

Why the Postsecular Matters: The Rise of the Novel and Literary Studies

In the summer of 2016, the authors of this essay co-directed a four-week NEH Summer Seminar for faculty, titled “Postsecular Studies and the Rise of the English Novel, 1719-1897.” The germ of our seminar was simple. We are scholars who work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, and we edit monograph series in religion, literature, and postsecular studies. In our experience, scholars in our fields have yet to take up the insights of postsecular scholarship in meaningful ways. By and large, their stories still cast the novel as the handmaid of secularization, reworking the well-worn plot of religion’s decline rather than of its complex transformation and shape-shifting nature in modernity. We wanted to lead a seminar that gave faculty a chance to read postsecular scholarship from many disciplines alongside canonical and lesser-well-known novels from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Dracula*, tuning our ears to hear other possibilities about the migrations of religion and secularism in these narratives.

The term “postsecular” continues to be used in a variety of ways that are important to distinguish. In *Post-Secular Philosophy* (1998) Philip Blond used it to describe a “Radical Orthodox” theological orientation. For Jürgen Habermas the postsecular is a political designation for a European society no longer homogenously secular and grappling to integrate religious citizens in the public sphere. For scholars in our discipline, it is often a literary-historical term borrowed from John McClure’s *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007), identifying select post-WWII literature more occupied with faith and spirituality than the modernist fiction that preceded it. In framing our seminar, we used the term “postsecular” primarily in a fourth sense, as shorthand for

multiform scholarship growing out of two decades of the “religious turn” in the humanities in general: what we like to think of as the religious turn’s coming of age.

We locate postsecular studies’ center of gravity in a critical perspective towards secularism and the secularization thesis. Since the mid-twentieth century, sociology’s secularization thesis has been the dominant paradigm for understanding religion in modernity, asserting that religion’s social significance declines as its roles diminish due to modern social differentiation (institutions), societalization (the decline in local orientation), and rationalization. Postsecular studies, in our view, marks the coming-of-age of the humanities’ “religious turn” in the 1990s and early 2000s; it proceeds from the wealth of recent historical scholarship that challenges the predictive and explanatory force of the secularization thesis, as well as from new critical interdisciplinary work in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and history that shows the division between the religious and the secular to be permeable and constructed, part of what Talal Asad calls an ideology of secularism in modernity. The “post” in postsecular does not mean that the secular is somehow finished or that a premodern religiosity lurks in the wings, but that our humanistic and social science inquires have passed through an unreflective assumption of secularization to a critical awareness of its dependency on a specific production of the categories of the religious and the secular in modernity. In this “post” lies the great promise of postsecular studies: it has new eyes to see modern manifestations of faith and secularism that previous paradigms had rendered invisible, and it is developing new vocabularies and frameworks for raising previously unasked questions about the complex connections between religion and secularism in modernity.

For both of us, the postsecular is a term at once imperfect and useful. Imperfect, because of the different meanings we attach to the word and also the scholarly irritation that frequently accompanies the overused “post.” The term was flagged by some of the supportive reviewers and NEH staff who funded our seminar: enthusiastic about its content, they worried that reference to the postsecular might alienate certain constituents. In the end, we were allowed to keep the title on our website, while the NEH publicized the program as “Religion, Secularism, and the Rise of the English Novel, 1719-1897.” Although the compromise seemed reasonable, we had sought to retain the term postsecular because we felt it could do useful work for our discipline and the humanities as a whole, namely, mainstreaming the major insights of the religious turn described in the previous paragraph, overcoming the ghettoization of religiously-related scholarship, and catalyzing a sea change in the discipline not unlike the one worked by feminism and the New Historicism in previous decades. Put another way, we thought, and still think, that foregrounding the term postsecular enables a critical perspective on secularism and an awareness of the persistence and transformation of religion in modernity. This can help scholars working on religion move beyond the seemingly endless need for basic refutations of the secularization thesis and onward to conversations that can help humanists of many stripes better understand and speak to complex iterations of religion, spirituality, and secularism at work in the literatures and cultures we study.

In the discussion that follows, we explain why we think the postsecular matters, for literary studies in general and for our stories of the novel in particular. As we do so, we draw heavily on our experience of the seminar: our preparations for it, the astute and generous contributions of the participants, the gracious wisdom of our four guest speakers,

the points emerging from the large body of transformational material we read, and the intellectual life of our group over four weeks in Iowa. The last of these is probably the most difficult experience to convey here, but the importance of communal activity for postsecular studies is something that we want to insist on and will return to later in this essay.

