

## CHAPTER ONE

## Believing in Literature

### *Faith in Faith in the Fifties*

LEADING THE 1953 inaugural parade for President Eisenhower was a float known to its builders as “God’s Float.” Added to the parade lineup at the last moment, when a parade official noticed that the event might fail to represent the idea that “this was a nation whose people believed in God,” the float was constructed to make that abstract point concrete. It was built around a “central edifice denoting a place of worship” with “side aprons” carrying “greatly enlarged photographs of churches and other scenes of worship. In Gothic script on the sides and ends of the float [appeared] the legends, ‘Freedom of Worship’ and ‘In God We Trust.’”<sup>1</sup> The journalist William Lee Miller, observing the inauguration in a 1954 essay for *The Reporter* titled “Piety along the Potomac,” suggested that “the object of devotion for this float is ‘religion.’ The faith is not in God but in faith; we worship our own worshipping.”<sup>2</sup> The *Episcopal Churchnews* shared this view of the float, adding an aesthetic critique as well: “Standing for all religions, it had the symbols of none, and it looked like nothing whatsoever in Heaven above, or in the earth beneath, except possibly an oversized model of a deformed molar”: A tooth for a toothless religion.<sup>3</sup>

This feature of contemporary religion was widely observed in the fifties. A year later in his now-classic study of American religion, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955), Will Herberg reflected on the same phenomenon in more academic fashion. Examining the upsurge of religious activity in 1950s America, Herberg found little evidence of specific, deeply held religious

belief in the survey data he collected, data covering church membership, attendance at services, beliefs about God, and general knowledge of religion. It seemed to Herberg, putting it in the same words Miller chose, that Americans had “faith in faith,” that they believed in the virtue of belief, regardless of the content of that belief. What Herberg did find among his survey data was a specific faith in what he called “The American Way of Life,” a system of beliefs that enfolded such values as consumerism, optimism, self-confidence, and individualism. As the immigrant generations moved farther from the ways of their parents, rooted in the Old World of their origins, people identified with religion—their status as Protestant, Catholic, or Jew—as a way of finding both social belonging and social distinction within what Herberg thought of as America’s “triple melting pot.” It was this social function of religion, for Herberg, that explained how intense religious activity could combine in America with a disregard for the basic beliefs of its three major religions. A version of this argument persists in recent work that reads religious practice as the equivalent of ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup>

President Eisenhower’s discourse and practice of religion became the most prominent example of the faith-in-faith phenomenon. President Eisenhower, as Miller trenchantly put it, “like many Americans, is a very fervent believer in a very vague religion.” “Like Ike, Americans remember with reverence a pious heritage, the form and spirit but not the content of which they want to preserve.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Eisenhower has often been credited with a famous line encapsulating such a position: “Our government makes no sense,” Eisenhower is said to have said, “unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.”<sup>6</sup> What is interesting about the quotation is that it has been reproduced, both at the time and subsequently by historians of religion, in an erroneous form that makes Eisenhower’s notion of religion sound more vacuous than it was, even as he uttered something close to these words. What he actually said was: “In other words, our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is. With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept but it must be a religion that all men are created equal.”<sup>7</sup> What Eisenhower actually said locates general religious faith, as it applies to America, in the “Judeo-Christian” tradition, though he implies that democracy might find its grounding in any religious tradition so long as it shared that characteristic of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

The difference between the common version of Eisenhower’s quotation and the accurate one points up the complexity of faith in faith. The difference reveals the specific content of the faith Eisenhower invokes—the “Judeo-Christian” tradition—while also showing how even that content reflects the faith-in-faith ethos. In his influential 1967 essay, Robert Bellah noted Eisenhower’s quotation as a prelude to his own effort to describe what he called “American civil religion” as a substantial, and truly religious, tradition of shared belief in certain basic assumptions—prime among them, that there is a God, and that American leaders are

obligated to that higher authority in addition to—and in crisis, above—the authority of the people.<sup>8</sup> The Judeo-Christian tradition is itself a notion that mediates between pluralism and doctrinal specificity. It is the product of postwar religious thinking, popular (as we can see in Eisenhower’s usage) as a way of naming the distinction between Western democracy and Soviet communism. The star theologians of the day, including Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, developed the idea of the Judeo-Christian tradition in intellectually substantial detail. (Niebuhr’s celebrity was such that he was chosen to grace the cover of *Time* magazine’s twenty-fifth anniversary issue in 1948.) Jewish writers such as Herberg and the novelist Waldo Frank embraced the term as well, Herberg invoking it at the conclusion of *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* as the religion that must be called upon to renew the “inner character of American religion.”<sup>9</sup> As the historian Mark Silk puts it, the notion of a Judeo-Christian tradition had become “the true emblem” of America’s faith in faith.<sup>10</sup> Writers looking at religion in the fifties and the historians following them—including the eminent Sydney Ahlstrom—have found the bowdlerized version of Eisenhower’s remark an even fitter emblem for American religion of the postwar period, demonstrating how even delimited vagueness came to be displaced by something even vaguer in the late-century conception of American religion.<sup>11</sup>

What faith in faith represents—a version of religious thinking that minimizes the specificity of religious doctrine in service to usually nationalistic goals of civil connection—stands in contrast to the version of religion that stresses doctrinal content, a kind that in 1950s America most prominently includes the multiple versions of Christianity, from committed mainline Protestantism and Catholicism to the more evangelical strains. During the fifties and sixties, minority and working-class churches—Holiness and Pentecostal churches, in particular, with their intense and particular religious expressions—thrived largely out of sight of the faith-in-faith mainstream, while Billy Graham, fully in view of that mainstream, drew the masses to his revivals and had the ear of presidents. This is the window on American religion that James Baldwin gives us in his 1953 novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, showing us the ecstatic worship at Harlem’s storefront churches that he both admires and criticizes years later, from a secular point of view, in *The Fire Next Time* (1963). These doctrinally focused religions can be usefully described as religions of “conversion,” which emphasize the abandonment of erroneous beliefs and the habits that go with them and the adoption of right ones along with a righteous life.<sup>12</sup> While faith in faith has been the favored way of understanding American religion in the mid-twentieth century—a tendency evident in the ways Eisenhower’s speech has been misquoted—doctrinal or conversional religions were nevertheless important within American culture in the postwar period. Their presence beside the blander and more dominant versions of fifties faith reveals a dual track in American religion in the postwar period: not simply the coexistence of doctrinal and nondoctrinal faith, but, I will argue, the mutual dependence of one upon the other.

Unsurprisingly, that mutual dependence sometimes took the form of reaction: some doctrinal assertions were inspired precisely by the phenomenon of faith in faith. In 1959, for example, the minister and theologian Martin Marty gave an impassioned analysis of sectarian weakness, calling for the renewal and intensification of sectarian difference in the face of religion's erosion by the American proclivity for vagueness.<sup>13</sup> More often, doctrinal assertion in the period is not pleaded for, but is simply evident, and evident in ways that reveal how specificity and vagueness feed one another. The year 1949, for instance, saw two signal moments for the Catholic presence in American culture: on the one hand, the publication of Paul Blanshard's virulently anti-Catholic *American Freedom and Catholic Power*, which aligned the Roman Catholic Church with communist totalitarianism, and on the other, the ecclesiastical prosecution of Jesuit Leonard Feeney in the Boston Heresy Case.<sup>14</sup> Blanshard's book went through eleven printings in eleven months, and a second, updated edition was published in 1960, suggesting a broad concern about specifically Catholic forms of exclusivity and authority. But Feeney's crime against that very Church was to argue, in packed public meetings across the street from Harvard, that there was no salvation outside the Church. The Church rewarded him with its strongest doctrinal sanction: he was excommunicated.

Some read Feeney's excommunication as the Church's attempt to accommodate to an overwhelmingly Protestant American culture, but the picture is again more complicated than that. Feeney's position and that of his prosecutors both had support in Catholic tradition, and Feeney's beliefs may have been closer to lay Catholic belief than those of the liberal Richard J. Cushing, the Archbishop of Boston, who was largely responsible for Feeney's downfall.<sup>15</sup> Feeney's prosecution in fact demonstrated the Church's insistence on a theological difference between Catholicism and Protestantism. Whereas it is not uncommon in Protestant tradition to suggest that the salvation held out by one's own denomination is the only salvation to be had, Catholic thought on salvation outside the Church has not, in the last century, been that clear-cut. And so doctrinal insistence in this case meant the insistence that doctrine is not the ultimate arbiter of one's eternal fate. (I will have more to say about the Protestant–Catholic contrast in the final section of this chapter.)

