

**Quarrels without God:
Nineteenth-Century American Literature in the Age of Secularism**

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THESIS

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*Dedicated to the memory of my grandmothers, Jean and Joanne,
and to my sisters, Olivia and Emily*

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SUMMARY

This dissertation thinks about American literature in “the age of Secularism.” That periodization, on the one hand, gestures to the well-worn account of the cultural and political shift that happened in the nineteenth century (in America and elsewhere), which chronicles the decreasing power and influence of religious institutions in favor of something we would identify as the secular modern state. On the other hand, to call the period I am focusing on, which spans roughly the second half of the nineteenth century, “the age of Secularism” also serves to intervene in the tendency to position secularism as the atmospheric background of that shift. Many scholars of secularism know that the term was first coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 but tend not to assign much importance to Holyoake beyond that. But Holyoake coined the term as a way to designate a new movement, whose followers espoused a specific position in relation to religion—close to but distinct from freethought or atheism, which he deemed problematically anti-religious. In contrast to the standard view of secularism established by the secularization thesis, the Secularist movement was primarily interested in establishing an essential difference between something identifiable as unequivocally religious or unequivocally secular. It took an already familiar separation between public and private spheres and sought to redefine those spheres on its own terms, establishing whatever was deemed “religious” as belonging to the private sphere. What that meant, ultimately, was that a world shaped by Secularism was not one in which there would be no religion, but one in which the question of where religion belonged and what counted as good or bad religion would always be negotiated under the Secularist rubric.

As *Quarrels without God* investigates the linked emergence of literary realism and secularism, it shows that secularism produced an epistemological order predicated on the opposition between the secular and the religious, an opposition made possible only by the

survival of religion. From this standpoint, I argue that from Hawthorne's Custom-House preface and Wilson's *Our Nig* through Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* and Melville's *Billy Budd*, realism preserves the romance by continually producing it as one of its own modes of representation. The literary texts, when read in this light, also come into view as something of a shadow archive of secularism in the nineteenth century. The authors constellated together here, as they grapple with the secularizing society, end up giving formal shape to what critics of secularism have so far found ethereal. The figure of the narrator, moreover, emerges as a potent tool, which authors will use to critically examine and challenge the emerging secularist formation of the public by linking the literary text to questions of embodiment, conversion, and epistemology.

PROLOGUE;
OR, IS THE SECULAR REAL?

Since secularism re-emerged in academic discourse in the 1990s, every scholar of secularism has taken pains to articulate some definition of what secularism is. In fact, it's safe to say that a key characteristic of what has come to be called postsecular critique is precisely the act of defining secularism, something that has, for decades, simply been taken for granted as part of the fabric of the modern world. Where we might once have been perfectly comfortable with the idea that secularism is almost self-explanatory as a position of neutrality or objectivity, particularly with respect and in contrast to the passions of religious belief, scholars from Charles Taylor to Talal Asad to Joan Wallach Scott have illuminated not just the shape of secularism but the extensive reach of its many tentacles. Over the last thirty years, we have relearned to see secularism as an ideology in its own right, though not always explicitly claimed, and one nimble enough to alter the parameters of its definition enough to make coming to some consensus over its principles completely reliant on a host of contextualizing and qualifying factors. Ultimately, perhaps the most concrete thing that we can gather from the proliferation of secularism scrutiny is that we have been defining and redefining secularism for 170 years.

One major polemic that brought secularism out of the realm of an objective perspective through which critique is possible and into a space in which secularism was itself the object of study was Charles Taylor's assertion that secularism was something more complicated than a gradual disappearance of religious belief. Before Taylor, the standard wisdom of secularism came from secularization theorists of the 1960s like Bryan Wilson, Thomas Luckmann, and

Peter Berger,¹ who protracted the sociologies of religion established in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries² to argue that mid-twentieth century trends in ecumenicalism, declining church attendance, and robust individualism were harbingers of the inevitable disappearance of religion from society. To them, the trend toward secularism was the natural consequence of the increasing rationality of the modern world.³ While Taylor basically preserves the idea that secularism is the harbinger of modernity, he finesses the claim of the secularization thesis to say that secularism doesn't appear as part of the some waning of religiosity; instead, secularism inaugurates a version of the world in which unbelief is *possible* (not just with respect to a religious creed but to the supernatural more broadly) which consequently makes belief an option to choose from rather than an inescapable fact of life. His characterization of modernity, in his terms "the secular age," is one in which belief is fragilized, so that the beliefs (or unbelief) of others come to seem more and more like a possibility and as such one's own belief system becomes open to questioning. In Taylor's account, secularism isn't how the modern world becomes disenchanted and finally rids itself of the irrationalities of religious belief but how religion becomes decentered from daily life.

Scholars have built upon and moved beyond Taylor's account of secularism to challenge the synchronicity of secularism and modernity, along with all of the various (ostensibly progressive) values that have been amalgamated with these broad concepts. Indeed, in 2014, Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman proposed throwing out "modern" altogether as a periodizing term that has become inextricably attached to a vision of the world that privileges secularity in favor of a more precisely historical, "globality."⁴ Joan Wallach Scott refutes the claim that secularism is a guarantor of the modern world's ideal of gender equality, arguing that in fact gender inequality "is at [the] very heart" of "modern Western nations, characterized by the separation between the public and the private, the political and the religious...[and] secularism

is the discourse that has served to account for this fact.”⁵ As postsecular critique has emerged as a field of study, the definition of secularism has itself undergone something like what Taylor calls a nova effect, “an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond.”⁶ Where Taylor left the idea that secularism was a position of unbelief untouched, others have peeled back the layers to show the ways in which secular principles originate from mostly Protestant Christian traditions. Tracy Fessenden perhaps makes the strongest claim for this when she argues that the rise of secularism in American culture reflects “the consolidation of a Protestant ideology that has grown more entrenched and controlling even as its manifestations have often become less visibly religious.”⁷ Talal Asad’s anthropological genealogy of secularism shows us that the definition of secularism relies entirely on its relationship to what is defined as religion, which explains the difficulty in being able to establish any kind of fixed meaning for the secular.⁸

The attempt to produce a comprehensive account of secularism has shown itself to be an unwieldy endeavor. Not only have critics of secularism debunked the idea that the arc of modernity bends toward secularism, but from differing positions, they have also argued that the broad influence of secularism has produced misapprehensions about the category and social function of religion, instituted the paradigm of the progress narrative across disciplines, and shaped the dominant categories by which we structure and interpret modern society and the modern self.⁹ The attempt to historicize secularism has also produced new theoretical accounts of secularism that, while moving away from the secularization thesis, also in many ways returns to the core concept of secularism as *zeitgeist*. Jose Casanova, for instance, demonstrates the tendency toward a *zeitgeist* vision of secularism when he writes:

Secularism refers more broadly to a whole range of modern secular worldviews and ideologies that may be consciously held and explicitly elaborated into philosophies of history and normative-ideological state projects, into projects of modernity and cultural programs. Or, alternatively, it may be viewed as an epistemic knowledge regime that

may be unreflexively held and phenomenologically assumed as the taken-for-granted normal structure of modern reality...¹⁰

Casanova's both expansive and hedging qualifiers mark a norm of describing secularism in environmental terms. John Modern defines secularism as "that which conditioned not only particular understandings of the religious but also the environment in which these understandings became matters of common sense. Rather than signal a decreasing influence of the religious, secularism names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment..."¹¹ These terms—"environment," "structure," "regime"—signal not only secularism's successful escape from definition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries but also postsecularism's contribution to our continued sense of secularism as an atmospheric condition.

