INTRODUCTION

Christian Orthodoxy and the Rhetoric of Fiction

This is a book about the work of six writers of fiction—Flannery O’Connor, Muriel Spark, John Updike, Walker Percy, Mary Gordon, and Marilynne Robinson—and its relationship to what I call “Christian orthodoxy.” I define Christian orthodoxy as the conviction that the central dogmas and moral imperatives of historic Christianity are true and binding and that we ignore their truth and their claims upon us at our peril. Orthodox Christian believers affirm, at a minimum, that there is one God, who has revealed himself in the Old and New Testaments; that there are three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the one God; that Jesus Christ is both God and man; that his salvific death and resurrection were real historical events, not mythic narratives or metaphors; that those who believe in him and repent will have eternal life; and finally, that such believers, commanded to live in accord with Jesus’ moral teachings, constitute the Church, the Body of Christ, wherein salvation is found. ¹ Moreover, orthodox Christians do not regard these as merely intellectual propositions but strive continuously to make of their belief and their actions an integrated whole. Christian orthodoxy, in short, is both a narrative that claims to tell the truth about the human predicament and a mode of life lived in obedience to God.

¹ Beyond these minimum propositions, of course, orthodox Christians—whether Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox—disagree considerably about particulars of doctrine and practice.
I consider the novels and short stories discussed in this book as case studies in what Wayne Booth long ago called “the rhetoric of fiction,” investigating how their authors position themselves in relation to Christian orthodoxy and attempt to persuade their intended audiences of the truth and the desirability of its doctrinal claims. The first four writers—O’Connor, Spark, Updike, and Percy—began their careers in the 1940s and 1950s and have to varying degrees identified themselves as advocates for Christian orthodoxy. Gordon and Robinson, who began writing in the 1970s, have a more complicated stance toward Christian orthodoxy—indeed, Gordon often writes in explicit opposition to it—but they too see it as essential to their projects, whether as a force to be challenged in some of its particulars or as something to be appropriated for other purposes. All six writers, I maintain, have much to teach us about the relationship between Christian belief and literary rhetoric in what I call the late modern period—a time that begins roughly with the Second World War.

It would be easy enough—and partially accurate—to explain the broad differences between O’Connor, Percy, Spark, and Updike on the one hand and Gordon and Robinson on the other by referring to the cultural upheaval in the West known as “the Sixties,” which temporally divides the first group of writers from the second. Such an explanation would, however, align too neatly with a classification of the first four writers as “modern” in orientation and the last two as “postmodern.” I maintain that as Westerners of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, all six writers inhabit a late modern world still with us—a condition defined by liberal and democratic forms of government, religious toleration, and an expansive cultural pluralism underwritten by an increasingly global capitalism. This world has much in common with the one predicted by sociology’s “secularization thesis,” which held that as modernization proceeds, a “disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber’s phrase) comes to sever religion from the public sphere and to weaken its cultural influence. Marx, Weber, Freud, and Durkheim all advanced versions of the secularization thesis,

2. Part of what makes this period “late modern” is the perception that some political-economic regimes—mercantilism, fascism, or Soviet Communism, for instance—have been decisively discredited, leaving no viable alternatives to finance capitalism. “Late modern” thus suggests a certain shrinking of horizons, and in this sense it echoes the term “late modernism,” which Fredric Jameson regards as a disappointing interval between the utopian high modernisms of the early twentieth century and the postmodernism that soon supplanted them (*Singular Modernity* 165–66). I too perceive shrunked horizons and disappointment, but I define “postmodernism” very differently from Jameson, as one strong current within the late modern rather than a phenomenon in its own right. I also mean to evoke the urgency intrinsic to Christianity—the sense that ever since Christ’s resurrection, the hour has been “late.”
which, despite their considerable differences, all foresaw religion’s ongoing attenuation. It is now a commonplace that in the mid- to late twentieth century, the secularization thesis was widely accepted by intellectuals in the West, including many who were avowedly Christian.\(^3\)

From a contemporary perspective, the secularization thesis has become less persuasive. It seems most persuasive when applied to contemporary Europe and Japan, far less so when one considers the United States and Latin America, and least convincing when one views the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, where an intensification of religious belief and feeling in all of the world’s major religions proceeds in apparent defiance of modernization. Important correctives have recently come from Peter Berger, who insists that “Modernity is not necessarily secularizing; it is necessarily pluralizing” (23), and especially from Charles Taylor, who in *A Secular Age* rejects “subtraction stories” in which modern human beings have “lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge” (22) and predicts that “the dominant secularization narrative, which tends to blame our religious past for many of the woes of our world, will become less plausible over time” (770). Yet if the portrait I have sketched of the West since the mid-twentieth century sounds like a wholly secular world, this is because I wish to emphasize the difference between Christian orthodoxy and the proliferation of any religious belief or intimation. I would argue that in the contemporary United States, for instance, profession of and emotional investment in Christianity remain strong, but that many avowed Christians have in fact adopted a kind of narcissistic spirituality that does not challenge a fundamentally secular order. The contemporary world may not be thoroughly secular in Weber’s sense, but it is primarily therapeutic—and therein lies its attraction for many.\(^4\)

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3. See, for instance, Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City* for an exemplary Christian endorsement of secularization—indeed, an argument that secularization continues the demystification set in motion when Jewish monotheism divided God from nature and the cosmos (15–32).