Similarly, Eisenhower's faith itself can be seen as emblematic of both kinds of religion—faith in faith and specific doctrinal conviction. Eisenhower's religion first took center stage when he surprised the crowd at his inauguration in 1953 with "a little prayer of my own" at the start of his inaugural address. It read:

Almighty God, as we stand here at this moment my future associates in the executive branch of government join me in beseeching that Thou will make full and complete our dedication to the service of the people in this throng, and their fellow citizens everywhere.

Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow all our words

and actions to be governed thereby, and by the laws of this land. Especially we pray that our concern shall be for all the people regardless of station, race, or calling.

May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen.

Eisenhower's prayer was one of four officially offered that day, the other three of which decorously enfolded Herberg's Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish cohorts.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, some in the Washington establishment were taken aback by the president's decision to read a prayer he wrote himself, and not because of what it said. Its religious statement was bland in the extreme. The one whiff of differences among faiths—of disagreements over what one believes and what one does in response to belief—is explicitly displaced from religion to politics, where those united by their loyalty to the Constitution might yet “hold to differing political faiths.” The prayer was surprising not so much because it outlined a set of religious beliefs but because it seemed to indicate that Eisenhower actually believed in some set of religious claims. Unlike the formal prayers offered at the ceremony, it constituted a personal rather than an official, and civil, religious statement.

Precisely because of this, Eisenhower's prayer has had a double afterlife. In addition to being cited by those interested in church–state issues and presidential history or rhetoric, in Christian circles it is held up as an inspiring example of presidential faith. It entered that double afterlife in 1956 at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco, when the movie star Irene Dunne recited it on stage, to the accompaniment of violins playing “America the Beautiful,” in the light of the Pacific sunset, all broadcast to millions on their new TVs.<sup>17</sup> The prayer's assumption into the heart of political rhetoric—via the political theater made possible by the new mass medium of television—elevated what looked like a personal expression of faith into something more like civil religion. The prayer in this way drew closer to the formal prayers next to which it looked so uncomfortably distinct when first uttered. But that assumption did not ultimately disperse the scent of conviction that surrounds personal prayer. Thus the very emptiness of “faith in faith” through which the public culture of the postwar years represented America to itself was in many ways true to the predominant sociological facts of American religion—the sociological facts upon which Herberg and others drew in their analyses. But both the Feeney case and Eisenhower's own example reveal how such faith in faith could become entwined with fervent and specific conviction.

Though Blanshard's anti-Catholic success was not far, historically speaking, from John F. Kennedy's campaign success, those two poles seem to represent an evolution in American religious thinking, an evolution away from doctrinally specific belief and prejudice and toward the firm establishment of faith in faith as American's civil religion. Kennedy, of course, secured his victory in part at a Dallas

ministers' convention on 12 September 1960, where he laid out his own Catholic philosophy: that religion was a private matter, one that should have no bearing on the public decisions of a public figure, this despite the fact that mobilization of Christian principle had already proven powerful in the Civil Rights movement. In the latter case, religious belief was not what one subtracted from one's thinking upon entering the realm of public policy, but the very springboard from which one launched that entrance. Prejudice against Catholics certainly accounted for some of the difference between the embrace of the largely Protestant religious presence in the Civil Rights movement and the dismissal of Kennedy's Catholicism, though already in the early 1960s sectarian issues were not the defining ones (as Martin Marty's 1959 call to sectarianism reveals). More importantly, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and other Civil Rights groups were advancing a version of Christian morality that echoed the tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition as Eisenhower imagined it—in particular, the notion that all men were created equal. The year 1961, then, saw both Kennedy's inauguration and, the following summer, the Freedom Rides that prompted Kennedy to bar segregation in interstate transportation and that vaulted the Civil Rights movement into the national consciousness. Together these two events suggest the waning power of any religion of difference and the strengthening of civil religion, where even faith in faith was replaced by a more straightforwardly secular moral and humanist argument.

Sociologists and historians of religion observing the developments of the post-war years read them just this way, as the triumph of secularity. Peter Berger, in his 1966 analysis of American religion, *The Sacred Canopy*, argued that Judaism and Christianity had been digging their mutual grave since the prophets, echoing Weber's analysis in suggesting that Western religion's "disenchantment of the world" began well before the Protestant Reformation. By confining the sacred into one gigantically transcendent God (this was the prophets' contribution), by progressively denying Him mediating beings like angels and saints, by scrapping sacrament and religious art (these accomplished by the Reformation), the Judeo-Christian tradition drove the sacred right out of ordinary life. The effect, according to Berger, was to make God less and less plausible as a force within the realm that the Old Testament always did reserve for God's appearance, the realm of historical event. If God was so transcendent that He was never palpable in one's ordinary life (so Berger's argument went), it was hard to believe that He was busy making history. It was hard to believe in Him at all.

The thesis of secularization of which *The Sacred Canopy* is a prime example was dominant for decades and sought to take account of the obvious persistence of religious fervor. The sociologist Bryan Wilson argued, for example, that the increasing intensity of private expressions of religion in the twentieth century does not refute secularization but is rather the product of it, the product of religion's disappearance from public life.<sup>18</sup> Ahlstrom, Berger, Herberg, and even Martin

Marty saw strong and specific doctrinal belief as a waning enterprise, losing out first to the notion of faith in faith and, finally, to secularism. It is worth noting here that a major literary-critical argument for secularization also appears at this time: M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), which argues that since the Romantics, literature has come to conserve religious values while stripping them of their supernatural scaffolding. His analysis tellingly stops with Eliot; the literature of his own day would have told a different story.

Indeed, this interpretation of postwar American religion would turn out to be wrong. Strong, doctrinally specific religious belief was not the shrinking remnant of an earlier form of American religion, but the growing edge of a new form. And faith in faith would not inevitably lead to civil religion and secularism triumphant, but instead proved hospitable to doctrinal religion in the ways hinted at in the Feeney case, where faith in faith fully merges with doctrinal religion. The fifties in these respects was not the end of something but the beginning of something, the beginning of what Zygmunt Bauman would much later identify as a postmodern "re-enchancement of the world."<sup>19</sup> We can see this most dramatically in the subsequent growth of conservative Christianity in the late century, which surprised historians of American religion. The growth of Pentecostalism in particular was the major development that Ahlstrom, in his magisterial *The Religious History of the American People* (1972), did not foresee, a development that commands significant space in the updated edition published after Ahlstrom's death.<sup>20</sup>

Berger was more prescient. A Christian himself (though he confessed he had not yet found the heresy to which he belonged), Berger took just a few years before publishing *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1969), a companion to *The Sacred Canopy* aimed at the general reader. There he suggested that despite the earlier book's conclusions, all was not lost for religious perceptions of reality; secularism could be turned around. The angels stripped away from God, beings that for Berger represent the possibility that transcendence can touch the world, are still rumored, and this offers us the opportunity to transform the future. "If the signals of transcendence have become rumors in our time," Berger wrote, "then we can set out to explore these rumors—and perhaps to follow them up to their source."<sup>21</sup> Berger's rumored angels can be seen as part and parcel of what one scholar has called "the sixties spiritual awakening."<sup>22</sup> By the end of the century, Berger notes that only academics continue to think of fundamentalism as a rare and hard-to-understand phenomenon. "The difficult-to-understand phenomenon is not Iranian mullahs but American university professors. . . . My point," he continues in an essay confessing the "Mistakes of Secularization Theory," "is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false."<sup>23</sup> Where secularization persists, Berger argues, it is only among a subculture of global intellectual elites. (Charles Taylor's magisterial task, in *A Secular Age*, is in part to account for religious life thriving in the condition of secularism over several centuries.)