This dissertation thinks about American literature in "the age of Secularism." That periodization, on the one hand, gestures to the well-worn account of the cultural and political shift that happened in the nineteenth century (in America and elsewhere), which chronicles the decreasing power and influence of religious institutions in favor of something we would identify as the secular modern state. On the other hand, to call the period I am focusing on, which spans roughly the second half of the nineteenth century, "the age of Secularism" also serves to intervene in the tendency to position secularism as the atmospheric background of that shift. Indeed, one of the main contentions that this project makes is that secularism was not simply the *zeitgeist* through which we can explain consequential changes in the way we live and organize ourselves in American society, but that it was an event on its own merit, itself something that *happened*, and to which American writers responded. Many scholars of secularism know that the term was first coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 but tend not to assign much importance to Holyoake beyond that. But Holyoake coined the term as a way to designate a new movement, whose followers espoused a specific position in relation to

religion—close to but distinct from freethought or atheism, which he deemed problematically anti-religious. In contrast to the standard view of secularism established by the secularization thesis, the Secularist¹² movement was primarily interested in establishing an essential difference between something identifiable as unequivocally religious or unequivocally secular. It took an already familiar separation between public and private spheres and sought to redefine those spheres on its own terms, establishing whatever was deemed “religious” as belonging to the private sphere. What that meant, ultimately, was that a world shaped by Secularism was not one in which there would be no religion, but one in which the question of where religion belonged and what counted as good or bad religion would always be negotiated under the Secularist rubric.

In looking at secularism from this more precisely historical lens, I am sympathetically aligned with the critiques of secularism that have come out of the work of postsecularism at the same time I contend that the secularism around which postsecular critique has coalesced isn't exactly the secularism of Holyoake's movement. Paying closer attention to the fact that there was a coalition of people who understood themselves to be creating a new movement called Secularism, which would include such things as official societies and membership, allows us to see a version of Secularism that explicitly tries to explain itself to the general public. This fundamentally changes how we understand and tell the story of secularism, not as a milieu but as a movement so successful that it became absorbed into the epistemological framework of modern society. As much as Secularism is a central character in this project, it is not my goal to offer any new critique of secularism in these pages. Rather, my approach to the Secularist movement is to take it more or less at face value and to try to limn what the authors I am focusing on seem to think about the growing influence of Secularism in the world around them and how it affects the way they approach the literary text. As the chapters move through the

second half of the nineteenth century and trace the shift from romance to realism as the standard of high literary art in America, we also trace how the Secularism of Holyoake matures into the secularism that scholars today see as the “conceptual environment” of the last two centuries.

We might locate the originating incident of the Secularist movement in 1842, when Holyoake was put on trial for blasphemy after declaring in a lecture that he did not believe “in any such thing as a god” and that he did not adhere to a religion.¹³ At the time, Holyoake had been editor of the *Oracle of Reason*, the first known British publication with an explicitly atheistic bent, having taken over for Charles Southwell who was himself imprisoned for blasphemy. Most of Holyoake’s testimony follows the tenets of freethought, an anti-clerical movement that fought for the freedom to express criticism of religious doctrine and refute claims of Biblical truth. But we can also see in his testimony—which lasted nine hours and included such disparate points of defense as the religiosity of Holyoake’s mother and Reformation-era prohibitions on mutton-eating—a certain style of maneuvering around religious belief. In his remarks to the jury, Holyoake points out the difference between expressing his individual opinion that there isn’t any such thing as a god and “declaring dogmatically, ‘There is no god.’”¹⁴ He goes on to say he avoids dogmatizing, that he always assumes that “others might be as right as myself” and that he invites those who disagree with him to say so. The position he takes here in service of producing a defense for the charge of blasphemy sidesteps any discussion of what warrants his disbelief, a position that would become the hallmark of Secularism and, for him, a differentiating characteristic from freethought or atheism. Moreover, Holyoake links this position to a certain vision of the public sphere. “I seek a public place,” he says, “where any man may refute me if he can, and convict me as wilful or ignorant.”¹⁵ The charge of blasphemy, then, seems to have highlighted for Holyoake a need to

make the public sphere a place where religion can be discussed but not where religion has any political power.

Four years after his trial, Holyoake would launch *The Reasoner*, which would become the organ of the Secularist movement. Holyoake developed his ideas about religion and the public sphere in his articles and officially coined the term Secularism in a lecture he gave at the first Free Discussion Festival in England. Rather than attempting to disprove or stamp out religious belief, as the secularization theorists would later frame it, Holyoake's Secularist movement made an ideological commitment out of prioritizing the secular, which simply described things that were "of the world," and, much like his testimony to the jury some ten years earlier, moved away from quarreling about religious truth claims.¹⁶ In one of his earliest tracts, *Secularism: The Practical Philosophy of the People*, Holyoake writes that while Secularism "ignores Christianity" if it "stands in the way of truth and progress," it will also "work with the Christian if he will."¹⁷ Throughout the 1850s, one of Holyoake's primary occupations was to define the Secularist position as independent from but not averse to religion, to insist that unlike atheism, Secularism was not a threat to religious belief because it had no interest in eliminating religious belief; instead, it set itself apart from religion by insisting on the idea that there was something fundamentally different between a religious worldview and a Secularist worldview. Secularism, in other words, wasn't the absence of belief or even disbelief; it simply made belief a private matter.

Holyoake had admirers in the United States who brought the Secularist movement to the attention of American freethinkers. The U.S. had its own burgeoning freethought movement, which appears to have converged with Secularism over the course of the century. One of the challenges of tracing this movement is the extent to which Americans used Secularism interchangeably with freethought and atheism, even though Holyoake wanted

Secularism to stand apart from those groups. By Susan Jacoby's account, Americans had access to a number of freethought publications starting from at least the 1830s, including the *Boston Investigator*, established in 1831.¹⁸ Holyoake or some of his close associates would sometimes contribute articles or letters to these publications, often bringing Secularism into political conversations. In the years leading up to the Civil War, for instance, American Secularists tried to intervene in the debates over abolitionism. As we will see in chapter 2, the Secularist antislavery argument set itself against Christian arguments for abolition, which also served to consolidate the concept of religion in opposition to a non-religious public. Meanwhile, "The Great Agnostic," Robert Ingersoll, dominated the lecture circuit and charmed "even the most orthodox religious members of [his] audiences."¹⁹ Ingersoll is generally accepted as the chief evangelist for secularism in the United States. In 1872, *The Index*, the official paper of the Free Religious Association, published the "Nine Demands of Liberalism," outlining a political platform that included the discontinuation of religious institutions' tax exempt privilege, the removal of any publicly supported religious practices or positions such as military chaplains, and the prohibition of the Bible in schools, even as an ostensible textbook. The *Truth Seeker* was established in 1873, the only secularist publication that had national circulation and is still in print today. The first national organization to advocate for the separation of church and state, the National Liberal League, formed in 1876 and in 1885 became the American Secular Union, led by Ingersoll. Secularism as a distinct movement seems to evaporate around the end of the century, but by that time, American society had already been shaped around secularist principles to the extent that it was nearly impossible to see outside of a secularist framework.