4. I use the term “therapeutic” in the sense developed by Philip Rieff. The term implies narcissism and a disconnection from social endeavors, but I do not mean to equate it with “pietism” or “contemplation,” nor do I mean to suggest that all strategies of coping with the pains of life are ignoble. Rieff locates the origins of “the triumph of the therapeutic” in Freud’s work and distinguishes sharply between “our present inwardness” (that is, therapeutic culture) and “ancient faith.” For Rieff, “the therapy of all therapies is not to attach oneself exclusively to any particular therapy, so that no illusion may survive of some end beyond an intensely private sense of well-being to be generated in the living of life itself” (*Triumph* 261). In therapeutic culture, religion contributes toward this “private sense of well-being” and may even be perceived as necessary to social order. But the question for Rieff, as Christopher Lasch puts it, is “not whether religion was necessary but whether it was true” (228).
Such conditions tend to produce neither militant atheism nor even a
general indifference to religion, but rather what Amy Hungerford calls
“postmodern belief.” Hungerford describes postmodern belief as a “belief
in meaninglessness,” a valorization of the form over the content of religion.
She argues that American literary culture since 1960 is strongly marked by
this “belief without meaning [which] becomes both a way to maintain reli-
gious belief rather than critique its institutions and a way to buttress the
authority of the literature that seeks to imagine such belief” (xiii). Whether
embraced consciously or not, postmodern belief works to reconcile indi-
vidual religious feelings with the pluralism of American life. It does so
largely by stressing the nonsemantic, aesthetic aspects of religious practice
and even of religious language—striving, like the New Critical poem that
Hungerford considers its analogue, to “be” more than to “mean” (xviii).

As a description of a broad swath of recent American literature and its
relationship to belief, Hungerford’s account is convincing, and her read-
ings of texts by writers such as J. D. Salinger, Allen Ginsberg, Don DeLillo,
and Toni Morrison are often illuminating. My quarrel is not with her liter-
ary history but with her evaluation of “postmodern belief” and its textual
exempla. While Hungerford perceives in her chosen literary texts and in
the culture that nourishes them “the very richness and success” of post-
modern belief (xv)—even arguing that it is “in good measure responsible
for the continuing relevance of American literary culture since the 1960s”
(xxi)—I perceive instead the proliferation of an eclectic but vapid “spiritu-
ality” that may pay lip service to some features of Christian orthodoxy but
empties out the radical specificity of its truth claims. Against Hungerford,
I maintain that to take Christian orthodoxy seriously means to entertain (if
not necessarily to accept) the primacy of truth over desire, utility, and cus-
tom, and to remain open to the content as well as the forms of Christian
belief.

In a pluralistic society, writers with orthodox Christian commitments
will try to anticipate the commitments and desires of their intended audi-
ences, to speak to their own historical and cultural situatedness. They
will neither neglect nor minimize the narrative dimension of Christian-
ity, its unfolding in time as a story of redemption. Yet they will not proffer
their arguments only as a set of aesthetic or therapeutic satisfactions—in
attempting to persuade, they will insist, in Ralph Wood’s words, on “the
premise that the Christian Story is absolutely and definitively true, not only
for me and my kind, but potentially for every human being” (Literature vii).
Because the six writers I examine take Christian orthodoxy seriously, even
when they do not endorse all of its propositions, their arguments are, even
to many sympathetic readers, “hard sayings.” My task will be to evaluate their claims to persuasive authority in a climate in which the value of persuasion itself has been called into question.

I write as a Roman Catholic Christian, and the disproportionate weight given to Catholic writers reflects my own commitments and scholarly interests, though it also reflects the fact that, for whatever reason, more avowedly Catholic than avowedly Protestant fiction writers of literary merit have addressed such questions since 1945. Because I maintain that Christian orthodoxy and reason are compatible, I am opposed to the widespread notion that theology is an idiosyncratic and personal endeavor that should be excluded in principle from public deliberation and from other forms of inquiry. Accordingly, I reject both the positivism of much contemporary scientific thought, which sees religious and metaphysical discourse as irrelevant at best and pernicious at worst (as in the “New Atheism” of Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett); and the romantic irrationalism of much that goes by the name “postmodernism” (for instance, the work of Jean-François Lyotard or Gilles Deleuze). These two currents of thought, however ostensibly opposed, in fact complement each other well—as seen in those strands of libertarian thought that yoke together a positivist understanding of economic behavior with a commitment to the primacy

5. My title, of course, alludes to the Gospel passage in which some of Jesus’ disciples, hearing Him teach that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life, respond, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” and then abandon him (John 6:60). This remains a “hard saying” even within Christianity, as the history of theological dispute about transubstantiation reveals.

6. This fact is, in some respects, surprising. Walker Percy has, in an amusing section of Lost in the Cosmos called “Why Writers Drink,” proposed that painters and sculptors are the “Catholics” among artists, while writers are the “Protestants.” Language, less material than painting or sculpture, focuses solely on the word (or Word) but lends itself more readily to gnostic temptations and distortions (147–48). The images produced by painters and sculptors, moreover, can be viewed as possessing an implicit sacramental force (a Catholic view) or as temptations to idolatry (a Protestant one). When I consider my own relationship to the works that I examine here, I have to conclude that my theology is Catholic, but my aesthetic sensibility is Protestant.

7. See, for instance, John Rawls’s Political Liberalism. Even when not explicitly acknowledged as a principle, this exclusion informs a good deal of contemporary opinion in Western societies about the relationship (or lack thereof) between religion and public life.

8. I will have more to say about postmodernism, but for now I would insist that the most common slogan associated with it—Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv)—makes no sense. To be conscious of the contingency of one’s beliefs, of the possibility that they could be different or could change, does not imply that one holds the beliefs less firmly, that one is less convinced of their truth. One can only become incredulous toward one metanarrative by replacing it with another; a general incredulity toward metanarratives is impossible.
and unanswerability of desire, often rendered polemically as “freedom” or “choice.” Moreover, both of these currents work to discredit acts of persuasion. The first suspects that facts speak for themselves and that persuasion always amounts to coercion, demagoguery, or seduction; the second resents what it considers persuasion’s pretense of objectivity, as if human beings could ever have sufficient distance from their desires to consider them in the cold light of someone else’s argument, or would consent to do so if they could. Both, in short, are suspicious of ordinary human beings’ capacity to listen and to make competent judgments, and both—whether cynically, joyously, or unwittingly—endorse a way of life centered upon bread and circuses: experts should run the world, and one should trust them implicitly in order to pursue one’s desires without worry and with maximum liberty. In a world so ordered, religion can be only a private matter of therapy and self-fashioning.

