

## AFTERWORD: BEING IN UNCERTAINTIES

GAVIN HOPPS

Gerhard Richter's 1973 series of five paintings, each entitled "Verkündigung nach Tizian" ["Annunciation after Titian"], and each offering a more or less blurred vision of Titian's original,<sup>1</sup> nicely illustrates several prominent features of a post-secular posture. In the first place, the paintings advertise a sense of "afterwardsness," which may be a source of liberation or anxiety but which either way bears witness to a complex mode of cultural and historical relatedness with respect to the tradition they equivocally invoke. This sense of an afterwards haunted by what it seeks to supersede—winkingly acknowledged in the dual sense of "nach" in the paintings' title—is explored at length in Richter's 2011 monograph *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics*, in which he calls attention to a mode of "living on and after that both remains attached to what came before, and [...] departs from it in ever-new directions," and in which he asks: "Can the 'after' ever fully emancipate itself from its predecessor, or does it in fact remain in the latter's ghostly debt?"<sup>2</sup> Richter's meditations in print and paint on the act of "wrestling with a ghostly *Nach*"<sup>3</sup> have obvious corollaries in "postsecular" studies, which, as several essays in this collection attest, have to wrestle not only with the multiple and contested conceptions of the "secular" but also with the various divergent meanings of that notoriously slippery prefix "post."

In the second place, in their opening-up of a shifting distance from their subject (the Annunciation—or, perhaps, an already vertiginously regressive annunciation of the Annunciation), the paintings adopt an in-between stance, at once oriented towards and yet keeping a distance from, which suggests an attitude of ambivalence or reticence in relation to the religious.<sup>4</sup> (Though we should note that this "in-betweenness" appears to pertain to the manner of the paintings—which hovers between Renaissance figuration and twentieth-century abstraction—as well as the posture they adopt towards their subject.) What's more, the paintings pass on this unsettled and unsettling sense of in-betweenness to the viewer, as Richter's trademark technique of blurring involves a showing and a teasing partial withdrawal of what's shown, which disrupts our automated habits of viewing and functions as a kind of alienation device, presenting us with an image whose haunting modality of half-presence eludes even as it allures.

A parallel posture of postsecular in-betweenness is conveyed, at least in the eyes of some viewers, by what is probably Richter's most well-known and most controversial work—namely, the window he designed for the south transept of Cologne Cathedral, which was unveiled in 2007, and consists of approximately 11,500 pixel-like squares of brightly-colored glass, arranged in a random pattern, without any figuration, generated by a computer program.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, Richter's eschewal of explicitly Christian symbolism or figuration has been interpreted as an antagonistic gesture and an incongruously "areligious" design within a space of worship. Jackie Wullschlager, for instance, has remarked: "It is hard to think of a more militantly anti-

---

<sup>1</sup> Titian's "Annunciation," which was produced between 1559 and 1564, was commissioned for and remains to this day in the Chiesa di San Salvatore, Venice.

<sup>2</sup> *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 4 and 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Richter's views on religion, see James Romaine, "Gerhard Richter: The Capacity for Belief," in *Image*, issue 64.

<sup>5</sup> The design for the window is based on an earlier work entitled "4096 Colours," from 1974.

spiritual cathedral decoration anywhere.”<sup>6</sup> Others, however, prefer to see the window’s meaning less as a matter of its intrinsic forms and more as something determined by its context and affects. An obvious example of the latter would be the “uncontained splendor” of kaleidoscopic light that the window brings flooding into the heart of the cathedral,<sup>7</sup> which creates a spectacle of heart-stopping beauty that can help to elicit a sense of awe and wonder as one approaches the altar. The window might therefore have a religious significance on account of what it *does* and not simply in terms of what it *is*. Equally, as one window amongst many in the cathedral, and in a context that emphasizes the immanence of the divine, the conspicuous avoidance of all figuration may serve a countervailing apophatic purpose, pointing toward a beyond that exceeds finite determination and freeing the viewer from the idolatrous accretions of our kataphatic imaginings.

