perceptions being made finer" (*Archbishop* 50). According to Hall, "Love is perceiving and perceiving is anguish" (371). By mingling sacrament and sacrilege, *Just Above My Head* links love, perception, and anguish together by binding them to a complex religious background and by articulating that link through the relationship between gospel music and blues.⁶⁰ Speaking to the importance of gospel music in African American communities, Hall explains: "Niggers can sing gospel as no other people can because they aren't singing gospel—if you see what I mean. When a nigger quotes the Gospel, he is not quoting: he is telling you what happened to him today, and what is certainly going

⁶⁰ For a fuller discussion of Baldwin's investment in the relationship between gospel music and blues, see D. Quentin Miller's essay "Using the Blues: James Baldwin and Music." Miller contextualizes Baldwin's interest in both genres by arguing that, throughout Baldwin's writing, "The boundaries between sacred and secular, between popular and classical, between traditionally white and traditionally black musical forms proves to be fluid" (93). Thus, he contends, "Baldwin's break from the church...has an evident metaphor in his treatment of music," for while "one might assume that he leaves gospel behind to explore secular forms," his writing—including many of his later book titles, including *The Fire Next Time* and *Just Above My Head*—remains just as preoccupied, if not more preoccupied, with gospel music. To Miller's argument I would only add that, in refusing to draw firm boundaries between sacred and secular, either in the musical forms of *Just Above* or in the modes of perception described through the imagery of *Go Tell It*, Baldwin avails himself of an important resource for configuring his engagement with political questions of race and sexuality. He deploys the immediate, embodied, experiential intensity of Pentecostal ritual in order to sacralize the profane.

to happen to you tomorrow” (109). Gospel music, according to Hall, ties love, perception, and anguish together by giving shape and texture to suffering that might otherwise go unnamed and invisible. Gospel, like the “city out of time” that John Grimes envisions as he lays on the threshing floor in *Go Tell It*, proves to be neither a pacifying illusion nor a blueprint for revolution but, according to Hall, a way of giving voice to “what happened...today.” It testifies to the turmoil undergone by the singer, and it projects that turmoil onto the listener, binding singer and listener together in a shared experience of suffering and struggle. As Hall explains:

Our suffering is our bridge to one another. Everyone must cross this bridge, or die while he still lives—but this is not a political, still less, a popular apprehension...He was not singing about a road in Egypt two thousand years ago, but about his mama and his daddy and himself, and those streets just outside, brother, just outside of every door, those streets which you and I walk and which we are going to walk until we meet.

(110)

Hall’s account of gospel, of its capacity to turn “suffering” into an intersubjective “bridge,” offers an important insight into Baldwin’s mature theology of art. It demonstrates how religion and aesthetics, a Pentecostal background and a preoccupation with the affordances of specific artistic forms, converge to instantiate new modes of attention, attachment, and affinity.

Hall’s key observation in *Just Above My Head*, “Love his perceiving and perceiving is anguish” (371), clarifies what is at stake in Baldwin’s secular faith. To fully

understand these stakes, however, we must turn to one of Baldwin's first essays, written before any of his novels, where he first begins to catechize what I have been calling, to repurpose Houston Baker's complaint, Baldwin's theology of art. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin famously makes the case for writing that prioritizes psychological depth and narrative complexities over writing that takes an overly didactic political stance. According to Baldwin, it is "the power of revelation which is the business of the novelist" (13). To understand both the form of Baldwin's fictional engagement and the form of his narrative strategies for exhibiting his work's sociopolitical concerns, it is imperative that we understand Baldwin's concept of "revelation" in its full-fledged Pentecostal usage: the sudden burst of insight that disrupts the continuities of daily experience, the eternal rupturing into time, perception transformed in an instant so that the world one has "always seen," as Baldwin puts it in *The Fire Next Time*, suddenly reappears with the vividness of what one has never seen before. For Baldwin, this "power of revelation," this theology of art, is not an effort to take one's attention elsewhere, but a means of redoubling one's commitment to the struggles and subjugations that manifest most immediately before one's eyes. It is what enables perceiving to become anguish, what allows us to abandon what Jimmy, near the end of *Just Above My Head*, calls "the dream of safety" (575), the complacency inculcated by "what the world calls morality" (575).

"Everybody's Protest Novel," perhaps more than anything else he wrote, earned Baldwin his reputation for elevating aesthetic interests at the expense of sociopolitical and material concerns. But looking more carefully at the theological terms on which Baldwin bases his quarrel with protest fiction, especially in light of how Baldwin crafts

the relationship between religion and aesthetics throughout his fiction, will show how Baldwin's aestheticism is hardly a ruse for evading questions of race and sexuality. It is, rather, a peculiar and powerful way of engaging such questions. "The 'protest' novel," Baldwin asserts, "so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene" (15). Directing his sharpest criticism of this genre at Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Wright's *Native Son*, Baldwin complains that protest fiction is merely "comforting;" its "report from the pit reassures us of its reality and its darkness and of our salvation" (15). Readers find protest fiction "titillating," Baldwin argues, for reasons that are as theological as they are political. Such novels, and their readers, trade in an economy of salvation and damnation. The damnation lasciviously portrayed by protest fiction immobilizes readers by offering them too comforting of a reminder: that, being among the saved, they will never have to endure the terrible conditions that they encounter in the pages of the book that they hold. If the oppressed characters who populate the protest novel are among the damned, and if the comfortable reader is among the saved, then the writer of protest fiction, Baldwin claims, will have neutralized any emancipatory virtues that he or she had hoped to achieve.

Counterintuitively, Baldwin suggests that writing which seeks to be didactic, which is valued on the basis of the ideological commitments it espouses, actually serves to mystify the material conditions of oppression. By rendering those conditions in ways that are alien to the reader's experiences, by writing about them sensationally while containing these sensations within the covers of a novel, the protest writer prompts readers to treat suffering as an otherworldly phenomenon. The miserable conditions portrayed by protest fiction, no matter how gritty and naturalistic their portrayal, stand

outside of the comfortable reader's perceptual horizon. To rephrase Hall Montana's observation in the negative, protest fiction requires neither "love," nor "perceiving," nor "anguish" on the part of the reader. For it drives a wedge between the reader and the invisible structures of everyday social injustice when it ought to be training the reader's attention to see those structures more clearly. Thus protest fiction cannot ameliorate suffering; rather, Baldwin insists, by making suffering ubiquitous across its pages and by endowing it with a deliberate, didactic purpose, protest fiction makes suffering invisible.

By contrast, what Baldwin wants is a way to portray oppressive social conditions, especially insofar as those conditions confront race and sexuality, in a way that will manifest with the same revelatory power he witnessed in Harlem's Pentecostal churches.⁶¹ To achieve this, Baldwin turns away from protest writers like Richard Wright and toward figures such as Henry James.⁶² Baldwin derives his claim that "literature and sociology are not one and the same" (15) from figures like James. But his Jamesian aesthetics, coupled with his refusal of the "rejection of life" (18) that he discerns in protest fiction, ultimately operates according to the logic of the Pentecostal background that saturates his fiction. It manifests most vividly when the eternal interrupts the temporal, revealing the textures of the mundane world in their "doubtful glory" in order to alert characters and readers alike to the menace harbored in the worlds that they intimately know.

⁶¹ For another applicable, and rather remarkable, account of how a Pentecostal childhood influences and intensifies an investment in literature, see Michael Warner's autobiographical essay, "Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood."

⁶² For the most extensive analysis of Baldwin's indebtedness to Henry James, see Horace Porter's *Stealing the Fire*.

Baldwin's aestheticism, therefore, should not be understood as politically quietist. It is not an "ideology of the aesthetic," to borrow Terry Eagleton's phrase. Rather, it is an effort to render the mundane, material world more vividly and, by intensifying perception, to reveal the invisible contours of ordinary suffering rather than to pretend that writing about oppression will necessarily ameliorate it. In this sense, Baldwin's alternative to protest fiction places him within a broader critical tradition that describes the relationship between art and politics as a formal relation. As Caroline Levine has recently argued, "Forms are at work everywhere," and if we consider carefully how "literary" and "sociopolitical" forms interact, the "traditionally troubling gap between the literary text and its content and context dissolves" (2). Or, as Jacques Rancière asserts: "Art is not political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world" but "because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space" (23). Baldwin's insistence upon the primacy of aesthetics, as theorists like Levine and Rancière can help to clarify, does not disavow the sociopolitical or the material. Rather, Baldwin's aestheticism—so often expressed in his fiction through the background made available by Pentecostal theology and ritual—aims to cultivate a particular kind of attention. Baldwin calls this attention the "power of revelation," and it is this theology of art, I suggest, that grounds Baldwin's engagement with sociopolitical concerns such as race and sexuality in his fiction,⁶³ particularly in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*.

⁶³ For what is perhaps the most comprehensive study of the way race and sexuality intersect in Baldwin's fiction, see Matt Brim's *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*. Brim argues that, although Baldwin's lifelong interest in sexuality and race has made him a "totem figure" for "black queer studies" (1), his relationship both to race and to sexuality is anything but straightforward. On one hand, Brim argues that

For a writer who stopped believing in the doctrines of salvation, resurrection, and divine revelation almost immediately after he stepped down from his pulpit, Baldwin's words have attained a surprising theological afterlife in the decades following his death. In an unusual twist, Houston Baker's claim that Baldwin's "theology of art" lays claim to "existentialist individualism" at the expense of sociopolitical concerns has been contravened most emphatically by the way Baldwin's writing has inspired the work of black theologians. For not only does Baldwin depend on the Pentecostal trope of intensified perception to craft his aesthetics; and not only are Baldwin's aesthetics cast in contradistinction to the protest novel; but these dynamics within Baldwin's art, in recent years, have proven to be influential resources for what many would consider to be the most innovative thinker in contemporary African American theology. James H. Cone, a pioneering figure in black liberation theology who was briefly made infamous for his influence on the Reverend Jeremiah Wright,⁶⁴ regularly teaches a graduate seminar on Baldwin at Union Theological Seminary and cites Baldwin extensively throughout his writing. If the role of religion in Baldwin's writing is to intensify one's perception of the world's "doubtful glory," to vivify the menace that lingers amid the mundane, then Cone has proven more adept at recognizing this role than have many of the most prominent literary critics who study Baldwin's work.

"Baldwin, working with and beyond prescribed identity categories, takes as his most enduring subject precisely those illegitimized desires, often between men and often between races, that have been pushed to the very edge of the thinkable" (2). On the other hand, he describes Baldwin himself as "an unstable signifier of an always rupturing tradition" (27), a figure just as notable for the way in which "an unqueer undercurrent [persists] within the queer imagination" (5).

⁶⁴ See Rev. Wright's Fox News interview with Shawn Hannity on *Hannity & Colmes*, March 1, 2007. In response to Hannity's criticism, Wright retorts: "Do you know liberation theology, sir? [...] How many of Cone's books have you read?"

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone develops his most systematic reading of Baldwin in relation to black liberation theology. “The cross and the lynching tree,” Cone argues, “interpret each other” (161). The central questions of Cone’s work, questions that are operative within but not reducible to these symbols, run as follows: “Can the cross redeem the lynching tree? Can the lynching tree liberate the cross and make it real in American history?” (161). By “the cross,” Cone means not only the symbol that sits atop churches and adorns many Americans’ jewelry, but the “real scandal of the gospel,” which he defines as the belief that “humanity’s salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal” (160). And by “the lynching tree,” Cone refers not only to the brutal legacy of lynching across American history (though he explores this legacy at great length); he is describing, rather, the myriad ways by which “whites [have] had the right to control the black population” by virtue of “the religious belief that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to” white supremacy (7), mechanisms that include, in our present moment, the prison industrial complex that Michelle Alexander has dubbed “the new Jim Crowe.” “One can lynch a person,” Cone concludes, “without a rope or tree” (162). According to Cone, we must fuse these symbols, the cross and the lynching tree, for their entanglement within American history is such that each should be impossible to decipher without reference to the other. Cone contends: “the lynching tree frees the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians,” for if “we see the crucifixion as a first-century lynching, we are confronted by the reenactment of Christ’s suffering in the blood-soaked history of African Americans” (161). Likewise, “the lynching tree also needs the cross, without which it becomes simply an abomination” (161), a horror rendered invisible by our desire to forget. Cone concludes: “Through the

powerful imagination of faith, we can discover the ‘terrible beauty’ of the cross and the ‘tragic beauty’ of the lynching tree” (162).

Although Cone derives his concepts of “terrible” and “tragic beauty” from many theological and political sources, from Reinhold Niebuhr and W.E.B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X, the voice that he settles on most decisively is that of James Baldwin. To summarize his argument, Cone quotes from *The Fire Next Time* at length, giving particular attention to a passage that could just as readily summarize what I have been calling Baldwin’s theology of art.

This past, the Negro’s past...this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity...contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful...That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakeable...I am proud of these people not because of their color but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and beauty. This country should be proud of them, too, but, alas, not many people in this country even know of their existence. And the reason for this ignorance is a knowledge of the role these people played—and play—in American life would *reveal more about America to Americans than Americans wish to know*. (324-44, emphasis added)

Cone's effort, in quoting Baldwin at length, is to make an explicit theological statement about the symbols of the cross and the lynching tree in contemporary American Christianity. My interest, by contrast, is somewhat more modest, carrying none of Cone's theological, metaphysical, or spiritual ambition. Baldwin's fiction, from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to *Just Above My Head*, seeks to vivify what Baldwin calls the "endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity," to illuminate what "no school" and "no church—can teach." From the "doubtful glory" of the dirt John Grimes sees on his sunlit windowpane to the sense in which "perceiving is anguish" for the gospel singers of *Just Above*, Baldwin's fiction draws upon Pentecostal theology and practice in order to craft a secular faith which makes vivid the "terrible beauty" that writers like Cone confer upon symbols like "the cross and the lynching tree."⁶⁵

Baldwin concludes *The Fire Next Time* with a final appeal to an unlikely form of beauty. "When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, What will happen to all that beauty?" (346). Whatever else may happen to it, it persists in Baldwin's writing as a way to memorialize the faith he rejected at seventeen. It lingers as a menacing specter of the "doubtful glory" that haunts Baldwin's vision of American life, where our damnation and our salvation intertwine, echoing the question posed by the narrator near the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: "Forever?" (221).

⁶⁵ Critics such as Horace Porter and George Shulman have glossed a dynamic similar to what Cone describes. Porter anticipates Cone's demand to interpret the cross as a lynching tree when he observes: "The cross in Baldwin's fiction does not stand as an unambiguous sign of redemption," but is rather "a dubious iconographic symbol, threatening to destroy the very life it ostensibly nurtures" (102). Shulman, likewise, reflects Cone's interest in thinking about the lynching tree in terms of the cross, arguing that for Baldwin: "American nationhood is constituted by disavowed domination" (107), and that Baldwin draws upon an Old Testament tradition of "Biblical prophets" to make that domination explicit; that is, to help us "turn toward what we disavow" (118).

Chapter 4

Don DeLillo and the Religious Meaning of Postmodern Atheism

Near the end of the penultimate chapter of *White Noise*, Don DeLillo turns skepticism into sacrament. Here, in what is perhaps the most frequently misunderstood scene of DeLillo's *oeuvre*, secular faith—a revitalized aesthetic attention to the surfaces of worldly experience—emerges as an alternative to the postmodern solipsism and simulacra which permeate the rest of the novel. This secular faith cuts through familiar postmodern aesthetic categories to offer a theologically robust form of atheism as a palliative to the smorgasbord of postsecular spiritualities which proliferate across the novel's pages.

The scene depicts narrator Jack Gladney lying in a hospital bed, tended by nuns as he recovers from a gunshot wound. He was injured while trying to acquire Dylar, a drug which promises to cure his fear of death. Despite the setback, he continues to cast about for something which will rob the possibility of death of its sting. As he takes stock of his surroundings, Jack notices a painting which he instantly interprets as offering the next best solution. In the painting, President Kennedy is in heaven shaking hands with Pope John XXIII. The two iconic figures stand shining among the clouds. Fascinated by this artifact of religious kitsch, Jack sees in its promise of eternity a final chance to scam his way out of his finitude. "I had a sneaking admiration for the picture," Jack muses. "It made me feel good, sentimentally refreshed. The President still vigorous after death. The Pope's homeliest a kind of radiance. Why shouldn't it be true?" (317). Failing to acquire the drug that will reconcile him to his mortality, Jack wonders if perhaps it is time to give a religious version of immortality a try. Perhaps the tradition, ritual, and belief that these

nuns represent will offer him a kind of salvation, enabling him to have faith in the afterlife so gaudily portrayed in the painting.

Yet when Jack announces himself to Sister Hermann Marie as a spiritual seeker, desirous of faith and wondering how to acquire its consolations, her response shatters his nascent piety. Jack asks: “What does the Church say about heaven today? Is it still the old heaven, like that, in the sky?” After briefly considering the picture, she responds, perversely Christlike, with a question for his question: “Do you think we are stupid?” (317). “This is a dumb head,” she continues, “who would come in here to talk about angels. Show me an angel. Please. I want to see” (317). The irony of this exchange is obvious. Jack, the secular university professor, turns out to be more susceptible to the lure of superstition than the nun who, Jack assumes, guards “all the traditional things,” such as “[f]aith, religion, life everlasting. The great old human gullibilities” (317, 319). In this exchange, skepticism goes all the way to the heart of belief; the secular, one might reasonably assume, has enveloped the most sacred, turning even the devotion of nuns into an irreverent instantiation of postmodern pastiche.

Many of the most recent literary critics to analyze religion’s persistence in contemporary American literature have misread this scene,⁶⁶ but their misreading reveals

⁶⁶ Although I focus on how Christopher Douglas and Amy Hungerford interpret this scene, their readings resemble those of earlier critics. For instance, Cornel Bonca asserts that Sister Hermann Marie’s message to Jack is that “the priests and nuns of the Catholic church just speak another kind of white noise. They don’t ‘believe’ their teachings; they help people evade death with a torrent of doctrines, litanies, catechisms—language” (470). Leonard Wilcox declares that, in *White Noise*, “Even religious belief is swallowed into the order of the simulacrum” (358). Of previous studies of DeLillo, Mark Osteen comes closest to my position when he asks: “Is faith no more than a performance, and religion as much a simulacrum as the most photographed barn in America?” (188). Answering his own question, Osteen remarks: “perhaps DeLillo is suggesting that the impulse to believe, a faith in the bare potential for sacredness and transcendence, will always endure” (188). Yet even Osteen’s analysis misses what makes the nun’s dedication to pretense so remarkable. It is not just that the nun symbolizes the persistence of the desire for transcendence in a postmodern age; what fascinates me, rather, is how the nun rejects the desire for transcendence through the very religious rites and vows that she embodies in her daily life.

something crucial for our understanding of DeLillo's career long engagement with religion. Despite their otherwise trenchant analyses of how contemporary writers respond to religious concerns,⁶⁷ what critics such as Christopher Douglas and Amy Hungerford overlook in this scene will prove to be the key to understanding how Don DeLillo crafts the relationship between religious devotion and aesthetic attention into yet another variant of what I have been calling secular faith. Douglas, for example, begins *If God Meant to Interfere* (2016), a study of American literature during the rise of the Christian Right, by reading this scene as a proof-text the American literati's desperate attempt to affirm an increasingly dubious secularization narrative amid the insurgent political Evangelicalism of the Reagan years. "Recasting religious belief in terms of pretense," Douglas argues, "the nun portrays religion in the final stages of secular decline" (2). The scene, Douglas continues, "was a vivid literary snapshot of American religion in the 1980s, but one that was spectacularly wrong" (2). Where Douglas interprets this scene as DeLillo's counterfactual reassertion of a defunct secularization thesis, Amy Hungerford exempts *White Noise* from her otherwise persuasive argument about religious "belief in belief" under postmodernism. Hungerford contends that DeLillo's later fiction is best understood as the work of a "lapsed Catholic" (75) committed to transforming the concerns of faith into the language of literary art, the mystery of the Catholic mass into the mysteries of the prose fiction. But she only mentions *White Noise* to describe it as "a standard text of the old postmodernism," an "aberration within DeLillo's oeuvre" (xx). Hungerford cites Jack's encounter with the nuns as her case in point. "The unbelieving

⁶⁷ Despite my disagreement with their reading of *White Noise*, Douglas and Hungerford each remain two of the most important critical interlocutors for this study, and I address their broader arguments about religion in contemporary American literature at length in the introduction, the fifth chapter, and the conclusion.

nuns,” she claims, “are just one more satirical joke in a secular white suburbia” (xx). If we follow Douglas and Hungerford, we conclude that when Sister Hermann Marie tells Jack that “nonbelievers need the believers” because they “are desperate to have someone believe” (318), she is weaving a familiar Weberian picture of secular disenchantment into the equally familiar webs of postmodern undecidability.