If, however, Christianity proclaims the truth—as O’Connor, Percy, Spark, and Updike affirm, and as Gordon and Robinson are prepared to consider—then these writers’ fiction confronts a central problem of rhetoric, which Richard Weaver sums up in a question: “[I]f truth alone is not enough to persuade men, what else remains that can be legitimately added?” (15). One might reply that Weaver’s question is misguided, that to pursue the truth as one does in philosophy and theology should suffice. Perhaps even to pose such a question with respect to fiction shows, as Simone Weil once suggested, that humans have returned “to the age of Protagoras and the Sophists, the age when the art of persuasion—whose modern equivalent is advertising slogans, publicity, propaganda meetings, the press, the cinema, and radio—took the place of thought and controlled the fate of cities and accomplished coups d’état” (64). Plato’s desire to banish the poets in The Republic is only the earliest extant attempt to draw a line between imaginative writing and philosophy, and even he has Socrates call the opposition between the two “ancient” (396). Moreover, it cannot be denied that many Christians have shared his desire, while others have

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9. My understanding of the terms “persuasion” and “judgment” is influenced by Bryan Garsten, and I will cite here his definitions: “Persuasion in the strict sense identifies a way of influencing that is neither manipulation nor pandering. . . . By judgment I mean the mental activity of responding to particular situations in a way that draws upon our sensations, beliefs, and emotions without being dictated by them in any way reducible to a simple rule” (7). Garsten is interested primarily in the role of persuasion in democratic politics; he wishes to preserve a space for it, against those theorists of deliberative democracy who, following Rawls, believe that political arguments in a democracy must be rooted in a shared conception of public reason. It should be clear that from the standpoint of political philosophy, I agree with those who hold that religious discourse and argument have a legitimate place in the public sphere—but the primary thrust of my argument is about religious persuasion in and of itself, rather than its possible political applications.
endorsed imaginative writing only when it functions as transparent allegory or dogmatic exposition—in short, when it is aesthetically bad according to contemporary literary standards. On the other hand, readers who value aesthetic complexity often consider it incompatible with didacticism: as Marian E. Crowe puts it, “Even people who don’t mind being preached to in church, object to it strongly when they sit down to read a novel” (2).

Given these pitfalls, why turn to fiction at all—particularly when philosophers and theologians who argue for an authentically Christian and historically grounded understanding of both reason and faith have done important work? Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, has argued (above all, in Whose Justice? Which Rationality?) that the tradition initiated by Aristotle and subsequently enlarged and revised by Augustine and Aquinas has continued to maintain its explanatory power and capacity for self-correction in the face of less coherent, less persuasive challenges from the younger tradition of liberalism. Doesn’t the consideration of fiction in this context merely muddy the waters?

Although I find MacIntyre’s argument compelling, I am aware that relatively few people will ever engage it, that in our contemporary moment most who struggle with questions of belief and rationality do not turn to philosophy or academic theology for aid. Moreover, I fear that too many are not particularly interested in truth—that even if they have never read William James or Richard Rorty, they, like Rorty, would endorse the Jamesian view that truth is “a compliment paid to sentences that seem to be paying their way” (Rorty, Consequences xxv), rather than something that exists irrespective of our emotional investment in it. To this extent, philosophy and theology are already at a disadvantage because of their traditional insistence that truth—which necessarily excludes and divides—is an object of primary importance. Postmodern belief would regard such claims as unwarranted arrogance, affirming instead only those philosophers or theologians who abjure or relativize any notion of truth.

Fiction, on the other hand, reaches a wide audience and can have great persuasive power. Indeed, fiction in the broadest sense seems inescapable in argument, for philosophers, theologians, and Jesus himself have had frequent recourse to it, whether in the form of allegory, counterfactuals, or

10. Rorty of course recognizes the ironic nature of such a claim—is it “true,” after all, that truth is only a compliment?—but refuses to argue with those who challenge it. Instead, he wants to seduce his critics to this point of view. Perhaps, then, it is more accurate to say not that many are uninterested in truth but that, like Rorty, they inoculate themselves from challenges to their own “truths” by labeling them preferences—and then maintaining that preferences cannot be questioned, because tolerance demands it. Here again persuasion as such is precluded, and the effort to influence people is redescribed as either coercion or seduction.
other protofictional narratives. Jesus’ parables are the obvious example, but even Plato, often understandably viewed as the enemy of rhetoric, finds the fictive and rhetorical mode of allegory useful for his arguments in the *Phaedrus* and *The Republic*. The popularity of such novels as *The Da Vinci Code* and the *Left Behind* series is only the most recent evidence of fiction’s ability to provoke religious argument and even to serve as surrogate theology—sometimes despite factual errors, commitment to false premises, flawed reasoning, or bad faith on the part of the author. And even if a reader begins from something like a Rortyan standpoint, distinguished fiction might nevertheless lead readers to love truth for its own sake. (That the work of the six writers examined in this book is more aesthetically distinguished than the productions of Jenkins and LaHaye or Dan Brown I take to be an uncontroversial claim.)

Some of the most interesting recent arguments in narrative theory, to be sure, have bracketed any connection between fiction and truth, even when they have not invoked aesthetic worth as the alternative to truth. Richard Walsh, for instance, describes “fictionality” as a distinct use of rhetoric (rather than a set of generic or formal features), and the “age-old problem of fiction’s claim upon our attention” as “the problem of reconciling fictionality with relevance” (16). Readers find fiction compelling neither because they mistake it for a set of propositional truths—after all, most sentences in novels, referring to nonexistent people and events, are “false”—nor because they view it as an unproblematic imitation of the real world, but rather because they perceive its relevance to their interests. I find Walsh’s argument suggestive but potentially misleading in its implication that relevance and truth are so neatly separable. (I am tempted to reply: Truth is always relevant.)