From the early sixties through the end of the century, American expressions of religious belief and the religious practices of Americans would follow a dual track marked by the growth of both public and private religious expression. While liberal politics of the sixties and the multiculturalism of the eighties and nineties tolerated or celebrated the diversity of private personal religious practice on display beginning in the sixties, conservative or radical versions of religion took the public rather than the private realm to be their logical home. We can see this in how groups like the SCLC were displaced by the rise of the Nation of Islam in the late sixties, and how the New Left was trumped by the rise of the Religious Right, culminating in the founding of the Moral Majority in 1979 (one of whose founders, Tim LaHaye, would go on to coauthor the *Left Behind* series). Indeed, the role of churches in recent presidential campaigns, where pastors have sometimes made it clear that the truly faithful would vote for certain candidates, and some Catholic priests have argued that a pro-choice candidate (or anyone voting for such a candidate) should not receive communion, suggests just how clearly the most conservative factions of Protestant and Catholic churches have seen their role in relation to public life. Private tolerance of religious diversity, and public exertion of particular religious will, characterize, in different formations, the decades from the start of the sixties to the end of the century. I will argue in the following sections that the seeming contradiction at work here—private belief hedged round by a tolerant faith in faith, public doctrinal specificity, what amounts to a reversal of the fifties version of American religion—is in fact not a contradiction. Writers, critics, and religious Americans in the period develop ways of thinking that allow them to hold both positions simultaneously. They seek to have faith in faith and specific conviction, too, and they seek to have both in both spheres of life, the private and the public. Taken as a single cultural development of American religion, the two strains together manifest the logic behind belief without content. This kind of belief, and, more precisely, this way of talking about belief, comes into its own from the beginning of the sixties; it develops with special nuance in the realm of literature, to which I now turn.

### ***Vaudeville and the Jesus Prayer***

The nutshell history of faith in the fifties I have given here deposits us at the start of the sixties with an abiding tension between “faith in faith” and specific religious conviction. Lionel Trilling used terms that straddle this divide as he insisted on the spiritual quality of recent literature in 1961. In an essay titled “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” Trilling argued that modern literature (what we would call modernist literature, though he speaks of it as if it were contemporary) “asks us . . . if we are saved or damned—more than anything else, our litera-

ture is concerned with salvation. No literature has ever been so intensely spiritual as ours.” While Trilling does not “venture to call it actually religious,” he yet sees in modern literature “the special intensity of concern with the spiritual life which Hegel noted when he spoke of the great modern phenomenon of the secularization of spirituality.”<sup>24</sup> Trilling looks slightly more mystical than Kenneth Burke, who in the same year published *The Rhetoric of Religion*, which itself walks a fine line between theology and literary criticism while proclaiming a complete secularity. Burke argues that words about God are in essence words about words. Understanding words about God, in sacred texts such as Augustine’s *Confessions*, allows us to know something about language itself when those words about God return to the secular realm with new religious valences. This mode of studying words—which Burke calls “logology,” echoing “theology”—substitutes a secular understanding of transcendent language for the sacred understanding of the divine Logos. But Burke’s logology nevertheless bumps literature toward the transcendental meaning traditionally accruing to religion. If words about God are really words about words, it doesn’t take much to reverse the equation and arrive adjacent to Trilling, to suggest that words about words—so many of which are found in literary texts—are in some sense words about God. That is the reversal at the heart of J. D. Salinger’s contribution to the literary discourse of 1961, the novel *Franny and Zooey*. The novel provides a case through which we can see how a literary text negotiates the relationship between words and God at this particular moment. It exemplifies how a writer might locate religious experience in meaningless language, and how doing so might alleviate the tension between specific doctrine and religious pluralism without giving in to secularism.

The narrative of *Franny and Zooey* follows young Franny Glass’s spiritual crisis from the moment she collapses in a college-town diner to the family’s apartment in New York, where she has holed up with her mother, Bessie; her father, Les; and her older brother, Zooey. Part I of the novel covers the scene in a town that looks much like New Haven or Princeton; it was published first in the *New Yorker* in 1955. The much longer part II, also published as a separate story in the *New Yorker*, in 1957, takes place in the apartment, first in the bathroom where Zooey and his mother talk, then in the living room where Zooey finds Franny snuffling on the couch, and finally in two bedrooms—the upstairs room that had belonged to two older Glass brothers, Buddy and Seymour, and the downstairs bedroom belonging to their parents. Between these two bedrooms, a telephone conversation takes place between Zooey and Franny, a conversation that provides the climax and the conclusion of the novel.

The narrative tension in the novel is generated by religious questions that swirl around an instance of ritualized religious language—the Jesus prayer that Franny began to mutter unceasingly to herself shortly before meeting her boyfriend, Lane, an English major at an Ivy League university.<sup>25</sup> In saying the prayer, she is trying to

follow the Russian Orthodox mystical classic, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, out of the spiritual bankruptcy represented by Vassar College and her blueblood boyfriend. When I make this claim about the centrality of the novel's religious concerns, it should be said that I am contradicting the narrator, who insists that the plot does not hinge "on religious mystification" and that it "isn't a mystical story" at all, but "a compound, or multiple, love story."<sup>26</sup> I will show how Salinger ensures that this is a religious story in the face of his narrator's insistence that it isn't one; indeed, the novel's simultaneous denial and assertion of religious meaning is the first hint as to how Salinger will approach the problem of doctrine.

So what exactly does the novel say about religion? In the first place, Zooney's monologues on religion respond both to Franny's breakdown and to their elder brothers' preoccupation with spiritual matters. As Buddy reminds Zooney in an old letter Zooney reads in the bathtub, Buddy and Seymour decided to take over the education of their younger siblings to promote the children's spiritual development. Buddy writes that Seymour had begun to believe that education shouldn't "begin with a quest for knowledge at all but with a quest, as Zen would put it, for no-knowledge . . . to be in a state of pure consciousness—satori—is to be with God before he said, Let there be light" (65). The older Glass brothers attempted to pass this quest on to their siblings by offering them all the best nuggets they had found in their reading, many of which they also inscribed on a panel of white-painted beaverboard nailed to the back of their bedroom door.

Franny's response to her brothers' instruction is to say the Jesus prayer. Her practice aligns with their teaching because she utters the prayer as a ritual practice leading to religious enlightenment, not as the result of existing belief. Surprisingly, it is precisely this lack of doctrinal content that Zooney criticizes. He castigates Franny for rolling "Jesus and St. Francis and Seymour and Heidi's grandfather all into one" (166). According to Zooney, "If God had wanted somebody with St. Francis's consistently winning personality for the job in the New Testament, he'd've picked him. . . . As it was, he picked the best, the smartest, the most loving, the least sentimental, the most *unimitative* master" (171, original emphasis). If we listen to Zooney, praying specifically—knowing the Jesus to whom one is praying—will solve at a stroke all the other problems he sees in Franny's approach to the prayer. Christ embodies the principle of selfless love, through which one avoids both the acquisitiveness of which he accuses Franny (she wants to acquire wisdom by saying the prayer) and the harm she is doing to others (to her parents, who are worried about her, and to Professor Tupper, the pompous don leading her religion seminar, whom she mocks). Zooney argues that the specificity of Jesus—as opposed to St. Francis—is that Jesus values any human being more than any bird or beast; even a Professor Tupper qualifies for his love.

Specificity looks quite different, though, when, Zooney moves to impersonate his brother Buddy when later calling Franny on the phone from Buddy and Seymour's

bedroom. He resorts to this measure having failed, in the living room, to do more than browbeat his sister in her misery. Upon entering his brothers' room to place the call, Zooley first pays homage to the beaverboard panel of quotations. He appears in the doorway with a clean white handkerchief spread on the top of his head, as if entering a holy place. The beaverboard panel, which we read over his shoulder, suggests the brothers' syncretic view of religious wisdom, with quotations from Ramakrishna, Kafka, Mu-Mon-Kwan, Ring Lardner, St. Francis de Sales, and Tolstoy. As if to underscore that syncretism, the quotation from Ramakrishna has the sage admonishing a disciple who wants to teach the people to be more accurate in their worship, to worship God instead of images of the gods. "Do you think God does not know he is being worshipped in the images and pictures?" Ramakrishna asks. "If a worshipper should make a mistake, do you not think that God will know his intent?" (178–79). The no-knowledge upon which Seymour and Buddy's studies were converging is syncretic because the very negation at the root of it denies the importance of the specificity Ramakrishna's disciple wants to instill and that Zooley argues for in the Jesus prayer. The setup for Zooley's phone call thus puts the nature and status of syncretism at stake.