Returning to the novel, however, we find that Jack has already internalized Douglas and Hungerford’s claims and rephrased them as a question. “All the old muddles and quirks,” he asks, “Are you saying you don’t take them seriously? Your dedication is a pretense?” (319). Phrased this way, the nun’s religion, figured in the painting and embodied in the nun herself, becomes a campy instantiation of the postmodern sublime.⁶⁸ It is a comforting but ultimately alienating distraction—a hospital bed for a wounded man to rest in, perhaps, or a charming but hollow image that briefly “cheers us up” (317) in the face of the void. The nun, however, answers with a chiasmic retort which inverts Jack’s question and, in the process, dismantles the intimation that either she or the picture is merely another postmodern joke. “Our pretense is a dedication,” she declares. “Our lives are *no less serious* than if we professed real faith, real belief” (319, emphasis added). For the nun, the absence of any God, any eternity, or any systematic doctrinal consolation is precisely what offers an impetus for a life of committed religious devotion. Inverting the popular, postsecular moniker “spiritual but not religious,”⁶⁹ the nun insists

⁶⁸ My reference to postmodern “camp” alludes to Susan Sontag’s definition of the term as “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (275), a “vision of the world in terms of style” (279). My references to the “postmodern sublime” throughout this chapter refer to the first chapter of Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. I address Jameson’s work in relation to DeLillo in the third section of this chapter.

⁶⁹ Tracy Fessenden’s recent essay, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” offers a particularly forceful critique of the way critical discourse on the “postsecular” turns upon a problematic vagueness about actual religious or theological content. Taking aim mainly at Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly’s *All Things Shining: Reading*

that she is religious without being spiritual. Her skepticism, a theologically serious skepticism conditioned by its origins in a doctrinally specific religion, paired with the disinterested distance she inserts between herself and the kitsch painting, enables her to confront the fact that this world is all we have and that death is an unflinching finality.⁷⁰

the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age, but including Amy Hungerford, John McClure, and other Americanists in her critique, Fessenden worries that “the spiritual jumble sale from which the project of reenchantment takes its materials” can lead to a “subordination of particular histories, content, and context to some essential sacred something” (161). And by reducing all forms of religion and spirituality to “some essential sacred something,” she claims, “no more religious or historical literacy is required for this kind of scholarship than was ever needed in American literary scholarship’s more longstanding secular presentism” (161). Despite being the target of Fessenden’s critique, Amy Hungerford sounds a similar warning in the coda of her book. Hungerford warns that “the reenchantments have their own emptiness,” for “when vague religion has consequences, which it often does, that vagueness insulates religious assumptions from the push and pull of public discourse” (133). The dangers of this vagueness, she continues, offers “the basic reason why I wanted to write this book...to bring thought to bear on the currents of unarticulated religious assumptions” (133). Throughout this chapter, I aim to add to this critique of postsecular “vagueness” by showing how much of DeLillo’s work takes the paradoxical position of the nun, who rejects the vagueness of Jack’s desire for “some essential sacred something” in favor of a serious, devotional dedication to the pretense of faith.

⁷⁰ Idiosyncratic as the nun might appear in this scene, her paradoxical attitude toward religiosity and unbelief bears an important resemblance to several important strands of twentieth century Christian theology. Most notably, her desire to maintain her faith despite her unbelief resonates with the writing of religious existentialists such as Paul Tillich who, in *The Courage to Be*, argues that faith “is without *special* content, yet it is not without content,” for the “content” of faith is “the ‘God above God’” (182). That is, faith “takes the radical doubt, the doubt about God, into itself, transcends the theistic idea of God” (182). While the nun does not quite claim, as Tillich does, that God is a symbol of God, the structure of her unbelief is similar: her life is an affirmation predicated upon a theological negation. One can find similar parallels to the nun’s faithful disbelief in the work of death of God theologians such as Thomas J. J. Altizer, who inspired the famous “Is God Dead?” issue of *Time* magazine with book titles such as *Radical Theology and the Death of God* and *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. More recently, Slavoj Žižek develops a similar analysis of Christianity and atheism—the affirmation predicated upon negation—in what he describes as his “perverse” readings of the crucifixion and the book of Job. (See *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*.)

The most compelling point of comparison, however, comes neither from theology nor philosophy but from the prayer journals of perhaps the most famous nun of the past century, Mother Teresa. In *Come Be My Light*, which contains many of her posthumously published, she describes her crisis of faith as a loss that motivated her commitment to worldly service. “In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing...I do not doubt that it was You who called me, with so much love and force.—It was You—I know. That is why the work is Yours and it is You even now—but I have no faith—I don’t believe” (192-93). Peter Rollins, a popular ex-Evangelical writer who examines contemporary Christianity through the work of thinkers like Tillich, Žižek, and Lacan, interprets Mother Teresa’s struggle with belief in a way that helps us to better grasp the dedication to pretense embodied by DeLillo’s nun. “Her call to become a nun can be viewed as a concrete example of the religious sacrifice as it was the point when she gave up everything for God. It was some years later, however, when she experienced what she described as her ‘call within the call.’ This can be seen as nothing less than her identification with Christ on the Cross: here she loses everything, including God...This is the transition from the ultimate religious sacrifice to the sacrifice of religion itself. The latter event does not

But if there is no eternity, then why hold onto a painting of the pope and the president luxuriating in eternal bliss? For that matter, why keep up the pretense of faith if, as Jack discovers, “Death is the end” (319) and there is nothing to be done about it? For all of its falsity, the nun teaches Jack, the painting must first be taken seriously and viewed, not with the credulity of naïve identification, but with a detached attentiveness that will allow him to see the figures in the painting on their own terms. Ridiculing his pious effort to find meaning *in* the painting’s otherworldly theme, she trains him to look *at* the worldly implications apparent in the painting’s surface. Jack hopes that this painting of the president and the pope in heaven might reveal some deeper spiritual truth, that if he looks closely enough, he might discover that heaven is a real place where he will one day cheat death by joining the painting’s subjects “somewhere, advanced in time, against a layer of fluffy cumulus...as in some epic of protean gods and ordinary people, aloft, well-formed, shining” (317). But Sister Hermann Marie knows better. What she understands, and what Jack fails to recognize, is that the painting reveals not a world beyond this one but the inexorability of death, the finitude and fragility of this world. The painting depicts the president and the pope in paradise because the president and the pope are dead. The painting therefore reveals not the immortality of its subjects but the bare fact that even these seemingly immortal figures have succumbed to death. The religious theme of the painting, redoubled by the nun’s theological commitment to atheism, is paradoxically what quells Jack’s unremitting anxiety over the prospect of his nonbeing. To adopt the nun’s way of looking at the painting—her devoted skepticism—requires Jack to give up the metaphysics of the involved religious visionary in exchange for the

supersede the former but rather deepens it” (157-58). In Mother Teresa’s “sacrifice of religion,” I argue, we see an echo of Sister Hermann Marie’s “serious” devotion to her unbelief.

trained judgment of a sacramental vision. After an incessant pursuit of anything that will cure his fear of death, it takes an image of eternity and an unbelieving nun to reconcile Jack to his finitude.

Don DeLillo's fiction turns repeatedly to this dynamic, which in the following pages I will call sacramental finitude. The religious aspects of DeLillo's writing reveal neither a pious nostalgia for a reenchanting cosmos nor a secularist reduction of the sacred to postmodern simulacra. Instead, DeLillo devises a robust model of secular faith by infusing the tropes of postmodern fiction with a deeply religious commitment to skepticism. Like Sister Hermann Marie, DeLillo's novels imagine, in theological terms, how pretense itself might be transformed into a mode of dedication, not as a means of escaping the world, but as a renewed existential commitment to living and dying on the world's terms. This chapter elucidates how DeLillo's writing models its version of secular faith by tracing it across three key elements of his fiction: 1) skeptical clerics who train DeLillo's narrators in that mode of aesthetic attention that I call sacramental finitude; 2) the pastiche of postmodern aesthetic categories, such as the simulacra and the postmodern sublime, as vague, postsecular spiritualities which offer little but escapist mystifications of late capitalism and which serve as a foil to sacramental finitude; 3) the process by which sacramental finitude comes to displace postmodern irony and postsecular dreams of immortality, a process that closely resembles what Paul Ricoeur calls "the religious meaning of atheism" ("Religion, Atheism, Faith" 467). These three stages recur throughout DeLillo's writing, but for the sake of coherence I will limit my analysis to three novels where they emerge most prominently: his most famous novel, *White Noise*, his most ambitious novel, *Underworld*, and his most recent novel, *Zero K*.

By examining how DeLillo's writing turns the longing for eternity deathward, we discern an iteration of American literature's secular faith which escapes the endless iterability of postmodern freeplay by embracing the inexorable finitude of worldly experience.

In order to turn postmodern pretense into devotional dedication, DeLillo's characters repeatedly turn their gaze to kitschy religious images and commonplace "holy objects" (*Zero K* 47); in doing so, they devise modes of aesthetic attention which enable them to better perceive both the surfaces of these images and, in turn, the finitude of their own phenomenal experience, with greater distinctiveness. Throughout this chapter, I will call this mode of attention sacramental finitude. In order to adequately define sacramental finitude, however, we must take a closer look at the painting in *White Noise* to see how the nun's conversation with Jack serves to short-circuit a pervasive critical attitude toward questions of aesthetic attention and judgment—the Bourdieuan critique of aesthetic disinterest as a mechanism of bourgeois cultural hegemony.

When Jack learns from the nun how best to look at the painting, he takes the position of a novice learning from an expert. He is, as Pierre Bourdieu and his disciples might say, belatedly acquiring the cultural capital that will enable him to regard the painting with the appropriate "aesthetic disposition" (Bourdieu 20). When Jack first sees the painting, it makes him "feel good, sentimentally refreshed;" its theme, eternal life in heaven, gives him "a sneaking admiration" (317). His gaze seems to be conditioned by what Bourdieu calls the "charismatic ideology of the relation to the work of art," whereby one abstracts one's own "particular mode of perception [of an artwork] as an essence" (Bourdieu 20-21) rather than as a culturally contingent posture which "corresponds to a

particular state of the mode of artistic production” (22). Jack simply looks at the painting and assumes that he sees in it what anyone would see, unaware that his manner of looking is symptomatic of a particular habitus—a habitus, in his case, shaped by his obsession with eluding death. The nun’s surprising response thus breaks the illusion of the “charismatic ideology,” showing Jack’s mode of perception to be conditional rather than necessary. Moreover, Jack’s contingent response to the painting resembles what Bourdieu calls the “popular aesthetic,” as opposed to the “high aesthetic.” By looking at the painting and immediately considering how its subject matter speaks to his own life, Jack affirms the popular “continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function” (Bourdieu 24). In other words, Jack “identifies” (24) with the image’s subject. When he sees an image of the pope and the president living on in heaven, he imaginatively places himself in the heavenly scene with them. This “popular” proclivity toward identification, Bourdieu explains, contrasts with the “distinction” of the disinterested “high aesthetic” insofar as it invests a “deliberate ‘naivety,’” an “ingenuous, good-natured credulity” (25) on the part of the viewer.

If Jack looks at the painting with the naïveté of the “popular aesthetic,” then the nun, in the terms of this Bourdieuan analysis, possesses the cultural capital Jack needs in order to tune his aesthetic attention to a more sophisticated frequency. The nun accomplishes this by letting Jack in on the secret of her unbelief. Where Jack is invested in the concept of eternity that the painting supposedly represents, the nun is detached from the painting’s content. Where Jack finds himself “sentimentally refreshed” by the possibility that the painting points to some metaphysical truth—“Why shouldn’t it be true?” (317)—the nun explains that her professional responsibility is “to believe things no

one else takes seriously” (318), for “[t]here is no truth without fools” (319). Their conversation ends when Jack, one last time, suggests that some nuns, somewhere, must “still believe” (320). In response to this insinuation, Sister Hermann Marie replaces the semantic content of their conversation with a disquisition that Jack perceives as nothing but sound, the pure, autonomous form of words to which he can attach no concrete meaning.

She said something in German. I failed to understand. She spoke again, at some length, pressing her face toward mine, the words growing harsher, wetter, more guttural. Her eyes showed a terrible delight in my incomprehension. She was spraying me with German. A storm of words...She was reciting something, I decided. Litanies, hymns, catechisms. The mysteries of the rosary perhaps. Taunting me with scornful prayer. (320)

By refusing to answer Jack’s final question in a language he can understand, the nun pours forth a torrent of language which alienates Jack from his earlier attempts to identify and interpret. No longer “sentimentally refreshed” by the consolations of his naïve, novice gaze, Jack describes his response to the nun’s final words using the language of aesthetic taste: “The odd thing is I found it beautiful” (320). His mode attention has shifted from sympathetic identification to formal judgment, completing the Bourdieuan transformation. “Detachment, disinterestedness, indifference,” Bourdieu explains, “aesthetic theory has often presented these as the only way to recognize the work of art for what it is, autonomous” (27). The high aesthetic gaze which produces art’s “sacred character” (26), Bourdieu concludes, refers ultimately to “the refusal to invest oneself and

take things seriously” (27). What Jack learns from the nun is a similar of self-distancing, a perceptual detachment that enables him to see the surfaces of images.

And this is precisely where *White Noise* short circuits the Bourdieuan critique of aesthetic judgment. According to Bourdieu, the “popular” and the “high” aesthetic are indicators of social class. If I know your taste in art, I can reliably guess your socioeconomic status—an assertion evident from the title of Bourdieu’s opening chapter, “The Aristocracy of Culture.” But Jack’s transition, the turn from naïve identification to sophisticated detachment which he gleans from Sister Hermann Marie’s dedication to pretense, flips Bourdieu’s categories. For Jack’s initial mode of attention, caught up in the naïve identification, attachment, and involvement with which he sought the drug Dylar, derives from an illusory escapism which plagues him throughout the novel. He continually invests himself in experiences and commodities which, he hopes, will assuage his fear of his mortality, yet everything he pursues in this fashion turns out to be a chimerical mystification of the market’s networks and products.⁷¹ By contrast, when Sister Hermann Marie teaches him how to look at the painting, she teaches him to cultivate a dedication to pretense which will allow him to simultaneously find beauty in the form of a kitsch painting⁷² and find solace in the fact of his own finitude. The chapter

⁷¹ Precisely how *White Noise* thematizes late capitalism is a matter of some debate. For Bonca, the “white noise” of the novel is “a product of late capitalism and a simulacral society,” an incessant demand for “death evasion...which ‘now gets expressed in the argot of consumer culture’ (466). For Maltby, DeLillo has a “conservative tendency,” because “his response to the adverse cultural effects of late capitalism reproduces a Romantic politics of vision...that obscures, if not undervalues, the need for radical change at the level of the material infrastructure” (275). And for McClure, “*White Noise* views the magical culture of consumer capitalism with some sympathy and wonder” (89). Where these and other critics disagree on precisely how DeLillo’s fiction responds to late capitalism, I claim that DeLillo’s writing often aligns the vagueness of unspecified postsecular spiritualities with late capitalist consumer culture, and that by resisting these spiritualities through sacramental forms of skepticism, his work likewise offers a critique of the longing for transcendence which, for DeLillo, is inherent in this consumer culture.

⁷² Daniel Tiffany’s analysis of kitsch is instructive here. In contrast to Sontag’s concept of “camp,” Tiffany defines “kitsch” as a term “introduced into art criticism by modernist writers to identify (and condemn)

thus ends on a note of stillness, a stark contrast from the frenetic pace of his earlier attempts to alienate himself from death by pursuing either Dylar or a religious faith in immortality. “There was nothing to do but wait for the next sunset, when the sky would ring like bronze” (321). What Jack gains from the nun’s mode of aesthetic attention, therefore, is not so much the social distinction which grants a “sacred character” to “high culture” (Bourdieu 26), but rather a commitment to the surfaces of trivial objects and ephemeral perceptions, an ability to regard both the form of an impossibly pious painting and the finality of his worldly experiences from a posture of sacramental finitude.

By sacramental finitude I mean the following: a depth of field, to borrow a metaphor from photography, by which the mundane, immanent dimensions of experience show up more vividly when disclosed from the aesthetic distance made available by a concept of eternity. The nun’s basic claim, that her “pretense is a dedication” (319), models sacramental finitude in a particularly clear way, but its basic dynamic recurs throughout much of DeLillo’s writing. It is “sacramental” in the sense that it inverts the traditional Augustinian understanding of sacrament: outward signs of inward grace. In the Augustinian formulation, the sacraments are the tangible manifestations of the intangible, the comprehensible vision which reveals an incomprehensible mystery. Sacraments are immanent manifestations of transcendence, the eternal made tangible in the temporal. The logic of the sacrament, in its traditional theological sense, can be described through the doctrine of Christ’s incarnation, the belief that in Jesus, God has been made flesh. As Hungerford observes, DeLillo’s writing is saturated with sacrament; “traces” of his

productions of mass culture...derivative, sentimental trivial...contrary to the true values of art” (1). Yet kitsch, for Tiffany, redeems itself insofar as it “participates in the subliminal domain of mass experience, even if it is not reproduced or exchanged in a direct material sense” (15).

childhood Catholicism, she asserts, “can be found everywhere...in his choice of words, in his subjects, in the ways he understands faith, belief, agency, guilt redemption, and human relations,” but he “ultimately transfers a version of mysticism from the Catholic context into the literary one” (52-53). DeLillo’s incarnational translation of religious into literary language intimates, for Hungerford, the sacramental logic of an eternal mystery disclosing itself in time. But Hungerford’s analysis relies on a traditional notion of sacrament, where an ideal eternity is ultimately real and our material experience of temporal life is the necessary illusion by which we come to know the eternal.⁷³

By contrast, I argue that DeLillo’s writing imagines a sacramental finitude, a mode of attention which elevates the immanent rather than the transcendent, the knowable quotidian rather than the ineffable divine. Where a conventional understanding of sacrament would, for instance, suggest that one encounters God in a ritual like the Eucharist through the tasting of bread and wine, DeLillo’s vision of sacramental finitude is such that one tastes bread and wine in a new way by positing God. Applied to the painting in *White Noise*, traditional sacramentality would hold we can see the truth of God’s eternity even in the pedestrian kitsch of a poorly crafted painting; sacramental finitude, by contrast, holds Sister Hermann Marie’s position, which is that by positing the eternal—by rendering eternity central to the image’s composition—one garners the kind

⁷³ John McClure remarks on the centrality of the sacramental in DeLillo’s writing. The sacramental, McClure explains, “emphasizes the immanence of divine grace and the holiness of this world” (77). McClure describes several of DeLillo’s novels as offering a “secularized sacramentality” (77), sketching this sensibility by comparing patterns in DeLillo’s fiction to the writing of George Santayana. According to McClure, “Santayana called on religious believers and secularists alike to throw off their transcendent dreams and accept the facts of human mortality and profound limitation” (78), a rejection of the spiritual that would render the quotidian sacred. My argument differs from McClure’s insofar as I postulate a sacramental finitude whereby the mechanism is not so much replacement and exchange (the spiritual for the quotidian); rather, I claim that DeLillo’s work frequently affirms a mode of attention whereby cultivating a certain form of religiosity circumvents the transcendent in favor of a renewed encounter with the immanent.

of attention one needs to behold the painting's figures more assiduously. Instead of the painting revealing a deeper theological truth, it is the prospect of a deeper theological truth which reveals the painting. Against the backdrop of eternal bliss, the painting shows that even two of the most immortal figures in Jack's imagination have succumbed, irrevocably, to death. And so, eventually, will Jack.

A similar scene in *Underworld* develops the concept of sacramental finitude as a mode of aesthetic attention further developing the logic of Sister Hermann Marie's dedication to pretense. The narrator, Nick Shay, meets with his Catholic schoolteacher, Father Paulus, during the winter of 1955. He begins his account of this meeting by describing "stories" he had been hearing "about the Pope" (536), an "underground rumor" that "Pope Pius was having mystical visions...seeing things in the dead of night" (536). Like the unbelieving nuns of *White Noise*, Father Paulus responds with humorous skepticism. "If you'd been drinking dago red until three in the morning, you'd have visions too" (536). Yet although Father Paulus's comments begin with skepticism, like Sister Hermann Marie's, they do not end in irony and pretense. On the contrary, Father Paulus begins to explain to Nick the purpose of the school. This purpose bears striking resemblance to how Sister Hermann Marie defends her dedication to pretense. "One of the things we want to do here is to produce serious men...Someone, in the end, who develops a certain depth, a spacious quality" (538); Father Paulus himself, however, regrets that he is "not a serious man. Too much irony, too much vanity, too little what—I don't know, a lot of things" (538). The priest proceeds in his lesson by explaining how Nick might acquire the "serious" quality that he himself lacks: "Aquinas said only intense actions will strengthen a habit. Not mere repetition. Intensity makes for moral

accomplishment. An intense and persevering will. This is an element of seriousness” (539). Like Sister Hermann in *White Noise*, Father Paulus begins by rejecting “mystical visions” and “supernatural events.” He eschews the spiritual for the religious, insisting upon the dedication to habits that will make one “serious.” “Serious vows,” Sister Hermann Marie calls them. “A serious life” (*White Noise* 320).