He is correct to maintain that “[f]iction does not achieve relevance globally, at one remove, through some form of analogical thinking, but incrementally, through the implication of various cognitive interests or values that are not contingent upon accepting the propositional

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11. For the same reason, I am hesitant to endorse fully Nicholas Boyle’s very different argument that a “Catholic approach to literature” would affirm that “[l]iterature is language free of instrumental purpose, and it seeks to tell the truth” (125). Much turns, no doubt, on the precise resonance of the phrase “instrumental purpose.” For Boyle, “[B]oth sacred and secular literature . . . do not talk about the things of this world as, directly or indirectly, capable of fulfilling the desires of the speaker of the writer but talk about them in a way that Kant, who had something like this insight . . . called ‘disinterested’” (125). Seeking to tell the truth may not be “instrumental” in that it will often not fulfill one’s own all-too distorted and self-destructive appetites. But if Boyle means merely that in reading literary texts, readers may come to love the truth, without respect to how well it approves their cravings for power, then I am happy to concur. I would only add that having the right relation to the truth must be a matter of urgency, and that one should not simply reject exhortations to the truth on the grounds that they might be described as “instrumental.”
truth of the utterance itself and upon the deployment, investment, and working through of those interests in narrative form” (30). The writers I examine certainly affirm particular truths that do not depend upon accepting the reality of the characters and the events they depict—which is what I understand Walsh to mean by “the propositional truth of the utterance itself.” Moreover, these writes’ efforts will succeed only to the degree that they establish these truths, through context-specific appeals, as relevant to readers. While the time that elapses in reading does preclude an “analogical thinking” that establishes relevance immediately, readers can and do make general statements about the truth claims of fiction as they read, statements which can later be corrected or refined. Taking Walsh at his word, then, when he holds that “a pragmatic approach to fictionality . . . does not, and should not, conflict with what we currently do as readers and critics” (37), I see no reason not to investigate both the persuasive strategies that these writers employ and their fidelity to the truths that they communicate.

As Benedict Anderson has suggested, the novel is an ideal vehicle for the presentation of argument in a secularized milieu, more congenial to the sensibilities of educated contemporary readers than allegory or parable. As “a device for the presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogenous, empty time,’ or a complex gloss on the word ‘meanwhile’” (25), the novel invokes an “imagined community” that embeds and helps to explain its characters even as it generates conflicts among them. Just as what binds millions of Americans into a single nation is less their shared intimacy or their commitment to a single set of beliefs than their simultaneous existence in a historically defined place, characters in novels interact and argue with each other without the harmonizing force of a single worldview—even when the author’s own beliefs are evident. For this reason a theorist of genre such as Mikhail Bakhtin can view the novel as essentially dialogic and “unfinalizable” (68). I am happy to agree if “unfinalizable” means that beliefs expressed in novels are essentially contestable rather than “equally valid”—a distinction that Bakhtin’s admirers do not always seem to recognize.

Even more than from Walsh, Anderson, or Bakhtin, however, I take my critical bearings from Booth, who never lost sight of the banal but radical fact that works of fiction, like all language, are communications between human beings. Communication in good faith requires an effort to understand that cannot be evaded by appeals to the “text itself” (as in many twentieth-century formalisms), to the ostensibly self-undermining properties of language (as in received accounts of deconstruction), or to some form of biological, historical, or ideological determinism. The bracketing of

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12. The phrase “homogenous, empty time” is Walter Benjamin’s.
authorial intention may perhaps be warranted when a reader focuses narrowly upon aesthetic judgment, though even then I have my doubts. But the mere fact that we exclude our own writing from such proscriptions, believing our persuasive efforts to be freely undertaken and worthwhile, suggests that we ought to extend the same courtesy to fiction writers. Unless one is willing to commit to a programmatic and contradictory anti-humanism when confronting writing with persuasive intention (and it is striking how inconsistent even those who claim to do so become when push comes to shove—witness the later career of Michel Foucault), one must begin by taking writers at their word, respecting their efforts to communicate on their own terms, and acknowledging whatever clarifications they offer in commentary on their own work. As Booth makes clear in *The Company We Keep*, one’s “co-ductions,” in which one judges the intentions and merits of individual authors and works, will be “implicitly a comparison between the always complex experience we have had in its presence and what we have known before” (71). Such a stance does not rule out the possibility that a given piece of writing may be inept, its purposes incoherent or dishonest, or its author a victim of false consciousness. But the burden of proof for such claims is on readers; it cannot be waved away by recourse to general theories about language, subjectivity, or ideology whose premises are in principle unfalsifiable.

The writers examined here take for granted that in a world of secular, homogenous, and empty time, many in their intended audiences will not subscribe to their beliefs. And indeed, as writers of self-consciously literary fiction, they appeal to an educated audience more likely than the general population to live secular lives and to believe in the desirability (if not the inevitability) of secularization. They do not conclude, however, that the effort to persuade through fiction is futile. Instead, they present their beliefs forthrightly, in all their urgent contestability. Perhaps none is as explicit and thorough in the presentation of her beliefs as O’Connor, whose letters and essays, collected in *The Habit of Being* and *Mystery and Manners*, provide for many of her critics the definitive statement of how her fiction is to be interpreted. But even for those who are less explicit and whose concerns range afield from the strictly theological (such as Updike, Spark, and Gordon), the positive content of their Christian beliefs, rooted in the specific history, liturgies, and dogmas of Christianity, can be determined.