In the third place, the blurring of Richter’s Annunciation—a blurring which is in a sense turned into the subject of the paintings by the serial unfolding of their gradations of unclarity—insinuates a “perhaps” into the fabric of their vision and appears to announce an epistemological weakening, of the kind expounded by Gianni Vattimo.<sup>8</sup> By foregrounding the subjective, mediated act of seeing whilst staging a retreat from discernable reference, the paintings evince a radical insecurity about what can be apprehended. (In the second painting—the most blurred of the five—one would probably have no idea what was intimated if it weren’t for the title and the other more realistic renderings.) This weakening is particularly significant given the refracted subject of the paintings—namely, the announcement of the Incarnation, which in the words of a traditional Christian hymn marks “the beginning of our salvation.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the painter’s representation of this foundational event as increasingly illegible and obscured from view—like an epiphany witnessed through frosted glass—has pointed implications for the subject of religious belief more generally.

Manifestly, there are other more positive ways of reading Richter’s refusal of clarity. For instance, one might interpret the paintings’ blurred vision as an imaging of the space of affect prior to distinct cognition, which is hospitably receptive to divergent construals. Such moments of affective openness have been explored by the political theorist William Connolly, who argues that the visceral interstices that mediate “more conceptually refined thinking” are “plurivocal” spaces of becoming, “lodged between theistic faith and secular abstinence,” which are fecund with an openness to both possibilities.<sup>10</sup> Such spaces for Connolly therefore constitute a sort of postsecular opportunity. Alternatively, as with the cathedral window, one might interpret the virtual dissolution of the biblical scene that Richter’s paintings purport to depict as an apophatic strategy, which in shrouding the narrative in a halo of unknowing indicates an event of such overwhelming significance that it exceeds conceptualization or containment, and to which an experience of bedazzlement bears witness.<sup>11</sup> As Darryn Ansted has noted: in Richter’s blurred envisaging of the Annunciation, “the subject unexpectedly acquires renewed potency, suggesting that the original

---

<sup>6</sup> “Afterthoughts of a Nihilist,” *Financial Times*, 25 September 2008. The Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Joachim Meisner, has also commented negatively on the window: “Das Fenster passt nicht in den Dom. [...] Es passt eher in eine Moschee oder in ein Gebetshaus. Wenn wir schon ein neues Fenster bekommen, dann soll es auch deutlich unseren Glauben widerspiegeln. Und nicht irgendeinen” (*Düsseldorfer Express*, 29 August 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The phrase in quotation marks is borrowed from Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982 [1961]), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Vattimo’s notion of “*pensiero debole*” or “weak thought” designates a posture that repudiates “strong” claims to truth, on the basis of an epistemological anti-foundationalism, as a counterpose to fundamentalist tendencies in secular as well as religious traditions to lay claim to an ultimate or objective perspective, “outside” interpretation, with respect to the real. Instead, “weak thought” emphasizes the provisional and mediated or always-already interpreted character of our knowledge of reality, and seeks to mitigate metaphysical violence by reducing all truth-claims to the level of competing interpretations. See, for example, ‘Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought’, in *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Troparion of the Feast of the Annunciation in the Orthodox liturgy.

<sup>10</sup> *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3 and 15.

<sup>11</sup> Behind such a reading lies the work of Jean-Luc Marion on the “saturated phenomenon.” See, for example, *In Excess: Studies of the Saturated Phenomenon*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

event to which [Titian's] painting alludes—the Annunciation, the instantiation of the radical Other of God into human kind in the form of the Virgin Mary—might best be represented by obfuscation, and with a more iconoclastic approach. [...] The blur that Richter uses to occlude the subject assigns it an inaccessible quality that instantiates rather than images its subject—intimating a place permanently beyond the symbolic reach of the oeuvre.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the serial character of Richter's paintings, whose repeated envisaging of the same subject sets each of its iterations under erasure and refuses any sense of definitive depiction, offering instead an unhierarchized series of differing “takes,” also suggests a kind of vagrancy or itinerant gaze, which is more akin to a nomadic modality of “seeking” than a more singularly committed spirituality of “dwelling.”<sup>13</sup>