One reason we see the postsecular as so potentially generative for literary studies is its capacity to prompt a shift, change, expansion, and re-arrangement of what we read. The belief that the rise of the novel in England marks the arrival of the secular is so common, so pervasive, and so widespread, that it is difficult to imagine other ways of conceiving the form. There have, of course, been multiple attempts to narrate the rise of the novel differently than Ian Watt did in his 1957 book, but in nearly every instance, the subsequent accounts have found no more room for religion.¹ Our interest in the postsecular is not, to be clear, an attempt to replace one monolithic idea (the secular) with another (the religious), but rather to acknowledge and open up the creative space for thinking that emerges when difficult ideas and disciplinary modes of thought are allowed to cross-pollinate.

Postsecularism's proclivity for interdisciplinary reading is not only generative, then, but necessary, too. Once we recognize that the relation between the secular and the religious—most often a clearly separated hierarchy—helps configure the habits and practices of literary criticism as a discipline, we can see why we need to read across established frameworks of knowledge. The interdisciplinary grounds of the secularization thesis and of the thinkers who challenge and revise it mean we read sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and history, to understand their critiques and grasp how they might translate into, resonate with, or inspire related reconsiderations in our field.

Enthusiasm for interdisciplinary reading is not new, and we acknowledge the myriad of other contexts and arguments put forward over the years in favor of reading across and between disciplines. And we acknowledge too that, as others have pointed out, interdisciplinary reading brings with it substantial practical difficulties. Being perpetually confronted by different assumptions and frames of reference can be discomfoting, and we sympathize with those moments in which participants in the seminar voiced a level of disquiet with a particular piece of reading. Why does the historian need so many examples? Why does the theologian seem so concerned with an apparently minor point of doctrine? Why does the sociologist rush to quantify and chart categories of thought? Why does analytic philosophy seem so resistant to the ambiguity of the literary text? We appreciate the danger of simplification that these characterizations connote, and accept that the best scholarship, in multiple disciplines, has long shown at least some awareness of reading outside one's immediate sphere of knowledge. But postsecular thinking seems to encourage a greater level of interdisciplinarity than is common to many areas of literary studies, at least when it comes to the rise of the novel. This has been our impression as we listened to participants (and other colleagues who looked at our reading list) comment on how different so much of our syllabus was from the sort of reading typically done in the discipline. Their remarks on this score led to internal reflection, from both of us, about how and why our thinking on the relation between the religious and secular has drawn so heavily on material from outside literary studies.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* was an important text for us during the seminar, and we benefited from the help of one of our guest speakers, Colin Jager, in helping us attend to the rhetorical forms in Taylor's work. Thematically and formally, *A Secular Age* epitomizes

the interdisciplinary promiscuity we associate with the postsecular. Perhaps this is unsurprising given Taylor's focus on narrative—which he insists “is not an optional extra”—and his desire to relay many of its different strands: “The story of what happened in the secularization of Western Christendom is so broad, and so multi-faceted, that one could write several books this length and still not do justice to it.”² For some of Taylor's detractors, the interdisciplinary breadth of his work is a problem, and it is not uncommon to hear even those who are sympathetic to Taylor's project joining the chorus of complaints about a lack of disciplinary or historical nuance. There is a related concern, articulated more than once during our seminar discussions, that his commitment to narrative might prove both limiting and totalizing. But while we recognize the need for incredulity towards any meta-narrative with an omniscient ambition, narrative does not have to be understood in this manner. On our reading, the form narrative takes in the novel—certainly in the western tradition but also elsewhere, across time, place, and subgenre—can and frequently does model a more open-ended mode of conversation, with multiple characters, plot threads, and readers creating space for different interpretations. We wish to advance a similar claim for Taylor's work. For all the gaps and weaknesses and biases of *A Secular Age*, the story it tells about the relationship between religion and the secular is one that has prompted and accommodated scholarly responses from a huge array of disciplines.

Taylor is not alone in wanting to tell a more complex story about religion and the secular. Another formative text for our seminar, as for our postsecular sensibility more broadly, was Jacques Derrida's essay, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.” Although Derrida's methodological starting point is significantly different than Taylor's, the two scholars share a desire to trace the involved