The specificity of these practices and beliefs ultimately derive from the centrality of revelation to Christianity—the claim that what is to be believed has been revealed by God through prophets; the inspiration of sacred scripture; and divine interventions in history such as the selection of Abraham and his descendants as a Chosen People, the Exodus of the Isra-
elites from Egypt, or the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Protestants and Catholics have traditionally agreed that whether reason contradicts or complements Christian orthodoxy, it cannot provide entirely sufficient grounds for Christian belief; only the authority of revelation can. The importance of revelation to these six writers’ fictive projects—often only implicitly expressed, but essential nonetheless—is rhetorically a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the ability to state one’s beliefs in positive, succinct form constitutes a rhetorical strength. Against the thinness of many secular systems of belief and ethics—which, in my view, minimize the necessity of conflict by taking too much for granted that human beings want to be well disposed toward each other—a belief in revelation produces forthright, irreducibly contestable propositions. (Either Jesus is the son of God who takes away the sins of the world, or he wasn’t, and no amount of tolerance for Christian or non-Christian beliefs changes the fact that the question of who Jesus is/was is a truth claim, not an aesthetic preference.) On the other hand, if belief is founded upon revelation, then persuasion becomes much harder when the intended audience is not already open to the possibility that belief does not necessarily contradict reason. Even if many would agree in theory with Paul Giles’s reminder that “[p]ure skepticism can never be attained, any more than pure reason or pure innocence can,” such a reminder might do little more than suggest to secularist

13. When Martin Luther famously proclaimed that “Reason is the Devil’s greatest whore,” he seems to have meant that reason, while useful for the purposes of human knowledge, is a positive obstacle to knowledge of God, for it encourages the belief that one may achieve salvation entirely through one’s own efforts. Catholicism has traditionally had a less hostile opinion of the relationship between reason and faith, but its official teaching maintains that while reason may suffice to justify theism, it cannot suffice to justify belief in the dogmas of Christianity. As the most recent Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it: “What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe ‘because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.’” And again: “Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth” (48, 49).

14. Many contemporary versions of pragmatism and cosmopolitanism, I would argue, fall under this category. Their emphasis on practice doesn’t, of course, deny that beliefs motivate people, but it greatly underestimates the degree to which beliefs matter. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for instance, points out that “we can live in harmony without agreeing on underlying values” and that “we can find ourselves in conflict when we do agree on values” (78). He is of course correct, but to make this argument presupposes that the primary good should be harmony. There is much to be said for such a live-and-let-live attitude; it is even compatible with much of the ethical thrust of Christianity. It cannot be, however, the sine qua non for Christians, because it does not admit the primacy of revelation. The Misfit’s claim (in O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”) that Jesus “thown [sic] everything off balance” (27) is worth remembering here. Balance and harmony are not necessarily Christian virtues, as Slavoj Žižek has reminded us (Fragile 122–23).
readers what Giles calls “the discrepancy” between the “lucidity” of the “rational mind” and “every form of religious conditioning or assertion of religious truth” (19). Christian orthodox writers addressing a wider public therefore seldom rely on exhortations to the revealed word of God alone; they must employ other arguments, and various traditions within Christianity on the relationship between revelation and reason make possible a range of rhetorical approaches.\(^\text{15}\) The difficulty, it would seem, is how to employ strategies that do not initially depend on an appeal to revelation, yet do not ultimately contradict its primacy.

A related difficulty has to do with historical context—or, put differently, the tension between the particularity of an act of persuasion and the universality of the claims asserted. A writer who proclaims the truth of Christianity might tailor rhetorical strategies to particular audiences—one thinks of Paul, a Jew among Jews and a Greek among Greeks, or of Augustine, accepting that Christians have something to learn from classical rhetoric as long as they don’t cross the line into sophistry—but insofar as he considers his beliefs to be true and therefore universal, there can be no exclusions of anyone on principle. Yet because an intended audience is historically, geographically, or rhetorically delimited, there is always the risk that the appeal to that audience will undermine the belief’s integrity. This risk is compounded when the vehicle for persuasion is a work of fiction and therefore bound up with culturally variable narratives and histories. The “transcendental signified” of any belief system is ahistorical, while the individual narratives that are the raw materials of fiction are temporal. Christianity, which affirms both an eternal, transcendent God and the teleology of God’s involvement with human beings (most strikingly in the Incarnation), must negotiate both the temporal and the atemporal, accounting for its own enmeshment in the stream of human history. Yet the more writers invoke the particularities of their time and place, or resort to auto-

\(^{15}\) In presenting his own position on these matters, Giles mostly avoids definite statements about the validity of religious claims but reveals his own secular commitment to “demystification” clearly enough. *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* seeks “to reveal how a secularized form of religious consciousness has become implanted within twentieth-century American art” (21), in ways that often elude detection. The “lucidity” of the “rational mind” thus proves itself through the deconstruction of claims to authority. At best, Giles suggests, Catholicism performs its own demystifying function when it confronts other (primarily political) claims of authority: “The culture of Catholicism deconstructs the more celebrated American ideologies . . . to reveal them as provisional systems; Catholic arts and fictions in turn deconstruct the theological and philosophical bases of Catholicism . . . but the critical impulse of deconstruction in turn illuminates the fictional status of all these aesthetic creations, reconstituting them as inventions of the human imagination at particular times and places within history” (183). That it might provide access to a truth that is more than “provisional” and “aesthetic” is not seriously considered.
biographical explanations for their own beliefs, the more idiosyncratic their beliefs might seem.

Perhaps the first Christian writer to ponder the rhetorical problems involved in writing about belief within a secular context was Blaise Pascal. Earlier proselytizers, such as Paul and Augustine, could assume that their intended audience already shared a sense of the sacred (hence the enormous energy Augustine expends in *The City of God* arguing against the gods of pagan Rome, and in other works against Christian heresies). Pascal, however, reflects on the difficulties of arguments about belief when one’s audience includes agnostics. He proposes a strategy for how to craft arguments that do not begin with revelation but do not preclude it: “[W]e must begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason; that it is venerable, to inspire respect for it; then we must make it lovable, to make good men hope it is true; finally, we must prove it is true” (205).

If the truth of Christianity is guaranteed by its divine revelation, then it follows that making this revelation explicit would be the final step of an argument on its behalf—that a potential convert could make this leap only after having been persuaded of its reasonableness and desirability. This task would be far more difficult than the first, as Pascal perceived it to be even long before Marx, Darwin, or Freud. For Pascal understands the earlier tasks of persuasion, however necessary, as steps that must finally be *aufgehoben* (to use the anachronistic Hegelian term) in the “foolish” assent to Christian revelation:

> Our religion is wise and foolish. Wise, because it is the most learned and the most founded on miracles, prophecies, etc. Foolish, because it is not all this which makes us belong to it. This makes us, indeed, condemn those who do not belong to it; but it does not cause belief in those who belong to it. . . . And so Saint Paul, who came with wisdom and signs, says that he has come neither with wisdom nor with signs; for he came to convert. But those who come only to convince can say that they come with wisdom and signs. (277)

The distinction between “convincing” and “converting” that Pascal identifies here marks the acid test of religious persuasion, and it is difficult to reconcile the first passage I quoted (with its methodical progression of argumentative steps) with the exasperation toward argument implicit in the second passage. How, then, does one move from convincing to converting, and what rhetorical strategies does one employ in this effort?