Whilst not all of the contributors to this fine collection focus on precisely these features of post-secularism, what most of them share is a sense that approaching literature in light of such a framework can illuminate and help us to take the measure of works like Richter's whose engagement with religious concerns is marginal, conflicted, ambiguous, unsettled, shadowy, ludic, overdetermined or coy. In short, one of the things the foregoing essays reveal is the “negative capability” of post-secular criticism.<sup>14</sup>

What I mean by this is that such a critical approach to literature is “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,” without seeking to tidy everything up into the either-or categories of the religious and the secular. In the words of Mark Knight and Lori Branch, it can help to “[tune] our ears to hear other possibilities about the migrations of religion and secularism.” It is particularly important for literary critics to aspire to this sort of “negative capability,” for as Dawn Coleman argues in her contribution to this volume, literature is so valuable to cross-disciplinary discussions about religion and secularity precisely because of the way it makes visible the messy, inconclusive and non-rational aspects of “lived spirituality”—that is, “the feelings beyond reason, the contingencies that defy theory, the exceptions and specifics of individual lives”—which can “productively unsettle scholarly theories in the non-literary disciplines.” Cultivating a form of critical practice that can keep these “exceptions and specifics” in view is therefore imperative if we are to avoid diminishing the relevance of literature to contemporary debates about religion and the secular.

As the essays in this special edition make clear, the in-between posture of literary post-secularism can take a wide variety of forms. As John McClure shows in his exemplary opening chapter, it can take the form of a Romantic vitalism, whose energies are at once “carnal and spiritual” and which is opposed alike to the constraining protocols of secular rationality and traditional religiosity. Illustrating his argument with reference to the work of Whitman, Rand, Kerouac and DeLillo, McClure explores the divergent outworkings of such “energy mysticism” in American counter-culture of the 1960s and the neo-liberalism that came to the fore in the 1970s. What McClure concludes, against a tendency to condemn such vitalism as “a celebration of animal spirits” incompatible with a “steady care for others,” is that there are sympathetic forms of vitalism as well, which can foster a living connection to others and possess significant ethical and spiritual potential. What we need, therefore, and what McClure's post-secular reflections deftly encourage, is “a discrimination of vitalisms.”

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Artwork of Gerhard Richter: Painting, Critical Theory and Cultural Transformation* (Oxford: Routledge, 2107), 221.

<sup>13</sup> In distinguishing between “dwelling” and “seeking” as forms of religious life, I am drawing on Robert Wuthnow's work *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). In *Art after Metaphysics* (North Charleston: Createspace, 2013), John David Ebert describes Richter's habit of blurring as a “deconstructive method of effacing and erasing previously extant images,” which he compares to Heidegger's practice of placing concepts “sous rature” (99ff).

<sup>14</sup> This well-known phrase was coined by John Keats, who explains it as follows: “I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge” (letter to his brothers, George and Tom, in December 1817); cited in *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York: Norton, 2009), 109.

Kristin Joy Wilkes's essay also turns our attention to post-secular stirrings in nineteenth-century literature; however, she focuses in particular on Harriet Beecher Stowe's "novelistic theology" and the ways in which "earthly experience" can be "a source of religious knowledge—a ladder one could ascend toward God." Calling into question "the supposed secularity of realism" and the widespread correlative assumption that the novel is an "assistant to or symptom of secularization," Wilkes argues that Beecher Stowe's work testifies to the contrary that the novel is peculiarly well equipped for "describing the complexities of lived religion." Indeed, as Wilkes makes clear in a highly illuminating discussion of *The Minister's Wooing*, the novel—as well as literature more generally—doesn't just *reflect* religious practice; it can also more actively shape and transform it. In this case, then, the opening up of a post-secular literary space is a matter of stepping outside of established models of religious practice (on this occasion, the severe doctrines of nineteenth-century New England Calvinism) not out of an anti-religious impulse, but rather as a way of exploring alternatives that do not "divorce daily experience from one's religious belief." In other words, what Wilkes's essay brings into view is a form of secularization that isn't opposed to the religious.