Zooley's ensuing monologue, delivered over the phone to the still-snuffing Franny, solves the tension between syncretism and specificity, between wisdom and no-knowledge, by transforming a theory of religion into a theory of acting. At first, this theory still looks simply Christian. He tells Franny that when their brother Seymour found Zooley disdainful of the audiences they entertained as radio quiz show contestants on the program "It's a Wise Child," he told Zooley to shine his shoes and do his best "for the Fat Lady." The imaginary Fat Lady is the abstract but extravagantly embodied human being who is always entitled to one's love. The Fat Lady is also doubled in Zooley himself: he later tells Franny that he and Buddy, unbeknownst to Franny, drove up to see her perform in "Playboy of the Western World" the previous summer, joining the anonymous audience beyond the footlights. Zooley's point (and Seymour's) is that one must project one's love outward from the stage to all of common humanity, regardless of whom one is addressing, on the off chance—or rather, on the certainty—that someone out there is entitled to the love you project. Zooley could not make his incarnational theology more explicit: "*There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady . . . don't you know who that Fat Lady really is? . . . Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy*" (202, original emphasis). And Franny receives the wisdom: "For joy, apparently, it was all Franny could do to hold the phone, even with both hands" (202).

The Christian message thus transmitted and received is not the last word in *Franny and Zooley* on acting as a religious practice, though these words are not far from the novel's actual last word. It is rather the paragraph following, the one that does contain the novel's last words, that completes the religious vision of the

narrative: “A dial tone, of course, followed the formal break in the connection. She [Franny] appeared to find it extraordinarily beautiful to listen to, rather as if it were the best possible substitute for the primordial silence itself. But she seemed to know, too, when to stop listening to it, as if all of what little or much wisdom there is in the world were suddenly hers” (202). She hangs up the phone and falls asleep in her parents’ bed, and the novel is ended. What would it mean for the dial tone to contain all the spiritual wisdom of the world, or, for that matter, all the wisdom of the novel? How does it reflect back on Zooey’s Christian message?

The novel’s religious views about acting, which I’ve begun to detail, explain why Salinger leaves us with doctrine and dial tone. Zooey tells Franny that because she is a good actress, “the only religious thing you can do, is act . . . be God’s actress” (198). Zooey’s own acting career, as he describes it to Franny, commits him to acting in this way, no matter the quality of his material. It is thus the capacity to act—to assume the identities and voices of others and occupy them for a time, returning then to some other state of consciousness—that represents the religious understanding at work in the novel. The content of the acting is spiritually irrelevant. If the specificity of Christ is that he was the “most unimitative master,” the specificity of God’s actress is that she is the most imitative master, moving easily from *imitatio Christi* to the imitation of Hamlet. By locating religious enlightenment in acting, Zooey preserves the structure of the syncretism his twinned homage to the beaverboard and his Christian hermeneutics represent. That syncretism insists upon the specific content of religious wisdom but finds that content converging in a space of no-knowledge, the consciousness of God before He said “Let there be light.” God’s “light,” in Buddy’s letter, specifically includes Shakespeare and all of literature, pointing toward the incarnational logic of plays as such as well as the incarnational logic of the novel itself. The play and the novel are incarnations of the divine word; as instances of verbal performance, they point back always to the silence they break, to the moment before all incarnation and all speech. They point back, as it were, to the dial tone.

Salinger gives us a prose style that places the author of the novel in that ordinary position. The author himself is always acting. We can see this in Salinger’s self-conscious use of clichés and mannerisms, which intensifies toward the climax of Zooey’s call to Franny. We are told that Zooey’s “shirt was, in the familiar phrase, wringing wet” (172) and that “this was the first time in almost seven years that Zooey had, in the ready-made dramatic idiom, ‘set foot’ in Seymour’s and Buddy’s old room” (175). Of that room we are told that “a stranger with a flair for cocktail-party descriptive prose might have commented that the room . . . looked as if it had once been tenanted by two struggling twelve-year-old lawyers” (181). The novel’s debt to drama is evident as well in the structure and staging of the narrative. The action—mostly histrionic family conversation, giving us no other access to the inner thoughts of the characters—moves in spatial unity from room to room.

The narrative focuses on characters' precise movements within those spaces; this is almost excruciating in the bathroom scene where Zooey and his mother, Bessie, converse. Precariously balanced objects such as Buddy's letter on the edge of the bathtub, Bessie's cigarette on the edge of the vanity, or Zooey's razor clattering from the sink into the metal trash can, sensually register the slightest movement of the two bodies within the space. Zooey's nakedness, and Bessie's constantly adjusted housecoat, not to mention the incest taboo against which Salinger thereby brushes up, make us acutely aware of their physicality. These formal elements, as well as the narrator's claim that the story is a "prose home movie" (47), all suggest that writing as Salinger pursues it is modeled on acting: on the structures and demands of the stage (or of the film's frame) as a physical space, on the assumption of different voices and the interplay of these.

Thus perhaps the most powerfully endorsed mode of religious art in the novel is not writing or drama but something like Vaudeville, the source of Bessie and Les's now-faded fame. We see such a vision of Vaudeville in Seymour's diary, which we read with Zooey as he sits at Seymour's desk. The passage we see brims with pleasure in the details of a performance the family stages in the living room to celebrate Seymour's birthday. The ideal art is something like that performance, something like family Vaudeville. Set in the Upper West Side apartment, Vaudeville can be fully revealed as religious art because the family love it represents is in fact divine love; as Zooey reminds Franny, even the chicken soup Bessie repeatedly offers is "consecrated chicken soup" (196). The novel suggests that pretense without love is just pretension (this is what Franny's unbearable boyfriend, Lane, represents), though continually inventive pretense—the hallmark of Vaudeville as a genre—constitutes a transcendent state of being and communicates divine love.

Vaudeville's status as the ultimate religious art illuminates the novel's verbal hedging about Buddy's identity as the narrator and accounts, in a formal sense, for why Zooey impersonates his brother Buddy when he calls Franny. At the start of part II, the narrator, having confessed that he is Buddy, announces that he will continue to refer to Buddy (to himself, that is) in the third person. If "Buddy" is thus multiplied by two, he is multiplied by three and then by four in the course of the novel. Zooey impersonates Buddy on the phone with Franny, and throughout the ensuing conversation (during which Franny quickly finds him out) he calls her "buddy," a slangy pet name. It is as if Zooey speaks to the abstracted narrator of the story and to his brother and to his sister all at once. Of course, since Salinger is the author of Zooey's voice even while Salinger assumes the voice of Buddy-as-narrator, Salinger is talking to himself in the telephone scene, too. All of which, along with the power of Zooey's rhetoric and his message, places Zooey in the position of the truly "wise child," displacing the announced narrator as the arbiter of wisdom, incarnating the wisdom that Seymour—who committed suicide—seems to have possessed but with which he could not live.<sup>27</sup> And so we must read

back to the moment when the narrator contradicts Zoey about the essentially religious nature of the story. This is a religious story (which as Zoey tells us in his phone call, must also therefore be a love story), the more because it is Zoey who tells us so through the layers of impersonation. *Franny and Zoey* is a religious novel in its own terms, then, because it lets us hear the divine dial tone as well as the performance of sacred human speech. The latter we hear in multiple forms: as a family's private language, and as the endlessly inventive languages of art, all dramatized into something like a Vaudeville routine. Like Franny, the novel knows when to stop listening to the dial tone and when to launch into virtuosic voice.