historical and textual threads between faith and knowledge and to query the extent of their separation. In pondering this relation, Derrida distinguishes between two kinds of faith in modernity. The first is a Kantian, rationalizing one, which is always tempted to cash out faith in terms of knowledge and which, by virtue of this internal contradiction, is “bound” to reason “by the band of their opposition.”³ The second sort of faith, Derrida writes, is aligned with prayer and sacrifice rather than philosophy. It resists the comforts of abstraction, mastery, and the mechanisms of the law, passing through them without stopping at mirages of certainty, on towards what he calls the “desert in the desert,” where the aporias of law and knowledge appear, and where belief and the experience of the sacredness of the other might take place.⁴ In other words, the uncertainty of the desert in the desert allows for the possibility of faith that remains faith and is not subsumed into knowledge. Alterity, freedom, and responsibility are made possible by faith’s uncertainties and are, for Derrida, since his earliest works, rooted in the nature of language. Building on Saussure’s notion of the differential nature of the sign, Derrida’s 1968 essay “Différance” shows that thought and our perception of reality are governed by the same structure: the work of *différance* that produces presence as an effect of temporal and spatial displacement which leaves a perpetual trace of alterity on each idea and concept. This does not mean that there is no knowledge or meaning, but that there is no knowledge or meaning in isolation. Knowledge, like language, is relational, based in constructive, interpretive acts of belief. Re-reading “*Différance*” today, we can see why, thirty years later, Derrida was still writing in “Faith and Knowledge” about “the act of faith in the appeal to faith that inhabits every act of language and every address to the other.”⁵ Faith, like relationality, is for Derrida inherent in the linguistic condition.

Overturning binaries is not the same as claiming that all perspectives are the same, however, and we join Derrida and Taylor in wrestling with the difficulty of writing and talking in a way that accommodates perspectives oriented differently towards faith and knowledge. One of our participants prompted us to think about the importance of table hospitality in Derrida's explorations, and the intuition proved fruitful for our seminar. The Jewish and Christian contexts of this conceit—a shared insistence that offering hospitality to a stranger, like Abraham with the angels, is the paradigmatic moment of openness to the other, both human and divine—lead us to understanding why the postsecular, more adeptly than narrower, secular constructions, encourages the interdisciplinary reading that we find so helpful for our thinking about the novel. Across our academic careers we have experienced some secular scholarly conversations to be as inhospitable to religious interlocutors as religious conversations can be to secular and skeptical voices, and so it is no accident that we imagine and experience the postsecular as uniquely concerned with hosting long, invested conversations among speakers that have yet to regularly share a table together. Judaism and Christianity may not be unique in helping us to set this table: Amanda Anderson argues for the cosmopolitan ambition of secular modernity, and Habermas draws on a related commitment to Enlightenment values when speaking of postsecular Europe as a context in which secular citizens come to recognize the resources and intuitions religious citizens can offer to deal with society's most contentious divisions. Nevertheless, the long-standing commitment of the three Abrahamic religions to hosting the other is a key reason why the postsecular enables more diverse conversations in literary study, providing deep, fertile soil in which a richer, more biodiverse interdisciplinarity can flourish.

It seems to us that in the secular contexts in which we work, postsecular studies specifically opens up the reading of religious and theological texts, as well as religious ways of reading, by which we mean reading marked by one or more aspects of a faith tradition—e.g. its language, rituals, or priorities. Even if we consider literary studies a secularized sort of religious reading, as many have done, these explicitly religious reading practices and sensibilities are, as Michael Warner points out in “Uncritical Reading,” often neglected in literary studies. Yet they overlap a great deal with the concerns of literary scholars. In seeking to resurrect the reading of religion—that is, reading with a greater openness to theological vocabulary and grammar—we are aware that not everyone will share our enthusiasm. Some of our peers remain reluctant to talk about religion in literary studies, seemingly shy of doing anything to encourage a dogma they consider to be intellectually unyielding and closed to new ideas. There is historical evidence, of course, to support this nervousness, and we acknowledge those disturbing instances where the language of closed thinking about faith has given rise to violence. But the same charge can be brought against any other discourse or body of thought, not least political secularism in the twentieth century. The signature movement of secularist thinking since the early modern wars of religion has been to equate violence with religious violence, and thus to render secularist violence unmarked and invisible, and therefore unchecked. Moreover, we can think of numerous counter-examples, where believers from across the religious spectrum have privileged freedom and found in their beliefs a source for positive social transformation and acts of radical hospitality.

Part of the reason why the interpretative work undertaken by those who identify as believers can result in such different outcomes is that the life of faith, individually and

communally, is inevitably entangled with the politics of power and the various forms of injustice and wrongdoing that mar all of our attempts to live in the world. This entanglement, which can be thought about as sin but is perhaps better understood as the “fortunate” fall described in *Paradise Lost*, a fall into brokenness that nonetheless sets out for healing in hope, is not specific to religious believers: it is part of what it means to be human and a reason why theological language, like all other human knowledge, needs to come from a position of epistemological humility. Contrary to what many people think, the work of religion, at least of the Christian tradition with which we are most familiar, is to explore faith in all its worldly entanglements rather than always seeking to extricate itself from those entanglements. What we value about the postsecular, then, is its insistence on thinking about religion alongside and within the secular: rather than seeking or excluding a reified and narrow account of transcendence, the postsecular admits the reading of religious and theological texts as part of the world that the modern academy seeks to understand. This opens doors, previously locked, to whole new intellectual worlds.