Father Paulus proceeds to teach Nick how to live a “serious life” by inviting him to reflect on how he pays attention to mundane objects. Instead of asserting that the worldly or the immanent serves as a sign for the transcendent or divine, Paulus emphasizes careful attention to the material world itself, showing how a religiously inflected seriousness enhances one’s capacity to see the material world more vividly. “Sometimes I think the education we dispense is better suited to a fifty-year-old who feels he missed the point the first time around,” Father Paulus complains. “Too many abstract ideas. Eternal verities left and right. You’d be better served looking at your shoe and naming the parts” (540). Then, in contradistinction to “abstract ideas” and “eternal verities,” the priest orders Nick to do just that—to ritualistically identify all the parts of his shoe. When Nick gets stuck, he explains: “I knew the name. I just didn’t see the thing” (540), to which Paulus replies: “You didn’t see the thing because *you don’t know how to look*” (540, emphasis added). The priest teaches Nick how to look at his shoe much as he nun instructs Jack Gladney on how to look at a religious kitsch painting. To developing the “habit” one needs to become “serious,” Paulus continues, one must understand how “everyday things lie hidden” (541), a hiddenness which allows even the “vamp” and “grommet” and “last” of a shoe—objects so mundane as to be invisible—to become “the final arcane knowledge” (541-42). Here again a character representing

religious authority trains a naïve neophyte in what Bourdieu calls the “aesthetic disposition;” and again, the religious figure’s spiritual skepticism leads not to an abandonment of religiosity but to a renewed, devotional attention to what Father Paulus calls “Quotidian things” (542). “If they weren’t so important,” Paulus concludes, “we wouldn’t use such a gorgeous Latinate word...An extraordinary word that suggests the depth and reach of the commonplace” (542). By training his attention on the parts of his shoe, Nick is initiated into the rites of sacramental finitude which we find throughout DeLillo’s writing. In *Underworld*, as in *White Noise*, learning “how to look” is the first step toward the “seriousness” required to embrace the world; yet that process, despite its avowed skepticism, begins and ends in religion.

The skeptical religious figure who teaches a narrator how to train his attention by way of sacramental finitude reappears in DeLillo’s most recent novel, *Zero K*. The novel envisions a secret community where billionaires can freeze their bodies through cryopreservation, hoping for an earthly resurrection where they will “reawaken to a new perception of the world...a deeper and truer reality” (47). In *Zero K*, scientific and technological advancement, far from creating the “disenchanted” world of the Weberian secularization thesis, only intensifies the longing for immortality. Here, technology makes a new form of immortality available to those who have the means; moreover, it creates the conditions for a quasi-religious sect to emerge around the implementation of the new immortality. But in a gesture surprising only to readers who have not already considered the role of figures like Sister Hermann Marie and Father Paulus in DeLillo’s earlier work, the most committed skeptic of this new form of immortality in *Zero K* is the character who embodies traditional religious authority. Jeff, the narrator, meets “the man

in the monk's cloak" in a cafeteria, and he begins by asking: "What do you do here?" (40). "I talk to the dying," the monk replies, which Jeff initially regards in the same way that Jack interprets the beginning of his exchange with the nun in *White Noise*: "You reassure them," Jeff suggests (40). The dialog that follows proceeds according to a pattern that should by now seem familiar:

"What do I reassure them of?"

"The continuation. The reawakening."

"Do you believe that?"

"Don't you?" I said.

"I don't think I want to. I just talk about the end. Calmly, quietly."

"But the idea itself. The reason behind this entire venture. You don't accept it."

"I want to die and be finished forever. Don't you want to die?" he said.

"I don't know."

"What's the point of living if we don't die at the end of it?" (40).

Like Sister Hermann Marie of *White Noise*, this skeptical cleric has devoted himself to tending the material needs of the sick and dying; like Father Paulus of *Underworld*, he counsels Jeff to eschew the promise of a transcendence beyond the worldly and instead to cultivate seriousness through habit and ritual. When Jeff asks the monk if he remembers who and where he is, the monk replies: "I remember who I am. I am the hospitaler. Where I am, this has never mattered" (43). When Jeff inquires if the monk's cell has a window, the monk retorts: "I don't want a window. What's on the other side of a window? Pure dumb distraction" (43). And when Jeff asks the monk what

interests he has aside from “tending to people in their last hours,” the monk insists: “This is everything I do. I talk to people, I bless them. They ask me to hold their hands, they tell me their lives” (44). The monk insists that his asceticism enables him to live free of “dumb distraction,” to avoid the escapist demands of eternity even as he tends to those who have signed up for the dream of high-tech immortality. Unlike Sister Hermann Marie, however, DeLillo offers little ambiguity about whether the monk should be read as “one more satirical joke in a secular white suburbia” (xx), as Hungerford claims of the nuns in *White Noise*. When the monk departs, Jeff offers a somewhat heavy-handed observation: “I did not want to regard him as a comic figure. He clearly was not. I felt, in fact, reduced by his presence, his appearance, by what he said, his trail of happenstance. The cloak was a fetish, *a serious one*, a monk’s scapular, a shaman’s cape, carrying what he believed to be spiritual powers” (44, emphasis added). Despite the absurd juxtaposition that the monk’s presence creates in this scene—if you see a man strolling through Google’s headquarters dressed in a monk’s robes, you will probably assume it is a prank—the narrator is at pains to insist upon the seriousness of the monk’s vocation. Later in the novel, Jeff describes the monk as “an eccentric figure of the type who is left alone by others,” as a man who “had no illusions about the sweeping promise of a second life” (86). The monk’s seriousness, reinforced by his skepticism, reasserts the logic of sacramental finitude in a novel that is otherwise dominated by fantasies of a science that could turn theological dreams into biotechnological commodities. His conversations with Jeff offer Jeff his first training in how to look at the images of death and resurrection that surround him throughout the novel, images that prove as fantastical as the painting of the Pope in *White Noise*. By learning “how to look” (*Underworld* 540), the narrators of *White*

Noise, *Underworld*, and *Zero K* each extricate themselves from an escapist vision of eternity, cultivating a different kind of religious vision which entails both careful attention to quotidian objects and a resolute affirmation of their own inevitable finitude.

Throughout much of DeLillo's writing, the dynamic I am calling sacramental finitude offers a reversal of conventional Catholic piety while retaining the seriousness of religious dedication. But it also goes further than this. I suggest that to examine the logic of sacramental finitude more carefully in *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Zero K* is to see how DeLillo's ongoing interest in religion contravenes the self-conscious postmodernism for which his work has received so much critical attention. As innumerable critics have already observed, DeLillo's writing dramatizes familiar tropes of postmodern literature and culture, including what Jameson calls the "postmodern sublime" and what Baudrillard terms the "simulacra."⁷⁴ In doing so, however, his work gives these tropes a sinister, dissembling quality; he characterizes these tropes as vague, shapeshifting postsecular spiritualities which supplement what they lack in substantive content by garnishing late capitalist consumer culture with an aura of transcendence. To understand how the nun, the priest, and the monk train DeLillo's narrators in the "seriousness" of sacramental finitude, we must contrast their way of looking with the ironic yet insubstantial stylization valorized by DeLillo's prophets of postmodernity. In *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Zero K*, the demand for a timeless, transcendent eternity is not an archaic aspect of a bygone religious era, but a persistent feature of the postmodern

⁷⁴ For an early iteration of this reading, see Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative." For a more recent example, see Laura Barrett, "'How the dead speak to the living': Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*."

condition, a form of life that mystifies consumerism and deifies the mysterious workings of markets.

White Noise is perhaps most famous for having scenes, characters, and dialog that seem to be lifted straight out of postmodern cultural theory. Jack Gladney's oft-cited trip to the "most photographed barn in America" (*White Noise* 12) offers the most familiar example. Jack watches roadside tourists taking pictures of other roadside tourists who are taking pictures of a barn—which in turn is only famous for having been the subject of so much picture-taking—all while Murray Jay Siskind, a visiting professor of Elvis Studies, mutters in Jack's ear: "Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender... We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura" (12-13). The "aura" of the barn stems from its infinite reproducibility, its capacity to perpetuate its surfaces without ever revealing any depth. According to Murray, the barn is remarkable because it is "part of a collective perception," a "religious experience" that is, ultimately, indistinguishable from "tourism" (12). The conflation of "religious experience" and "tourism" into an amorphous mystical "aura" persists throughout *White Noise*. The novel foregrounds a vaguely spiritual mode of consumerism, and as many other critics have noted, it gestures almost constantly toward a mystical rendering of the hyper-mediated world of images generated under late capitalism.⁷⁵ Jack's wife, Babbette, teaches posture classes at the Congregational church, about which Jack solemnly reflects: "We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following the rules of good grooming...[her students] seek to redeem their bodies

⁷⁵ Cornel Bonca, for example, argues that the novel presents "a vision of contemporary America that bypasses cultural critique in favor of recording awe at what our civilization has wrought." Likewise, Laura Barrett asserts, "*White Noise* presents a world in which individuality is replaced by media role models and God is replaced by an ATM. The loss of self and spirituality is sorely felt by Jack, a character who attempts, often parodically, to infuse his mundane and superficial life with some grander meaning" (101).

from a lifetime of bad posture. It is the end of skepticism” (27). A woman named Janet Savory moves to Montana, renames herself “Mother Devi,” and works on an ashram’s investment portfolio: “Peace of mind in a profit-oriented context” (87). Jack’s daughter, Steffie, mutters “Toyota Celica” repeatedly in her sleep,⁷⁶ a mantra that reminds Jack of the “ritual meaning” of an “ecstatic chant” (155). Jack feels waves of “relief and gratitude” as he withdraws money from an ATM, relishing the knowledge that “the system had blessed my life”—a godlike system, he reflects, which is “invisible,” “impressive,” and “disquieting” (46). In these examples and many others from *White Noise*, the sacred and the saleable intermingle, giving the rituals of contemporary consumerism a palpable yet unspecific aura of supernatural mystery.

One can hardly avoid reading these examples through the theoretical tools provided by Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism* or Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*. When Jack claims that he perceives the mechanics of an ATM as a kind of religious grace, for instance, he intimates a phenomenon that Jameson calls the “postmodern or technological sublime...the sense that beyond all thematics or content the work seems somehow to tap the networks of the reproductive process” (37). Jack’s sense

⁷⁶ Paul Maltby offers a rather different account of the “Toyota Celica” scene. I concur with his overall argument, which pushes against postmodernist readings of *White Noise* by asserting that “to postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the (conspicuously unpostmodern) metaphysical impulse that animates his work” (260). But his reading of the “Toyota Celica” passage demonstrates the limits of reading DeLillo as a late-blooming Romantic. According to Maltby, where “it looks as if DeLillo is mocking the traditional faith in visionary moments or, more precisely, ironically questioning the very possibility of such moments in a postmodern culture,” what DeLillo is actually revealing is his “tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration” (260-61). The mistake that I believe Maltby makes is representative of a widespread critical tendency to conflate the sacramental finitude one finds in a character like Sister Hermann Marie with the postmodern, postsecular mystifications promulgated by characters like Murray. The “Toyota Celica” chant does indeed point to a desire for “transcendent moments” and for “cultural regeneration,” but it is also indicative of what DeLillo’s writing posits as postmodernity’s insidious conflation of spirituality and shopping. Where DeLillo ultimately lands, I contend, is not on an affirmation of what the “Toyota Celica” chant represents, but on a theologically robust dedication to skepticism which enables one to relinquish the longing for transcendence that such scenes make lucid.

that his daily habits—particularly his consumer activities—bear upon some deeper, impenetrable mystery closely resembles Jameson’s description of postmodern aesthetics, whereby the “present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescrivable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming...bearing a mysterious charge of affect” (27-28). Likewise, the proliferation of images in *White Noise*, most notably the “most photographed barn” but also the constant allusions to spiritual perceptions that seem to have no material referents, align closely with Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra: “models of a real without origin or reality,” a “map that precedes the territory” (1). Indeed, the similarity between DeLillo’s portrayals of late capitalist spirituality and the theoretical paradigms developed by Jameson and Baudrillard might lead one to believe (prematurely, I would caution) that a novel like *White Noise* anticipates the “postsecular” moment in contemporary theory. John McClure makes such a claim when he contends that the mystical valences of DeLillo’s writing operate within the inexplicable, apophatic affinity for the “radical unknowing” (“Mystery” 173) of a hybridized, “weakened and postsecular” (*Partial Faiths* 65) spirituality.⁷⁷ For a critic like McClure, Jack Gladney on the mysticism of ATMs sounds a little bit like Fredric Jameson on the Bonaventure Hotel

⁷⁷ McClure’s reading of the religious dimension in *White Noise*, and in DeLillo’s work more generally, is for the most part quite exemplary. In *Partial Faiths*, McClure outlines the way in which *White Noise* “views the magical culture of consumer capitalism with some sympathy” while simultaneously proffering a “harsher judgment” that “invites us to consider...the scandal of an ostensibly secular and rational society governed by debased versions of the very religious drives and practices it prides itself in having cast off” (89). Ultimately, McClure argues, *White Noise* disavows the “church of consumption and electronic chatter” in favor of the “modest alternative” of “returning to the noisy desolation of the supermarket” (93). This reading usefully illuminates the exchange between religion and postmodern capitalism in *White Noise*. Nevertheless, its strength is also its weakness insofar as it describes a quasi-religious blending of the “religious” and the “secular” that, despite McClure’s protestations, all too closely resemble Murray Jay Siskind’s ideology. By contrast, I argue that the novel meditates trenchantly on how “secular” qualities (finitude, the desire for survival, and the resignation to one’s own mortality) are enhanced and affirmed only insofar as they first take seriously the text’s “religious” content, much as Sister Hermann Marie is not so much a hybrid figure expressing a “partial faith” but is rather a devoted skeptic who models her devotion on the religious vows that are endemic to her vocation.

because postmodernism itself is a phenomenon which erases any clear demarcation between the spiritual and the secular.

If, as I will soon demonstrate, the religious dimensions of DeLillo's writing upend its familiar relationship to postmodernism, then DeLillo's work also complicates contemporary debates about postsecular theory and the so-called "religious turn" in continental thought. Theorists of the postsecular frequently ground their work in a late essay by postmodernism's most notorious prophet, Jacques Derrida. In "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," Derrida invokes a "messianicity without messianism" (56), a "faith without dogma" which "cannot be contained in any traditional opposition" (57). In the wake of John Caputo's influential study of Derrida and religion, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, this "faith without" conception of religion in postmodernity has become a central pillar of postsecular thinking. This thinking, however, has recently come under sharp criticism from another interpreter of Derrida's late writing, Martin Hägglund. According to Hägglund, those who find a religious dimension in Derrida's work are drastically misreading him. Against Caputo's reading of *differance* as a messianic devotion to an unknowable event that is always yet to come, Hägglund insists that "a radical atheism informs [Derrida's] writing from beginning to end" (*Radical Atheism* 1) and that deconstructive atheism, unlike the conventional positivist atheism that "traditionally limited itself to denying the existence of God," undercuts the very plausibility of religious desire (1). For Hägglund, the "radical atheism" of deconstruction reveals how the "so-called desire for immortality dissimulates a desire for survival that precedes it and contradicts it from within" (1). In Hägglund's analysis, the longing for immortality is the

root of religious desire, and the logic of Derridean deconstruction, far from enabling a return to religious thought, undercuts it from the beginning.

DeLillo's fiction, however, stays one step ahead of this debate, transforming its terms. It resists the postsecular spiritualities of postmodernism on grounds that resemble Hägglund's argument against the "desire for immortality," yet it does so, contra Hägglund, in a manner that is itself deeply rooted in a religious background.⁷⁸ *White Noise* satirizes the postsecular impulse most powerfully through Murray Jay Siskind, a character whose speech, as McClure rightly observes, mimics "the ultimate expression of white noise: the babble of sages" (*Partial Faiths* 91).⁷⁹ Murray's breathless infatuation with the faux-sacredness of surfaces and shopping serves as a foil to the logic of sacramental finitude. Unlike the nun, who takes no interest in curing Jack's fear of death, Murray offers Jack a market full of only half-understood spiritual solutions as balms for his anxiety. "You could put your faith in technology" (285), Murray suggests. "Give yourself up to it. Believe in it. They'll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. God's own goodness" (285). Although Jack is less than convinced—"I don't think I want to see any doctors for a while, Murray, thanks" (285)—Murray continues to advise Jack on his religious options. "Read up on reincarnation, transmigration, hyperspace, the resurrection of the dead," he

⁷⁸ Of course, the desire for immortality is not one and the same with religion, despite the tendency of thinkers from Feuerbach to Hägglund to conflate the two. As I have shown in the introduction, "religion" is itself a contested term. But even if we confine our analysis to Christian traditions, it takes very little effort to displace the desire for immortality as a foundational or universal drive within the religious imagination. For a useful introduction to these debates within the field of religious studies, particularly as these debates have challenged the longstanding influence of Mircea Eliade's dichotomy of "the sacred and the profane," see Lynda Sexson's *Ordinarily Sacred*.

⁷⁹ Mark Osteen arrives at a similar point about Murray. Despite being "the most persuasive live authority in the novel" (*American Magic* 169), Osteen concludes, Murray's earnest, omnivorous fascination with every form of spirituality proves to be a "bogus naïveté" (174).

suggests. “Pick one you like” (286). Murray’s advice, a laundry list of “weakened and postsecular” (*Partial Faiths* 65) spiritualities, trivializes the question of belief or unbelief, instead offering religious practice as a sort of supermarket where one identifies whatever creed catches one’s eye, walks it down the checkout aisle, and pays for it with cash or credit. Whether it is faith in technology or resurrection, fascination with Hitler or Elvis, Murray’s solutions for the anxiety over death offer consolation, not resolution. And it is precisely this trivialization, this dearth of seriousness, which Sister Hermann Marie finds so appalling in Jack’s initial fascination with the kitsch painting on the hospital wall. Murray thus dramatizes the spiritualized postmodernism that thinkers like Hägglund find so repellent; yet the way out of Murray’s webs, in *White Noise*, turns in an unexpected direction—not away from religion, per se, but through the sacramental finitude modeled by the hospital nuns. In exchange for the “aura” of Murray’s postsecular “spiritual surrender,” *White Noise* posits a renewed form of religious devotion—a secular faith consecrated to what one cannot believe.

The faith that Murray proposes as the cure to Jack’s anxiety in *White Noise*—“You could put your faith in technology” (285)—becomes the governing theme of *Zero K*. This theme is announced in the novel’s opening sentence: “*Everybody wants to own the end of the world*” (3, original emphasis). In *Zero K*, a secret community of the world’s wealthiest oligarchs has managed, through biotechnology, to acquire both the ultimate form of social distinction and a solution to the fear of death. Their path to immortality is a process called “the Convergence” (64). Through the Convergence, a process involving cryopreservation, participants hope to be able to purchase the immortality they will achieve once science and technology have made it possible for their

bodies to be transfigured and their consciousness to be restored. In a gesture that concretizes the critiques of transcendence made by Feuerbach, Hägglund, and many others, the participants undergo a process of self-alienation, electing to end their earthly lives prematurely so that they can preserve their bodies for an immortality that is yet to come. Surprisingly, however, it is not religion which initiates this alienating desire for immortality; instead, the community's quasi-religious, postsecular mysticism emerges in response to a program put in place to meet this desire. By contrast, it is a very different expression of religiosity embodied by the monk—a kind of secular faith—which offers the tools for rejecting this immortality and reaffirming the world.

Soon after being brought to these strange, high-tech catacombs by Ross Lockhart, his billionaire father, Jeff stumbles upon a gathering where those who have signed up for the Convergence listen earnestly while two nameless leaders explain the community's philosophy. As Jeff overhears this high-tech homily, he begins to discern what it might mean to "own the end of the world." The unnamed man and woman take turns uttering gnomic aphorisms. "Think of money and immortality," one enjoins the congregants. "Life everlasting belongs to those of breathtaking wealth" (76), adds the other. The two de facto priests of the Convergence, speaking like Murray Jay Siskind in "the babble of sages" (*Partial Faiths* 91), admonish their listeners: "Take the existential leap. Rewrite the sad grim grieving playscript of death in the usual manner" (76). Surprisingly, Jeff observes, these injunctions feel very different to him than his ordinary experience of listening to advertising. "This was not a sales pitch," he reflects. "I didn't know what this was, a challenge, a taunt, a thrust at the vanity of the moneyed elect or simply an attempt to tell them what they've always wanted to hear even if they didn't know it" (76).

This promise of high-tech immortality offers an extreme form of conspicuous consumption shrouded in the idioms of mysticism. But it goes further. By converging “money and immortality” to defeat “death in the usual manner,” this community amplifies the sense, common throughout DeLillo’s fiction, that there is something spiritual—postsecular, one might say—about postmodernity’s modes of consumption and production. Like Jack Gladney’s intimation that the ATM offers him a kind of divine grace, the prophets of the Convergence insinuate that “an escape from our personal mortality” (66) is merely the apex of millennia of religious pursuits. “But is there a link to older beliefs and practices? Are we a radical technology that simply renews and extends those swarming traditions of everlasting life?” (64). Moreover, they cast the Convergence in a parlance that should sound familiarly postmodern: “Death is a cultural artifact,” they assert, “not a strict determination of what is humanly inevitable” (71). And as their homily concludes, Jeff turns his attention from their words to the physical space around him, describing that space in language that one could easily mistake for a passage out of Jameson’s *Postmodernism*:

This was their aesthetic of seclusion and concealment, all the elements that I found so eerie and disembodied. The empty halls, the color patterns, the office doors that did or did not open into an office. The mazelike moments, time suspended, content blunted, the lack of explanation...I thought of my room, the uncanny plainness of it, the nowhere-ness, conceived and designed as such, and the rooms like it, maybe five hundred or a thousand, and the idea made me feel again that I was dwindling into indistinctness. And the dead, or maybe dead, or whatever they were, the

cryogenic dead, upright in their capsules. This was art in itself, nowhere else but here. (73-74)

In *Zero K*, the postmodern sublime is the aesthetic manifestation of a postsecular spirituality where “money and immortality” converge to assuage the fear of death. And if the prophets of the Convergence are to *Zero K* what Murray Jay Siskind is to *White Noise*, then the skeptical monk gives to Jeff what the unbelieving nun gives to Jack: a commitment to doubt, rooted in the devoted performance of religious rites for the dying, which refuses to see death as escapable and, consequently, enables each narrator to see these postmodern, postsecular promises as hollow, mystified reifications of capital and class. Yet, as in *White Noise*, it is only through the initial premise of immortality, positing the possibility of an eternity or transcendence in excess of daily experience, that sacramental finitude is brought to bear as a mode of attention.