All of this provides context for this project's broad ambition, which is to intervene in the standard narrative of the shift from romance to realism as a reflection of a spirit of progressive secularity in the United States. *Quarrels without God* investigates the linked

emergence of literary realism and secularism, showing that secularism was never primarily interested in eliminating religious belief or in disguising religion as something more neutral. Rather, secularism produced an epistemological order predicated on the opposition between the secular and the religious, an opposition made possible only by the survival of religion. From this standpoint, I argue that from Hawthorne's Custom-House preface and Wilson's *Our Nig* through Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* and Melville's *Billy Budd*, realism preserves the romance by continually producing it as one of its own modes of representation. The literary texts, when read in this light, also come into view as something of a shadow archive of secularism in the nineteenth century. The authors constellated together here, as they grapple with the secularizing society, end up giving formal shape to what critics of secularism find so ethereal. The figure of the narrator emerges as a potent tool, which authors will use to critically examine and challenge the emerging secularist formation of the public by linking the literary text to questions of embodiment, conversion, and epistemology.

The chapters naturally split into two parts, both chronologically and thematically. The first two chapters look at the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Wilson who are writing at midcentury in the early years of the Secularist movement. Though Hawthorne and Wilson have very different motivations for writing, both in some ways want to enact through their literature the world that secularism promises. The evolution of narrative strategies in Hawthorne's midcentury novels, namely *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, shows how Secularism's investment in the defining the public and private spheres may on the one hand produce a world that diminishes the power of Calvinist theocrats, but on the other hand, relegates the romance, and by extension the author, to the realm of the private sphere. In Wilson's 1859 novel, *Our Nig*, the use of the disembodied narrator works as both a formal enactment of kind of emancipation that secularism claims to offer and a critique of what its

limitations are. *Our Nig* considers the problem faced by free blacks by reproducing the structural limitations instituted by the Secularist regime, whose distinction between the public and private spheres is simultaneously the mechanism for racial exclusion.

The works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Herman Melville represent a shift in the attitude toward secularism and an attempt to use the literary text as a kind of resistance against its pervasive influence. The journal form that shapes the narrative of Phelps's 1868 novel *The Gates Ajar* serves to eliminate the two perspectives which sentimental novels typically imagined in opposition to each other—the narrator inside the text and the unconverted reader outside of the text—a kind of formal enclosure that also functions to remove the opposition between a secular perspective and a religious one. Phelps's incorporation of the materialism of the secular into a vision of heaven, which appears to challenge orthodox religious doctrine, is actually an attempt to restore that doctrine, which allows us to see the impact of secularism on the way even religious adherents saw themselves. Melville is similarly suspicious of secularism's ability to superintend questions of epistemology. Toward the end of his literary career, Melville moves toward the production of texts that escape realism. His last two major works—his epic poem, *Clarel*, and his final novel, *Billy Budd*—worry over the state of faith in American culture and offer the literary text itself as a way to escape the fusion of the character of the state with secularist ideology. The tension between realism and romance dramatized by the narrator of *Billy Budd* tries to hold in suspension the reification of secularism as a universal standard of value in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. In the end, what this project posits is that the narrative that puts together the rise of secularism and the shift in the American literary tradition toward realism can no longer hold as a narrative of co-emergence in a society on the progressive path toward modernity. Rather, what we are able to glimpse by looking at

secularism through its impact on literary form is a different kind of progression: one in which secularism increasingly governed the very constitution of the real.

CITED LITERATURE

¹ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London: Watts, 1966); Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Peter Berger, "A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion." *New York Times*, February 25, 1968

² Namely, Karl Marx, Emil Durkheim, and Max Weber, widely considered the fathers of sociology.

³ See texts cited in note 1. Bryan Wilson and Thomas Luckmann both saw the decline of religion as the logical conclusion of a process of privatization. For Wilson, secularization came in the form of a religious institution's dwindling influence on individual values. Whereas Wilson cited declining church membership and attendance in Europe as evidence of such dwindling influence, he explained the opposite trend in America suggested that American church participation functioned as an expression of nationalist values, rather than spiritual ones. Luckmann similarly observed the decline in religion in terms of the individual, though rather than discounting religion, Luckmann redefined religiousness as anything that allows a person to transcend his or her biological nature; he saw the decline of institutionalized churches in the modern era as a trend of privatization that would culminate in a kind of individualized religiousness. That is, systems of meaning once provided by the church would be replaced with systems of meaning important to a particular individual, such as family, self-expression, or professional success. Peter Berger perhaps gave the clearest vision of the secularization thesis when he compared a believer to a Tibetan astrologer visiting an American university. "The astrologer will be treated very politely, but listened to only as an eccentric, exotic diversion," he said, and predicted that by the 21st century, the pressure to give up religious beliefs would be difficult to resist" (3). For Berger, the ecumenical trend of the midcentury was evidence of religious institutions taking refuge in each other to fend off the pressure of secularization.

⁴ Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman. "Introduction: After the Postsecular." *American Literature* 86, no. 4 (Dec 2014): 645-654

⁵ Joan Wallach Scott. *Sex and Secularism*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018), 4

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 299

⁷ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), 5

⁸ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003)

⁹ For some of the best recent scholarship, see Lindsay Reckson, *Realist Ecstasy: Religion, Race, and Performance in American Literature*, (New York: New York UP, 2020); Peter Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods: Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2019); Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2018)

¹⁰ Jose Casanova, "Secular and Secularisms," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 1051

¹¹ John Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011), 7

¹² The term is capitalized here and throughout the dissertation to refer specifically to the movement that was active from the middle of the nineteenth century and was defined chiefly by Holyoake. Capital-S Secularism would dissipate as a distinct movement toward the end of the nineteenth century as it established itself as an ideology of universal neutrality and became the default framework for thinking about the modern world. I refer to this latter version of secularism in the more familiar, uncapitalized form.

¹³ George Jacob Holyoake, *The trial of George Jacob Holyoake on an indictment for blasphemy, before Mr. Justice Erskine, and a common jury, at Gloucester, August the 15th, 1842*, JSTOR, 3

¹⁴ Holyoake, *The trial of George Jacob Holyoake*, 8

¹⁵ Holyoake, *The trial of George Jacob Holyoake*, 9

¹⁶ Jose Casanova clearly outlines the nuances between earlier uses of the term secular and its more recent usages to describe a historical process of separating political institutions from religious control and a form of political statecraft. See “The Secular and Secularisms” *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2009)

¹⁷ George Jacob Holyoake, *Secularism: The Practical Philosophy of the People*, (London, 1854), 11

¹⁸ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. (New York: Owl Books, 2004) 155-6

¹⁹ Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 170

Chapter 1.