By resisting the confined space that secular thought so often leaves for religion, postsecular studies invites us to examine theological texts and mine their theoretical possibilities. One of the examples we spent time considering during our seminar was the concept of providence, a theological doctrine that is frequently impoverished by those literary histories which presume that the emergence of the novel inaugurates an emphasis on agency and/or the material world at odds with older notions of God’s action in the world. Many of the most brilliant and best known theorists of the novel—Georg Lukács, Ian Watt, Frederick Jameson—work with a constricted understanding of providence, and George Levine is hardly alone when he sees the Victorian novel’s emphasis on capital

putting “pressure on the providence narratives bequeathed to it by Christianity.”⁶ The problem with such readings is that providence is more subtle and wide-ranging than the harsh Calvinistic determinism that Charles Dickens embodies in *Little Dorrit* through the character of Mrs Clennam. Dickens’s novel was one of the texts for our seminar, and our lively discussion of it included a consideration of providence that went much further than Mrs Clennam’s interest in the determination of the elect and the damned. Christian theology sees providence more comprehensively, from talk of how God makes space for others in creation to the role of the Holy Spirit and the transformational work of God and God’s people in society. Equipped with this extensive grammar of thought, we see how the concerns of an array of novels in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—concerns with the quotidian, with purpose, and with the material world, to take just a few examples—are compatible with rather than antagonistic to readings that take seriously the ongoing vitality of religious thought.

Recognising this opens up the considerable theological complexity and ambiguity in the ending to *Little Dorrit*, which describes Amy and Arthur “[going] quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar.”⁷ Five times in the final two paragraphs Dickens insists that the couple “went down,” and in one reading this going down is just a simple and somber descent from the sacramental space and time of their wedding in the church, under the stained-glass image of Christ. But before they descend, Dickens has the pair pause for a moment on the steps of the portico, “looking at the fresh perspective of the street in the autumn morning sun’s bright rays.”⁸ We might think of this pause as pregnant and

postsecular, creating a “fresh perspective” that can acknowledge even slanted autumn sunshine as bright, that understands going down into the daily labors of motherhood and neighborly care as radically participating in Christ’s kenosis and enfleshing, in the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in forming and giving life to the creation. Thinking in this way gives us the means of overcoming a presumed opposition between divine and human agency, as well as giving us traction in pushing back against Levine’s insistence that the quotidian detail of the novel, however religious its contents, stacks its deck in favor of the secular. To deny the possibility of this more positive reading is to narrow the Christian valences of the novel too negatively for our tastes.

Providence is also a central theme in the writing of George MacDonald, another of our novelists during the seminar. Throughout his fiction, the commitment to God’s mysterious activity in and through creation endows all events with a divine purpose that eschews easy answers, registers the contribution of all creatures, and remains open to different interpretations. While the writings of an explicitly Christian author such as MacDonald may seem an all-too-convenient site for thinking about postsecular studies in the novel, we think the postsecular opens up multiple interpretative possibilities across the range of novels we work with. This includes *Phantastes*, which is hardly a straightforward religious text: some of MacDonald’s initial readers were unsure what to make of the theological implications of his work, and many of our participants had a similar reaction, delighting in the freshness of his writing style but finding it hard to make sense of the novel’s imaginative explorations through familiar critical lenses. Bringing the conceptual framework of the postsecular to bear on MacDonald’s fantastic fiction does not offer easy answers but it does prove beneficial, not least in ensuring that we do not frame only

questions that isolate the fantastic from the affairs of this world. How does MacDonald use fantasy in the novel to reconfigure the relationship between the religious and the secular as it was conceived in his day? In the heyday of fictional realism, why does he find *fantasy* such an appealing venue for expressing something crucial about the *reality* of religious experience?