Where *White Noise* and *Zero K* dramatize a postmodern illusion of immortality with characters who put their faith in technology, *Underworld* skeptically examines a similar form of postsecular spirituality by ruminating on the religious implications of one of late capitalism’s most ubiquitous yet invisible byproducts: garbage. “Waste is a religious thing,” declares narrator Nick Shay. Comparing his work at the waste corporation with his upbringing in the church, he continues: “The Jesuits taught me to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections. Were they thinking about waste?” (88). In *White Noise* and *Zero K*, Jack and Jeff must reconcile a desire for eternity that is intensified by both the possibilities of technology and the inevitability of death. But in *Underworld*, Nick’s professional life revolves around managing the afterlives of objects whose earthly utility has already expired. Like Jack and Jeff, who

spend considerable time scouring for “hidden meanings and deeper connections,” Nick finds his attention to the quotidian world transformed by constantly confronting the detritus that capitalist society endeavors to render invisible. When a coworker complains that all he can see anymore is garbage, and that he “didn’t see it before,” Nick quips: “You’re enlightened now. Be grateful” (283). Like the grace of the ATM machine and the resurrection enabled by biotechnology, waste management, in *Underworld*, presents itself as a postsecular path to spiritual enlightenment.

What kind of enlightenment can you get from garbage? McClure contends that DeLillo, in such scenes, “urges us to see Nick’s vocation as a perversion of more authentically reverent treatment of the earth and its detritus” (94). This dichotomy of authenticity and perversion seems, in part, to accord with what we have seen elsewhere in DeLillo’s writing: the contrast in *White Noise* between Murray’s postsecular mysticism and Sister Hermann Marie’s sacramental finitude, for example, or the difference in *Zero K* between “money and immortality,” on one hand, and the nameless monk’s refusal of comforting illusions as he tends to the dying. But as with these other examples, enlightenment through garbage cannot quite be so cleanly explained by dichotomizing the perverse and the authentic. Rather, as Osteen persuasively argues, DeLillo’s fiction persistently “catalogues the variety of American religious experience” against a backdrop of “postmodern dread” (2). In *Underworld*, waste affords a mystical experience of the postmodern sublime, a dread-inducing encounter which makes an amorphous desire for transcendence legible even as it turns that desire toward late capitalism’s mountains of refuse. Recalling his decision to work with garbage, Nick reflects: “I was ready for something new, for a faith to embrace,” and “there is a whisper of mystical contemplation

that seems totally appropriate to the subject of waste” (282). It is this “whisper” of the mystical, this vaguely formed but insistent desire for something which transcends one’s finite experience of the material world, which pervades *Underworld*. And it is a religious commitment to skepticism, doubt, and unknowing, in *Underworld* as in DeLillo’s other work, which eventually puts these whispers to rest.

Nick returns to the subject of mystical enlightenment again, in a rather different key, when he raises an unlikely topic midway through an encounter at a swinger’s club. “A long time ago,” Nick tells Donna, a woman he has just met, “I read a book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Written by an anonymous mystic...in the days of the Black Death” (295). Nick continues, noting that a priest, perhaps Father Paulus, “pressed this book upon me” during “the priestly part of my life” (295). And while he had “forgotten most of this book,” Nick observes, “it made me think of God as a force that withholds himself from us because this is the root of his power” (295). Unlike the form of enlightenment endemic to waste, which promises “hidden meanings and deeper connections” just beyond the reach of mortal minds, the mysticism of *The Cloud of Unknowing* entrenches itself around an earnest refusal: the refusal to name God. “I read this book,” Nick continues, and “I tried to approach God through his secret, his unknowability...And so I learned to respect the power of secrets. We approach God through his unmadeness. We are made, created. God is unmade” (295). Reiterating Sister Hermann Marie’s dedication to pretense, but without a trace of her caustic irony, Nick concludes his summary of *The Cloud*: “We don’t know him. We don’t affirm him. Instead we cherish his negation” (295). DeLillo’s concern, particularly in *Underworld*, is less about “perverse” and “authentic” modes of attention and more about how to cultivate one’s skepticism with the

reverence of sacrament. The problem with Murray's babbling, with the Convergence, and with the enlightenment of waste—indeed, the problem with the postmodern sublime as a source of postsecular spirituality—is that each affirms too much, too quickly. These solutions respond to an escapist desire to elude the constrictions of everyday finitude. In response, DeLillo returns to traditional religious figures, traditions, and texts in order to imagine how one might supersede the postmodern condition by learning to “cherish...negation” rather than sliding indefinitely along the slippery surfaces of postmodern *differance*.

I have shown how DeLillo, throughout his novels, returns to the figure of the skeptical cleric in order to model a peculiar form of aesthetic attention, a sacramental finitude which, once cultivated, enables DeLillo's narrators to embrace the material world in its everydayness and to reconcile themselves to the possibility of their own nonbeing. And I have shown how this sacramental finitude stands in contradistinction with what most critics understand to be the dominant impulse of DeLillo's writing—a postmodern sensibility, akin to phenomena theorized by Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and others, which in DeLillo's work takes on a vaguely spiritual “aura” resembling what theorists of the religious turn in literary criticism and continental philosophy call the postsecular. Throughout *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Zero K*, the naïve, untrained aesthetic judgment leaves characters vulnerable to postmodern charlatans like Murray Jay Siskind, prophets of late capitalism who promise spiritual escape in the form of “money and immortality” (*Zero K* 76). The alternative to such charlatans, in these novels, is the religious dedication to pretense one finds in characters

like Sister Hermann Marie, Father Paulus, and the nameless monk. This dedication trains the aesthetic judgment so that characters better understand how to look with seriousness, with care, and with an awareness of the material world's perishability. Contrary to the protestations of theorists like Bourdieu, the process of gaining a more sophisticated aesthetic disposition does not serve, for DeLillo's characters, to reinforce the illusions of capital and class. Rather, this disposition, when modeled as sacramental finitude, serves to shatter these illusions, breaking the spell of "money and immortality" so that these characters can perceive the quotidian world and their involvement in it as if for the first time. Ultimately, this dynamic enables a mode of perception that resembles what Bishop Latour of Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* calls "our perceptions being made finer" (50), or what Hall, in Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*, refers to when he says: "Love is perceiving and perceiving is anguish" (371). DeLillo, in other words, inculcates a renewed perception of the plain sense of things by imagining a robust theological tension between faith and skepticism as a means of quieting the perpetual distractions of postmodernity.

All of this, however, leaves an obvious problem unanswered. How can skepticism be sacramental? What does it mean for doubt to take the form of a religious dedication? How can one be devoted to one's unbelief? Nick Shay's summary of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in *Underworld*, begins to answer these questions. But Nick's account of what it means to "cherish...negation" remains somewhat obscure. To elaborate on this concept, I want to conclude by examining the endings of *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Zero K* in light of the work of Paul Ricoeur, whose phenomenological account of the tension between belief and unbelief will help to illuminate how this dynamic unfolds

across DeLillo's fiction. Each of these novels concludes, not on a "weakened and postsecular" (*Partial Faiths* 65) note, but with a renewed sense of belief, a secular faith which follows closely on the heels of the catharsis of unbelief.

In one of continental philosophy's most influential descriptions of the relationship between Christianity and atheism, Paul Ricoeur formulates an answer to these questions. Ricoeur's "Religion, Atheism, Faith" offers a roadmap for understanding how DeLillo's novels figure the relationship between belief and unbelief, one that will prove particularly helpful for making sense of the endings of the three DeLillo novels I discuss in this chapter. Explaining the essay's title, Ricoeur comments: "'atheism' has here been placed in an intermediate position, both as a division and as a link between religion and faith; it looks backward toward what it denies and forward toward what it makes possible" (440). Religion, according to Ricoeur, is the naïve domain of accusation and consolation, taboo and refuge: "the two poles of religious feeling [are] the fear of punishment and the desire for protection" (441). Ricoeur then develops an understanding of atheism by summarizing the atheisms of Nietzsche and Freud, an atheism that, like Martin Hägglund's deconstructive account of "radical atheism," dismantles religious propositions on the basis of their existential value rather than on the positivistic basis of their empirical verifiability. Such an atheism, however, is not an end in itself. For Ricoeur, the atheistic gesture, the commitment to unbelief, "opens up the way to a faith situated beyond accusation and protection" (441). The goal of atheistic skepticism is not nihilism but, rather, a means of rescuing religion from itself. For Ricoeur, the "religious meaning of atheism" is that an "idol must die so that a symbol of being may begin to speak" (467).

Ricoeur's tripartite analysis of religion and skepticism maps almost perfectly onto the final chapter of *White Noise* when Jack's infant son, Wilder, embodies the religious existentialist's leap of faith by riding his tricycle across the highway and emerging unscathed. Wilder's passage from religion, through atheism, and into faith transpires over the course of the novel and culminates in this final scene. Early in the novel, Wilder is characterized as an innocent, a small child sheltered from the pernicious influence of television and mysteriously uncommunicative. "The boy is growing up without television" (50), Jack tells a nonplussed Murray, "which may make him worth talking to...a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush, intelligent and literate but deprived of the deeper codes and messages that mark his species as unique" (50). Like the "religion" of Ricoeur's trifecta, which offers consolation and prohibition, Wilder's innocence offers his parents the consolation that he is as-yet uncontaminated by the white noise of entertainment media; yet his innocence is preserved only by prohibition, by enforcing a boundary between Wilder and the media that saturates the novel's world.

If Wilder's innocence resembles Ricoeur's definition of "religion" and characterizes him as a naïve, precritical "wild child," then his moment of "atheism" occurs later in the novel, when he begins to weep uncontrollably for seven hours straight. Jack immediately interprets Wilder's ululation as a kind of dark night of the soul, a deeply religious phenomenon that transforms Wilder from an untouched savage to a wizened old prophet. "He was not sniveling or blubbing. He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony" (78). Critics have rightly interpreted this passage as a humorous portrayal of the loss of faith, a primordial

expression of anxiety stemming from some unutterable transition in the child's consciousness that might best be described as the sudden coming to awareness of the possibility of non-being.⁸⁰ To say that Wilder's ululation coincides with Ricoeur's concept of atheism is to say that it obviates consolation and prohibition. Awestricken, Jack notes: "It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place...where things are said, sights are seen...of the most sublime and difficult dimensions" (79). This is Wilder's infant encounter with the same "cloud of unknowing" that fascinates Nick Shay in *Underworld*. Tellingly, the novel's first section concludes with Wilder finally sitting in front of a TV set, "crying softly, uncertainly" (105). The consolation provided by Wilder's innocence, along with the prohibition from television, have both been eradicated by his bout of atheistic weeping.

Wilder's transformation from naïve innocence to wizened cognizance of finitude eventually culminates in a bold confrontation with death. Having learned to cherish negation, Wilder flouts passive resignation and actively embraces the possibility of risk.⁸¹ When Wilder rides his tricycle across the highway, the contrast between his demeanor and that of the adult onlookers is noteworthy:

Hey, sonny, no. Waving their arms, looking frantically for some able-bodied pedestrian to appear on the scene. Wilder, meanwhile, ignoring

⁸⁰ Bonca argues that "Wilder is expressing (however unconsciously) his death fear." Osteen contrasts the sincerity of Wilder's ululation, which "permits him to express the family's emotional condition with stark honesty" (174), with Murray's perpetual mendacity.

⁸¹ Here again I want to note a parallel between DeLillo's fiction and the existentialist theology of Paul Tillich. In what is perhaps the most familiar passage of *The Courage to Be*, Tillich explains: "The courage to be is an expression of faith and what 'faith' means must be understood through the courage to be. We have defined courage as the self-affirmation of being in spite of non-being. The power of this self-affirmation is the power of being which is effective in every act of courage. Faith is the experience of this power" (172). Wilder's tricycle adventure, I suggest, is a comical instantiation but "the self-affirmation of being in spite of non-being."

their cries or not hearing them in the serial whoosh of dashing hatchbacks and vans, began to pedal across the highway, mystically charged. The women could only look, empty-mouthed, each with an arm in the air, a plea for the scene to reverse, the boy to pedal backwards on his faded blue and yellow toy like a cartoon figure on morning TV... What did it mean, this little rotary blur? Some force in the world had gone awry. (322-23)

We might read this scene alongside Ricoeur's triad of religion, atheism, and faith. For the terrified onlookers, the demand "for the scene to reverse" or for some "able-bodied pedestrian" to perform the salvific role of the *deus ex machina*, conforms to the religious longing for reassurance and safety. But this desire for protection is precisely what Wilder's moment of atheistic ululation has enabled him to transcend. Instead, he has achieved a comical but nonetheless serious experience of what for Ricoeur is the faith that atheism makes possible. Ricoeur describes this faith as a kind of *poiēsis*: it is the "sense that poetry is equivalent to primordial dwelling," a "love of creation" that "finds within itself its own compensation" because "it is itself consolation" (467). Crossing the highway unsheltered and under his own power, Wilder finds a renewed sense of assurance by exposing himself to the risks that are endemic to his own being. This scene thus demonstrates the "faith" that, for Ricoeur, emerges from the atheistic rejection of religion. Wilder's defiance of death, eluding the oncoming traffic, causes him to appear miraculous, otherworldly, immortal; yet it is the very performance of crossing the street that attunes Wilder, the terrified onlookers, and the befuddled drivers to his and to everyone's inexorable being-toward-death. *White Noise* thus draws toward its conclusion by holding up an absurd, quasi-miraculous scene, a toddler successfully crossing the

highway in a “little rotary blur,” as an example of the wholehearted embrace of negation and nonbeing that Jack cannot accept until he learns to look at the world like the unbelieving nun.

Far from being an outlier in DeLillo’s *oeuvre*, Wilder’s progression from religion, through atheism, and into faith in *White Noise* initiates a pattern that persists in a more sophisticated form in DeLillo’s later work. For instance, *Underworld* reckons with Ricoeur’s triad of religion, atheism, and faith through yet another vignette involving “wild” children and doubting nuns. DeLillo chooses a minor subplot in *Underworld*, a story about two nuns working with homeless children in the Bronx which he adapted from an earlier short story titled “The Angel Esmeralda,” as the note on which to end his most ambitious novel. Momentarily replacing Nick’s first person narration with an extradiegetic voice, the novel introduces Sister Edgar, a nun wearing the traditional habit who seems, at first, to be a more pensive, reflective rendition of Sister Hermann Marie. “The old nun rose at dawn,” the vignette begins. “She said a morning offering and got to her feet. At the sink she scrubbed her hands repeatedly with coarse brown soap” (237). Sister Edgar’s cleaning immediately turns into a meditation on her own theological misgivings, her own transition from a conciliatory religion toward a kind of anxious atheism.

How can the hands be clean if the soap is not? This question was insistent in her life. But if you clean the soap with bleach, what do you clean the bleach bottle with? If you use scouring powder on the bleach bottle, how do you clean the box of Ajax? Germs have personalities. Different objects

harbor threats of various insidious types. And the questions turn inward forever. (238)

The questions continue to “turn inward” for Sister Edgar weeks later, when she returns to her soap and scrubbing brush after reading in a magazine about “News and Rumors and Catastrophes” germane to the Cold War (250), a persistent terror that inculcates a “faith of suspicion and unreality...that replaces God with radioactivity” (251). As she scrubs, the narrator notes, “she hadn’t cleaned the original disinfectant in something stronger than disinfectant. She hadn’t done this because the regression was infinite... You see how fear spreads beyond the pushy extrusions of matter and into the elevated spaces where words play upon themselves” (251). Cleaning, praying, fearing nuclear catastrophe, and worrying about the safety of a young girl named Esmeralda whom she has been trying to rescue, Sister Edgar starts to succumb, like Wilder in his ululation, to the “disquiet” and “foreboding” of an atheistic negation.

Underworld’s conclusion resolves the fitful tension between religion and atheism by returning, after a nearly 600 page gap, to the subplot with the nuns. When Esmeralda is murdered, Sister Edgar and Sister Gracie—a younger nun characterized by her “secular dress” (238) and her social activism—learn of a strange miracle story. In a postmodern, late capitalist twist on the cruciform tree that appears to Bishop Latour in Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, thousands of people are gathering by a highway overpass to watch as an image of Esmeralda’s face appears in a billboard every time a train passes. Sister Gracie rejects the miracle stories, complaining that they are nothing more than the simulacra of a media-saturated postmodernity. “You know what this is? It’s the nightly news...It’s how the news becomes so powerful it doesn’t need TV or newspapers. It

exists in people's perceptions...It's the news without the media" (819). But Sister Edgar cannot stifle her fascination with the miraculous image any more than she can subdue her incessant, inward-turning questions about the cleanliness of soap or about the authenticity of her religion. "I want to see for myself" (819), she declares. And when she does see the image in the billboard, she momentarily feels that all of her doubts have been resolved: "She feels something break upon her. An angelus of clearest joy...Everything feels near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory" (822-23). Yet her elation proves to be temporary, and by the end of this vignette, her questions keep turning. A night later, the billboard is blank. "What a hole it makes in space. People come and don't know what to say or think, where to look or what to believe" (824). And in response, Sister Edgar passes from the negation of atheism and into the vulnerability of faith. Unlike Wilder, however, who eludes death, Sister Edgar's experience of faith draws her into it. "There is nothing left to do but die and this is precisely what she does, Sister Alma Edgar, bride of Christ, passing peacefully in her sleep" (824). And after a short, fantastical account of Sister Edgar wandering through an afterlife that has been retrofitted to the Internet, the novel ends with a word that attempts to put all the anxious, inward-turning questions to rest: "Peace" (827).

Peace, ultimately, is what Jack pursues throughout *White Noise* as he seeks to elude the fear of death. It is the enlightenment that Nick Shay hopes to find when he turns to waste management while looking for "a faith to embrace" (*Underworld* 282). And it is the redemption that the billionaires of *Zero K* hope to achieve by conflating "money and immortality." But throughout his fiction, DeLillo portrays such desires as illusions to be dispelled through a systematic, deeply theological embrace of doubt, unknowing, and

nonbeing. The transition out of religion, through atheism, and into faith is ultimately what the reinvigorated aesthetic attention of sacramental finitude makes possible in DeLillo's fiction.

This dynamic substitutes one way of looking, a gaze that is inhibited by the fear of death and the desire for transcendence, with a mode of attention which is better equipped to bind itself to the immanence of quotidian, material experience. The mundane miracle that concludes DeLillo's latest novel thus offers a fitting resolution, crystalizing this process in a particularly powerful way. What *White Noise* tracks over several scenes with Wilder's emergence out of shelter and into risk, and what *Underworld* develops through Sister Edgar's gradual transformation from religious affirmation to atheistic negation and, finally, to a faith in the world that allows her to die in peace, *Zero K* captures in its concluding image. Riding a bus through Manhattan, still dazed by his experience with the secret community of billionaires, Jack finds himself "startled by a human wail" (273). When he turns to see what is happening, he finds a boy staring out the window, enchanted by "a natural phenomenon" which comes to Manhattan "once or twice a year, in which the sun's rays align with the street grid" (273). This mysterious event—"I didn't know what it was called" (273)—causes the boy to be "swallowed up in the vision" (274), a vision which he perceives secondhand. As the boy continues his cries, "unceasing and also exhilarating, they were prelinguistic grunts," Jeff wonders if this is what Ross meant when he told him that "everybody wants to own the end of the world" (274). But unlike Ross and all who had placed their faith in the immortality promised by the Convergence, Jeff concludes that "the boy was not seeing the sky

collapse upon us but was finding the purest astonishment in the intimate touch of earth and sun” (274).

To find “the purest astonishment” in the material world, to be reconciled with immanence and at peace with one’s finitude despite the clamor and the chatter of postmodernity’s infinite deferrals of meaning, this is what DeLillo seems to suggest when he explains, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, that his work pursues “a kind of radiance in dailiness” (330). It is fitting, then, that Nick concludes *Zero K* with what is at once a statement of faith and an expression of unbelief: “I didn’t need heaven’s light. I had the boy’s cries of wonder” (274). Sister Hermann Marie, the unbelieving nun of *White Noise*, would probably share Jeff’s sentiment. After all, when Jack Gladney asks, “You’ve been praying for nothing all these years?” (319), she retorts: “For the world, dumb head” (319). To understand the paradoxical role that religion plays in Don DeLillo’s writing, neither the secularization thesis nor a postsecular account of religion’s reemergence as postmodern spirituality will be sufficient. For it would seem that DeLillo, like so many of his characters, wants to reject “heaven’s light” only after it has made “the world” available to our “cries of wonder.”