For all six of the writers discussed below, *irony* is crucial to bridging the gap. “Irony” here should not be understood primarily as a steely-eyed
fatalism that flirts with tragedy, corrodes any positive values, or leads only to a perpetually renewed (and frequently bogus) humility in the face of ethical and epistemological confusion. Rather, it is above all an invitation—to use Booth’s helpful metaphor, an invitation to leap toward a new view “that is intended as wiser, wittier, more compassionate, subtler, truer, more moral, or at least less obviously vulnerable to further irony” than one’s former view (Rhetoric of Irony 10). Some, such as O’Connor, assume the hostility of their audience and take for granted that the invitation will wound—that one must become a victim before (or at the same time as) one is admitted to the newer perspective. Others, such as Spark and Updike, make of the invitation a form of complicity between author and reader, wagering that much will depend on whether they have guessed their intended audience’s predispositions and desires correctly. Yet for all of these writers, irony proves stable—it does not initiate an infinite regress in which no truths or bedrock values can be plausibly asserted or defended.

What Booth states of irony in general is true of all six writers’ approach to it, though their methods and degrees of intended “victimization” are very different: “[W]e need no very extensive survey of ironic examples to discover . . . that the building of amiable communities is often far more important than the exclusion of naïve victims. . . . The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because . . . he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built” (28). This double movement—on the one hand, an exclusion that may involve an appeal to elitism (an appeal particularly evident in Spark); on the other, the building up of an affirmative and potentially unlimited community of the like-minded—is, of course, intrinsic to Christianity itself, for the God who divides the sheep from the goats and emphasizes the narrowness of the straight path nevertheless wills the salvation of all human beings (1 Timothy 2:3–4). When such irony succeeds as an appeal, it probably does so in part because it accommodates both the exclusions of any actual community and the universality (that is, the truth) of that community’s beliefs.

There is also, however, a more existential dimension to the irony that these six writers use—a sense that only an ironic approach can account for the messiness of the world and thus reach a contemporary audience effectively. Even a cursory glance at Western history during the twentieth century suggests not only the enormous importance that irony assumed as an aesthetic concept but also the tendency to invoke it as a coping mechanism for the traumas of modernity. Arguments against Christianity, after all, found much apparent support in the horrors of the early to mid-twentieth century—two world wars, the Nazi attempt to annihilate the Jews,
the atrocities that took place in Stalin’s Soviet Union, and the dropping of atomic bombs on cities in Japan—which raised the question of theodicy in unprecedented ways. Indeed, it has always been plausible to construct an account of modernism in the arts that places doubt about God and the social orders that he had allegedly blessed at center stage. Seminal modernist moments, texts, and themes would thus include Stephen Daedalus’s revolt against Catholicism in Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Freud’s deep and intractable pessimism about religion in Civilization and Its Discontents, the inaccessibility of divine law in Kafka’s The Trial, and Brett Ashley’s affirmation in Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises that “not to be a bitch” is “what we have instead of God” (245).

On the other hand—and partially in response to these developments—it is equally plausible to see modernism as a return to the primacy of belief after a long trek through the wilderness of positivist science and its monstrous offspring, global capitalism. Nietzsche, however scornful toward Christianity his work may have been, was in this camp, looking forward to a revival of self-conscious paganism that would reject the bourgeois capitalism and slavish, atavistic religions of the Last Men. D. H. Lawrence elaborated similar ideas in his novel The Plumed Serpent, suggesting that the modern world might rediscover more primordial and vital beliefs in the religion of the Aztecs. The key figure here, however, was T. S. Eliot, who also marks a decisive rupture within the “believing” wing of modernism. After beginning his career along vaguely Nietzschean lines, enthusiastically applauding Stravinsky’s Le sacre du printemps and appealing to comparative mythology in The Waste Land, Eliot threw his allegiance to Christianity, shocking many of his admirers in 1927 with his declaration that he was now “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion” (ix). By virtue of his visibility alone, Eliot probably did more than anyone else to make Christian orthodoxy compelling to anxious moderns—yet he appealed to irony no less than did those moderns who rejected Christianity. His literary career both paralleled and helped to influence a revival of religious writing, especially among Catholic writers. Indeed, were I to conduct a comprehensive survey of major Western writers during the age of high modernism (say, from 1910 to 1955) who either advocate orthodox Christian beliefs or engage seriously with them, I would have to deal not only with Eliot but also with G. K. Chesterton, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos, Graham Greene, François Mauriac, Czeslaw Milosz, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Evelyn Waugh, W. H. Auden, C. S. Lewis, J. F. Powers, Robert Lowell, Nikos Kazantzakis, and Albert Camus.

Yet while O’Connor, Percy, Spark, and Updike first emerge in a period defined by aesthetic modernism, the bulk of their work was published
during and after the 1960s, when the banners of postmodernism (whether defined primarily in aesthetic or epistemological terms) begin to fly. In the most common understanding of the term, postmodernism is even more committed to irony than modernism was: irony drives the “incredulity toward metanarratives” that Lyotard spoke of, undermining all metaphysics, but generating, instead of the angst, despair, or religious faith that were its most frequent effects under modernism, a breezy joy, a vague sense of liberation. Given such a definition of postmodernism, Christian orthodoxy becomes less plausible, even as the specific aspects of modernity that once seemed to challenge it recede or lose their initially traumatizing character. Perhaps it should not be surprising that writers who remain committed to Christian orthodoxy in such times increasingly present themselves as embattled and self-consciously contrarian.