As Novalis observes in a quotation that MacDonald uses as an epigraph for *Phantastes*, a “fairy-story is like a vision without coherence. An ensemble of wonderful things and events.” Rather than seeking escape from the world that we know, these “wonderful things and events” reorient our customary perceptions of the world we inhabit and help us glimpse creation’s eschatological goal. In MacDonald’s hands, the fairy-tale and the fantastic communicate a crucial dimension of religious experience, perhaps one that MacDonald is especially concerned to reconfigure: an experience of openness to a sometimes inscrutable alterity (“a vision without coherence”) and of wonder, that is, the capacity to experience real “things and events” as wonders. Religion, or perhaps spiritual experience, in MacDonald’s hands, is a journey, a sensibility connecting childhood, maturity, and old age, a process of learning and growth, a mode of engagement with others and the world that seems necessarily to entail moments of both authenticity and of self-deception. As we saw in our seminar discussion of *Phantastes*, MacDonald’s theology evokes a variety of responses: fascination with his perspective on suffering, confusion and disagreement about his understanding of agency, interest in his view of the imagination, and questions about the gender politics of his text. But the more basic point we wish to emphasise here is that his use of the fantastic—and the religious as reconfigured through the fantastic—maps onto this world rather than seeking escape from it. Recognising this is

the key to integrating the fantasy genre into our broader accounts of the novel, dislodging the dominance so frequently accorded to realism and helping us see a greater plurality of ways in which novelists imagine the world.

The postsecular helps us to hear the rumblings of religion, secularity and modernity in more familiar spheres, too, spheres that are no less providential for their familiarity and which continue to mediate a complex understanding of the interaction between divine and human agency. *Robinson Crusoe* was the first novel we turned to during our seminar, and our efforts to draw out its theological nuances and indebtedness to the Bible went hand in hand with attention to the last half century of economic and postcolonial thinking on the novel. Whereas Ian Watt sought to position the novel's manifest spiritual and theological content as a losing contestant in the battle with secularity, we see in it a more complex and fluid relation among religion, secularity, and modernity, one that does not always pit religion and secularity against one another. This is not to say that personal religious belief is left uncontested in Defoe's novel. The key scene for us on this head is the one in which Friday poses a series of theological questions to Robinson concerning the problem of evil and God's providential care: "*if God much strong, much might as the Devil, why God no kill the Devil, so make him no more do wicked?*"⁹ This question brings Robinson up short, because throughout his adventures he assumes precisely that God *is* punishing him for his wickedness, and in the run-up to this discussion with Friday, moreover, that God would have him kill the cannibals to make them "no more do wicked." Robinson thus literally cannot fathom why his all-powerful Christian God allows the Devil to exist. But in the course of their dialogue, miraculously, and "mighty affectionately," Friday can: "*so you, I, Devil, all wicked, all preserve, repent, God pardon all.*"¹⁰ Quite specifically, Friday uses the

deep logic of this Christian God's redemptive love to imagine the *apokatastasis panton*, the salvation of the wicked and even of the devil. In what might more frequently be interpreted as a flatter moment of religious indoctrination and colonization, Friday powerfully if unwittingly exposes, in the very heart of the novel, the gaping chasm between Robinson's unexamined assumptions about God and the Christian God's apparent patience with evil, between God's actions in the world and the violence Robinson would commit in God's name.

Although the problem of evil has a long history of reflection within faith communities, in this case it falls to an outsider—Friday—to put his finger on the difficult question. The contribution of the religious outlier is not a sign of secularization, however, and in a postsecular spirit we might read the scene more generously as one of mutual hospitality and its outcomes. Friday's questions form the basis of three happy years of companionship and conversation, in which the Savage is said to become a "good Christian."¹¹ This latter development raises the question of whether the same can be said of Robinson and whether he should be Friday's spiritual judge, and the question does not go away as the two of them continue to talk about the Word of God. Furthermore, the fact that Friday is a native rather than a European modern and that Robinson's (and Defoe's) religious beliefs about providence are themselves inflected by modernity make it clear that secularism is not the only source for thinking critically about belief. Nor is it the case that Friday reveals how the outsider can always see more clearly what the believer cannot. Instead, Friday's contribution suggests that the best sort of theological thought always proceeds in dialogue. There is a parallel here with Mikhail Bakhtin's account in *The Dialogic Imagination* of the mingling of voices that marks the emergence of the novel form in the

modern world. It is no accident, we think, that Bakhtin turned to Dostoevsky, an avowedly Christian novelist, to illustrate his account of the novel, and we share the perspective of those contributors to the collection *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, who, according to the editors, see Bakhtin “as deeply immersed within the tradition of Christian thought.”¹² Reading Bakhtin in this way reveals how the dialogic emphasis he saw in the emergence of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel is rooted in the multi-voiced narratives of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures as much as it is in the plurality of modernity, and can never be fully divorced from a religious sense of sacred or liturgical dialogue with the other as an act of faith. For all Bakhtin’s interest in the modern conditions that influence the form of the novel, there is in his work a corresponding recognition of the continuity with an earlier impulse that emanates from a religious view of language: “The development of the novel is a function of the deepening of dialogic essence.”¹³ This amounts to a very different history of the novel than the one given to us by Frederic Jameson, who sees in the “already secular ‘spiritual autobiography’ of Defoe” a form in which “religious influence is itself a mere external and enabling condition.”¹⁴