“NO SUCH PLACE AS BLITHEDALE”:

ROMANCE, HISTORY, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A curious thing happens in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s introductory sketch, “The Custom-House.” It is not, as one familiar with the text might expect, the moment in which the narrator puts the scarlet letter he’s just found on his breast, but rather just *before* that oft-quoted moment. Before the letter is called a “mystic symbol” with “some deep meaning in it,”¹ before it mysteriously produces “a sensation...of burning heat,”² we are given this piece of information: “By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length.”³ A line like this, in the context of *The Scarlet Letter* (not to mention Hawthorne’s reputation for allegorical tales), is curious precisely for its utter banality. Rather than supernatural mystery, the language of exactitude saturates this sentence with words like “accurate,” “proved,” “precisely.” And, of course, the persnickety “three inches and a quarter” detail will keep any reader a comfortable distance from the edge of her seat.

If we take a step back, what becomes apparent is that this curious line comes at the end of a flurry of such material details about the letter, just before the passage pivots into its signifying power. We learn that the letter was made of “fine red cloth” with “gold embroidery” but that “very little of the glitter was left.”⁴ The verbs that deliver these details smack of, if not scientific, at least dispassionate observation. Hawthorne employs the language of perception when he opens the passage by noting that the “object...drew [his] attention.” His explanatory asides throughout the passage follow suit: he remarks that the skilled needlework of the letter

“was easy to perceive”; he realizes “on careful examination” that the cloth is the shape of an A.⁵ Then we get the “accurate measurement” of the letter itself. Up to this point, there is no sense of mystery or the supernatural or even symbolism attached to the object at hand, which should strike modern readers as odd—at this point in the passage, any reader who already knows *The Scarlet Letter* is likely to get impatient. Where is the allegorical Hawthorne they expected to find in these pages? Where are the fantastic, the unexplainable qualities of this enigmatic symbol? What does it matter that the limbs were three and a quarter inches long?

What *does* it matter that the limbs were three and a quarter inches long? The measurements stand out as *particularly* ordinary, insistent on the A’s materiality in a register that other material aspects can’t quite reach. Hawthorne’s inclusion of the measurements might strike readers as a move meant to convince skeptical readers of the reality of the A. By the mid-nineteenth century, these sorts of claims had become a relatively standard trope of the novel, and authors often used the preface to give their texts a certain verifiable quality.⁶ Of course, the way Hawthorne uses this trope also conjures up the central tension that will come to characterize nineteenth-century American literary history: the opposition between romance and realism. This opposition that we see enacted in Hawthorne’s description of the A is an old story in literary criticism. The idea that realism was the literary mode of the modern world (a world marked by dispositions of rationality, universality, and liberal democracy) if not expressly stated, is often the operating assumption in any claim about the literary history of the nineteenth century. Fredric Jameson affirms this when he writes in *Antinomies of Realism* that “realism as a form (or mode) is historically associated...with the function of demystification.”⁷ As far back as 1930, Vernon Louis Parrington saw the rise of realism in tandem with scientific advancement, declaring that “[as] a new cosmos unfolded before the inquisitive eyes of scientists...a new spirit of realism was abroad...[and] the transcendental theologian was soon

to be extinct as the passenger pigeon.”⁸ More recently, Nancy Glazener has taken a critical eye to what Parrington saw as a natural co-evolution to show that the alignment of realism with modernity and progress was achieved by pitting realism against romance and labeling romance the literature of immature fancies.⁹ As we’ll see, the Custom-House preface marks this tension between romance and realism that runs through American literary history—its central object, the A, belongs to both literary modes but resists being completely absorbed by either. The literary question about what it means to measure the A, this chapter will argue, becomes key to understanding how theories of the romance intersected with other mid-nineteenth century shifts in conceptions about the public and private spheres.

To begin to understand the significance of the scarlet letter’s measurements, we might note that Hawthorne’s precise description isn’t exactly a literary innovation. This kind of specificity has its place in the history of the novel.¹⁰ Tucked into a letter in one of the earliest novels, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, for example, there’s mention of “a brick wall, of a few inches thick.”¹¹ Laurence Sterne playfully measures out various things in inches throughout *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, as he does in his reference to Italian philosopher Fortunio Licetus: “though all the world knows he was born a fetus, of no more than five and a half inches in length, yet he grew to...write a book with a title as long as himself.”¹² Hawthorne’s description of the letter, though, more closely follows the kinds of measurements we would find in the pages of *Robinson Crusoe*. Measurements abound in Defoe’s novel. When Crusoe first arrives on the island, for instance, he estimates his position “by observation, to be in the latitude of 9 degrees 22 minutes north of the Line”;¹³ later, when Crusoe begins to build his dwelling out of materials gathered from the wrecked ship, the description is almost nothing but measurements:

On the flat of the green, just before this hollow place, I resolved to pitch my tent....It was on the N.N.W. side of the hill; so that it was sheltered from the heat every day, till it came to a W. and by S. sun, or thereabouts, which, in those countries, is near the setting.

Before I set up my tent I drew a half-circle before the hollow place, which took in about ten yards in its semi-diameter from the rock, and twenty yards in its diameter from its beginning and ending.

In this half-circle I pitched two rows of strong stakes, driving them into the ground till they stood very firm like piles, the biggest end being out of the ground above five feet and a half, and sharpened on the top. The two rows did not stand above six inches from one another.¹⁴

Of course, Richardson, Sterne, and Defoe all have some narrative purpose for including these measurements—to point up the tension surrounding a letter exchange between Clarissa and Lovelace; to imbue the literary text with a bodily materiality; to insist on verisimilitude in providing measurements that are part of the skills necessary for survival on an island. In the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, knowing his global position provides Crusoe with a certain amount of information helpful for his circumstances. If he can figure out his latitude, he can estimate what climate he is in and what kinds of weather he must prepare for, and he can determine the best place to construct his tent. Here, the measurements matter because they provide a space large enough for Crusoe to store his goods while the rows of stakes six inches apart compose a fence “so strong, that neither man nor beast could get into it or over it.”¹⁵ The measurements, in other words, are included in service of the meaning of the text, rather than in excess of the text’s meaning.

Franco Moretti has observed that the centrifugal force of *Robinson Crusoe* is this narration of usefulness that details like the rows of stakes evoke, a concept he sees at work in three dimensions—the Lockean principles of work and private property as well as “the lexico-grammatical concatenations that were the first embodiment of *Zweckrationalität*: instrumental reason as a *practice of language*” or put more plainly, “prose, as the style of the useful.”¹⁶ For

Moretti, the prose that emphasizes usefulness and centers Crusoe's ever-growing list of daily tasks is imagining a new social figure that emerges in a modern capitalist society, the working upper class. Crusoe is at once worker and master, and as the novel watches him cycle through these two identities, it shows how "work has become *the new principle of legitimation of social power*."¹⁷ While Moretti tends to focus on the verbs in Defoe's language, the measurements are just as crucial for conveying what makes Crusoe's actions useful, as the height of the stakes and their distance from each other are essential for constructing a space safe from intruders.