Yet I do not view the ascendancy of postmodernism as a catastrophe, and I do not measure the rhetorical efficacy of Christian writers in postmodern conditions primarily by their degree of crankiness. Instead, I maintain that this usual understanding of postmodernism is wrong—or, at the very least, unwilling to embrace its implications fully. As Peter Augustine Lawler has suggested, postmodernism is best understood as “human reflection on the failure of the modern project to eradicate human mystery and misery and to bring history to an end” (1). The antifoundationalism that many conflate with postmodernism is, on the other hand, “really hypermodernism, or the exaggeration to the point of caricature of the modern impulse to self-creation” (2). I align myself not just with Lawler but with a group of thinkers from Romano Guardini to Ralph Wood who hold that “postmodernism” affords a propitious opportunity to speak and hear Christian orthodoxy, and to do so in relative freedom both from the cultural accretions that often distorted its message in the past (leading to, for instance, such phenomena as German Kulturprotestantismus) and from the increasingly discredited “modern” imperative to master and remake the world and human beings. Guardini’s evocation of the conditions obtaining at “the end of the modern world”—a passage which was excerpted by Percy in the epigraph to his 1966 novel *The Last Gentleman*—remains powerful and, I believe, persuasive:

Everywhere within the modern world [the Christian] found ideas and values whose Christian origin was clear, but which were declared the common property of all. How could he trust a situation like that? But the new age will do away with these ambivalences; the new age will declare that the secularized facets of Christianity are sentimentalities. This declaration will clear the air. The world to come will be filled with animosity and dan-
ger, but it will be a world open and clean. This danger within the new world will also have its cleansing effect upon the new Christian attitude, which in a special way must possess both trust and courage.

The character and the conduct of coming Christian life will reveal itself especially through its old dogmatic roots. Christianity will once again need to prove itself deliberately as a faith which is not self-evident; it will be forced to distinguish itself more sharply from a dominantly non-Christian ethos. . . . The absolute experiencing of dogma will, I believe, make men feel more sharply the direction of life and the meaning of existence itself. (105–6)

What Guardini calls “the new Christian attitude” centers upon the claim, accessible only through revelation, that God’s salvific work is gratuitous and—as Ralph Wood often reminds us—scandalous, in the original sense of the word.16 It can be reduced neither to a secularized ethics nor to a do-it-yourself spirituality. Against the backdrop of a discredited modernity, the electrifying character of Christian tidings is all the more evident. And those who wrestle with it honestly—including those who, like Gordon and Robinson, cannot fully embrace orthodox doctrine and practice—testify to its power. The irony proper to such tidings is not only affirmative in Booth’s sense of creating a community—it is also so in the joyful conviction that the world, however imbued with evil it may be, is already redeemed.

In constructing this book, I have faced two recurring difficulties. On the one hand, there are the unavoidable problems of space and focus: because several of the writers discussed here have had extremely prolific careers (the published works of Spark and Updike, for instance, span roughly half a century), I have not been able to engage with all of their work in detail. On the other hand, because previous critics have read these writers through varied theological lenses, I am also wary of repeating familiar interpretations. I have tried to evade these difficulties not only by hewing closely to my focus on the rhetorical strategies of each writer, drawing comparisons and contrasts when appropriate, but also by focusing on works that are both representative of an author’s career as a whole and, in my view, unjustly neglected. The chapter on Updike, for instance, examines Couples and the Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy only in passing but proffers extended close readings of The Poorhouse Fair and In the Beauty of the Lilies. In the case

16. “Scandalous” derives from the Greek word skandalon, a snare or stumbling block. Guardini suggests that the cooptation of Christian “ideas and values” by secular Western culture has obscured the scandalous character of Christianity, its claim to be a truth that is nonetheless not “self-evident,” a truth that will have to be proven “deliberately,” despite its implausibility, but which can be confirmed only in the “absolute experiencing of dogma.”
of writers whose corpus is smaller, such as O'Connor, I have simply chosen the works that seem to me best suited to highlight the authors’ distinct rhetorical appeals.

Chapter 1 begins by considering the fundamental impasse that has always governed interpretation of Flannery O’Connor’s work. Because O’Connor was so explicit both about her intended audience of secularists and about her fictional aims, critics of her work have been divided into those who see her as a prophet and those who, rejecting her religious vision, seek either to redeem her work for twentieth-century liberalism or to castigate its alleged cruelty and antihumanism. After considering my own exasperation before this impasse, I argue that the impasse will persist, for it reveals that belief itself—whether in Christianity or in some other set of commitments—is inescapable, and that O’Connor’s facility in foregrounding this fact is perhaps her most compelling strength as a writer. I then suggest that O’Connor intends her obsessive violence in large part as an index of human freedom, which her own Catholic version of Christian orthodoxy affirms. Precisely because intimations of freedom in a literary work must seem counterintuitive and self-contradictory—a fictional character, after all, is by definition not free—violence connotes freedom because it suggests a breaking of the chains of realist necessity and plausibility. The “freest” act of all thus becomes the acceptance of God’s grace, in spite of the considerable obstacles to its accomplishment. Taking up three of O’Connor’s most celebrated stories, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “The Artificial Nigger,” and “[Judgement sic] Day,” I contend that O’Connor more successfully dramatizes this nexus of violence, human freedom, and Christian belief in the first and the third of these stories than in the second.

Chapter 2 examines Muriel Spark, a convert to Catholicism and in some respects the most sophisticated of these writers. I argue that in contrast to O’Connor, who assumed the hostility of her audience, Spark declares herself to be writing for “really intelligent people” and tailors her rhetorical strategies as appeals to her readers’ aesthetic sensitivity—an approach informed by her own reading in John Henry Newman and by her tendency to portray artist figures whose own work is figured as analogous to divine creation. Though Spark’s particular approach runs the risks of theological distortion and unabashed elitism, I argue that often its cold, self-assured whimsicality often proves compelling, particularly in works such as The Comforters, The Girls of Slender Means, The Abbess of Crewe, Loitering with Intent, and Reality and Dreams.