We are anxious not to repeat Robinson’s colonial mindset by exploring the formal qualities of the novel and declaring the treasures we find there to be the property of Christianity. Though we see a theological history in the concept of dialogism that Bakhtin finds in the novel, it does not follow that the language of the dialogic belongs only to those who see themselves as part of a community of faith. The dilemma of knowing how to talk about religious influences without closing down discussion or marginalizing other contributions is one that recurs regularly in our reflections on the postsecular: how do we describe new discoveries in our thinking about the religious and/or secular whilst avoiding

triumphalism and the exploitation that remains such a problem for Defoe? This is a question with implications that extend beyond our thinking about the novel, and the broader hermeneutical concern is one that Bruno Latour touches on in “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” when he considers the dominant mode of reading in the humanities and queries whether we should add “fresh ruins to fields of ruins” through our attachment to critique.¹⁵ Latour describes critique as a mode of interpretation that seeks to get behind or beneath appearances and demystify the ideology of texts. The risk with reading in this way is that we presume we are, in Latour’s words, “always right! When naïve believers are clinging forcefully to their objects ... you can turn all of those attachments into so many fetishes and humiliate all the believers by showing that it is nothing but their own projection, that you, yes you alone can see.”¹⁶

Latour’s interrogation of his own reading practice is part of a hermeneutical turn sometimes referred to as the postcritical. While alternatives to the dominant hermeneutic practiced in literary studies have recently been designated in all sorts of ways (including the “surface reading” proposed by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus), the term *postcritical* insists that we explore these options with ongoing reference to the practice of critique.¹⁷ The key thinker for us here is Rita Felski, whose book *The Limits of Critique* (2015) makes it clear that it is our excessive *reliance* on critique, rather than critique per se, that is the problem: “That critique has made certain things possible is not in doubt. What is also increasingly evident, however, is that it has sidelined other intellectual, aesthetic, and political possibilities—ones that are just as vital to the flourishing of new fields of knowledge as older ones.”¹⁸ While the practice of critique has often centred on matters of economics, race, and gender, those who are interested in religion can easily find

themselves performing the same sort of reading, “as the critic scans page or screen for signs of failed repression and demonstrates that a text is not in command of its own rhetoric.”¹⁹ For a postsecular scholar of the novel, the postcritical issues a call to read differently without either leaving critique behind altogether or falling into the trap of critiquing critique and reinstating the very mode of reading we have just been complaining about.

From our vantage points, the postsecular is one particular, potent version of the postcritical, and the postcritical and postsecular are potentially great allies, especially if we work to articulate their common ground and differences. The postcritical often borrows the language of enchantment, immersion, and suspension of disbelief. While this might seem promising for a postsecular critic, such language sometimes serves merely to quarantine and even neutralize the experience of belief in a safely secular, literary, even virtual environment. Such a recognition can prompt us to reflect on the important differences between the two modes of enchantment, and to consider the significance of the extra-virtual openness of religious and spiritual experience, of what it means to suspend one’s disbelief in ways that are not only temporary or provisional.

Without such a conversation with the postsecular, the postcritical runs the risk of reinscribing the secular/religious binary that we’ve been troubling for twenty years now. While we greatly admire *The Limits of Critique*, sharing many of its convictions and finding in its pages a considerable amount of space for religious reflection, we are struck by those moments in which the religious language of Felski’s book is filtered through a secular lens. In such passages, the rhetoric condemns the hermeneutics of suspicion as an ascetical, cultish practice, complete with its own creeds, rituals, and modes of belief, and proclaims

its own good news: that of a more rational, secular literary faith. This pattern of paradigm-shifting as a kind of ritual of re-secularization has been in evidence since the earliest days of the professional study of English, when the amateur's love of literature was cast in terms of hazy enthusiasm and abandoned in favor of more rigorous, secular, serious, objective forms of knowledge, and subsequent shifts tend to paint the previous paradigm as excessively naïve and insufficiently concrete or critical.²⁰ Looking back on previous paradigm shifts in our profession, we can predict what both the postcritical and the postsecular will turn into, if they amount only to more rituals of our re-secularization: the next critical "-ism," eventually overthrown in the name of a more certain secular knowledge. What we don't know yet is what it would look like to remain with our uncertainty, to refuse to reinscribe the secular/religious divide, and to say to ourselves that this condition of believing in the midst of imperfect knowledge is the human, linguistic condition of being in the world, the condition of making-meaning and of what might be shared in a deep and genuine pluralism. This, by our lights, is a more promising, rightly postsecular version of the postcritical. From within such a postsecular conversation, we might begin to glimpse a scholarly culture in which spiritual, religious experiences of hope, belief, love, and longing are not routinely dismissed or secularized.