What makes the measurement of Hester's A in the Custom-House preface different from measurements of earlier novels is that it is completely cut off from any possible use, either as a narrative trope or as serving some practical purpose within the world of the text. Notably, the precise size of the A is the one detail introduced in the preface that is *not* carried into the text of the novel itself—in fact, inches are never mentioned again. By contrast, what the A stands for is a question that runs through the entire novel, the A standing for adultery on one level, but eventually, in the eyes of some villagers, "it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength."¹⁸ The mysterious meteor that writes an A in the sky the villagers "interpret to stand for Angel."¹⁹ The color of the A is just as significant—the deep red signifying, for example, both the shame of Hester's sin but also the passion at the root of her sin. Outside of drastically different measurements (half an inch would be too small to grab attention, a foot or more, comical), the exact size of the A is quite literally of no importance, so much so that a basic survey of visual interpretations of Hester Prynne will bring up a variety of sizes for her famous red A. In short, the fact that the letter is an "A" is important, and the fact that it is red is important (no visual interpretation would depart from these details) but the fact that it is three-and-a-quarter inches long doesn't matter at all. This detail—not just precise but rather insistent upon its precision—emphatically points to what Roland Barthes might identify as the

“reality effect.” In “The Reality Effect,” Barthes argues that modern literary realism is marked by the inclusion of objects or details that are not subsumed by the text’s meaning, but instead exist only as an aesthetic symbol of the real.²⁰ As Fredric Jameson explains it, “if it means something, it can’t be real; if it is real, it can’t be absorbed by purely mental or conceptual categories.”²¹

If in Moretti’s account, details like the ones we find in *Robinson Crusoe* are part of the novel’s *Zweckrationalität*, we might point to the Custom-House preface as a moment in the history of the novel in which the detail, rather than enacting instrumental reason, functions as the refusal of it. In fact, a broad view of the Custom-House preface will show that it vacillates between the kind of hyper-specificity of the real world and the more abstracted world of romance. As the preface leads up to the moment of the letter’s discovery, the prose seems to follow what Moretti would identify as the style of the useful. In a description of the library of the Custom House, for instance, the narrator calls attention to “a score or two of volumes of the Acts of Congress, and a bulky Digest of the Revenue Laws”²² on the shelves. Every object is a potential tool for the narrator’s job as the Surveyor of the Custom House, right down to a “tin pipe” which served as “a medium of vocal communication with other parts of the edifice.”²³ When we arrive at the scene in which Hawthorne’s narrator discovers the letter, the central event of the entire preface, the paragraph seems to dramatize a shift from narrative as *Zweckrationalität* to narrative as *Symbolwelt*, or symbolic world. The paragraph is essentially split between two different narrative polestars—roughly the first half in the register of the material characteristics of the letter and the second half in the register of the unexplainable. In the first section of the paragraph, the narrator evokes *Robinson Crusoe*’s world of utility in its gesture to Hester Prynne’s vocation as a seamstress by observing that the letter had been made “with wonderful skill of needlework.”²⁴ But that world is immediately put into an irretrievable

past: “the stitch (as I am assured by ladies conversant with such mysteries) gives evidence of a now forgotten art, not to be recovered even by the process of picking out threads.”²⁵ Moretti’s conception of “prose as the style of the useful,” Hawthorne indicates here, no longer makes sense for the kind of literary project he is interested in. Which is why the last detail we get about the letter before the paragraph pivots into the second half (the half that focuses the description onto its more mysterious elements) is the measurements. Once again: “By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length.” The purpose of this sentence, rather than to give some significant detail about the novel’s principal symbol, instead flags a transitional point between two literary modes, that of the verisimilitude of the early realist novel and that of the romance novel that had dominated American writing up until that point. It is a sentence that signals a different kind of realism altogether, the realism of the reality effect, in which the “three inches and a quarter” have no aesthetic purpose except to say, to borrow Barthes’ phrase, “*we are the real*.”²⁶

It’s striking that this example of the reality effect appears in what is perhaps one of the most famous romantic novels of American literature and written by someone who would come to be known as one of the central theorists of the American romance. But it could hardly be thought to be accidental, since this introduction of the reality effect in a romance novel appears at a turning point in American literary history, when the central tradition of American literature which critics would later identify as the period of American Romanticism (bringing together authors like Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper), would take a turn toward realism, established in different ways by authors like Mark Twain, Rebecca Harding Davis, William Dean Howells, and Henry James. Hawthorne stands out in this literary history in that he is recognized as the apotheosis of the American romance and a kind of forefather of the tradition of American realism, whose main theorists maintained a

certain fascination with his writing even as they actively developed a literary tradition that was meant to depart from it.²⁷ Hawthorne doesn't know what will come in the development of an American literary tradition, but his conception of the A as it coincides with his turn to the novel suggests that he at least understands the romance (and as a consequence, the American novel) to be at a crossroads. He offers us an object that can be at once quantified and unknowable, and with that gesture, begins to forge a new theory of the romance, which resists both the real and the fantastic. In the realist novel of instrumental reason, the measurement of the A would indicate some use in the same way a volume of the Acts of Congress does, and in the romance, they would convey or contribute to some larger meaning, but as we have already established, the inches are neither useful nor meaningful. In this sense, the A embodies both the realist novel and the romance novel, but it is not reducible to either.

The other main transition that Hawthorne captures in *The Scarlet Letter* is the shifting tenor of religiosity in America. The irreducibility of the A in the preface is carried forward into the narrative and fused with the religious conflict at the center of the Puritan community where the narrative takes place. In the first pages of *The Scarlet Letter*, the A is immediately positioned as a sign of a changing society. The women, who are standing at the prison door waiting for Hester Prynne to appear for the first time, gossip about the relative lenience of Hester's punishment and their displeasure that Hester was not sentenced to death, as the law "both in the Scripture and the statute-book"²⁸ would dictate. Their discussion underscores a vision of the Puritans as "a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical"²⁹ and who endeavored to create a society where the laws of God and the laws of man were perfectly unified. But their displeasure at the fact that Hester's punishment is a departure from that unity recapitulates the A as both a mark of the harsh punishments of an austere religious community and a harbinger of the more modern age to come, the age of Hawthorne and his readers, but not

fully belonging to either. In this sense, the A of the narrative takes on a kind of structural similarity to the A in the preface—it belongs to the world of the novel but it stands outside of the ideal of religious and secular unity that defines the social order of the Puritan community. And at this point, we arrive at the crux of the matter: just as the measurements of the letter give space to the reality effect which evokes the growing tension between romance and modern literary realism, the letter in the context of the novel gives space to a new vision of the secular that was emerging in American society.