Chapter 3 examines the contradiction that many have seen in the work of John Updike—an unfashionable and stern commitment to Protestant theology on the one hand and an obsessive attention to sexual delight on the
other, both filtered through a sense of American exceptionalism. Through sustained readings of *The Poorhouse Fair* and *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and briefer considerations of *Couples, Roger’s Version*, and *Terrorist*, I argue that what resolves this apparent contradiction is a commitment to narcissism. Updike perilously casts the doctrines of Christianity as appeals to the essential narcissism of the twentieth-century white American male, gambling that readers will find their own narcissism reflected and confirmed.

In his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, Updike accommodates this narcissism even as he (in light of his later work) uncharacteristically suggests that orthodox belief and moral conduct ought to go together. As his career progresses, however, Updike comes to divide the two and even to suggest that orthodoxy affords a greater frisson to one’s sins. By the time he publishes *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, he has come not to take disbelief seriously but rather to regard it as a species of thwarted belief that springs from the same narcissistic desires that motivate faith.

Chapter 4 focuses on the later career of Walker Percy. Like Spark a convert to Catholicism, Percy argues for the truth of Catholic Christianity but takes as his point of departure what he regards as the near-universal condition of boredom in modernity. In my earlier book, *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South*, I argued that in his first three novels, Percy proposes that Catholicism can restore meaning to people made desperate by their boredom, but shows, against his intentions, how easily this Catholicism can become an essentially aesthetic marker of “lifestyle.” Here I continue and refine this argument, considering the fictive works of Percy’s later career—his novels *Lancelot, The Second Coming,* and *The Thanatos Syndrome,* and the narrative “A Space Odyssey” embedded in *Lost in the Cosmos.* These novels display a new stridency, and I argue that they represent an attempt to leave behind the ambiguities of the earlier books, even, perhaps, through a sacrifice of aesthetic complexity. At the same time, when these texts are at their most compelling, they continue to emphasize that only death brings closure to human lives, that any change in belief is possible until that point, and that the chief difficulty that Christians face is that of keeping faith in a world in which boredom is never permanently eradicated.

Finally, in chapter 5, I examine the work of Mary Gordon, a Catholic, and Marilynne Robinson, a Congregationalist. Both writers emerge in a context defined by recent turmoil in their respective traditions—the events and effects of the Second Vatican Council for Gordon; the decline of mainline American Protestantism and of the habits of civic responsibility that it nourished for Robinson. I do not challenge these writers’ self-description as Christian, but I do argue that their treatment of Christian orthodoxy is
more accurately described as a use of Christian orthodoxy than an argument in favor of it. Gordon’s novels—particularly *Final Payments*, *The Company of Women*, *Spending*, and *Pearl*—evoke the vanishing milieu of ethnic working-class Catholicism in the Northeast, yet tend to argue that the value both of Catholicism itself and of the culture it produced is largely aesthetic. Theologically, Gordon invokes the “spirit of Vatican II,” but her deepest commitments, to art and to sexual pleasure, both intersect with and oppose this spirit in ways that seem even more self-serving than Updike’s avowedly narcissistic appeal. Turning attention to Robinson’s intelligent and feisty appeal to a liberal Calvinist tradition in her essays, I argue that she places the doctrines of Christian orthodoxy in the service of a democratic humanism that she considers threatened by the triumphs of a materialist worldview and global capitalism. In her novels *Gilead* and *Home*, on the other hand, Robinson portrays Calvinism, as practiced in a small Iowa town in 1956, as the norm against which modern anomie is measured and found wanting—an approach that depends in part on an insular nostalgia that is in some tension with her avowed universalism. In both the novels and the essays, Robinson succeeds in making Christian orthodoxy attractive to her readers but does so in a way that emphasizes cultural critique instead of truth—and in doing so empties it of much of its specificity.

Throughout this book, as I develop my judgments of these writers’ rhetorical appeals, my primary intention is less to convert people than to convey something of the remarkable power and integrity of Christian orthodoxy, to insist that such unabashed claims to tell the truth deserve a respectful hearing. Ralph Wood’s salutary reminder that “Christians are not converted and sustained in their faith chiefly through art and culture, but through the community of worship and witness called the church” (*Comedy* 282) marks the limits of my inquiry, for I am maintaining neither that “correct” readings of these writers’ fiction should result in conversion, nor that the work of these writers might provide—as per Hungerford’s argument—an aesthetically rewarding surrogate for Christian belief. Nevertheless, I feel comfortable here following Augustine’s cues in *On Christian Doctrine*—subsuming (as Wayne Booth does) fiction to rhetoric and likening these writers’ specific fictive narratives to a kind of oratory. The celebrated claim attributed to Karl Barth—“Belief cannot argue with unbelief; it can only preach to it”—need not necessarily contradict my purpose, for surely one can distinguish between more and less effective preaching.

My overarching claim is that despite the difficulties negotiated by these six writers, Christian orthodoxy still has the potential to persuade or to trouble, even among educated audiences most committed to secular principles. Indeed, I suspect—as Kierkegaard argued and Guardini reaffirmed—
that this is truer, in a world deeply marked by Hungerford’s postmodern belief, than it might have been in a more uniformly constituted Christendom. This is my own Boothian coduction, derived not only from my own experience of reading these works and finding my own faith both challenged and strengthened but also from the way my readings of these texts intersect with recent trends in the sphere of what used to be called “critical theory.” I am particularly encouraged by the fact that even a number of contemporary Marxist philosophers, such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, have claimed the banner of “belief” in an effort to resuscitate their moribund political projects. The potential power of Christian orthodoxy, in other words, is evident even to those who would appropriate it for anti-Christian ends and distort its insistence on truth. If I am able to convey something of this power even to those who are nominally Christian but who are, to a far greater degree, citizens of the contemporary secular West, then this book will have fulfilled its purpose.

17. See especially Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism* and Žižek’s *On Belief.*
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