There are occasions when the postcritical shares such a vantage, as when Felski questions the narrative of modernity as a one-way slide into disenchantment:

It is not just that critique has failed to eradicate the desire for the sacred and to root out magical, mystical, and mythological thinking, which flourish in both old and new guises. We might also consider that critical thinking

conjures up its own forms of enchantment; the faith in critique is no different, in certain respects, from other forms of faith. ...

That critique has its sacred texts, rites of passage, and articles of faith is not a deplorable lack or shameful failing—something to be corrected by an industrial-strength dose of yet more critique. It is a timely reminder, however, of the blurred lines between the secular and the sacred, the modern and the premodern, and thus of the limits of any vision of critique as disruptive negativity.²¹

Key here is the potentially postsecular recognition of the religiousness, or, as Felski might say, the enchanted nature of critique as of all forms of meaning-making: the capitulation of critique's claim to a monopoly on rationality and acknowledgment of its imbrication in a world of sign- and meaning-making that is inevitably a place of interpreting and believing, of giving and receiving credit, of sacralizing aspects of human experience. And yet the postcritical and postsecular do not always collapse into one another or fully translate into each other's terms. If postcritical thinking seeks, in Felski's terms, "to strengthen rather than diminish its object—less in a spirit of reverence than in one of generosity and unabashed curiosity," as postsecular interlocutors we would investigate the various valences of "generosity" and "curiosity" over and against "reverence" and explore why reverence is somehow lesser than the other two or incompatible with them.²² While generosity, curiosity, and reverence all seem to speak to our sense of religious selves and personhood, perhaps reverence is more basically incompatible with the liberal, autonomous individual implicit in the postcritical, an individual who, by the end of *The*

Limits of Critique, seems unable to occupy a position of reverence or enjoy immersive experience beyond the confines of a novel or movie.

Aware of the limits of the liberal subject and impressed by the capacity of novels to encourage dialogue across the stories that they tell, we sought models of exchange in our seminar that might work to similar ends. The seminar format was central to this work, and we were grateful to our participants for modelling an openness to other perspectives during seminar discussion and in other contexts too. And we were thankful for the input provided by our four guest speakers—Colin Jager, Misty Anderson, Deidre Lynch and Regina Schwartz—which helped to prevent our discussions from growing too settled. But in an attempt to structure our seminar in a way that would further extend our commitment to the dialogic, we also experimented with a different way of hearing about participants' individual projects. In the sessions set aside for seminar members to learn about each other's individual research projects, participants were paired together and asked to give a ten-minute introduction to the other person's work that was both summative and evaluative. Pre-written papers provided the basis for seminar members to prepare these introductions, and participants supplemented this written work with one-on-one meetings before the group sessions; the assigned pairs read each other's project descriptions, met together face-to-face to talk, ask questions, and come to a deeper understanding of each other's work and motivations, and only then crafted their presentations of each other's projects, followed by further queries and suggestions. During the group sessions, seminar members did not talk about their own their work until the Q&A period, which meant that the only introduction that participants had to an individual's work was through someone else's words. Shortened versions of the pre-written papers were made available

beforehand, but there was no expectation that participants would read these ahead of the session. In using this model, our hope was that it would encourage discussion. But the reality was more profound, and our shared dialogue was taken to higher levels by everyone being thrown into a shared interpretative conversation, in which one's own ideas began in dialogue, and in a setting where ideas and persons were intermingled.

Participants consistently singled out this format as unique in their academic experiences, and, by turns, extremely challenging and enlightening. By the end of the seminar, many participants found themselves commenting not only on the implications of this mode of exchange but also upon other ways in which the postsecular approach of the seminar was leavening the whole texture of our conversations. The postsecular seemed to authorize us to speak in meaningful ways about the “big questions” of love and anger, injustice and retribution, communion and isolation; and, simultaneously, it seemed to lend a transfiguring and generous spirit to our conversations, which involved a wide range of people, from those who identified as religious to those who did not. Participants reflected so repeatedly on the liberating goodwill of the conversations and its possible relation to the seminar's methodology and subject matter that we'd be remiss not to think about it further. Our wager is that participants, ourselves included, from a real range of religious and secular identities and very different educational backgrounds and institutions, found the postsecular framework of the seminar liberating because it encouraged us to see each other as *persons* with genuine *beliefs* and commitments, and to extend compassion for the epistemological and humane vulnerability of our condition. While it might be tempting to label this view as religious, we could also describe it as a *better sort of secularity*—a phrase generated by the participants and echoed across the four weeks as a primary goal of