Although the term secularism wouldn't be officially coined until the year after *The Scarlet Letter* was published, early iterations of the Secularist movement's central principles were already in circulation. John Modern has traced what he sees as part of the "diversity of [secularism's] public articulation" to the American interest in Scottish Common Sense philosophy, which appealed to both religious and political circles alike.³⁰ Common Sense, Modern writes, emphasized "objective knowledge" and a kind of reasoning that saw the world "as ultimately legible" and recognized the human capacity to make "the unknowable known and the invisible verifiable."³¹ And Ann Douglas has shown that the 1830s and 40s were a period of great transition in the religious history of America, as the Calvinism that had largely dominated religious life in New England gave way to the more liberal Unitarianism.³² Added to this was a growing freethought movement, which questioned the truth of religious claims, particularly the belief in the divine origins of the Bible, and encouraged critical inquiry into any such truth claims that cannot be empirically proved.

As the long process of disestablishment came to a close in 1833,³³ the ecclesiastical world became increasingly interlaced with the literary world. The burgeoning print culture that Douglas's ministers and women took advantage of also helped accelerate the freethought movement's following. A number of newspapers and periodicals were published to promote and

defend religious skepticism, chief among them the *Boston Investigator* whose tag line declared its dedication “to the development and promotion of universal mental liberty.”³⁴ By the late 1830s, the *Investigator* boasted 2,500 subscriptions across the country. Its editor, Abner Kneeland, was a well-known advocate of freethought, made even more famous for a series of highly publicized trials for blasphemy, which ended in a short prison sentence. Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen were leaders of the freethought movement in New York City and co-edited the *Free Enquirer*; their efforts followed in the footsteps of Owen’s father, Robert Owen, a Welsh social reformer whose many followers, or Owenites, were drawn to his rejection of all religion as false superstition. The London paper, *The Reasoner*, edited by George Jacob Holyoake (himself an Owenite) kept tabs on the progress freethinkers were making in the U.S. It would be Holyoake who would coin the term “Secularism” in 1851³⁵ to describe a movement that espoused a specific position in relation to religion, as he would put it later in *The Principles of Secularism*, “a religiousness to which the idea of God is not essential, nor the denial of the idea necessary.”³⁶

Perhaps what most distinguished the priorities of the Secularist movement in relation to other anti-religious movements was its apparent lack of interest in arguing religious principles. In fact, many of Holyoake’s writings that explain or define Secularism make clear that the Secularists have no interest in stamping out or otherwise disproving religion. While it would be a contradiction in terms to be a religious atheist and most likely a religious freethinker, in the way Secularists understood themselves, it was entirely possible to be a religious Secularist. Instead, what Secularists were primarily interested in was “the recognition and development of the Secular sphere as a province of human exertion. That is, [to] draw a line between the things of time and the things of eternity, as subjects of separate pursuit.”³⁷ What is clear from the way Holyoake envisions the Secular sphere as a place to debate and discuss belief is that he understands the “Secular sphere” to be synonymous with the public sphere. To put his

formulation another way, to be in the Secular sphere is to care about the measurements of the A; to care about its meaning is a subject “of separate pursuit.”



The Scarlet Letter seems to mark a kairotic moment that demonstrates a certain sympathy between the development of Hawthorne’s theory of the romance and the concept of an exclusively Secular sphere. If we look more broadly at American Romantic writing in the early decades of the nineteenth century, we can see how the debates over the relation between the private and public that were crucial to the foundation of Secularism were already at work in conceptions of the romance. These questions would become the central focus of Hawthorne’s theory of the romance that we see articulated in Hawthorne’s prefaces. The influence of romance writers like Sir Walter Scott and Charles Brockden Brown on Hawthorne’s early work is well documented.³⁸ George Dekker notes that Scott was “at the height of his fame and success,” when Hawthorne was first publishing. Indeed, Hawthorne’s first novel, *Fanshawe*, is thought to be a romance novel that shows an explicit influence by Scott. Even Hawthorne’s interest in the Puritans, Dekker asserts, “was as a ‘Romantic’ in the tradition of Scott,” more than as a matter of biographical connection.³⁹ Similarly, some scholars have seen Charles Brockden Brown as a precursor to Hawthorne and have drawn comparisons between Brown’s characters and Hawthorne’s.⁴⁰ In their time, both Scott and Brown published influential essays that sought to define romance and both focused on its relationship to history. For Scott, the purpose of the romance was not to conjure up a distant and unrealistic past full of haunted or abandoned castles, as the Gothic novels did, but to apply the Romantic sensibility to the narration of a past that was still connected to the modern present. This understanding of

romance as a kind of history was also at the center of Brown's theory of romance. As Gretchen J. Woertendyke has observed, Brown "used the category of history to chart the features and possibilities of romance," which claimed a kind of temporal flexibility because it extended a narration of the past to, as Brown describes it, "[trace] resemblances between the past, distant, and future, with the present."⁴¹ In "The Difference between History and Romance," Brown argues that, while both serve to narrate the past, history is limited to what is on the surface, what can be empirically verified, while romance (or more precisely, a romantic history) was one that sought to explain the private motivations of public actors.

Hawthorne's early writing certainly reflects these theories. His first major publication, *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), are sketches of the Puritan past, several of which feature real historical figures like John Endicott, Roger Williams, John Winthrop and Richard Bellingham. In fact, Woertendyke notes that up until the mid-nineteenth century, "Hawthorne's romances were theorized and understood [as] forms of history, rather than as 'marvelous stories'...with their recognizable departure from reality."⁴² Even today, the stories and sketches collected in *Twice-Told Tales* come across as more historical in nature than his later works.⁴³ If *Twice-Told Tales* isn't the first text to come to mind when one thinks of Hawthornean romance, it's because the text aligns closer to a Scott or Brown theory of romance in which the primary feature was an historical commitment, a commitment to representing the real from a romantic perspective. In this sense, the Hawthorne who wrote *Twice-Told Tales* understood literature as having a kind of relation to the public sphere because it embellished the public narratives of history by imagining access to the private interiority of historical actors. At this point in his career, then, the alternative to romance was not literary realism; it was the historical real.

This opposition is altered yet retained in the texts that come after *Twice-Told Tales*. As his work matures, Hawthorne begins to move away from the idea of romance as an alternative

to history and increasingly imagines it as an alternative to realism. In other words, the romance's commitment to the private is no longer attached to the public life of history but to public life *as such*. We can begin to see this in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). Here we see Hawthorne's world of romance is acutely linked to version of religious writing. The introductory sketch, "The Old Manse," in which, much like "The Custom-House," Hawthorne as narrator shows the reader around the environment that inspires the stories that will follow, a separation between public and private are immediately evoked. "The glimmering shadows, that lay half asleep between the door of the house and the public highway, were a kind of spiritual medium, seen through which, the edifice had not quite the aspect of belonging to the material world....From these quiet windows, the figures of passing travellers looked too remote and dim to disturb the sense of privacy."⁴⁴ The narrator goes on to note that the Old Manse had been built by a priest and that generations of "other priestly men" had inhabited it over the years. In this way, Hawthorne clearly links his work as a romance writer to the work of writing sermons—even as he jokes about the apparent contrast between writing sermons and writing "idle stories"—and situates it in the private sphere.