Chapter 5

Marilynne Robinson's Aesthetics of Belief and Finitude

In the preceding chapters, each of the writers I have examined devise characters who encounter, as DeLillo's narrator puts it, "the purest astonishment" (*Zero K* 274) in the ordinary and the everyday. They reveal a "radiance in dailiness" ("Matters of Fact and Fiction" 330) by inhabiting a particular religious background. Yet Twain, Cather, Baldwin, and DeLillo each, in their own way, approach the religious content of their work at arm's length. For Twain, wrestling with familiar Protestant discourses and tropes enables him to stitch together an aesthetics of mundane transcendence out of his fitful and fragmentary relationship to Christianity. In crafting her protagonist, Cather integrates the religious and aesthetic perceptions of a Roman Catholic priest, but she herself was a lifelong Episcopalian who found in Catholicism a valuable resource for imagining how "art and religion" might turn out to be "the same thing in the end" (*The Professor's House* 54). Baldwin goes further, writing the African America Pentecostal church into his prose many years after he himself had rejected the faith of his childhood. And DeLillo, returning to (and rewriting) the logic of the sacraments from the position of a lapsed Catholic, experiments with how a religious devotion to skepticism and unknowing might transform our perception of the world amid a media-saturated, late capitalist postmodern culture. I now return to Marilynne Robinson, whose work I began to address in the introduction, in order to illustrate how one contemporary American writer envisions a form of secular faith by dramatizing her own theological commitments within the content of her fiction. Marilynne Robinson's secular faith, as I will show, unfolds out of an investment in religious belief which is anything but strictly secular.

Midway through *Gilead*, narrator John Ames offers an important insight into how Robinson's theology enables her aesthetics—an aesthetics which, in turn, seeks to bring the wonders of a Calvinist eternity to bear upon the mundanity of quotidian experience. As I have already illustrated, one outcome of this religious aesthetics is to make even the most ephemeral of objects, soap bubbles, shimmer more brightly against a background which almost automatically entails a gracious God and an immortal soul. "This is an important thing," Ames reflects, "which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person ... it is as if a question is being put to you ... What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?" (124). Noting that this governing question is not simply his own, but that it operates in his thinking as a kind of intergenerational inheritance, Ames explains that the moment of "encounter" is the moment when one's religious disposition is called into focus. He then illustrates this idea with a revealing theological analogy:

Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it? I suppose Calvin's God was a Frenchman, just as mine is a Middle Westerner of New England extraction. Well, we all bring such light to bear on these great matters as we can. I do like Calvin's image, though, because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think about that far too little. (124)

While it would be easy to understand Ames to be making a rather familiar observation—that our images of God are socially constructed, the overdetermined byproducts of custom and convention rather than universally binding truths—I believe that it is his emphasis on the aesthetic itself which offers a key insight, not only for *Gilead*, but for Robinson’s entire body of writing. The difference between Calvin’s “Frenchman” God and Ames’s “Middle Westerner” God is not merely the difference between historical and cultural circumstances; rather, Ames is making a point about how a Calvinist picture of God, cobbled out of whatever imaginative resources are ready to hand, pivots around the questions of aesthetic judgment and interpersonal encounter. Where one comes by one’s image of God is, for Ames, a peripheral matter; what counts is how one’s faith in that God serves to instantiate both the “aesthetic” and the “encounter.” To believe in God, in other words, is for Ames to live one’s life as though one is an artwork with a divine audience; it is, moreover, to encounter others with the same “aesthetic rather than morally judgmental” disposition; finally, it is to encounter every jot of the bare material world, as Ames goes on to reflect, out of a background presumption that “the world exists for God’s enjoyment, not in any simple sense, of course, but as you enjoy the *being* of a child even when he is in every way a thorn in your heart” (124-25).

By offering an “aesthetic” rather than “morally judgmental” account of the Calvinist relationship between God and the individual soul, Ames begins to build a theological apparatus around the transient image of the bubbles which float skyward, the image that captures his attention near the novel’s opening. For if the “celestial consequences” of one’s “worldly endeavors” (9) are aesthetic rather than moral, then what, we are led to ask, are the worldly consequences of Ames’s—and, by extension,

Robinson's—celestial conceptions? Robinson's fiction imagines what it would look like for individuals and communities to be imitators of God in this particular sense: that just as, for Ames, God encounters us from an aesthetic disposition, for the sheer delight of our "being," so to should we attend to every instant and impression of the material world as something which offers a wonder-inducing moment of encounter.

If God's "aesthetic" response to humans helps us to understand how Ames responds to transient images, such as a stream of bubbles glistening in the sunlight, then the relationship between these two passages also establishes a key dynamic which persists across Robinson's fiction. This dynamic exhibits and transforms two aspects of Robinson's fiction which studies of her work have routinely addressed: its aesthetics of the quotidian that reveres the overlooked minutiae of daily life, and its saturation in theological imagery—specifically, Christian and usually Calvinist doctrine. More important, however, these passages call attention to questions that most recent analyses of Robinson's work, and of religion and literature more generally, have typically left unanswered: how and why these widely discussed characteristics of her work are intimately related and even interdependent. Robinson's aesthetics of the quotidian and her committed engagement with religious forms of life are, I argue in this chapter, deeply interwoven. As these passages illustrate, the creedal orientation that Ames inhabits throughout *Gilead* constitutes a background and a system of thought that sharpens his aesthetic perception of the mundane, visible world.

As Ames demonstrates in *Gilead*, Robinson's fiction consistently refers to the doctrines of a traditional Protestant Christianity; yet closer scrutiny shows that her novels' attention to religious vision precludes the temptation to read her work exclusively

as sacred Word made text, theology deployed wholesale as literary narrative. Instead, in each of her four novels, *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, the background of religious conviction activates concentrated aesthetic attention to quotidian moments, sharpening the minutest perceptions of contingent materiality. Although such moments reinforce a theological position that Robinson often asserts in her essays and interviews, that “the scene of miracle is here, among us” (“Psalm Eight” 243), their broader implications are more radical, intervening critically in the prevailing contemporary discourses on religion, literature, and secularization, offering a particularly vivid example of American literature’s secular faith.

The dynamics of Robinson’s fiction posit a theological or, more accurately, theopoetic point of view that preconditions meticulous attention to the nuances of finite materiality.⁸² Religion’s pervasiveness across her work is less propositional than phenomenological. It is exhibited less by the creeds Robinson’s characters proffer than by the way their theology mobilizes background—the interpretive horizon for characters’ concerned modes of being in the world. Against the backdrop of this belief in eternity, for example, Ames’s attention is drawn more acutely toward ephemera, such as the bubbles that drift past his window. This theopoetic approach outstrips two of the most prominent frameworks for conceptualizing religion in Robinson’s work and, more generally, for configuring religion and literature as a field of interdisciplinary inquiry. These

⁸² I draw the term “*theopoetic*” from “Theopoetic / Theopolitic,” by the poststructuralist theologians John Caputo and Catherine Keller, and from L.B.C. Keefe-Perry’s “Theopoetics: Process and Perspective,” which appeared in *Christianity and Literature*. Keefe-Perry describes the “theopoetic” as “a particular devotional quality of a text...and a postmodern perspective on theology” (579). More broadly conceived, “*theopoetic*” is a phenomenological term that seeks to coordinate the literary with the theological, emphasizing a softening of theology’s attempts to “prove” religious doctrines through propositional logic (581). Unlike theologies, theopoetics begins, not with the logos of creeds and maxims, but with a *poiēsis* that favors a blending of religious and aesthetic language over doctrinal orthodoxy.

frameworks—theological hermeneutics, on the one hand, and the postmodern emphasis on hybridized “partial faiths” (McClure) and “belief in belief” (Hungerford), on the other—provide insightful but limited accounts of Robinson’s project. Despite their vastly different theoretical commitments, both alternatives prioritize either the objects believed in or the performance of belief as a way of coming to terms with the intractable presence of the religious in presumably secular literary texts. Critics who deploy theological hermeneutics identify the theological patterns embedded in a text and explicate their relation to a particular religious practice or doctrine, while postmodern critics do not approach belief as a stable signifier but, rather, examine the literary practice of belief as it occurs outside the constraints of dogma.⁸³ The form of religious vision in Robinson’s fiction, by contrast, is not fully tethered to doctrinal objects of belief, nor is it entirely a subjective, self-reflexive performance of belief. Rather, it is a pervasive component of the subject’s phenomenological interpretive context and an occasion for aesthetic revitalization, persistently inviting us to look again at whatever appears most immediately in front of us, to look again and to see it differently.

The significance of belief in Robinson’s novels lies neither in the objects to be believed in nor in the subjective performance of belief but in the way that belief saturates the background from which experience and perception emerge. I thus contend that the purview of belief in Robinson’s novels includes but also exceeds the models of belief

⁸³ In distinguishing between “theological” and “postsecular” approaches to religion and literature, I follow Tracy Fessenden who claims, in her recent article in *American Literary History*, that proponents of a theological approach to religion in literature (which she calls “R and L,” as shorthand) “sought to translate a mostly Christian theological vocabulary into a purportedly secular, cultural one. The newer postsecular critics, by contrast, seem to apprehend religion in what I think of as the bookstore vernacular: a vivid, if arbitrary, sampling of traditions” (160).

recently identified by Amy Hungerford and Thomas Haddox, each of whom takes Robinson's writing as a core example in their respective studies of religion in contemporary American literature. Hungerford emphasizes the role of theological conviction in *Gilead*, particularly Ames's enactment of belief, as "belief made capacious" (121). Ames, Hungerford argues, embodies the pluralist, cosmopolitan erudition one would expect from characters who are "living in Charles Taylor's secular age" (114). In the passage discussed above, an approach such as Hungerford's might accent the pluralism inherent in the idea that Calvin's God is a "Frenchman" while Ames's is a "Middle Westerner." Haddox contextualizes Hungerford's argument while maintaining a similar approach, emphasizing Robinson's tendency to "highlight what she perceives as a suppressed link between political liberalism and Christian faith," a faith that approbates "tolerance and spirituality more than the content of orthodox Christian doctrine and practice" (166). Such readings, however, are limited precisely by the tacit commitments that make them so useful. Rooted in a vision of the postmodern as an epoch that privileges hybridity over purity, liminality over fixity, and heterodoxy over orthodoxy, these pluralistic approaches to belief in Robinson's fiction lean toward the periodizing tendency of postsecular criticism. Postsecularism, which I have discussed at length in chapter four and will return to in my conclusion, theorizes that a religious turn in criticism and philosophy is an outgrowth of postmodernity's more general mistrust of all totalizing metanarratives (including the metanarrative of teleological secularity). It thus depends on postmodernism writ large as its historical and philosophical antecedent.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ John Caputo describes the postmodern to postsecular trajectory as "the death of the death of God" (59). Kathryn Ludwig explains that the postsecular reflects both the desire for "construction following an age of deconstruction" and "the fragmentation that has dominated in the postmodern period" (230). Similarly, John McClure conceptualizes postsecular fiction as symptomatic of postmodernism's emphasis on the

Such forays into the hybridity of postmodern religious identities can be beneficial, particularly for debunking crude iterations of the secularization thesis and for unsettling the positivist certainties fueling skirmishes between religious fundamentalisms and the new atheism.⁸⁵ But if postsecular criticism affixes its relevance to postmodernism, it risks committing itself primarily to a sequence of conditional historiographical claims, limiting its reach by remaining largely a commentary on religion amid the cultural and textual artifacts produced under the aegis of postmodernity.⁸⁶ Moreover, it misses what is most noteworthy about Robinson's treatment of religious belief amid both postmodern culture and the much wider sweep of American literary history.

The status of belief in Robinson's fiction eludes postsecular categorization by stubbornly resisting the postmodernist readings for which her novels occasionally seem to beckon.⁸⁷ While her novels do lend themselves to discussions of hybrid identity and

provisional and contingent, on its privileging of "partial conversions" rather than "well-ordered systems of belief" (4).

⁸⁵ Postsecular thinking, for instance, helps us to notice how two very different postures toward religion are premised upon similarly foundationalist, positivistic epistemologies. On one hand, bestselling Evangelical writers like John MacArthur write books with titles such as *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception*, while on the other hand, popular new atheist writers reduce all religious thinking to a series of falsifiable propositions: "Either [God] exists or he doesn't," Richard Dawkins insists. "It's a scientific question; one day we may know the answer" (47). The salience of postsecular criticism is largely due to its ability to upend such reductive understandings of religiosity, to expose the inefficacy of what Paul Tillich describes as the unsatisfactory definition of "faith as a type of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence" (*Dynamics* 38), whether such definitions are promoted by religious or non-religious culture war agitators. And it is in her commentary on this subject, in her essays, that Robinson is perhaps at her most postsecular. She argues, "fundamentalism that makes the same naïve truth claims positivism makes is still more impoverished than religious thought that attempts to be reconciled with positivism" ("Givenness" 88).

⁸⁶ As noted in chapter four, Fessenden offers another incisive challenge to postsecular criticism. Warning of a "spiritual jumble sale," Fessenden cautions that postmodern decontextualization of religious beliefs and practices may neglect those "for whom a Hail Mary really is different from a Hail Mary pass, a ritual bath from a midnight swim" (163). Sharing Fessenden's concerns about fastening a hermeneutic for religion in literature to postmodernism's famously slippery surfaces, I differentiate my reading of Robinson from the postsecular criticism from which much of my reading may initially appear to derive.

⁸⁷ Despite including Robinson's work in her volume on postmodern forms of belief in post-1960 American literature, Hungerford concedes that, unlike most of the other writers in her study, "strongly held belief still

religious pluralism, their prominence at the intersection of religion and literature comes into sharpest relief when they are probed for their phenomenological and aesthetic concerns. Like the concrete doctrinal persuasions in *Gilead* that enable Ames to attend to a trivial “effulgence of bubbles” (9) and to imagine God’s perception of humanity as “aesthetic” (124), the textures of theological *poiēsis* in each of Robinson’s novels form the phenomenological background from which a robust aesthetics of the finite, the ephemeral, and the quotidian can emerge.

My use of *background* refers to the framework I develop at length in my introduction, drawing upon Charles Taylor’s reading of Heidegger’s concept of “engaged agency.” While Robinson does not cite the phenomenological tradition directly, she does turn, in many of her essays, to an unlikely source which, in her analysis, closely resembles the phenomenological understanding of background and fuses it to her aesthetics of the quotidian: the theology of Calvin and Edwards and, a more recent theme in her essays, the Pragmatist philosophy of William James. In her preface to the Vintage Spiritual Classics edition of Calvin’s writings, Robinson explains how Calvin’s “rapturous humanism” offers a counterweight to his doctrine of “total depravity” (xvii). Calvin, responding to the Copernican revolution, “preserves the literal meaning of the [biblical] text by making it a record of perception rather than an account of the physical structure of the solar system” (xxii). Reiterating an observation made by Ames in *Gilead*, she continues: “Calvin is never more French than in his insistence on the aesthetic

matters for Robinson.” Likewise, Judith Ryan observes that, while *Housekeeping* seems amenable to “seemingly Derridian elements,” “the balance” in *Gilead* and *Home* “tilts more toward stable presence”

(62). Both Hungerford and Ryan find Robinson’s work central to projects informed by the literature of postmodernity, yet both struggle to reconcile its status as an odd outlier. Ultimately, both critics imply, Robinson’s literary forms of religion lie elsewhere than in the rubrics of postmodernism.

character of perception. The beauty of what we see ... signifies the address of God to the individual human consciousness” (xxii-xxiii). Robinson’s reading of perception in Calvin does not, of course, cite either phenomenology or modernist aesthetics as its antecedent, despite my inclination to read her work alongside these traditions. Nevertheless, by grounding her fiction in a thoroughly religious vision, deeply enmeshed in Calvinist theology, Robinson, perhaps uniquely among her contemporaries, demonstrates how a phenomenology saturated in theology can renew aesthetic attention to surfaces and ephemera. In her preface to Calvin, Robinson concludes, “Behind the aesthetics and the metaphysics of classical American literature, again and again we find the Calvinist soul, universal in its singularity and full of Calvinist wonder” (xxvii).

One gets the impression, from this and similar assertions across Robinson’s nonfiction, that she understands herself to be adding to this tradition of “classical American literature.” Whether or not we wish to call her writing “classical American literature” (and whatever one makes of such a designation), however, it is clear that her concept of the “Calvinist soul ... full of Calvinist wonder” places her squarely within the tradition that I identify as American literature’s secular faith. This emphasis on background, perception, and wonder in Robinson’s work aesthetically transforms the familiar objects of attention so that we see them anew. Borrowing from Viktor Shklovsky, we might interpret this transformation as the shift from recognition to vision. “The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to what this image stands for,” Shklovsky argues, “but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a ‘vision’ of this object rather than mere ‘recognition’ (10).⁸⁸

⁸⁸ My use of Shklovsky accords with the work of recent critics who argue that Shklovskian defamiliarization is perceptual rather than cognitive or epistemological. For Shklovsky, Michael Clune

Yet while the familiar modernist inclination is to transmute religion into art, for Robinson, aesthetic defamiliarization of this kind draws a distinctly religious vision into the foreground. By persistently engaging the background formed by each novel's theological referents, the ordinary in Robinson's novels is transfigured, in Shklovskian terms, from the banality of recognition to the vivacity of vision. Such a claim by no means secularizes Robinson's engagement with Calvinist theology, however, nor do I suggest that she explicitly engages theorists of modernist aesthetics such as Shklovsky through her prose.⁸⁹ Rather, I contend that among the most significant consequences of Robinson's engagement with theology is its capacity to produce effects, classically analyzed by theorists like Shklovsky, which revitalize attention to the world's surfaces, collapsing the false opposition between secular modern aesthetics and a wholly religious discourse rooted in Calvin and Edwards.

If we can trace the similarity between Robinson's fiction and the phenomenological concept of background to her description of Calvin as an early phenomenologist, we can likewise locate Robinson's fascination with quotidian

argues, "[a]rtistic technology ... turns the affective clock back from 'the ten thousandth time' to 'the very first time,' from vanished to present, from dull to live" (108). Citing the work of Donald Davidson, Michael Holquist, and Ilya Kliger, Clune insists on the need to revisit Shklovsky's "alignment of artistic language with perception" rather than to read Shklovskian defamiliarization exclusively, as Carlo Ginzburg and Fredric Jameson would have it, "as a procedure that intends new understanding rather than new sensing" (104, 103).

⁸⁹ I am not suggesting that Robinson is self-consciously writing in a modernist vein or that her fiction takes Shklovsky's aesthetics as an explicit source. But neither is my use of Shklovsky merely heuristic. Rather, I refer to Shklovsky because he provides one of the most forceful articulations of post-Romantic literature's ambition to vivify the world's surfaces---like those of the bubbles bursting in front of Ames's window. Robinson's fiction, I argue, produces many of the aesthetic effects analyzed by thinkers, like Shklovsky, who can provide language for criticism that wishes to discuss those effects in depth; while Robinson's creative process (her input) draws on the theological concerns of Calvin, Edwards, and others, the way she takes up these concerns (her output) in her fiction provides a unique, provocative means of considering contemporary literature's aesthetic engagement with quotidian phenomena, for which Shklovsky provides a helpful guide.

experience in her understanding of how traces of Calvinist theology culminate in nineteenth century American Pragmatist philosophy. “My particular saint, John Calvin, says that our brilliance, our inventiveness, our imagination, our need to understand the movements of the stars and the planets, are unmistakable proofs of the existence of the soul” (“Experience” 227), Robinson states. “He says that in descending into ourselves we find God, we being the products of such exquisite workmanship” (227). She concludes, claiming to “share Calvin’s view, that this world is what God gives us to know. ... The rest really *is* silence” (238, original emphasis). In another essay, Robinson builds on this idea by showing how “Edwards is indebted to Calvin in that he makes the phenomenon of consciousness, rather than an objective cosmic order, the central reality” (“Givenness” 85). And in this sense, Edwards anticipates the pragmatist experience: “Edwards is a pragmatist by my definition because he has a very active sense of the givenness of things. We know what love is—he uses the word without definition or modifier” (77). The pragmatism which Edwards gets from Calvin, Robinson offers (more by insinuation than by argument), emerges once more in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where William James “seems to be making much the same argument Edwards had made more than a century earlier ... that a kind of experience felt as religious and mediated through the emotions does sometimes have formidable and highly characteristic effects on personality and behavior that are available to observation” (73).

Where Robinson sometimes leaves it to the reader’s imagination to discern precisely how this intellectual genealogy unfolds, the point I want to emphasize is her account of how the Calvinist theological tradition, worked out in American literature and philosophy, provides what she perceives to be an antidote to a positivism which, by her

account, “has made a project of talking [the mind and the self] out of existence” in order to “unite all knowledge in one vocabulary of description” (77, 85). People are “talked out of the meaningfulness of their own experience,” Robinson laments, because of “this privileging of information ... over experience” (88). Among these losses, she counts “the loss of the conceptual vocabulary of religion” (88), and it is in large part this religious vocabulary—a background which reanimates a sense of “experience” which, in her view, Positivism has eroded—that her fiction endeavors to recover.

