Chapter 1

Wording the World and Worlding the Word

Polytheistic, monotheistic, or pantheistic, no system, including theism as well as atheism, ever dawns on the human imagination, that does not bear the seed of its own subversion. It makes no difference if one is Greek or Jew, for remember Socrates and Jesus were equally charged with atheism as also were the latter’s followers by the Roman authorities. Like history, religion too is written from the standpoint of the winner. This standpoint seeks either to belie or vindicate legends like that of Prometheus or in particular that of Abraham smashing idols of his father.¹ Not to mention Jesus and his strictures against the Temple.² So that, recalling Feuerbach’s laconic verdict, today’s would-be “atheism is tomorrow’s religion.”³ With this difference, however: today’s atheism is methodological rather than ideological, practical rather than “confessional.”⁴ Wasn’t it the Devil who, in the Gospel, put faith as well as God into question by leaning on Scriptures and, slyly, muttering, “Will God really be there when you need him?”⁵

¹. Practical atheism only confronts an equally practical theism. It plays the experience of God’s absence against that of God’s presence: it settles for an argument about an experience actually no more felt than it is obsessively shouted about and, in this respect, scarcely differs from similarly obsessed fundamentalism or its latter-day sibling, Pentecostalism and the like.⁶ But the wedge it would drive between practical theism and its own variants only succeeds—as is equally the
case with its theistic opponent—in avoiding the real issue, namely, the relation between belief and unbelief, faith and unfaith, on the one hand, and, on the other, the interlocking of language and God insofar as, whether affirmed or denied, “God” is a matter of words. Yet of words not stuck with a predetermined meaning so much as of words whose meaning only grows precisely out of their use. Else empty, though not as would a tomb or much less a mausoleum be, but as would a shell be without its user, the snail. Or as likewise are theism and atheism when they seem obstinately bent on sheltering this or that particular use of a word they have eviscerated of all meaning—as would the shell be that was eviscerated of the snail it grows on.

Or, again, as are even words obsessed with God, whether present or absent, though they do leave a trace: in a dictionary, if not in the world, and as provisional and providential as the world if not more so. Hence quite a particular trace. And so particular that a collateral question arises: no sooner worshipped than God becomes an idol—idol to which language is as allergic as it is propitious to God so long as that very God is and remains radically Other and is no more fused with the world than kicked upstairs or out. And is neither a stopgap nor a superfluous hypothesis like the cherry on a piece of cake.

God is but a word—as are all the other words of a dictionary through which language consists in both wording the world and worlding the word: a kenotic as well as proleptic performance in keeping with which, neither more nor less than immanence, transcendence is no matter of the presence or absence of God but of the radical otherness between the divine and the human; so radical that, neither more nor less than unfaith, faith consists, not in being freed from or by God as in being free even of God.

Wording the world and worlding the word, the very language of faith consists in calling things and beings into that reality of which the world is “all that is the case” and of which God is not the name. Having no name, or even not so much as an identity, God is the identifier through which “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) and through which all that live, like the illiterate Dilsey in Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, know that their name is written in the Book and they do not even have to read it. Long before Lacan’s subtle definition of atheism as consisting less in denying God