Whilst Romantic and Victorian literary representations of nature lie in the background of Alexander Hampton's excellent essay, his primary focus is on the twenty-first-century rehabilitation of non-fictional nature writing. According to Hampton, what we find in this work is "a postsecular reconceptualization of our relationship to nature," which is precipitated by but also further engenders a dismantling of sacred-secular dichotomies. More positively, as Hampton explains, the "ontological indeterminacy" that accompanies this disruption of exclusively sacred and secular constructions of the real makes way for a multiplicity of "hybridized prospects and opportunities," which are bolstered by "a new understanding of the kindredness of life" and help to promote "a restored sense of participation" in nature. Yet, whilst highlighting the re-emergence of "transcendent and enchanted possibilities" within twenty-first-century nature writing, Hampton is careful to keep simultaneously in view its countervailing "metaphysical reticence," which distinguishes its unhoused and equivocal post-secular posture from a "strong" traditional religious stance.

The final essay in the first section, by Kevin Seidel, is also concerned with the "plurivocal" openness of literary spaces to religious as well as secular constructions of reality; but rather than describing such spaces as "post-secular," Seidel prefers to consider the ways in which they envisage and seek to cultivate a "better secularity"—that is, "a secular that is not necessarily hostile or antagonist toward faith, a secular that is sometimes nourished or inspired by its religious traditions, and yet a secular that has its own integrity apart from the disciplines of theology and biblical studies." The in-between space with which Seidel is concerned thus has less to do with metaphysics and more to do with social and political models of comportment—which is to say, the manner in which we inhabit and interact with diverse constituencies in the public sphere. In particular, what Seidel helpfully brings to light, drawing on the work of William Connolly, is literature's ability to refashion the secular by fostering an ethos of hospitable pluralism, which can help to counter "immodest" religious or secular conceptions of public life.

One of the recurring themes throughout these essays is the importance of literature's *affective* capacities—that is, its ability to transform the reader's vision, to reconfigure our dispositions towards the other, and to offer alternative models of life that can be appropriated "in front of" the text. (What I mean by this, drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, is that works of fiction can expand our sense of the possible, by bringing into view alternative ways of interpreting and inhabiting the world, which can then be "realized" or lived out by the reader on the other side of the textual event.) This interest in affect may help to explain why post-secular criticism so frequently engages with nineteenth-century literature. Yet it also surely has something to do with the parallels between the "spilt religion" of Romanticism and the equivocal re-enchantment of

postmodernism,<sup>15</sup> both of which keep a sceptical or suspicious distance from traditional forms of religiosity whilst evincing a radical counter-enlightenment openness to mystery, wonder and an ineffable “beyond.” Related to this critical interest in affect is a tendency to favor what we might describe as a “post-pessimistic” approach to literature, which seeks to move beyond an ethos of “suspicion” and explores instead the constructive, reparative and replenishing potential of literary works. Such approaches are less interested in ideology critique or the vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration and are more concerned with the social efficacy of literature and its ability to disclose new ways of being in the world.<sup>16</sup>

This latter tendency, and its relation to the post-secular, is something that is discussed by Mark Knight and Lori Branch in their pivotal contribution to the volume (“pivotal” because, whereas the first four essays in the collection focus on the post-secular as a literary, theological or socio-political tendency, the pieces that follow are primarily concerned with the post-secular as a conceptual or analytical framework; Knight and Branch’s distinguished contribution does something of both). Specifically, Knight and Branch suggest that the post-secular and the movement known as “post-critique” are “potentially great allies,” which share an interest in forms of enchantment and a desire to move beyond a one-sided “hermeneutics of suspicion.” However, they also highlight the persistence of secular presuppositions within the framework of post-critique, at least at it is currently practiced, which constrain its openness to religious possibilities that a post-secular approach would not foreclose. Though it should be immediately added that the radical hospitality of the latter—which is born of what Knight and Branch refer to as an “epistemological humility”—works both ways and makes it receptive to antagonistic secular views as well, so that it prompts us to question even as it “oxymoronically” defends the possibility of a religious construal of the real. (Another of the intriguing things that links postmodern re-enchantment with Romantic spilt religion is the way it seems to be a sort of self-subverting scepticism that dilates the parameters of the possible and thus paradoxically makes room for faith.) For this reason, Knight and Branch call for a post-secular reconception of post-critique that is expanded to encompass an “extra-virtual openness [to] religious and spiritual experience.”