### ***From the Heresy of Paraphrase to St. Jacques Derrida***

We could not find a more perfect embodiment of Harold Bloom's sense of what he calls "the American Religion" than we do in *Franny and Zoey*. Bloom argues in *The American Religion* (1992) that the essence of American religion is not Christianity but Gnosticism. Most relevantly, for Salinger's novel, he suggests that Americans thus imagine themselves as one with God prior to incarnation of any kind. Buddy's, and then Zoey's, attempt to imagine true religious enlightenment as the state of being with God before God said "Let there be light," and the transformation of that state into Vaudeville, fit neatly into Bloom's model. The coincidence of these two logics, separated by thirty years, attests to Bloom's intuitive grasp of a postwar American version of literary mysticism, though Bloom dates his "American religion" back to the days of Joseph Smith and to the early-nineteenth-century Protestant revivals.

It is not Bloom's model and its rightness, however, that is most significantly at stake in my alignment of his account and Salinger's novel. Rather, it is more revealing that Bloom's juxtaposition of literary criticism and what he calls "religious criticism" matches up with *Franny and Zoey*, especially when we recognize that for Salinger, literary style—verbal virtuosity—is the manifest form of religious wisdom. For Bloom sees the "religious criticism" he offers in *The American Religion* as the analog to the literary criticism he practices elsewhere. Where literary criticism, in Bloom's account, intends to highlight and conserve what is most irreducibly literary—for Bloom, aesthetic experience—his religious criticism intends to highlight and conserve what he sees as most irreducibly religious in religion—"spiritual experience," which is left untouched, according to Bloom, by the sociological, anthropological, or even psychoanalytic study of religion. Though Bloom takes some pains with this and other distinctions between the two critical modes, between the spiritual and the aesthetic, it nevertheless is difficult here, or in his slightly earlier *The Book of J* (1990), to discern the difference between literary criticism and reli-

gious criticism (a point I develop in chapter 4)—just as for Salinger, the sheer capacity for literary style is the corollary of religious enlightenment.

*The American Religion* appears rather late in the explicit convergence of literary and religious vectors in American criticism. Bloom's earlier entry in that category is noted in 1983 by Edward Said, who spots the trend in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, noting all the "influential critics publishing major books with titles like [Kermode's] *The Genesis of Secrecy*, [Frye's] *The Great Code*, [Bloom's] *Kabbalah and Criticism*, [Rene Girard's] *Violence and the Sacred*, [Thomas J. J. Altizer's] *Deconstruction and Theology*." For Said, this sort of criticism, which he also names "religious criticism," is marked by "critical ideas whose essence is some version of theory liberated from the human and the circumstantial." He identifies a precursor to such religious criticism in Marshall McLuhan, whose work "foreshadow[s] this basically uncritical religiosity" he finds in these books. "All of it, I think," writes Said, "expresses an ultimate preference for the secure protection of systems of belief (however peculiar those may be) and not for critical activity or consciousness."<sup>28</sup> In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said is arguing against such criticism and on behalf of a politically and historically engaged criticism he terms "secular."

Said was undoubtedly right about the trend toward religious subjects and sacred texts among the most prominent literary critics between the mid-seventies and the mid-nineties. That trend, and its relation to the way fiction of the period imagines the Bible, constitutes the subject of this book's fourth chapter. He is also right, in a way, about McLuhan, whom I discuss in chapter 3. But insofar as McLuhan is simply carrying forward a New Critical program into the new media of the late twentieth century, he doesn't so much foreshadow religious criticism as mark its emergence into popular culture. The New Criticism that thus dominated the study of literature in the university after the war was profoundly Christian in inspiration—though with a peculiarity I will take up. And so what is interesting about Said's comment in the 1980s is not only that he identifies a distinct iteration of a general postwar trend in criticism, but that he gets its implications subtly wrong.

As I have suggested with respect to American religious history since the 1950s, and with respect to the exemplary instance of Salinger's novel, I want also to suggest with respect to literary criticism: that specific belief—what Said describes, by its effect, as "the secure protection of systems of belief"—is less relevant to the critical trend he spots than something like the inclination to belief as such, found in the literary rather than in the institutions of religion. What seems to Said to be a criticism that imagines itself "liberated from the human and the circumstantial" can be seen, by virtue of that very self-conception, to be embroiled in the human, historical circumstances of the late-century American religious sensibility I have been describing. If this criticism is liberated, it is liberated not from history but from doctrine.

For the New Critics, one important fact about literary texts—and especially, about poems—was that they could not be paraphrased, that their form carried with it some unspecifiable, or unspeakably particular, literary quality that transcended pedestrian content. The New Critical poem qua poem is form without content imagined as transcendence. This bid for transcendence reproduces Arnold's effort to make literature a substitute for religion, and is neatly encapsulated in Cleanth Brooks's notion of the "heresy of paraphrase." As John Guillory has pointed out, the complexity of this substitution lies in the fact that "literary sensibility takes the place of religious belief." "The success of this replacement," Guillory suggests, "depended upon how thoroughly literature could be made to resist translation into doctrine."<sup>29</sup> The poem as the New Critics read it insists that all dogma is external to the text and that "the truth of every poem thus retreats before the act of interpretation; our arrival in its pretty room discovers an empty shrine, but a shrine nevertheless." For Guillory, this is itself a species of dogma we are "already within": the dogma of literature's valued and transcendent distinction from mass culture.<sup>30</sup>

There is more to say, however, about the dogma we are already within as New Critical readers, for it matters that the literary object so evacuated is represented as a shrine. This dogma is the one whose image I have been assembling so far through other means: the dogma of no dogma, the religion of no doctrine. To put it another way, if Brooks's "well wrought urn" is thus for Brooks and his disciples a living literary transcendence, Guillory's longer historical and sociological view yields up a darker circumstance:

The urn contains the ashes of something no longer living and thus the figure stumbles unwittingly on the very social conditions for which it attempted to compensate: the perceived decline in the cultural significance of literature itself, the perceived marginality of literary culture to the modern social order.<sup>31</sup>

But the urn that holds these literary ashes, like the empty shrine, represents something, too, something that sociology also points to, though not in ashen form. It points to the living religious belief exemplified by some of New Criticism's devoted followers—including, most famously, Flannery O'Connor, but also, in our own time, a writer like Marilynne Robinson. For Robinson, the urn is filled with spiritual and literary power, a power that, in classic New Critical fashion, she finds untouched by attempts to describe the specific content of any literary work. In a review of Harold Bloom's anthology of religious poetry, for example, she writes that religion "has been seriously distracted by the supposed need to translate itself into terms a rationalist would find meaningful," a "project more or less equivalent to rewriting Shakespeare into words of one syllable. But the problem of paraphrase is deeper yet," she goes on to say:

Anyone, asked to give an account of her or his deepest beliefs, will experience embarrassment and difficulty. This is true because of the way belief lives in experience. By analogy, it is impossible to know how many nuances and associations a given word has until they are discovered in the use of the word. . . . Even the most familiar words exist in us in a field of potentiality to which paraphrase can never be adequate.<sup>32</sup>

What is alive in the New Criticism as well as in the later iterations of religious criticism is not literary culture so much as the manifestation of religion, the shrine itself as a living thing, the use of words as a practice analogous to religious experience. This is something Guillory's admirably secular and sociological reading does not register, as if to recognize the continuing power of religion—as more than a “social fantasy” of “shared belief” bearing on literature—is to relinquish one's secularity as a literary critic.<sup>33</sup>

If literature by 1950 had found its ultimate institutional home in the university, threatened outside the school by the postwar economy and its mass culture, religion was alive and well in practically every corner of American culture. I want to suggest that this very fact, in the postwar period generally but especially starting about 1960, is imagined by writers and critics alike as the means for literature's salvation. This is precisely what Trilling's invocation of personal salvation in modern literature proclaims. To look forward to my reading of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* in chapter 4, religion serves as the bellows worked—consciously and unconsciously—by writers wishing to feed any remaining sparks among Guillory's literary ashes.

Indeed, the suggestion that what Said calls “religious criticism” substitutes belief for “critical activity or consciousness” finds its counterargument in Michael Warner's work on “uncritical reading.” He argues that what we call critical reading, the activity Said wants us to prefer over religious criticism, is in fact better understood as another species of the latter. Warner revisits the critical reading scholars practice and teach through the lens of the practices that we label uncritical, concluding that “critical reading is the pious labor of a historically unusual sort of person. If we are going to inculcate its pieties and techniques, we might begin by recognizing that that is what they are.”<sup>34</sup> His argument has the effect of validating religious forms of reading by analogy to a practice we respect as academics. At the same time, the argument implies that piety's rule-boundedness might be challenged by ecstatic or nonrational reading without altering, with respect to the exercise of reason and agency, what was, already, uncritical reading. For Warner, both critical and uncritical reading combine rule-boundedness with a faith that challenges reason's hegemony.