Gilead’s epistolary structure emphasizes the pattern elaborated above, whereby belief saturates the subject’s phenomenological background and offers a newfound aesthetic attentiveness to quotidian experience. Ames, aware that his failing health will soon cause him to “put on imperishability” (53), uses the occasion to provide his son with an account of his “begats” (9), the knowledge of his heritage that Ames might never have thought to bestow had he survived into his son’s adulthood (102). Yet the act of writing, as well as the belief that his soul will outlast his perishing body, reorients Ames to his experience of life in the temporal world: “I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know that this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that” (57). As he contemplates his impending death, Ames becomes like a child seeing the world afresh. Much as art, Shklovsky maintains, “return[s] sensation to our limbs” and “make[s] us feel objects” that have lost their luster through the erosion of familiarity (6), Ames’s dual confrontation with immortality—ruminating over the immortality of his soul while etching his words into a kind of

immortality through the act of writing—opens his eyes to a world no longer mundane but suddenly charged with novelty. Consequently, Ames's letter becomes more than just a genealogical account for his son. It evolves into an exercise in religious vision, a final retracing of his mortal life as he gazes back with exuberance and wonder.

Ames replicates this pattern in many of the letter's tangential vignettes, evoking theological commitments that ultimately privilege the attention and perceptions that, in his eyes, such commitments enable. Ames hints at this tendency, invoking Robinson's affinity for the Pragmatist tradition, when he claims that "it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer" (145). More than a century belated from William James's *The Variety of Religious Experience* (1902), such a statement may at first seem banal. Yet when read in the context of Ames's letter and, more specifically, according to the relation between phenomenological background and aesthetic attention that I argue is central to Robinson's project, this seemingly reductive appeal to religious experience takes on a new significance. Ames proffers no awestruck tales of subjective encounters with the sacred or the numinous. Instead, he valorizes the potential of religion, despite its inevitable moments of "awkwardness and falseness," to encourage adherents to trust "their thoughts, their expressions of belief, and their understanding" while recognizing "the essential dignity of their and their neighbors' endlessly flawed experience of belief" (146). In Ames's estimation, religious experience shifts from being a category of experience—something intrinsically enchanted or supernatural—to being a way of experiencing. It actualizes the possibility of facing what one has already encountered in the world with a fresh and gracious vivacity, of renewing one's perspective on what one already knows.

Religious experience as a way of experiencing is dramatized early in Ames's epistle. After announcing his intent to provide his son with a chronicle of his family heritage, Ames asks, "[W]hat else should I tell you?" (9). The vignette that follows, produced by Ames with no clear segue to account for its primacy in the letter, recounts the journey he took when he was twelve years old with his father into the Kansas wilderness, searching for his grandfather's grave. When they arrive at the cemetery where his grandfather is buried, they carefully scour the graveyard for the correct headstone. The scene culminates in an image of his father praying at the grandfather's graveside while the setting sun and the rising moon hang in suspension on either side of the sky, "standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them" (14)). This image of sunset and moonrise enfolds a fragmentary yet expansive corpus of personal, cultural, historical, and theological memory into a commonplace moment. The love between father and son, the solemnity of the father's prayer, the vocational bond between three generations who chose a life in the pulpit, and the loneliness of a deserted landscape charged with biblical and cultural myth all factor into the characters' interpretation of this moment, generating the profound sense of spiritual vision that emerges out of the quotidian throughout Robinson's writing.⁹⁰

As his father prays, young Ames kisses his hand and gently beckons him to look at the moon. "We just stood there until the sun was down," Ames reflects, "[a]nd that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me" (14-15). The scene ends when his father observes, "I would never have thought this place

⁹⁰ At various points, this vignette alludes to the story of Abraham and Isaac at Mount Moriah (11), the "desert wanderings" of biblical prophets (16), the legacy of nineteenth-century abolitionism, and the iconography of the American frontier myth (13-15).

could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that" (15). Later, however, Ames points out that his father was quick to insist that everyone would have seen this event, that the setting sun and rising moon were no supernatural vision but merely the clockwork of the natural world. Regarding his father, Ames recalls, "He never encouraged any talk about visions or miracles, except the ones in the Bible" (48). Yet despite the authority bestowed on the naturalistic interpretation, the thought of this event stirred him profoundly and even brought his father to tears:

I can't tell you, though, how I felt, walking along beside him that night, along that rutted road, through that empty world. ... I am glad I didn't understand, because I have rarely felt joy like that, and assurance. It was like one of those dreams where you're filled with some extravagant feeling you might never have in life. ... Who would have thought that the moon could dazzle and flame like that? Despite what he said, I could see that my father was a little shaken. He had to stop and wipe his eyes. (48-49)

By suspending the miraculous interpretation, much as Bishop Latour suspends Father Vaillant's supernatural understanding of the cruciform tree in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Ames and his father witness an unordinary vision in an ordinary worldly event. That this event occurs during Ames's father's prayer, and that the young Ames considers this vision with the reverence usually reserved for a miracle, says nothing in particular about the efficacy of prayer or the ontological status of miracles themselves. Yet it is the interpretive background of prayer and miracle that motivates Ames to ruminate on the event. Instead of providing Ames with an otherworldly experience of

spiritual revelation, the exercise of belief gives him the eyes to see what is already there. Religious vision exhibits its aesthetic efficacy by gathering the minutiae of a barren landscape and a desolate moment, transfixing the father and son by momentarily imbuing what they witness with a defamiliarizing radiance.

Andrew Latz and Christopher Leise each offer readings of *Gilead* that partially anticipate this discussion of miracle and materiality in Ames's narration. Latz first seeks to rid *Gilead*'s readers of the temptation to conflate the theopoetic vision of Robinson's fiction with didactic theological treatise. While "theological texts try to emphasise the practical nature of the doctrine ... they still remain at the level of abstraction," Latz remarks, concluding that in Robinson's work theological matters "are displayed, worked out: there is some flesh on the formal bones" (284). Furthermore, as Leise emphasizes, Robinson's theological commitments—her concern with Calvinism—emerge through her fiction, but not in the way that most students of the Calvinist and Puritan legacy would expect. "Robinson places the humanist Calvin before the theological one," Leise asserts. Her work therefore "provides a radical but legitimate rereading of Calvinism after Puritanism: one that finds the beauty of the world not simply as an *a fortiori* argument for the beauty of God's afterlife, but as an experience of the divine itself" (351). Both arguments are congenial for guiding future critical engagement with Robinson's work. Yet just as Hungerford's and Haddox's readings of belief in Robinson's novels are limited by what makes them most useful (their emphasis on postmodern hybridity and plurality), the readings by Latz and Leise can only take our reading of *Gilead* so far. While they rightly dissuade us from reducing Robinson's work to literary theology, they stop at the way narrative causes theology to be "worked out"—an important argument, but

one that does not fully account for the way *Gilead*'s theological background aesthetically transfigures ordinary vision. *Gilead*'s theological orientation holds the eternal and the temporal in phenomenological juxtaposition, doing so in a way that focuses characters' and readers' attention on the finite world's most transient details.

Gilead demonstrates its attentiveness to the temporal in relation to the eternal through a startling reading of its primary intertext, Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). Throughout *Gilead*, Ames gently reads Feuerbach against himself by reimagining religious vision in the light of Feuerbach's key claims. Feuerbach argues that religious ideas are projections that alienate humanity from its own best attributes; they disavow human grandeur by ascribing this birthright to a deity: "Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge. By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God; the two are identical." Thus, while religion may be "the solemn unveiling of a man's hidden treasures," the projection of these treasures onto divinity neglects the material, immanent human being (13). In *Gilead*, however, the relation between divinity and human experience is reversed. Instead of being shortchanged for the sake of the divine, earthly experience is enriched by its embeddedness in theological thinking. As I have argued above, it is through direct, embodied engagements with ordinary occurrences that Ames arrives at his most poetic moments of theological exposition. Take, for example, one of this many ruminations on the joys of being in the world: "If I were to multiply the splendors of the world by two—the splendors as I feel them—I would arrive at an idea of heaven very unlike anything you see in the old paintings" (149). Although Ames does abstract a theological construct from human experience, thereby enacting Feuerbach's principal claim, doing so focuses

Ames's immediate attention on the substance of experience itself. Far from divesting the corporeal of its meaning, religious vision enables Ames to perceive the minutiae of the material world with a more vibrant precision.

If Feuerbach's presence in *Gilead* advances a theological grounded aesthetics amid the liminal spaces of belief and skepticism, *Home* interjects and complicates a drastically different intertext: Christ's parable of the prodigal son. But in *Home*, which retells the events of *Gilead* from the perspective of Glory and Jack Boughton, the adult children of the minister Robert Boughton, Ames's most intimate friend, Robinson's configuration of the prodigal son trope is hardly as uncomplicated as many have suggested. Rebecca Painter, for instance, asserts that *Home* is a "modern version" of the biblical story, focalized through Glory's perspective to provide "a glimpse of how we might address some of the homelessness of the Jacks among us" (321, 332). I have no quarrel with the argument that Robinson's novel, like the many sermons that have sprung from the parable, appeals to the reader's compassion by valorizing qualities such as mercy and forgiveness over judgmental hardness. I contend that Robinson expands this trope beyond theological narration, offering a striking iteration of the interplay between phenomenology and aesthetics that persists across moments of religious vision throughout her work. In *Home*, the religious backgrounds inhabited by the characters and community generate a mythology of the past and a vision of a possible future, but the action persistently, and often frustratingly, remains arrested in the anxious and unfulfilled present. Unable to slip into the certitude provided by past and future, the theological impulse orients the text toward a renewed and renewing attention to the immediate.

Gregory Jackson's *The Word and Its Witness*, which traces the development of American literary realism in the nineteenth century through "the history of American religious representation," employs two terms that help illustrate the persistent "in-between" quality of *Home*'s narrative. The first is "aesthetics of immediacy," which, Jackson argues, describes a project of "self-education" that emerged in the nineteenth century and was "aimed at allowing all good Americans to live simultaneously in the United States and in Christ, simultaneously in history and outside time" (5). The second, not unique to Jackson but particularly noteworthy in his analysis, is "eschatological time," a mode of "double vision that allows audiences to perceive themselves as forever in a transhistorical present ... bearing the cross *with* their suffering Savior" (32).⁹¹ Although Jackson limits the scope of his argument to nineteenth-century American realism, his categories of eschatological time and aesthetics of immediacy might be productively aligned with the phenomenon I have identified in *Home*: the experience of being stretched uncomfortably between past and future (eschatological time) and the way that such an experience, when conceptualized in a theological or theopoetic framework, opens new avenues of aesthetic perceptivity (aesthetics of immediacy).

Near the beginning of the novel, Jack returns to the family house. He arrives unexpectedly, following a long and bitter absence, soon after Glory has moved back to Gilead to care for their father, Robert Boughton, during the final months of his life. For the Boughton family, the house comes to symbolize Jack's wandering. "Her whole life long," Glory recollects, "that house was either where Jack might not be or where he was

⁹¹ I am using Jackson's terms guardedly. Both concepts offer compelling insight into the dynamics of immediacy and unsettledness that emerge throughout *Home*, but I acknowledge that Jackson's is a historically specific argument—one that may not allow for a full-fledged transposition of his terminology in every case.

not. Why did he leave? Where had he gone? Those questions had hung in the air for twenty years while everyone tried to ignore them” (65). Throughout his mischievous childhood, Jack “didn’t feel at home in the house where he was born,” and his presence there loomed over the family like a kind of absence (115). After he left, his absence cast a shadow over the family’s quiet domesticity, a palpable void as father prayed for son’s return. Borrowing Jackson’s terminology, one might say that Jack’s perennial state of being absent when present and present when absent is a kind of eschatological time—he is the one always hoped and looked for but never arriving, the one who arrives but never as the one who was awaited. This relation between Jack and the Boughton home complicates any effort to forge a simple allegorical link between Jack’s return and the parable of the prodigal son. Clearly, Jack occupies the prodigal son’s position, but despite the family’s efforts he never reaches the biblical parable’s joyous resolution. At the novel’s conclusion, he leaves as uprooted and unsettled as he came (318).

Instead of embodying the traditionally redemptive role of the prodigal son, Jack is driven toward an aesthetics of immediacy by his perpetual status as one who is caught in between. On his return, Jack seeks to please his father by tending the garden that had been neglected in Boughton’s old age. At one point, the narrator portrays Jack “outside in the new morning light wrestling weeds out of the ground for all the world as if something depended on it” (91). From a pragmatic standpoint, Jack’s work in the garden seems superfluous. His own stay in Gilead is fleeting. His father, whom he hopes to please, will not live much longer. By toiling in the garden, Jack may as well be Adam returning from exile to uproot Eden’s weeds; a noble effort, yet utterly ephemeral. Despite the effervescence of his labor, Jack’s effort—along with the associated Edenic imagery—

calls attention to creative germination amid unsettled familial and spiritual conflicts. By clearing away the weeds, Jack creates space for the garden to flourish, cultivating the symmetry and stability that he has been unable to bring to his family.

The aesthetic sensibility that Jack nurtures, as he furtively seeks connection with his father, also casts him as musician. Asking Glory where Jack can be found, Boughton proclaims, “I’m Saul in his madness. I want some music around here.” When Jack comes back inside from the garden, he sits at the piano and plays the two hymns that Boughton requests: “Blessed Assurance” and “Whispering Hope” (113). Jack returns to the piano later in the novel when Boughton invites Ames and family to the house for dinner. “‘Love divine, all loves excelling’—they’re all waltzes!” Jack exclaims, launching into a vigorous and “distinctly Viennese” rendition of “There’s a Garden where Jesus Is Waiting.” After giving sacred music a worldly twist, Jack strays from the hymnal into a secular standard that casts earthly love in religious terms: “I want a Sunday kind of love, / a love that lasts past Saturday night / ... / I’m on a lonely road that leads to nowhere. / I want a Sunday kind of love” (189). Feeling estranged in his father’s house except when adopting the roles of gardener and musician, Jack fills the vacant present between memory and expectation with lighthearted attempts at transient artistry. Unable to find solace in the prodigal role that he performs, he turns to the weeds and the piano keys, momentarily translating his family’s hardship into art.

Glory, like Jack, encounters the ordinary more acutely as she abides in the house, torn by the anxious present that mediates between old memories and future hopes. Much as Jack blends church music and bar music, Glory blurs the distinction between her family’s public piety and its many painful secrets. For “she had never really distinguished

the secret from the sacred” (16). She thus experiences Christianity as the burden and the gift of familial memory. As Glory settles into her new life in the old house, the narrator informs us that she “had kept most of the habits of her pious youth.” For example, she reads her Bible daily, though her piety is largely “a performance meant to please their father, to assure him that they loved the old life, that they had received all the good he had intended for them” (101). At first glance, the relation between piety and habit seems to lend itself easily to a reading of religion, in *Home*, as a marker of identity, less a matter of personal engagement than a commitment to a community’s legacy.⁹² The narrator of *Home*, however, complicates such a reading by denying that Glory’s pious habits are mere acts of loyalty; for her, faith also meant “the unspecific memory of a comfort she had not really been conscious of until she left it behind,” a devotion to “distance and solitude.” As she thinks about her Bible, Glory observes, “What a strange old book it was. How oddly holiness situated itself among the things of the world” (102). For Glory, the Bible itself, along with the habit and routine she has constructed around it, demonstrates the innumerable connections between doctrine and daily life, sacred and quotidian. The memory of her childhood religion is aroused by the loneliness of the old

⁹² This is the point Christopher Douglas makes when he shows how Robinson’s portrayal of American liberal Protestantism borrows from the discourse of multiculturalism. For Douglass, “the reason for *Gilead*’s evasion of history—its will to not learn historical lessons—is that Robinson conceives of history as the source of what we have come to call ‘identity’ in cotemporary American multiculturalism” (93). Douglas goes on to critique the novel for offering a far rosier picture of Christianity’s role in American race relations than it deserves. “There is not a glimpse of this historical Christian support for slavery in Robinson’s *Gilead*. Why is Christian slavery missing?” (89), Douglas asks. I would offer a rather simple answer to this difficult question: because *Gilead* is set in Iowa, a hotbed of abolitionism which has fascinated Robinson since she relocated there to teach at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, not in Georgia or Alabama where Christian slavery was indeed the rule more than the exception. More subtly, though, Douglas’s reading of *Gilead* seems to leave out one of the novel’s bitter ironies, especially notable when Jack sarcastically refers to Iowa as “the shining star of radicalism” (210), as well as the crucial subplot of Jack’s inability to return home with Della, his African American partner. As Michael Vander Weele has pointed out, Jack’s struggles leave the reader uncertain “whether to bless the town or exercise our judgment upon it” (232), a scathing rebuke of the decaying town that had once celebrated its reputation as a mainstay of equality and diversity.

house, and she discovers that her experience of loyalty, comfort, and quiet enjoyment grows most palpable when imagined in the context of her youthful piety.

At the end of *Home*, Glory's experiences of "eschatological time" and "aesthetics of immediacy" converge abruptly. "The Lord is wonderful," she emphatically states at the novel's conclusion, linking the affirmation of religious belief to yet another aesthetic category: wonder (325). But *wonder*, while often used to designate the awe-inspiring or unordinary, can also be used as a verb and coupled with anxious tentativeness ("I wonder if..."). This double entendre reflects the state in which the conclusion of *Home* leaves Glory. Jack has absconded to St. Louis, and Glory remains alone in the old, familiar house to care for their dying father. Knowing that her prospects for leaving *Gilead* are dim, she imagines a future in which Jack's son, Robert, grows up and returns to the old house. "Maybe this Robert will come back someday. ... And I will think, He is young. He cannot know that my whole life has come down to this moment. That he has answered his father's prayers" (324-25). Glory, isolated on the porch steps, experiences the absence of her family in several ways: her father is dying, her perpetually absent brother, Jack, has left once again, and the rest of her siblings have moved on, leaving her to tend to the old house and its ephemeral memories alone. She lingers in the memories of a past that is fading and in the hope of a future that only exists in her imagination. But by envisioning the house as a repository of a life now long absent, Glory can dream that "transform the old love and make its relics wonderful" (323), and this dream motivates her to look once more on these memories with newfound care.

The hope that Robert will one day return to the site of familial memory, Jack's infamous "scene of the crime" (124), permits Glory to imagine that her solitary life in the

old house will allow for the intergenerational reconciliation that Jack and Boughton could never achieve while Boughton lived. This possibility leads Jennifer Holberg to interpret the conclusion as a hopeful promise of resolution: “The book seems to suggest that someday, through Glory’s efforts in the old, odd house with its cumbersome furniture ... both young Robert Boughtons, Robert Boughton Miles [Jack’s son] and Robert Boughton Ames, black and white, may return together to take up habitation in this land of their fathers” (297). Where the letters that constitute *Gilead* are written to guide Ames’s son into his uncertain future, *Home* tries to imagine what future the town of Gilead holds for the mixed-race child of Ames’s ne’er-do-well godson. But Holdberg’s reading of the ending may be too optimistic. By affirming that “[t]he Lord is wonderful,” Glory’s voice concludes the novel in the unfulfilled tension between aesthetic wonder and perplexed wondering (325).

The unresolved gap between belief’s hopefulness and the plot’s incertitude which marks the conclusion of *Home* can be traced back to Robinson’s first novel. In *Housekeeping*, religious vision is brought to bear on the narrator, Ruth, as the imaginative potentiality that gives form to her efforts to memorialize an otherwise inchoate sequence of rupture and loss. The novel begins with an account of a train plunging into the lake near Ruth’s hometown, Fingerbone, killing her grandfather Edmund and causing the lives of his surviving family to “[spin] off the tilting world like thread off a spindle” (13). The catastrophe’s aftershocks ripple through several generations. Later in the novel, Ruth, who lost her own mother to the lake in an apparent suicide, ponders this lake as she ruminates over a line of scripture printed in a missionary brochure: “*I will make you*

fishers of men.” Ruth fills in the blank spaces of familial memory by imagining her aunt Molly “leaning from the low side of some small boat, dropping her net through the spumy billows of the upper air” (91). This vision of her aunt quickly merges with the symbolism of the lake and with Ruth’s ongoing desire to arrange the fragments of her life, her family, and her heritage into some sort of coherence:

Such a net, such a harvesting, would put an end to all anomaly. If it swept the whole floor of heaven, it must, finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too. From there, we must imagine, would arise a great army of paleolithic and neolithic frequenters of the lake—berry gatherers and hunters and strayed children from those and all subsequent eons. . . . Add to them the swimmers, the boaters and canoers, and in such a crowd my mother would hardly seem remarkable. There would be a general reclaiming of fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles, of neighbors and kin, till time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole. (91-92)

In a single paragraph, Ruth poetically reconstructs an account of human history, from the earliest stages of evolution to her mother’s tragic suicide. The theological metaphor Ruth comes across in the brochure, Christ’s promise to make his followers “fishers of men,” brings all of Ruth’s experience and concern into focus, evoking depths that, like the lake itself, seem to have no bottom and no end of interpretive possibility. The biblical referent plunges like Molly’s imaginary net into historical and cultural anteriority, transforming these fragments—otherwise little more than a litany of banal anecdotes—into a complex and sophisticated vision.