This same kind of spatial imagining carries into "Young Goodman Brown," which is so often seen as a study in religious hypocrisy. Indeed, if we as readers identify with the titular character, Goodman Brown, we experience the apparent duplicity of religious followers behaving one way in the public spaces of the community and another in the private space of the forest as a kind of horror, just as Brown does. That is, to identify with Brown is to understand the villagers as exhibiting religious behavior in town and non-religious behavior in the forest and to see that as an untenable hypocrisy. But hypocrisy is also a way of getting at the issue of where religious behaviors belong in relation to the public or civic sphere. In fact, one of the revelations of the story is that both the behavior of the villagers when they are in town and the

behavior of the villagers when they are in the forest are all part of religious life. At the opening of the story, the forest is defined as a place empty of religion—the character of Faith does not, and in Brown’s estimation, cannot go into that space. It is the space, we realize quickly, in which the devil resides. However, as the story goes on, Brown comes to the realization that a version of religion *does* exist in the forest—the gathering in the forest consists of hymns, communion, conversion; there is a rock “bearing some rude, natural resemblance either to an altar or a pulpit.”⁴⁵ Importantly, Faith also appears in the forest, but without the same horrific response that Brown experiences. The story forces readers to recognize that what is conventionally considered “outside” of Christianity, here imagined as consorting with the devil and secret sin, is in fact a constitutive part of religion, consolidating the concept of religion as such. At the same time, it parses out its civil and uncivil qualities. That is, there is a wild version of religious belief and practice that is unsuited for the public sphere, and these uncivil aspects of Christianity that are relegated to the uncivil space of the forest are merged with non-Christian belief systems. The crowd gathered in the forest, Hawthorne writes, included “Indian priests, or powwows, who had often scared their native forest with more hideous incantations than any known to English witchcraft.”⁴⁶

The story ultimately stages the separation of spheres that would be the hallmark of Secularism and links an acceptance of that separation to survival. Brown, the figure of the committed Puritan, cannot countenance this separation of public and private. For the rest of his life, he lives in a perpetual state of horror. “Often, awaking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith; and at morning or eventide, when the family knelt down at prayer, he scowled, and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away.”⁴⁷ In the end, Brown dies away, but Faith remains living, and it’s at this point that the meaning of Faith’s name comes into full view. For if we thought, up until this point, that Faith’s name is meant to

be read ironically, that Faith embodies what Brown sees as the opposite of true faith, we now see that it is actually Faith who survives, and we are given a world in which the figure who demands a continuity between the public and private spheres no longer exists. Faith, then, becomes (perhaps counterintuitively) a figure of the secular—the embodiment of religion privatized, domesticated and disconnected from the Calvinistic refusal of the separation of spheres.

Hawthorne's interest in the identification of religion with the private sphere that is at work in "The Old Manse" and "Young Goodman Brown" returns, as we've already seen, as an integral part of the conflict in *The Scarlet Letter*. In fact, we might think of the figure of Arthur Dimmesdale as a kind of reprise of Goodman Brown. Like Goodman Brown, Dimmesdale is completely committed to the continuity between the public and private spheres and his inability to accept the separation of spheres eats away at him until he finally dies. And also like "Young Goodman Brown," we see Hawthorne remove from the world of the text the character who is most committed to the Calvinist vision of the world in which the laws of God and the laws of man are unified. But contrary to Goodman Brown, what kills Dimmesdale is not the knowledge that *others* have violated the unification of scripture and law, but that he has done so himself. Dimmesdale's guilt isn't really about the fact that he has violated scripture by his illicit relationship with Hester Prynne. The forest scene toward the end of the novel makes this clear. Dimmesdale yields to Hester's reminder that their brief affair "had a consecration of its own"⁴⁸ and the narrator keeps reminding the reader that the "lawless region" of the forest where Dimmesdale is freed from the burden of keeping his sin a secret "threw [a] flickering brightness over the trouble of his breast."⁴⁹ Rather than the sin itself, then, the source of Dimmesdale's guilt is the fact that he has failed to publicly acknowledge his sin. And in keeping his sin private and escaping public punishment, he severs the unification of scripture and law

central to the Calvinist vision of the world. Like Goodman Brown's horror, Dimmesdale's guilt is a guilt over keeping the private and public separated, and like Goodman Brown, that state of being proves unsustainable for the anti-secularist figure.

Just as Hawthorne envisions the disappearing Puritan in the figures of Dimmesdale and Goodman Brown, he also imagines religion's changing relationship between public and private spaces through the object of the pulpit. Dimmesdale's pulpit, unlike the rude pulpit used by the devil worshippers in the forest of "Young Goodman Brown," is the emblem of public religion, emphasized even more by the scene of the Election Day sermon. Hawthorne makes much of the spectacle of the harmony between politics and religion that marks the Election Day ceremonies—he dedicates several pages to description of the procession, which brings military personnel, civil leaders, and clergy together, highlighting their close affiliation. The procession is another reminder, though inverted, of the gathering in the woods that Goodman Brown witnesses, where church and community leaders, "the lady of the governor...and wives of honored husbands,"⁵⁰ all come together for their satanic errand. Hawthorne, in this sense, returns to the horror of the forest scene "Young Goodman Brown" by reminding us that what most horrifies Goodman Brown is not that devil worship exists in the forest, but that it is performed by the same people who would dutifully attend an Election Day sermon.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, of course, we don't suspect that any of the villagers attending the Election Day sermon is leading a double life; instead, Hawthorne portrays what Sacvan Bercovitch has described as the core feature of the election sermon: an occasion to rebuke any aspect of the community that could be seen as a miscarriage of the Puritan vision and to "attest to an unswerving faith in the errand"⁵¹ and thereby reinforce the collective commitment to the grand purpose of theocracy. While we are not given Dimmesdale's exact words, the narrator offers a summary, showing that the subject was very much in line with we might expect.

Dimmesdale, we are told, speaks about “the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with special reference to New England which they were here planting in the wilderness.”⁵² But the fact that we “listen” to the sermon along with Hester as she stands outside of the meeting-house underscores how Dimmesdale stands in stark contrast to both Hester and the rest of the townspeople. In fact, here we can see that Hester, even as she is marginalized, is in many ways exactly like the villagers with whom she listens to the sermon, since she lives a completely public religious life. Dimmesdale is set apart by virtue of the fact that his public self and his private self have been separated. Hester’s only difference from her fellow listeners is that she knows that Dimmesdale has chosen to keep his sin private. Thus, Hester hears the sermon differently than the rest of the villagers. The villagers who presumably hear every word distinctly, hear only the public message of religious and political unity. But Dimmesdale at his official place at the pulpit is physically separated from Hester, for whom his message can only be dimly heard. Instead of hearing the public message along with the others, then, Hester hears the “passion and pathos” in his voice. And unlike the others, she hears what cannot be publicly expressed, “the complaint of a human heart, sorrow-laden, perchance guilty, telling its secret...beseeching [mankind’s] sympathy or forgiveness.”⁵³

Hawthorne repeats and amplifies the disconnect when, on the heels of his election sermon, Dimmesdale admits to his relationship with Hester and Pearl and reveals the A on his own chest. We can read this dramatic gesture as Dimmesdale’s last attempt to reunite the private and public, which he himself has had a hand in separating. Not only does the revelation of his sin end in his death, however, but the villagers are unable to agree on precisely what happened. “Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a scarlet letter—the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne—imprinted in the flesh.... [but] certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never

once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast." Even those who claim to have seen an A on Dimmesdale's chest do not believe it to be evidence of his sin or hypocrisy, but an effort to make "the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the might and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners alike."⁵⁴ The villagers who were unable to hear the unexpressed guilt in his voice during the sermon cannot see the "proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine" of his sin. Their willful ignorance of what was kept out of the public sphere ironically crystallizes the separation of spheres they are committed to eliminating.