In a companion essay to Warner's, the medievalist Amy Hollywood is explicit about the sort of criticism that might result from taking his argument seriously.

Showing how her own critical reading (here of a thirteenth-century French mystic) is a form of piety, she arrives at a threshold she finds herself unwilling to cross.

One presumption I generally refuse to give up . . . is the power of constant skeptical questioning and critical reflection . . . a form of engagement in which I allow my assumptions to be changed by powerful counter-arguments. Yet the one assumption I don't allow to come into question is that of the value of critical, rationally grounded engagement itself. What would it mean to give oneself over—even provisionally—to a form of life in which criticism is grounded in the divine, in tradition, authority or community?<sup>35</sup>

Her question, and Warner's argument, raise another question: Would we want her to give herself over in this way? And what would her doing so accomplish? To give oneself over "provisionally" to belief looks like religious acting on Salinger's model.

The line I am drawing from Brooks and Wimsatt, through Bloom, to Warner and Hollywood, traces the development and persistence of religious thought in literary criticism. But what is perhaps even more remarkable than this line of development is the one that runs alongside it beginning in the late sixties. For the other major critical movement of the second half of the twentieth century, which for a time displaced New Criticism and "critical reading," was of course "theory," and more specifically, deconstruction. It is a strange demonstration of Zygmunt Bauman's argument that postmodernism constitutes the "re-enchantment" of the world to find that the work of Jacques Derrida, whose argument against the sign cast itself from the very beginning as an argument against the reign of theology, should become a veritable fountain of theological renewal within a few years of the publication of *Of Grammatology* in English translation.

This use of Derrida and of deconstruction more generally takes two forms. One form is theology that can be seen as the legacy of modernist, "death of God" liberal theology, where liberal theologians find in Derrida's work and in French philosophy of the late twentieth century a new description of the absence at the heart of theology, an absence they had already formulated as a negative theology founded on the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger. For these theologians, the most prominent of whom are Mark C. Taylor and Thomas J. J. Altizer, Derrida's work provides a location—the sign—for God's disappearance. These writers produce what Graham Ward calls, in his introduction to *The Postmodern God*, "post-modern theology"; I take the emphasis here to mean that in some sense they have made postmodernism their theology, rather than making theology responsive to postmodern insights.<sup>36</sup> The other form can be found among theologians such as Jean-Luc Marion and Michel de Certeau who begin from traditional theological assumptions about God (arising from their specific faith traditions) and use Derridean "différance" within the purview of faith to reimagine the elements of specific theology—elements such as the alterity of God, the fact of the Incarnation, or the

mystery of the Eucharist. (Ward identifies this body of thought as “postmodern *theology*.”) In other words, the presupposition of these theologians is not the death of God but the Living God—mostly the Living God of Christianity, though there are Jewish theologians who use a similar approach.

In fact, Derrida is one of those Jewish writers presented in Graham Ward’s *The Postmodern God* as a source-text for the conception of divinity in the postmodern moment. Late in his career, Derrida invited such a status by turning to quasi-theological subjects such as the gift and forgiveness and to explicit study of religion in *Acts of Religion* (2002). H  l  ne Cixous has made that mystical strain of deconstruction explicit in her own thinking, avowing that her work is an effort to write “God’s portrait.”<sup>37</sup> And she has made Derrida’s mystical standing among the leading lights of French theory even clearer by beatifying him in *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* (2001; English translation 2004). Her act of Jewish beatification calls into question whether such a vision of Derrida belongs more to a Jewish or to a Catholic understanding of religion. (I’ll return to this question shortly.)

The appearance of St. Jacques is perhaps the defining one for my understanding of Derrida’s issue at the end of the century. I have argued elsewhere that Derrida, and de Man as well, are informed by religious thinking in a subtle and profound way quite apart from Derrida’s explicit, late-career move toward theological subjects and quite at odds with the common understanding of these writers’ linguistic theories. I have shown how, in the effort to demonstrate the utter absence of presence in the written word, these writers posit the text as radically autonomous, then return language to an intensified version of presence by personifying the text so conceived. Language in their hands becomes immanent in much the same way that the names of God are imagined to contain God’s presence in Hindu and in Jewish tradition and in the way Christ is said, in the Gospel of John, to incarnate the divine Word. In my earlier book *The Holocaust of Texts*, I argued that the personification of texts I analyzed, and argued against, was not necessarily a Jewish or a Christian notion and that the uses of the personified text with which I was concerned were not religious ones. In this book, I begin from the idea that the personified word is at its root a religious construct and explore the ways words, as formal artifacts, remain religious in contemporary literature and theory.

The beatification of Derrida is reinforced by the theologians who do not begin with a recognizable faith, who do not declare, prior to their use of Derrida, the tenets of a particular religion but look instead toward, and beyond, the death of God. As Mark C. Taylor argues persuasively with respect to Altizer, the negation of God in a Hegelian dialectic reaffirms by negation, affirms that God exists, or existed, even if he is now dead. For Taylor, Altizer’s death of God theology (or a/theology, as it is postmodernly called) posits a God whose incarnation in the world only deepens with his death; the death of God thus reenacts the Christian trope

of a God who takes on a mortal body and experiences death—though it leaves out the trope of resurrection. Taylor’s effort to subvert Hegel and recover God another way, by “de-negating” him, produces in Taylor’s work since *About Religion* (1999) something like a rampant faith. Theorizing faith through Melville’s “confidence man,” through the structure of complex international financial markets and through the immense interconnectivity of the Internet, in *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World without Redemption* (2004), Taylor argues that religion is not constituted by faith in something, but by faith itself, faith that there is something one may seek and desire, the seeking and desiring limitless because of that Derridean deferral of closure inherent in the sign as deconstruction understands it. It is our pursuit of God, the sense that what we are after is what we have called God, or what we have described as religion, that defines faith after the death of God has been proclaimed. Faith’s incarnation in contemporary culture is found in what I think can best be called an endless restlessness that Taylor delineates, one way and another, in all his readings—of Richard Serra’s work, of Internet technology, of Las Vegas, even of quantum physics and the brain. The fact that for Taylor, God always gets away—through the reports of his death or by sheer abdication—suggests quite vividly how the notion that God is on the run indicates both God’s vitality and the vitality of the faith that sprints after him. Taylor’s deconstructive theology thus constitutes perhaps the best contemporary example of the phenomenon I pursue in this book: a rich and intense faith in faith, imagined as faith in the sign ungrounded by meaning.

### ***Belief in Literature***

It is telling that Martin Marty’s 1959 argument in favor of saving sectarianism self-consciously proclaims the special status of Protestantism in American culture, suggesting that Roman Catholic claims to have had a formative role in America are a case of “embarrassing” “special pleading,” and that Jewish communities were always so small as to have had only a minor influence on American life.<sup>38</sup> Some important studies, including Jenny Franchot’s *Roads to Rome*, and Julian Levinson’s *Exiles on Main Street* have by now offered alternative, and well-researched, arguments about the importance of these other traditions in Protestant America.<sup>39</sup> Beyond this, Robert Wuthnow has argued in his study of institutional religion in the latter half of the twentieth century that the sectarianism that is so important to Marty’s argument mattered less in American religious culture by 1970 than the skew of religious attitudes—toward the liberal or the conservative interpretation of the faith—within and around the various churches.<sup>40</sup> And while whole denominations would certainly take on one tendency or another after 1960, they also began to split internally into liberal and conservative factions.

Witness, for example, the splits over homosexuality or Biblical interpretation more generally within Protestant denominations. Thus, having journeyed in the first three sections of this chapter from popular postwar religion to literary and critical religion and to postmodern theology, I will turn finally to traditional religion and its institutions, for the fate of Protestantism and the evolution of Catholicism and Judaism in America in this period demonstrate the peculiar status of belief and the ways religious institutions either offered, or refused, the meliorating powers of belief without meaning.