Ruth's longing to uncover some meaningful order from the disarray of her life gives her name a peculiar relevance, particularly in a theological framework. As Anne-Marie Mallon notes, Ruth's name alludes to the biblical book of the same name, a text that, as Mallon claims, "came out of a narrative tradition that sought to reveal the enactment of a divine purpose in the reality of ordinary human history." While Mallon rightly maintains that such allusions do not serve "a primary theology," she clarifies this claim by purporting that they demonstrate Robinson's reliance on "resonance with sacred myth to deepen the vision of her own text" (104). Once again, the theological valences of the text go beyond the mere narrativization of doctrine and invigorate the attention given to ordinary objects and moments. One such moment emerges when Ruth and Lucille discover pressed flowers decaying in Edmund's old dictionary. This discovery precipitates a vicious fight between the sisters. "What will we do with these flowers?" Ruth inquires, to which Lucille replies, "What are they good for?" (126). Wishing to preserve the memories clinging to these crushed, withered plants—they were, after all, one of the few preserved remnants of the long-deceased Edmund—Ruth searches for a new book in which to store them. As she does so, however, Lucille gathers them up and crushes them, triggering a violent exchange between the sisters. Ruth, sensing that some sacred memory remains with these flowers, seeks to preserve them despite their uselessness. But Lucille, concerned primarily with advancing in society and escaping the orbit of her eccentric family, symbolically shatters her commitment to the past.

A few pages before this scene, Ruth reflects, "Lucille would busy herself forever, nudging, pushing, coaxing ... across the wide frontiers into that other world, where it seemed to me then I could never wish to go" (123). Ruth justifies her lack of interest in

Lucille's regime of self-improvement in terms that reflect her preoccupation with loss and recovery: "it seemed to me that nothing I had lost, or might lose, could be found there," she muses; by contrast, the sisters' caretaker, Aunt Sylvie, "felt the life of perished things" (123, 124). Whereas Lucille thrives amid the bustle of temporal cares, Ruth gravitates toward Sylvie because she longs for something timeless. Yet the timelessness she seeks is not caught up in questions about the immortality of the soul or a divine cosmology that transcends human finitude. She is not her aunt Molly. Instead, Ruth seeks to vividly encounter the beyond in the mundane world of deceased family members and decayed flowers, a vision that witnesses the timeless in the most unlikely emblems of moribund temporality. Like other instances of the religious aesthetic in Robinson's novels, Ruth's effort to stitch up the fragmentary past defamiliarizes and transfigures doctrinal notions of the timeless, eternal, and transcendent. Instead of positing a metaphysics of presence and encoding this theology into narrative, *Housekeeping's* frequent theological allusions transform the familiar cycles of mortality, temporality, and memory. In such a context, envisioning the unseen world attested to by religious belief revitalizes one's vision of the visible world, collapsing the boundaries between secular and sacred while grounding both in "rituals of the ordinary" (16).

Ruth's theological meditation on memory is, perhaps, her most striking effort to narratologically imagine an order amid the chaos of her experience. In this passage, Ruth explores how experiencing the other's absence through memory encourages a form of connection between living individuals and their deceased predecessors. "There is so little to remember of anyone," Ruth remarks, "But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will

fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, those whose lack we always feel, will step through the door” (194, 195). Ruth’s understanding of this phenomenon is charged with biblical allusion. In addition to using the language of incarnation to describe memory “become flesh” (195), she links this understanding of memory to a radically reconfigured account of Christianity’s doctrine of the resurrection:

Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell, or so the story goes. And while He was on earth He mended families. He gave Lazarus back to his mother, and to the centurion he gave his daughter again. He even restored the severed ear of the soldier who came to arrest Him—a fact that allows us to hope the resurrection will reflect a considerable attention to detail. (194)

This passage recalls Ruth’s earlier fantasy of a resurrection from the lake (91-92). She copes with her mother’s suicide by imagining memory as a supernatural force that restores whatever has been lost to time and chance, bringing families back together and stripping death of its finality. Notice Ruth’s juxtaposition of memory and supernatural doctrines (the incarnation and the resurrection). Ruth blends the hope for a supernatural resurrection with the mind’s finite ability to resurrect and refigure images of an otherwise absent past—to recall what we recognize as diminished and decayed in order to perceive it once more in its living vivacity. The merger of these two concepts, however, does not merely supplant the supernatural interpretation of resurrection.⁹³ Rather, this surprising

⁹³ For a useful phenomenological discussion of the engaged interpellations of supernatural belief and cognitive processes, see Charles Taylor’s “Disenchantment—Reenchantment.”

correlation elevates the natural, psychological capacity of memory by offering resurrection as a theological analog, a process of relating sensation and doctrine to each other not unlike Edwards's effort, throughout "A Divine and Supernatural Light," to convey the difference between having "an opinion that God is holy" and having "a sense of" that holiness akin, Edwards explains, to the difference between "having a rational Judgment that Honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness" (112). Blending psychological and theological interpretations with the imaginative hope for otherwise impossible reconciliations between families and communities, *Housekeeping* endows memory with what Robinson calls the "Calvinist wonder" of religious vision (Preface xxvii).

Robinson's latest novel, *Lila*, brings *Housekeeping*'s concern with memory and reconciliation to bear upon the characters of *Gilead* and *Home*. Displacing John Ames's soft but authoritative voice, *Lila* defamiliarizes Calvinist doctrine by imagining how Ames's religious background must look to someone encountering it for the first time. One way to summarize *Lila* would be to say that it dramatizes what might have happened if Ruth, having crossed over a bridge into oblivion at the end of *Housekeeping*, has grown to adulthood, appeared mysteriously in Gilead, and, to the scandal and amusement of the town, married its elderly minister. How would a neglected, transient, mysterious child such as Ruth respond to John Ames's slow sermonizing, his loving but laborious reflections on the Calvinist doctrines of predestination? How might a character with no religious identity to speak of, bereft of Ames's tendency to see the wonders of the material world against a complex theological background, respond to the company of a

preacher who regularly speaks of his favorite theologians as if they are standing next to him in the parlor? “I didn’t even know he was dead. Calvin. The way you and Boughton talk about him” (131), Lila quips while Ames tries to explain the sacrament of baptism.

For Lila, certain points of doctrine raise impossible questions, perfectly reasonable problems which Ames proves powerless to resolve—the doctrine of predestination, for example, or the problem of evil. Fretting over the souls of the people who rescued her as a child, Lila worries. “There was no one to help them with any of it. Their sins. So I guess they’re all just lost? What happens to you if you’re lost?” “There are other things I believe in,” Ames replies. “God loves the world. God is gracious. I can’t reconcile, you know, hell and the rest of it to things I do believe.” “I don’t know,” Lila concludes. “For a preacher you ain’t much at explaining things” (99). When Lila presses him further, however, Ames finally musters a response that he feels is somewhat satisfactory. He explains his faith, including his doubts, in a way that is wholly in keeping with the rest of Robinson’s work: he describes how his belief in a transcendent God transforms his vision of the material world’s most familiar experiences and sensations. He begins, predictably, by citing Calvin: “‘The only true knowledge of God is born of obedience,’ that’s Calvin, ‘and obedience has to be constantly attentive to the demands that are made of it, to a circumstance that is always new and particular to its moment’” (223). Recalling Ames’s explanation, in *Gilead*, of how God takes an aesthetic rather than a moral interest in his creatures, Ames states that his faith is bound to the call to be “attentive” to whatever confronts him. “Our experience is fragmentary,” he continues. “Its parts don’t add up. ... Nothing makes sense until we understand that experience does not accumulate like money, or memory, or like years and frailties. Instead, it is presented

to us by a God who is not under any obligation to the past except in His eternal, freely given constancy” (223). Ames concludes his testimony, summarizing these theological meditations with a much simpler axiom: “So joy can be joy and sorrow can be sorrow, with neither of them casting either light or shadow on the other” (224). He believes in God because it is how he knows to experience both joy and sorrow to their fullest degree, to receive them, along with the rest of his experience, as a gift of grace.

As *Lila* concludes, Lila makes up her mind that she too believes, even though she, like Ames, has no answers for the metaphysical questions that trouble her most deeply. “The old man always said we should attend to the things we have some hope of understanding,” she recalls, “and eternity isn’t one of them. Well, this world isn’t one either” (259). Having given up on the expectation that she would one day understand, Lila concludes:

Things happen the way they do. Why was a foolish question. In a song a note follows the one before because it is that song and not another one. Once, she and Mellie tried to count up all the songs they knew. How could there be so many? Because every one was just itself. *It was eternity that let her think this way.* In eternity people’s lives could be altogether what they were and had been, not just the worst things they ever did, or the best things either. So she decided that she should believe in it, or that she believed in it already. (259, emphasis added)

Eternity, for Lila as for Ames, proves to be something that enables her to think in a particular way, to attend to particular things, and to perceive one’s experiences of the world in a way that allows “every one” perception to show up as “itself.” Does Lila

decide to believe, or does she already believe? The answer does not seem to matter, for the point is not, in Robinson's fiction, whether one fastens one's cognitive assent to something called eternity; the point, rather, is the mode of attention that dwelling with a belief in eternity allows one to inhabit.

Having considered religion's role in the aesthetics of Robinson's fiction, we may be left asking, Why religion? Why could some other nonreligious content not serve the same function, transfiguring and renewing the familiar objects of perception without dragging in Calvin, Edwards, predestination, eternity, and the rest? But perhaps these are the wrong questions. Religion, as contemporary theorists of secularization such as Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*), Talal Asad (*Formations of the Secular*), and Vincent Pecora (*Secularization and Cultural Criticism*) have argued, shows no sign of receding from the myriad discourses of our public, academic, and creative worlds. Rather, we continue to learn that neither modernity nor postmodernity has eradicated religion's imaginative capacities from the background of public discourse. For such theorists, definitions of the religious and the secular mutually constitute each other, much as a religious vision of belief and a quotidian aesthetics of finitude depend on each other for their efficacy throughout Robinson's writing. The question, consequently, is not whether the religious and the aesthetic are mutually constitutive but, rather, what forms of vision and imagination are enabled by this generative relation.

In Robinson's prose, the most ordinary aspects of existence—from watching bubbles pop to remembering a deceased loved one—acquire the aspect of the miraculous. But closer scrutiny demonstrates that, across Robinson's work, the miraculous qualities to be found in the worldly are not intrinsic to the objects in question; rather, they are the

consequence of an engaged, interpretive relation between the perceiving subject and the existing object. The following passage, from the end of *Gilead*, exhibits this perceptual vision:

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light. . . . But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it? (245)

For Ames, as for Robinson, it is the “poor gray ember” of the quotidian, material world—not necessarily the rare, transcendent, or sublime experience—that “can shine like transfiguration” when illuminated by religious vision. The phenomenological background of Robinson’s fictional worlds, saturated in the language and experience of religious belief, establishes the conditions for an experience of wonder in the everyday, revitalizing, through its immersion in Calvinist theology, contemporary fiction’s attentiveness to surfaces and form. Such moments of wonder, however, are contingent on how you “turn your eyes” and on having “the courage to see” (245). Here, a theological imagination and an aesthetics of the quotidian are not just inseparable; they are mutually dependent. Ultimately, by exhibiting an aesthetic mode wherein religion endows finitude with an aura of wonder, Robinson’s novels resonate with yet another critical

transfiguration. They beckon us to reconsider how literature imagines the sacred, a call to revisit the discourse of religion and literature and to make it new.

Conclusion

Secular Faith: Beyond Postsecular Critique

Behind each of the preceding chapters lies what I consider a basic methodological question about the study of religion and literature. This question is rarely considered, but how we tacitly answer will set the parameters for our entire program of research. What difference does literature make for the study of religion? Or, to ask it another way: When we study religion's symbolic manifestations in literature, and when we study religion's social manifestations in life, are our objects of study the same, or are they different? I want to conclude this study by showing how scholarship on religion and literature, particularly the recent religious turn in American literary studies, has assumed that there is little significant difference between the two. After considering the consequences of this assumption, I will elaborate on my concern with the aesthetic in order to suggest how the methods of literary study may contribute to interdisciplinary questions in secularization theory and in the philosophy of religion. Ultimately, the aim of this study has been to disclose how religion's imaginative and figurative capacities continue to furnish American literature with models of attention and perception which can facilitate secular faith. But by forgoing the widespread tendency to conflate how religion works in literature with how religion works in social life, I have also sought to exhibit the kind of reading practice that can make these dynamics visible.

Had I adopted a more familiar method for interdisciplinary scholarship in religion and literature, I would have investigated how social, political, demographic, and theological antecedents had tilled the cultural soil from which the writing of Twain,

Cather, Baldwin, DeLillo, and Robinson harvests its religious concerns. I would have offered what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description” (3) of the twentieth- and twenty-first century’s religious milieu, implying—but, perhaps, never quite insisting upon—an organic relationship between context and text. Few of the scholars who have rekindled critical interest in religion and literature have argued explicitly for this historicist approach. But as I am about to demonstrate, the historicist paradigm remains so deeply embedded as a disciplinary norm that it has entrenched itself as the standard operating procedure for an emerging field of inquiry, a field which might be better served by a wider range of governing questions.

In recent scholarship, the most explicit call to ground the study of religion and literature in historicist methods can be found in Coviello and Hickman’s introduction to the 2015 special issue of *American Literature*. After pronouncing the death of the secularization thesis, they invite scholars of American literature to consider the “epistemological and methodological reorientation from which history might look different” from a postsecular vantage (646). They then outline a taxonomy of three ways we might use the term postsecular: first, as “the project of dislodging a particular style of progress narrative” (646); second, as “the epistemological and methodological self-interrogation following” the death of the secularization thesis; and third, as “the sense...that we might do our thinking about modernity...under a sign other than ‘the secular’” (649). From this third version of the postsecular, Coviello and Hickman draw what purports to be a conclusion that can redefine the entire field of American literary studies. They suggest that literary historians shift their “master category” from the secular to the global, a move that might “place Americanists in a position to be in the vanguard”

(649-50) as we undertake the challenge of rehistoricizing virtually all of “US literary history” (650) in light of our transformed understanding of secularization.

Hickman and Coviello are not alone in making this type of claim. The 2014 special issue of *American Literary History*, “American Literatures/American Religions,” opens with a survey of cultural phenomena indicative of how the secularization thesis has collapsed since the 1970s:

A Georgia Democrat who spoke comfortably of being born again was elected to the White House. The Iranian Revolution fixed the attention of the nation on an Ayatollah and his followers. The Moral Majority began organizing conservative Christians and imploring them to vote. In short, religion moved into the thick of both domestic and international politics.

(1)

For editors Jonathan Ebel and Justine Murison, literature scholars ought to revive critical interest in religion—a topic which was “demoted” during the 1970s as “another ideology at play within literature” to be “taken up, ignored, or seen as a mystification of the economic realities or power relations behind it” (2-3)—because religion continues to persist as a force shaping culture, politics, and history. Humanists need to learn more about American religion, they suggest, and to do so they should look to the evidence supplied by American literature. Similarly, in the 2010 issue of *Early American Literature* co-edited by Murison and Jordan Alexander Stein, the contributors offer “a renewed focus on methodology” which responds to “a fieldwide reexamination of the conceptual relationship among ‘literature,’ ‘history,’ and ‘religion’” (2). Although the editors concede that “the most tried and true method in early American literary studies—

historicism—might not itself be sufficient” (18), they maintain that the chief task of scholars concerned with religion and literature is to “allow religion to push them to think through history—what it is, what its criteria are, what makes it count” (19). Here, historicism’s conceptual parameters remain intact even where historicism’s methods are problematized.

The past decade’s most influential monographs on religion in American literature have followed suit. Tracy Fessenden’s *Culture and Redemption* persuasively scours American literary history, from the colonial period to *The Great Gatsby*, in order to dislodge the idea that the secular is a neutral category which adjudicates the religious from some privileged distance. A broad swath of American literary history, she explains, reveals how “particular forms of Protestantism emerged as an ‘unmarked category’ in American religious and literary history...blind to its own exclusions” (6). John McClure, whose discussion of Don DeLillo I have engaged with at length, makes a considerable effort in *Partial Faiths* to show how writers such as DeLillo, Pynchon, Morrison, and others take up a uniquely postmodern vision of spirituality, a vision that would be unintelligible outside contemporaneous discourses in poststructuralist philosophy and theology. Amy Hungerford, whose concerns come close to my own when she explains how postwar writers “turn to religious authority as a renewable resource for literature” (136), nevertheless justifies the scope of *Postmodern Belief* on familiar historicist grounds. “This book demonstrates how religion and literature in this period together present us with logical and imaginative structures that bridge the gaps between conviction and relativism, between doctrine and pluralism, between belief and meaninglessness” (xxi). These “gaps,” she explains, are bound up with the context of late twentieth century

postmodern culture and theory. And most recently, if also most tellingly, Christopher Douglas, in *If God Meant to Interfere*, offers parallel accounts of the historical rise of the religious right in the United States, on one hand, and postwar American literature's failure to recognize its sociopolitical significance, on the other.

Douglas's approach provides a revealing case study of both the power and the limits of historicist methods for scholarship on American literature and religion. His study offers what is perhaps the most trenchant literary-historical analysis to date of the sociopolitical phenomenon that Jenny Franchot cited two decades ago as her key justification for reinvigorating attention to religion among Americanists: "The country is in the midst of a conservative Christian revolt, Franchot observes, yet "Americanist literary and cultural critics have little to say," she laments. "A question facing American literary scholars at the turn of the twenty-first century is whether we want to persist in evading the larger culture's religious concerns" (833-34). Douglas dives deeply into these religious concerns, showing how a conservative Evangelical political resurgence adopted the familiar idioms of liberal literary culture—particularly multiculturalism and postmodernism—in order to reinvent itself as a marginalized identity which secularists had unjustly barred from the public sphere. "'Christian multiculturalism' and 'Christian postmodernism,'" Douglas asserts, "forestalled simplistic oppositions in the literary and cultural fields wherein, perhaps, a multiculturalism unsullied by religious commitments might have faced a Christian religious tradition that was only universalist, and a postmodernism confident in its secular methods and conclusions might have confronted rigid Christian theological doctrines" (4). While I believe that Douglas's argument about "Christian multiculturalism" has tremendous explanatory power for mapping the actual

religious landscape of the United States since the 1970s, his bridge between this historical phenomenon and his examples from literature strikes me as less precise. His aim, as he puts it, is “to listen to our literature for its sometimes subterranean attention to the religious upheaval that was going on around it” (5). His study of writers such as Robinson, Philip Roth, Cormac McCarthy, and others thus emphasizes how writers register the transformed religious landscape in “roundabout ways and by indirect address” (4), to “decipher its signs and clues in the literature and culture of our time” (303).⁹⁴ What Douglas finds so surprising in the past few decades of American literature, one might say, is how comprehensively its texts fail to derive their descriptions of American religiosity from their historical and cultural contexts. According to Douglas, late twentieth century America writers seem suspiciously mute about these important historical developments; they reveal this context only in “roundabout ways and by indirect address” (4). My response to this confusion is simple. If the authors I have studied here are any indication, a great deal of American literature failed to reproduce its contemporaneous religious milieu because it was busy doing something else. This would not be surprising, however, if we maintain that when we study religion in literature and when we study religion in life, we are studying related yet separate objects.

That religion is an urgent topic for literary studies, particularly for Americanists, is no longer a matter of controversy, thanks largely to these critics and to their historicist methods. The chief accomplishment of the recent turn to religion in contemporary criticism has been to challenge reductionist readings of religion as symptomatic of

⁹⁴ The hunt for “signs and clues,” incidentally, is precisely what Rita Felski describes, in *The Limits of Critique*, when she performs a phenomenology of the modern, disenchanted literary critic as a “detective” figure (86).

extrinsic historical, political, or psychological forces, and to take religious discourses and practices seriously on their own terms. Thanks to the hardnosed historicism of postsecular critique, it is now quite difficult to write off American literature's longstanding fascination with religion as epiphenomenal. Nevertheless, in their effort to recover the religious as a subject for serious scholarly inquiry in literary studies, postsecular critics risk repeating with regard to literature the methodological errors that they have corrected with regard to religion. This tension reveals itself acutely in the work of Lori Branch, a participant in the Mellon Foundation's recent working group on religion and literature and co-editor of a recent special issue in *Religion and Literature* which aims to theorize the postsecular for literary study. In her essay for *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, Branch offers seven premises for postsecular criticism. Her second and third premises, "The Recognition of Secularism as an Ideology" and "Revised and Historical Understandings of Religion," propose what appears to be a revisionary form of the New Historicism analogous to the turn that Coviello and Hickman advocate. We study literature in order to reveal the socially constructed, ideological nature of contemporary accounts of religion and secularism (95, 96). Literature, on these terms, will show us how historical forms of religion manifest and persist through modernity and postmodernity. Her fourth and seventh premises, however, "The Limitations of Critique" and "Renovating the Big Questions," plant the seeds for a very different kind of critical paradigm (97, 99). Here Branch praises the work of Rita Felski, advocating a postcritical approach associated with "making room for compassion in its dealings with the text and its writer, capable of interrogating and being interrogated by texts and of reaching an audience beyond the academy with the joy of humanistic

study” (97). I do not believe that these two approaches—a historicist rereading of religion in literature, on the one hand, and a redoubled engagement with how religion enables literary form, on the other—are entirely exclusive. But I do believe that we risk subordinating the latter to the former, and that if recent trends in postsecular criticism are any indication, I worry that we are already doing so.