postsecular studies, the generation of a more genuinely plural secularity that assumes rather than downplays the multiple religious positionalities of its participants. Whether we look towards a better form of secularity or of religious belief or both, the goal is to acknowledge, preserve, and cherish the human condition of seeking, reasoning and believing in the face of uncertainty, over and against any form of coercion, religious or secular. Personhood, communion, community, and conversation remain for us the watchwords of postsecular thinking—heavy ideals with practical pedagogical and scholarly implications, even when (and precisely because) they are never fully achieved.

Articulating the goal of postsecularity in this way risks a departure from the typical emphasis of the novel, which, in the nineteenth century at least, was marked by a commitment to particularity rather than abstract thought. To guard against this departure and remind ourselves once again why we teach novels rather than works of professional philosophy, we want to conclude by foregrounding those important moments in the seminar where different perspectives rubbed against one another. These moments were not as notable for their conflict as they were for their capacity to surprise. The differences inherent in any genuine conversation, whether in person or via the reading of texts, led to moments of interruption: unexpected, unsettling, revealing, transformative, and sometimes amusing. One of the most memorable examples for us occurred during our reading of John Zizioulas, an Orthodox Christian theologian. For Zizioulas, the interdependent life of the triune God models a way of understanding human personhood that is very different from those models of personhood in Western thought which think primarily in terms of individual ontology. Writing in *Communion and Otherness* (2006), Zizioulas explains: “Both in the case of God and in that of human beings the identity of a person is recognized and

posited clearly and unequivocally, but this is so only in and through a *relationship*, and not through an objective ontology in which this identity would be *isolated*, pointed at and described in itself.”²³ Zizioulas’s understanding of personhood is rooted strongly in the details of Orthodox theology, and while some of us were happy to rehearse and pore over long-standing points of doctrinal elaboration, others were bemused about the need for such extended theological work, even as they were moved by the beauty of Zizioulas’s thought. Common to all was an awareness that although theological ideas do not always translate easily into the thinking of those who remain unsure about such Christian beliefs, they can nonetheless result in insights as invigorating as they are strange. As one of our participants put it, “I don’t know whether I should be assigning this to all my students or getting the hell away from it.” His question is an important one, referencing real fears, longings, and risks, and we spent some time talking about it together. But even more important for us is the way that the comment exemplifies the capacity of the postsecular to make for surprised and surprising bedfellows, sustaining the strange sort of conversations that we are used to reading about in novels but less used to experiencing in the course of our literary scholarship.

The happy codas that we frequently find in the nineteenth-century novel can sometimes be read as unnecessary afterthoughts. While there may be some truth to that judgment, what follows could not be more different, as we finish by acknowledging the scholars we had the honor and joy of conversing with over the course of our seminar. This article and our ongoing thinking about the postsecular would be impossible without them, and we end by recording our considerable gratitude to: Christine Colón (Wheaton College, IL), Dwight

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Notes

¹ Margaret Anne Doody's *The True Story of the Novel* might be seen as the most obvious exception, with its interest in the feminine spirituality of ancient novels. But Doody's work sustains a level of suspicion towards aspects of the Christian tradition, from the declaration that "it would be a very bad thing, and disastrous for the appreciation of the Novel as a form, if this understanding of its religious origins and nature left us starrng blankly at a set of tracts" (170) to the more implicit ideas informing her assurance that "[t]he 'religion' of the novels is related not to a set of rules but to the understanding of a life lived hermeneutically, that is as something with meaning for individuals" (171). We share Doody's reservations about a rules-based reading of religion but we do not think that this has to exclude the theology and practice of Christian believers.

² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29.

³ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism*, 213.

⁷ Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, 859-60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 859.

⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 184.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹² Felch & Contino, *Bakhtin and Religion*, 16.

¹³ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 300.

¹⁴ Jameson, "The Experiments of Time," 102.

¹⁵ Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 225.

¹⁶ Ibid., 239.

¹⁷ Other alternatives include the reparative reading of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the hermeneutics of love favoured by Alan Jacobs, the distant reading of Franco Morretti, the uncritical reading called for by Michael Warner, and the descriptive reading proposed by Heather Love.

¹⁸ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 190.

¹⁹ Ibid., 65.

²⁰ See Lori Branch, "The Rituals of Our Re-Secularization: Literature Between Faith and Knowledge."

²¹ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 134.

²² Ibid., 182.

²³ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 112.

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