If Knight and Branch foreground the benefits of adopting a post-secular framework—on account of its ability to alert us to “manifestations of faith and secularism that previous paradigms had rendered invisible” but also in view of the way it appeared to foster “a transfiguring and generous spirit” amongst those discussing literature under its aegis—the contributions that follow raise a number of critical concerns. Kathryn Ludwig, for example, argues against a prominent model of post-secularism that conceives of the intertwining of the religious and the secular as a hostile conjunction, from which we can hope for “little more than a weakening of each viewpoint by the other,” and suggests that we should be more attentive to their mutually “enriching potential” and the ways in which they can operate in “fertile alliances.” Some of the respondents in Megan Milota’s contribution are even more critical and dismiss theories of post-secularism as unhelpfully vague or else are riled by what they see as “an attempt to smuggle religious dogma and rhetoric into academia through a side door.” An obvious retort to the demand for this sort of secular hygiene would be that it was precisely in order to contest the assumption that public spaces should be scoured of the religious that the pluralist framework of post-secularism was propounded.

The final contribution, by Christopher Douglas, raises an obverse concern—namely, that the ascendancy of post-secular discourse conceals the resurgence of “strong” religiosity, and especially the “unheralded public return” of conservative Christianity in America. In calling attention to “postsecularism’s other,” Douglas offers a discerning reading of David Foster Wallace’s short story “Good People,” whose delicate balance of sympathy and distance serves as

---

<sup>15</sup> As John McClure has noted, “Postsecularism [...] has been a feature of literary thinking since the romantics” (*Partial Faiths*, 3).

<sup>16</sup> This sort of “post-critical” approach has been persuasively espoused, amongst others, by Bruno Latour and Rita Felski.

a model for Douglas's own admirably even-handed treatment of the "strong" religiosity that continues to thrive and exert enormous authority within the so-called post-secular sphere.

Douglas's point is well taken; however, it might be argued that Wallace's story also shows us that the adoption of a post-secular stance is not incompatible with an unbiased recognition of the "strong" traditional forms of religion that flourish alongside it. For whilst the couple at the center of "Good People" clearly represent a form of conservative Christianity that, as Douglas observes, is "under-remarked in literary studies," the cumulatively constituted narrative perspective of the unfinished novel into which the story was incorporated (*The Pale King*) is manifestly much less religious and closer to a post-secular stance. The story itself is also narrated in a respectful but somewhat reticent manner. So, for example, in a way that parallels Richter's blurring in his "Annunciation after Titan," the advent of grace in O'Connor's story has become in Wallace's more cagey idiom the experience of "something without any name he knows," which is "given to him in the form of a question."<sup>17</sup> What's more, although Wallace's portrayal of the couple in "an evangelical predicament" evinces a touching width of sympathy and—given the author's largely counter-cultural readership—a characteristically contrarian daring, its shadowing of O'Connor's story with its celebrated instance of the "sacramental grotesque" involves a wonderful overarching irony; for whereas O'Connor typically seeks to shock her reader into registering providential incursions of the divine by showing "the action of God's grace in a territory held largely by the devil"<sup>18</sup> (in "Good Country People" the unwitting instrument is a nihilistic conman), Wallace aims to shock his hip postmodern readers by showing us the advent of something like grace where some of them might least expect it—namely, in a *religious* context.

Wallace's short story is thus a nice example with which to conclude, as his work reminds us how unstable and subject to paradoxical inversions and cross-pollination our categories of the secular and religious are. Which is a very post-secular lesson.

---

<sup>17</sup> *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2012), 44-5. Throughout the final "epiphanic" scene, the narrator employs suggestively stilted passive phrasings, such as "he was given then to know" and "Lane has been given to read her heart" (43-4), which coyly imply the ministrations of grace; the narrator also says that Lane would later call the "something more" that "is given to him to feel" "a vision or *moment of grace*" (44).

<sup>18</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 18.