The very notion that beliefs are at the heart of religion is at its core a Christian one. It has been argued that traditions such as Buddhism resist Christian efforts to describe them as systems of beliefs, though Buddhism does have ancient and extensive doctrinal writings. Donald Lopez has argued that “belief” understood as an internal religious disposition is the product of a Western gaze that subjects the thoughts of others to ephemeral status—the invisible thing the other holds within him—and renders questionable any worldview held by another.<sup>41</sup> The word “belief” seems to imply irrationality by its distinction from “knowledge,” thus painting beliefs with a perpetual shade of uncertainty, and with the indelible sense of relativity.

Though the oppressive valence of Western notions of belief in relation to other religions has been palpable, the gaze that calls a thought a belief—when turned upon oneself—also renders one’s own thoughts ephemeral. This effect is especially marked in Protestant traditions, as the Puritan accounts of daily, often anguished, religious introspection (in Cotton Mather’s writing, or in the poems of Edward Taylor, for example) make abundantly clear. This difficulty with internal belief as developed in Protestant thinking figures prominently in the period since 1960, and it is evident in the proliferation of characters in the novels of this period—and of writers—who do not know, or do not wish to know, their own minds. Catholicism and Judaism, in contrast to Protestantism, both have more complicated relationships to the notion of personal belief—to doctrinal truths and the person’s inner attitude toward them—and to the role of belief in religious practice or religious identity.

In Judaism, belief is inextricably bound up with ritual and with deference to external laws governing behavior. In *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, Arnold Eisen argues that ritual is often independent of theological beliefs; he suggests that to focus on the latter in the history of modern Judaism is to bring to the study of Judaism a set of basically Protestant notions about the centrality of belief. Indeed, Mordecai Kaplan, in his important *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934), makes the same point in the second of his book’s three epigraphs. The quotation is from Israel Friedlaender, arguing that “it was a fatal mistake of the period of [Jewish] emancipation, a mistake which is the real source of all the subsequent disasters in modern Jewish life, that . . . Judaism

was put forward not as a culture . . . but as a creed . . . similar in character to the religion of the surrounding nations."<sup>42</sup> Kaplan goes on to reimagine the Judaism of the past in terms that are not dependent upon Christian notions of creed; this approach gains significant standing in the evolution of Judaism in late-twentieth-century America, though Kaplan's Reconstructionist Judaism remains a small minority among other strains of Judaism.

According to Eisen, the persisting Jewish "emphasis . . . on practice rather than belief," gave Jews an "indispensable strategy" for dealing with modernity: "avoidance of questions of 'ultimate meaning' altogether."<sup>43</sup> The success of this strategy is marked, for Eisen, by the fact that many so-called nonbelieving Jews continue to observe certain rituals such as the Seder or circumcision, while, by contrast, nonbelieving Christians typically retain only a secularized Christmas.<sup>44</sup> It is practice, then, that importantly defines one's relation to Judaism, in contrast with the New Testament Christian notion of the individual believer's unstable internal hold on belief. The very difficulty of holding that belief is the only drama to be found, for example, in Norman Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997). Mailer's Jesus regularly performs miracles and even, in the end, rises from the dead, but he is never quite sure whether he really believes anything he is saying about himself or God or the Kingdom of Heaven. And maybe this is the insight that Mailer, a Jew, brings to what he gives us as the otherwise astonishingly orthodox story of the Christian Messiah.

There are historical reasons as well that help to explain why the Jewish writers of the late twentieth century by and large do not produce the mystical structures of belief that preoccupy the writers I consider throughout this book. Jonathan Sacks has argued that Jews have been "latecomers" to postmodernity's enchantments because of their particular response to modernity. "Alone among the faith communities of the world," Sacks notes, "Jews welcomed secularization."<sup>45</sup> Secularization promised an end to persecution, though it never made good on that promise in most parts of Europe. (Indeed, the very idea of "secularization" as an inevitable historical process is now largely discredited; the secular is better understood as one among many versions of public life within particular societies.) In the decades following the Holocaust, the resurgence of faith was difficult both because of this dream of secular tolerance and for theological reasons related to God's apparent indifference to the murder of millions of His people. At the same time, the state of Israel promised a political solution to persecution and a way of preserving Jewish identity without necessarily resorting to religious resurgence. Through the eighties and into the nineties, most Jewish Americans continued to identify themselves as Jewish by way of a secular humanist liberalism. A survey of Jews in Los Angeles in 1988, for example, found that 59 percent of the respondents identified "a commitment to social equality" as a quality "most important to your Jewish identity." Only 17 percent chose religious observance as one of those

qualities.<sup>46</sup> The counterexamples from the period—the growth of Hasidic communities in the United States, and the *aliyah* movement among young Jewish Americans—in fact prove the point. Those most committed to Judaism as a religion withdrew from the dominant American culture or looked to Israel for their grounding. The Jewish or part-Jewish writers I consider here—Harold Bloom, Ginsberg, and Salinger (whose father was Jewish and whose mother was Catholic)—are either consciously syncretic in their religious thought or (in the case of Bloom and other Jewish literary critics) embedded institutionally in a world where the pressure—or desire—to assimilate to an implicitly Christian reading tradition was at times in tension with a traditionally Jewish approach to texts.<sup>47</sup>

Myla Goldberg's novel, *Bee Season* (2000), exemplifies the literary manifestation of this history as it relates to this book's project. The novel features Eliza Naumann, the neglected daughter of a Reconstructionist rabbi, whose surprising preternatural success in spelling bees finally piques her narcissistic father's interest. He soon abandons the hours he had dedicated to the religious training of his eldest son in favor of instructing Eliza in Kabbalah. In the end, she surpasses her father in knowledge and attains the highest state of ecstasy while reciting the names of God. What sets this novel apart from others I consider here, where material language similarly becomes the site of divine immanence, is the strictly therapeutic payoff of her mystical wisdom. While her mother descends into kleptomaniac madness and her brother joins a Hare Krishna ashram, finding his own transcendent experience through meditation, her father pins his own religious attainment on her spelling bee success. At a crucial moment, after her ecstatic access to God, Eliza throws a bee, as it were, deliberately misspelling "origami" as "origamy." We understand that the wisdom she has attained allows her to see her father's idolatry of her own mystical talents. Failing in the bee, she forces him to face his own emptiness, a move that will either turn him to a new idolatry (as he had turned from the cultivation of her brother to the cultivation of her) or lead him to a truer religious life.

The therapeutic payoff in *Bee Season* places the stakes of religion firmly in the realm of family and personal health. This is part of what makes the novel a counterexample of the phenomenon I unpack throughout this book, even if it seems both an especially clear and an especially popular instance of divinized language. (The novel was a bestseller and has since been made into a film starring Richard Gere.) Also instructive is its lack of interest as an instance of language: for a novel preoccupied with mystical understandings of language, the prose is surprisingly uninventive and straightforwardly realist, suggesting that ordinary language, the language of narrative, is fundamentally different from ecstatic language. The novel thus veers away from the consequences for literary language or for religion of an experience of the divine based in the materiality of letters. It looks instead to the consequences for the family's psychospiritual development. More significantly, the

novel doesn't pose the immanent letter as existing in tension with the Jewish tradition in which the rabbi-father leads his congregation. That lack of tension sets it apart from *Franny and Zooey*. Neither the specificity nor the plurality of religious belief matters in *Bee Season*; what Salinger's narrator somewhat misleadingly says about *Franny and Zooey*, that it is a family love story, applies more prosaically to *Bee Season*.