What gets lost when the religious features of literary form are subordinated to the religious dimensions of literary history? One of my goals throughout this study has been to acknowledge the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship which reveals the limitations of the secularization thesis while subsequently modeling a critical approach which considers the consequences of that scholarship for literary aesthetics. Consider, for example, the following assertions and compare them with what scholars of religion and literature have been saying about the secularization thesis for the past two decades. “Max Weber’s thesis about the disenchantment of the world remains an essential touchstone,” yet “disenchantment reiterates and reinforces the very conditions it describes” (*Uses* 58). It is therefore time to “face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and a theoretical ideal” (76). Moreover, if our critical apparatus has been forged in the fires of what Ricoeur calls the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” it is long past time to revisit Ricoeur’s other categories, “a hermeneutics of trust, of restoration, of recollection” (*Limits* 9). With these claims, Rita Felski develops an argument about literature which is structurally identical to the argument that postsecular critics have been making about religion. Disenchantment is not totalizing; suspicion is but one of many postures available to the scholar; we must do a better job, as Felski puts it, of attending to a text’s phenomenology, of exploring and explaining “how things mean and how they matter”

(107).⁹⁵ What if we reconsider these insights in light of contemporary scholarship on religion and literature? How would it change what we are looking for when we read? There is, it would seem, a productive resonance between the religious turn and the revenge of the aesthetic. Both seem to have emerged simultaneously, running parallel to each other but rarely intersecting, each responding to a similar dissatisfaction with how historicist methods facilitate the critic's encounter with literature's imaginative, counterfactual ambitions.

One might object, however, that to prioritize a method which emphasizes how religion imbues literary aesthetics with new modes of attention is to reproduce another variation of the same outmoded secularization thesis. Such a method might reduce religion, stripping it of its attendant ontological and metaphysical commitments only to take what is left over and repurpose it as art. If religion is an aesthetic device, one might claim, it has stopped being religion, and thus to advocate a critical method which prioritizes form is simply to turn the clock back to the triumphant teleology of secular progress which has lost its explanatory power. In what remains of this conclusion, I will answer this objection in two ways. First, I will argue that there is no necessary "reduction" implied by a turn to the aesthetic. What I have sought to illustrate throughout this study is not a reduction of the religious to the aesthetic, religion repurposed as art, but a means of analyzing their relation, a way of inhabiting what Ricoeur calls the "projected world" of a text in order to see from the vantage disclosed by the internal

⁹⁵ Michael Clune makes a slightly different version of this argument in *Writing against Time*. "When literary critics describe actual states of affairs, our claims are necessarily parasitic on the methods and models of other disciplines, except in cases where we choose to make use of models long abandoned by those disciplines" (139), Clune observes. His solution, which runs parallel to my own argument about how literary critics might approach literature's relationship to religion, is to be "attuned to the ways in which our objects of study achieve discontinuity with actuality," a solution that helps "our descriptions gain a genuine autonomy that makes possible a new and productive relation to other disciplines" (139-40).

dynamics which are immanent to that text (“Philosophy and Religious Language” 44). For the writers I examine in this study, this mode of attention, this way of inhabiting a text and seeing the world disclosed through the text in a particular way, is what I have been calling secular faith, and it has important implications for contemporary debates within secularization theory and the philosophy of religion. Second, I will contend that religion and aesthetics are best understood as complementary rather than exclusive categories. Despite their obvious differences, much more remains to be said about their commonalities. I will show that the most effective way to analyze how religion resonates in literature is to describe how what is called “religion” and what is called “aesthetics” intermingle, co-constructing a text’s phenomenological horizon.

Each of these claims is a claim about form. But form is a tricky concept. Here I follow Nicholas Gaskill, whose recent discussion of aesthetic formalism, “The Close and the Concrete,” demonstrates an important paradox. When literary critics discuss aesthetic form or perform a close reading in order to call attention to form, they might mean “shape,” or they might mean “essence.” For “form” can refer to either the textures of a composite object, “the material aspects of a thing,” or to the abstract category to which it belongs, the Platonic “immaterial nature that makes a thing what it is” (507). We use form, often in the same breath, to mean both what is too close to notice without subtle analysis and what is too distant to conceptualize without broad stroke categorization. Gaskill delineates between these two understandings of form in order to explain the New Critical legacy and to reflect on what that legacy has to offer to the renewed interest in form among literature scholars today. And he explains this distinction in a way that, with some reflection, will reveal important implications for how we understand the relation

between religion and aesthetics in literature. The New Critical “concern with the abstract and the concrete,” the “essence” versus the “material,” Gaskill explains, “had previously been described as the individual and the universal, the particular and the general, or *the immanent and the transcendent*” (507, emphasis added). For the New Critics, resisting the abstract meaning of a text, its “transcendent” quality, was a strategy for making “every facet of the object count” (508); to get at a text’s concrete particulars, its “immanence,” as it were, was a way of insisting that “there is a unique way of attending to things as together, that there are objects designed for such attention” (512). Aesthetic formalism became a method for looking carefully at the immanent features of a text within the context of its transcendent abstraction. You gain clearer insight into the parts of a work by conceptualizing it as a whole, even if the unity of that whole is a fiction.

Building on Gaskill’s terms, I propose that the relation between religion and aesthetics, in the works I have studied throughout this project, is one that enables the religious content of the work to bridge the abstract, the “transcendent,” with the material, the “immanent,” in such a way that the background condition of transcendence (form as essence) enables the particularities and contingencies of worldly immanence (form as material) to show up with renewed vivacity. This is another way of saying that, in a novel like *Gilead*, John Ames’s belief in the immortality of his soul—an abstraction, an essence, a transcendence—is what gives him eyes to see the shapes and surfaces—the concreteness, the materiality, the immanence—of the bubbles that float past his window. An abstract belief sharpens the encounter with a concrete image because that image is given new significance within the context of belief. This scene neither gives a historically rigorous account of contemporary religious belief, nor does it merely reduce the religious

to the aesthetic by transposing Ames's belief in God into a perception of beauty. Instead, it models a dynamic whereby a recognizable feature of a particular religious imagination facilitates the aesthetic encounter. Religion is not what is sacrificed in the name of aesthetics; instead, religion is what animates the aesthetic relation.

"What are the salient differences between social situations and literary events?" (520), Gaskill asks, a question akin to my own inquiry about the difference between religion in life and religion in literature. He concludes where I conclude, insisting that we "need *some* notion of the specificity of art as a way of thinking or understanding" (521). In my account of religion in twentieth century American literature, secular faith is a name we might give to a recurrent "literary event," whereby a religious background serves as the aesthetic device which vivifies the surfaces of everyday experience. It is a relation between the religious and the aesthetic which grants "specificity" to a mode of attention, "a way of thinking or understanding," which literature seeks to model.

If secular faith is not a reduction of the religious to the aesthetic but rather a way of grasping the relation between the religious and the aesthetic, then what does that relation make visible? How does this mode of attention, to lean once more upon Gaskill, offer "nondiscursive forms of understanding cultivated in a range of human practices and rooted in a deep-seated human need" (516)? To answer these questions, I will explain why I have chosen the phrase "secular faith," and I will gesture toward how this concept might contribute to ongoing interdisciplinary debates surrounding secularization, disenchantment, and modernity.

I first encountered the phrase “secular faith” as the title of a recent edited volume. In their introduction, “Secular Faith as Tragic Faith,” editors Vincent W. Lloyd and Elliot A. Ratzman consider “how the two terms, secular and faith, may inflect each other” (4). “Faith,” they contend, “is a commitment to a tradition, commitment that can only be justified by reasons internal to that tradition” (8). Faith, in their parlance, names the subjective stance rather than the object—religious, secular, or otherwise—of that commitment. Understood this way, they claim, “secular faith is everywhere: sometimes it is faith in the tradition of scientific inquiry, sometimes it is faith in a revolutionary event, sometimes it is faith in a religious tradition, sometimes it is faith in one’s spouse. From inside a tradition, it is clear that faith in the tradition is faith in the good, the true, the beautiful” (8). Like Gaskill’s account of aesthetic form, this secular faith operates according to rules and dynamics that are “peculiar to this work and this work only” (506).⁹⁶ Moreover, Lloyd and Ratzman continue, secular faith is “tragic faith.” It is “just as much a part of ordinary life as the tragic,” and it is “elicited by loss, by upheavals large and small, by realizations that things are not as they were.” In doing so, they conclude that secular faith as tragic faith “returns to the ordinary” and “grasps for the ordinary concealed by the obvious” (11).⁹⁷ Understood in this way, to use secular faith as a

⁹⁶ I would argue, however, that Lloyd and Ratzman are unaware of the resonance between their concept of secular faith and the understanding of aesthetic form that I pursue in these pages. Repeating the familiar charge that the aesthetic implies some sort of reduction or escape, they assert: “tragic faith is anti-aesthetic to the extent that the aesthetic smooths tensions: it is authentically secular, refusing to embrace the beautiful tied to the true and the good” (12). Their mistake, I claim, is in believing that the “the aesthetic smooths tensions.” The aesthetic, as I hope my examples throughout this study will have shown, reveals tensions and, at times, creates them.

⁹⁷ Adam S. Miller, who adapts Bruno Latour’s work in actor network theory to the philosophy of religion, makes a similar claim, not for secular faith but for religion itself. “Religion corrects for our farsightedness. It addresses the invisibility of objects that are commonly too familiar, too available, too immanent to be seen” (143). Although my claims for secular faith are somewhat more modest than Miller’s claims for religion—I limit my assertions to the aesthetic spaces disclosed within particular works of literature and would not wish to imply that these findings are immediately applicable beyond that domain—I find

description of the relation between religion and aesthetics in twentieth century American literature is neither to secularize religious faith nor to theologize the non-religious. It is, rather, to explore how particular forms of attention, perception, and interpretation can disclose the ordinary—“sheer presence in the world,” as Furani reminds us, the ephemeral, phenomenal world of experience, a *saeculum* comprised of “finitude” and “frailty” (Furani 17).⁹⁸

What is significant about a relation between the religious and the aesthetic which “grasps for the ordinary”? To begin with, it shows that the past century’s American literature may have something significant to teach philosophers and secularization theorists who have, ever since the 2007 publication of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, fiercely debated the phenomenology of the secular within modernity. Two of the most troublesome concepts in Taylor’s work have been the concept of the “immanent frame” and the notion of “fullness.” In Taylor’s work, both concepts contribute to a phenomenology of how we experience the ordinary under the auspices of a secular age,

Miller’s metaphor of farsightedness to be extremely helpful in capturing my broader point. In each of the writers I examine, the relation between religion and aesthetics which I call secular faith is a relation which consistently reveals the “too familiar, too available” experiences of immanence, worldliness, ephemerality, and finitude.

⁹⁸ My understanding of secular faith is also informed by the philosopher Simon Critchley. In *The Faith of the Faithless*, Critchley defines faith as “fidelity” to an “infinite demand,” a subjective stance which refers not to “belief in the existence of some metaphysical reality” but can, as he imagines it, be experienced “by the denominationally faithless...in an exemplary way.” According to Critchley, “the faith of the faithless reveals the true nature of faith: the rigorous activity of the subject that proclaims itself into being at each instant without guarantees or security...the enactment of the self in relation to an infinite demand that both exceeds my power and yet requires all my power” (18). The key difference between my concept of secular faith and Critchley’s “faith of the faithless” is that I am describing a mode of aesthetic attention while Critchley is formulating a kind of political theology for the left, seeking to answer “the political question of what might motivate a subject to act in concert with others” when “rationality alone is insufficient” (19). Nonetheless, I am indebted to Critchley’s work because his project illustrates the way in which a subjective understanding of faith—faith as how one sees or acts rather than what one puts faith in—can engage with historical religious traditions without either secularizing those traditions or subsuming itself to those traditions. Faith, in Critchley’s account as in my study of American literature, is a form of life about which religion has much to teach us, even and perhaps especially if we prefer not to ground our ontology in religion’s metaphysics or ethics.

and each has been a source of considerable controversy across many disciplines.⁹⁹ The immanent frame, explain the editors of a volume responding to Taylor's work, refers not to "a set of *beliefs*" but to "the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs," the sense, specifically, that the experience of "religion and spirituality" is "refigured" by the conditions of modernity (Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun 13). Taylor uses the concept of the immanent frame to revise Max Weber's concept of disenchantment. It is not that religion's importance wanes under modernity, but that the conditions under which one believes anything have drastically changed, altering the experience of religious belief. Living in modernity's immanent frame, religion confers meaning upon everyday experience in a different way. William E. Connolly, however, disputes Taylor's characterization of the immanent frame, insisting that Taylor misunderstands certain forms of "immanent naturalism" which confess neither the "radical transcendence" of theism nor the "closed naturalism" of positivistic materialism. By contrast, Connolly concludes, "I confess radical immanence replete with fugitive encounters with mundane transcendence" (131). Taylor's concept of the immanent frame, Connolly insists, offers too neat of a binary between the immanent and the transcendent, a binary Connolly corrects by describing the "mundane transcendence" of "immanent naturalism."

Surprisingly, however, one of the novelists I have taken up in this study seems to have found a creative way to refigure the terms of this impasse more than two decades before it emerged as a philosophical dispute.

⁹⁹ One of the most fruitful sources of debate, in response to the reception of Taylor's work, is a website titled *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, sponsored by Canada's Social Science Research Council. For further reading on the controversies generated by *A Secular Age*, see the three dozen essays published by philosophers, social scientists, and literary critics at *The Immanent Frame*. See also Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun's edited volume, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*.

Secular faith, understood as a relation between religion and aesthetics which vivifies the ordinary and the everyday, reframes this debate by neutralizing this particular conflict between transcendence and immanence. Consider, for example, Don DeLillo's unbelieving nun. Such a figure only seems plausible under a condition like Taylor's "immanent frame," where one is always already confronted with the option to choose among the varieties of belief and unbelief. Nevertheless, the nun's worldview manages to entail both a "radical transcendence" and a "closed naturalism" simultaneously, for her dedication to pretense at once involves her devotion to a theistic religion and her rejection of anything that she cannot deduce from her own perceptions of the material world. How is this possible? Taylor and Connelly would, I suspect, come to sudden agreement, dismissing DeLillo's nun as an absurdity. Where such a position might seem merely comical, a postmodern pastiche of late capitalist religiosity but little more, the aesthetic space established within *White Noise*—the mode of attention configured through secular faith—makes the seriousness of this paradoxical position imaginable. DeLillo's fiction, by highlighting the gap between what Gaskill calls "social situations" and "literary events," manages to offer a convincing picture of how religion can shape the experience of the ordinary under an "immanent frame" which is more capacious—and more amenable to ambiguity and paradox—than either Taylor or Connolly seem to have imagined.

Like the "immanent frame," Taylor's concept of "fullness" is widely disputed, yet its meaning is transformed when understood through a framework of secular faith. Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun summarize "fullness" as follows: "any experience of life and the world as imbued with meaning, beauty, and connection—whatever the

source of the experience” (11). Fullness is, in many ways, a tempting keyword that I have nonetheless avoided throughout this study. It resembles but is not reducible to what I have described as the heightened aesthetic attention which, for writers like Willa Cather and Marilynne Robinson, gives the ordinary world a sense of divine radiance. I have carefully avoided appropriating this term, in part because I want to resist the tendency among literary critics to apply an extrinsic interpretive framework wholesale to a text which seems to resemble some of that framework’s features,¹⁰⁰ and in part because of the sheer volume of interdisciplinary consternation it has generated. Taylor’s longing for a sense of “fullness” amid a secular age has elicited charges of crypto-theology. Fullness, Taylor’s critics complain, gives Taylor, a practicing Roman Catholic, license to sneak normative forms of Christian theology into what purports to be a descriptive phenomenology of the modern secular condition in North American and Europe. Simon During puts this critique rather bluntly when he decries Taylor’s “conservative melancholy” as a decidedly “Burkean” sense of “nostalgia for a lost fullness and coherence” (110) that may or may not have existed under Christendom.

Once again, however, the literary concept of secular faith as a relation between the religious and the aesthetic offers an inventive way around this philosophical dispute. Take Ruth’s meditation on memory as resurrection in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, for instance. “What are all these fragments for,” Ruth wonders, “if not to be knit up finally?” (92). Here, Ruth’s longing for something like what Taylor calls “fullness” need not indicate a nostalgia for an age where religious authority enabled cultural hegemony; instead, it leads her to perceive her own experience of the world—her

¹⁰⁰ See John Guillory’s “The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism” for the source of my resistance to what Guillory calls literary criticism’s habit of “spontaneous philosophy.”

memories, her desires, her sense of tragedy, finitude, and loss—in a richer and more meaningful way. Yet here, as throughout Robinson’s fiction, it is precisely the theological resonance of this experience—the eschatological allusion to a resurrection where all will be “knit up”—which gives these ordinary experiences their significance. Robinson’s novels, in this and similar scenes, ground Taylor’s notion of fullness in the very worldliness that his critics have demanded, once again demonstrating the capacity of the aesthetic to create new paths for thinking rather than merely reflecting ideas that are already circulating elsewhere.

I am not suggesting that my account of American literature’s secular faith offers definitive solutions to the myriad questions which confront concepts like the “immanent frame,” “fullness,” or any other philosophical debate surrounding modernity and secularization. What I am showing, rather, is the extent to which literature’s capacity for secular faith makes new avenues available for thinking about these problems, avenues that are closed to historicist methods insofar as those methods are more invested in how a text comes into being than in the being of a text. This, I claim, is because religion in literature does not merely register the effects of its sociopolitical or historical contexts, but rather transforms those contexts by way of the peculiar kind of enchantment that we call the aesthetic. Religion and aesthetics are, therefore, not exclusive but complementary, comingling in literary texts to afford vivid alternatives to the default position of disenchantment.¹⁰¹ Here again I follow Rita Felski who, in turn, follows Jane Bennett, in her reassessment of the long-triumphant Weberian notion of disenchantment:

¹⁰¹ In her most polemical moments, Felski characterizes the postures of disenchantment and suspicion as a “pervasive presence as mood and method” (*Limits* 1). These dual arms of what she calls “critique” have become, in her view, “the powerfully normative concept” of the discipline, the “antinormative normativity” which takes “skepticism as dogma” (9). The problem with limiting the critical enterprise to the realm of

An affirmation of wonder is potentially enlivening, energizing, even ethical, encouraging a stance of openness and generosity toward the world. Conversely, the discourse of disenchantment reiterates and reinforces the very condition it describes, sinking us ever deeper into a void of dispiriting, self-corroding skepticism. (*Uses* 58)

In order to reclaim this “affirmation of wonder,” Felski offers the aesthetic experience of enchantment as “a state of intense involvement” (54). This sense of enchantment as affirmation, ultimately, is what I claim for the phenomenon of secular faith. “To be enchanted,” Bennett explains in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, “is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (4). This kind of enchantment is, in the final analysis, what August Feldner of *No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger* experiences when he is told that all of his perceptions are “dreams, visions, fictions” (405); it is what Bishop Jean Latour refers to in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* when he speaks of “our perceptions being made finer” (50); it is what fills John Grimes with the terror of damnation when, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he witnesses the “doubtful glory” of sunbeams lighting up the streaks of dirt on his living room window (15); it is “the purest astonishment” that the narrator of *Zero K* witnesses in the Manhattan sunset (274); and it is what John Ames means, in *Gilead*, when he explains that Calvin’s God is fascinated with us for reasons that are principally “aesthetic

disenchanted skepticism, Felski contends, is that such an approach becomes needlessly reductive. “A text is deciphered as a symptom, mirror, index, or antithesis of some larger social structure—as if there were an essential system of correspondences knotting a text into an overarching canopy of domination, akin to those medieval cosmologies in which everything is connected to everything else” (11). When we close off literary study to methods that do not accord with this formula, Felski asserts, we are left struggling to answer the most basic of questions: “Why, after all, should anyone care about literature?” (14). My study of how religion and aesthetics interact over the past century of American literature, a study which resists the lure of default disenchantment, is an attempt at answering this question.

rather than morally judgmental” (124). In this way, religion and literature come to resemble each other in their ambition to transform our apprehension of the world.

“When the Old God leaves the world,” asks the narrator of Don DeLillo’s novel *Mao II*, “what happens to all the unexpected faith?” (7). My study of American literature’s secular faith is an effort to answer this question. By starting my analysis at the beginning of the twentieth century, just as the Weberian axiom of the world’s “disenchantment” began to take hold, I have sought to explore the unlikely afterlife of American literature’s investment in religious thought during what was long understood to be a secular age. This is, of course, a subject for more than one study, one scholar, or one school of criticism. But I want to conclude by stating what I believe to be significant about the particular set of writers I have discussed in these pages. They provide us with something more vital than cultural clues for unraveling the mystery of religion’s persistence during an ostensibly disenchanted century. Instead, they fashion aesthetic spaces which imagine a different kind of relation between the religious and the secular, a relation that is emphatically not identical to how these dynamics have emerged over the past century of American history and politics. For these writers and many others, serious engagement with religion imbues the aesthetic with a mode of attention pivotal to what we routinely understand as secular life: a commitment to the finitude of the world and to the immanence of experience, a commitment which comes of bearing careful witness to the ephemeral and the mundane. Their work tells us very little about how religion is experienced or expressed during the historical moments germane their writing. For such information, one must turn to sociologists, historians, and scholars of religious studies. Instead, they imagine what it might look like if the features of familiar religious traditions

were experienced, not as retrograde relics of alien past, but as live wires which charge our quotidian experience of the material world with new energies, suggesting how we might cultivate a faith that is in and of the world.

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