What we see in *Bee Season* may be best understood as a simplified version of the great family stories of Philip Roth, especially the late Roth of *The Human Stain*, and also of the humanism that characterizes the most prominent Jewish fiction of the latter half of the twentieth century. Although Saul Bellow invokes the soul at least as often as Don DeLillo, Bellow does not seek to mystify language. He does not seek an engine to lift the human out of itself, since his concern is, above all, the human being. Language, for all its trickery in Roth's middle career, is for both these writers the medium through which human life unfolds. This is why Roth and Bellow do not appear in this book: they are not concerned either with otherworldly transcendence or with questions of belief on the Protestant model, and this is in keeping with Mordecai Kaplan's understanding of where salvation is located—not in another world, but in the here and now.<sup>48</sup> Put another way, it seems to me that writers like Bellow and Roth are either more completely secular (this would be the case for Roth) or already religious in a way that does not require them to wrestle down the problem of belief (as I would argue in Bellow's case). The exception, as I make plain in the next chapter, is Allen Ginsberg. For him, poetic vocation learned from Trilling and Mark Van Doren, and from poets including Blake, Whitman, and William Carlos Williams, combined with a secular Jewish upbringing (communism and nudism were his mother's religions; poetry his father's) and his attraction to the supernatural make him something like the representative man with respect to literary religion in the sixties.<sup>49</sup>

One of the surprising findings of this book, then, is the importance of the Roman Catholic religious imagination in the literature of this period, even—or rather, especially—outside the body of “Catholic novels” by believers such as Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Walker Percy, or Graham Greene. Catholicism, which we might describe as something close to halfway between Protestantism and Judaism in terms of the relative importance of internal belief and external practice, and which consistently privileges the oral over the written in religious ritual, proves to be a particularly fertile ground for the struggles over belief and the related literary strategies I follow. I have been consistently surprised, in my research, how often an author whose work demonstrates a mystical understanding of form or language turns out to have encountered Roman Catholicism in some significant way in early life. This is true for Cormac McCarthy and Don DeLillo, both raised in the Church, and true for Salinger, whose mother was Irish Catholic; Toni Morrison converted to Catholicism on her own initiative as a child, the name “Toni”

coming from her baptismal saint's name, Anthony. None of these writers remains Catholic or, in some cases, even recognizably Christian, which is a measure of how mystical understandings of language can exist independently of institutional religion.

Indeed, the pervasive orality of the examples of mystified language I examine throughout the book points to Catholicism's importance to the argument. Walter J. Ong, SJ, working contemporaneously with the Bible critics I discuss in chapter 4, argued in *Orality and Literacy* (1982) that the oral must be central to our understanding of the written (following, in some respects, the lead of his coreligionist, McLuhan). Though Derrida made writing distinct from speech precisely because writing, in hiding the human speaker, seemed to avoid the "metaphysics of presence," many of those who used Derrida's work downplayed writing's distinction, so that—to take one instance—Mark Taylor sees the deferral of meaning at the heart of his deconstructive theology as inherent in many forms of art and representation, whether written, visual, or sculptural. (He does not discuss much that is explicitly oral.) The oral aspects of Jewish tradition—such as the recitation of Kaddish, in Ginsberg's work, or the cadence of Hebrew syntax for McCarthy—become avenues to a sacralized literature.

Having said this, it is worth noting that the Roman Catholic emphasis on works, on liturgy, ritual, and the sacraments, has historically translated into a practice that puts less emphasis on that fractious internal disposition we call belief and more on one's participation in a communal, and ritualized, constellation of behaviors. Catholicism thus shares something of the Jewish ambiguity about the role of internal belief in the practice of religion, and recalling the case of Leonard Feeney, we can see how doctrinal beliefs within the Catholic tradition come to posit the limits of doctrine and point toward mystery and plurality instead. Catholicism also shares enough of Protestantism's interest in belief that it produces, within the tradition itself, the tension between doctrine and ritual, and between conviction and pluralism, that I have argued characterizes American religious culture more broadly in the second half of the century. The often uneasy relationship between the Church hierarchy and lay Catholics, especially in twentieth-century America, sometimes dramatizes the difference between doctrine and practice. Vatican II explicitly testifies to that tension: it was meant to rebalance the relationship between ritual practice and doctrinal knowledge as the basis for religious life. David W. Wills has argued for the increasing centrality of Roman Catholicism to American culture; I do so in a different context and on the strength of a different kind of evidence, but it is worth pointing out the convergence of the demographic and the literary arguments.<sup>50</sup>

If the erosion of Protestant religious understandings in American culture at large suggests that American culture is, as many scholars of Protestantism argue, "post-Protestant," Protestantism is certainly not off the stage. Even if the institutional and personal networks that defined the broad reach of the prewar Protes-

tant Establishment are shadows of themselves by the end of the century, belief, in the traditional Protestant sense, remains powerful in American understandings of religion, and, as Tracy Fessenden has argued, basic elements of Protestantism continue to infuse—and constrain—the development of a secular public sphere in America.<sup>51</sup> Arguments such as Wayne Proudfoot's, in *Religious Experience* (1987), argue for the continuing relevance of belief in shaping religious experience as such. As his allusive title suggests, he sets out to revise William James's enormously influential notion that religious experience is prior to religious belief—it is belief, he suggests, that makes us understand experience as belonging to the category of the “religious” in the first place. The study itself is evidence of a late-century emphasis on doctrine against which the modernist Jamesian version, though it emphasizes experience, looks closer to what I have been describing as the “faith in faith” particular to this period.<sup>52</sup> What is more, the rise of the Christian Right was initially a Protestant phenomenon, fueled by doctrinal conservatism. (That conservatism, around abortion especially, later encouraged alliance with conservative Roman Catholics.) In chapter 5, I argue that the instances of sacred form I track in relation to more mystical versions of religion (such as DeLillo's Catholicism or Ginsberg's bowdlerized Hinduism) can also be found in the conservative Christian movement of the late twentieth century, a realm known more for the literalism of its Biblical interpretation than the linguistic multiplicity in which my other examples revel, and in the work of that very literary Calvinist, Marilynne Robinson.

The major work of Thomas Pynchon, whose first novel, *V.*, appeared in 1961, perhaps best sums up the problem of belief and its relation to the literary in post-Protestant America. Pynchon is acutely aware of his own family's Puritan heritage. (Pynchons can be found in the earliest documents of Puritan settlement in New England.) In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), he bestows that heritage upon the central character, Tyrone Slothrop, whose old New England roots connect him back to the wilderness of the Berkshires in the eighteenth century. But in that novel, as well as in the earlier *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the question of meaning and attendant belief is transferred away from the effort to determine one's internal disposition in relation to God, and toward the notion that whatever is religious, whatever sort of transcendent meaning there is to be had, is incarnate in external pattern. Oedipa Maas's “religious instant” in *Lot 49*, for example, comes when she observes San Narciso from above, at night, where its streets and houses take on the form of a “printed circuit.” That notion of the religious, mystical in the mode of the sixties LSD culture (and also parodic of that culture), in fact depends upon the endless deferral of Oedipa's understanding of what W.A.S.T.E. and its posthorn or the printed circuit of the urban landscape might mean, a kind of deferral that is elaborated on a grand scale in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as Slothrop wends his way through the Zone seeking a V2 rocket numbered 00000.

In keeping with Slothrop's search for the rocket's origin, in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Pynchon seems to reenact the Jamesian (Henry, this time) contact between American Protestantism and the Old World of European Catholicism and Anglo-Catholicism from which it fled.<sup>53</sup> The very fact that the rocket lands before it can be heard suggests the explosive power of what is in this novel understood as a European mysticism on the Catholic model, a mysticism more material than verbal. Likewise, the rocket's name is not language but the numerical sign for nullity. Readings of *Gravity's Rainbow* that seek to delineate its formal structure—most influentially Steven Weisenberger's, which describes the novel as a mandala—expose the American postwar version of mysticism layered beneath the novel's European setting.<sup>54</sup> The mysticism of both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* have as much to do with the sixties counterculture, with the history of American syncretic religion, as they do with European Catholicism. Thus a Roman Catholic logic of mysticism merges with an explicitly American post-Protestantism in Pynchon's work, and his understanding of the Word comes to look, as his ancestors would say, popish. This fact suggests how American literature has entered its own post-Protestant age.

For a more extended illustration of that transformation, I turn now to Allen Ginsberg's poetic self-construction in the sixties. There we see what happens when a writer consciously and simultaneously rejects traditional referentiality and a notion of prophetic voice drawn from Christian and Jewish tradition. The resulting poetics, which aims at conserving the religious power associated with the prophetic voice, turns on what I will call a supernatural formalism.