If the pulpit in the forest in "Young Goodman Brown" is a vision of the horror of uncivilized religion and the pulpit in *The Scarlet Letter* is a vision of the impossibility of a completely public religion in a secularized world, the pulpit in *The Blithedale Romance* offers a vision of a completely secularized religion. Once again, the pulpit appears in the forest. This pulpit, which Coverdale, Zenobia, Priscilla, and Hollingsworth call Eliot's Pulpit, is shaped out of a large rock "some twenty or thirty feet [high], a shattered granite boulder, or heap of boulders," much like the forest pulpit in "Young Goodman Brown." Yet unlike the forest pulpit of "Young Goodman Brown," Eliot's Pulpit is not the site of devil worship; instead, it is tied to a figure of the past, the Apostle Eliot who "had preached there, two centuries gone by, to an Indian auditory." The four main characters of the novel habitually spend their Sundays there as Hollingsworth "not exactly preached—but talked to us, his few disciples, in a strain that rose and fell as naturally as the wind's breath among the leaves of the birch-tree."⁵⁵ Hollingsworth's "not exactly" preaching reminds us of the indistinct pathos of Dimmesdale's sermon, and its characterization in terms of nature reimagines the space of the forest from the site of horrific religion in "Young Goodman Brown" to the space of a domesticated religion, one that is both

positioned out of the public sphere and that is only vaguely recognizable as religion in its expression.

In all of these texts, the pulpit works as a kind of hinge between two worlds, which Hawthorne uses to investigate the place of religion in a society where the concept of the public sphere is beginning to merge with the concept of a Secular sphere. Of course, it is hardly a leap to say that as Hawthorne investigates the place of religion through his placement of the pulpit in his texts, he is also investigating the place of the literary and particularly of the romance. While *Blithedale* is in some ways connected to the narratives that revolve around the Puritan past—of which “Young Goodman Brown” and *The Scarlet Letter* have become central texts for Hawthorne readers—it also markedly stands out because, to begin with, it is the first novel to be set in the Hawthorne’s own time and disconnected from the world of Calvinism. Indeed, as Hawthorne’s preface repeatedly reminds us (even as he discourages his readers from making any direct connections), the novel is at the very least inspired by his experience at Brook Farm, the Transcendentalist utopian community established by George Ripley. The pulpit in *Blithedale*, then, takes on a different kind of importance—no longer the site of anxiety over religious hypocrisy or any particular person’s failure to adhere to the most stringent demands of a theocratic society, Eliot’s pulpit is the site through which Hawthorne dramatizes the new vexations that a domesticated and privatized religion yield. In other words, *Blithedale* is a study in how the shifts in the complexion of religion—which Ann Douglas identified as clerical disestablishment but what I offer might otherwise be seen as the emergence of Secularism and its consequent rending apart of religious and political authority—interweave the fates of the author, the preacher, and the woman.

We can read, in this light, the debate at Eliot’s Pulpit between Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Coverdale over the place of woman in society as functionally a debate over the political

fates of these three figures in the new secularized world. The scene at first pits Zenobia against the two men but quickly pivots to uncover a completely different dynamic. When Zenobia laments the fact that women are only allowed to “write a little...on a limited range of subjects,” their conversation almost immediately becomes a debate about women’s religious authority. Both Coverdale and Hollingsworth respond with contrasting visions of women’s role in God’s kingdom. Coverdale reaches for examples of the potency of female evangelism: “Heaven grant that the ministry of souls may be left in charge of women!...The task belongs to woman. God meant it for her,” he asserts.⁵⁶ Hollingsworth, on the other hand, insists that woman “is the most admirable handiwork of God, in her true place and character,” which is “at man’s side.”⁵⁷ The mistake that Coverdale makes is to assume that his position is fundamentally different, and more progressive, than Hollingsworth’s, but the difference between Coverdale’s and Hollingsworth’s response to Zenobia is eclipsed by their shared motivation: to preserve sex as the defining difference in political power and thus maintain their own authority in their respective domains. This moment in the novel shows Coverdale and Hollingsworth railing against something they only intuit, which is their own relegation to the private world as ministers and authors. The cruel joke of the setting of their debate—a pulpit long out of use tucked away from all society—is that it intimates the yet unarticulated reality that, like Zenobia, both Coverdale and Hollingsworth have already lost access to the kind of public authority they might want their voices to have in society.

But the novel also suggests that the secular separation of public and private spheres does not just signal the disappearance of the pulpit from public discourse; it also demands a reformulation of religious life and the religious self as fundamentally private. Hollingsworth is the figure that demonstrates this transformation. Hollingsworth’s ambitions throughout the novel are completely public in nature: he wants to construct “an edifice” dedicated to “the

reform and mental culture of our criminal brethren” and he plans to build a cottage with Zenobia on “the open hillside,” insisting to Coverdale in an overt reference to John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” that he intends his cottage to be “as a spectacle to the world...that it may take example and build many another like it.”⁵⁸ In the end, however, Hollingsworth’s projects never come to fruition, and Coverdale goads him about it when he meets Hollingsworth and Priscilla on a walk.

“I have come, Hollingsworth,” said I, “to view your grand edifice for the reformation of criminals. Is it finished yet?”

“No, nor begun,” answered he, without raising his eyes. “A very small one answers all my purposes.”

Priscilla threw me an upbraiding glance. But I spoke again, with a bitter and revengeful emotion, as if flinging a poisoned arrow at Hollingsworth’s heart.

“Up to this moment,” I inquired, “how many criminals have you reformed?”

“Not one,” said Hollingsworth, with his eyes still fixed on the ground. “Ever since we parted, I have been busy with a single murderer.”⁵⁹

The “single murderer,” Coverdale intuitively, is himself, referring to Zenobia’s accusation just before her suicide. Hollingsworth’s public project of criminal reform, rather than a failure to uphold a commitment to a certain vision of society, is reduced to the site of the individual, the public project wholly internalized.

The novel’s formal logic, too, enacts this transformation of the public self into the private. *Blithedale* is the only one of Hawthorne’s novels narrated in the first person. Compared to his previous novels, *Blithedale*’s world is much more constricted and compressed, of which the first-person narration is the chief effect. The first-person narrator does what a third-person narrator cannot—it diminishes the world that we have access to and converts the public act of writing into the relation of a personal narrative of an individual. Hawthorne compounds the effect when he evokes the real-world origins of the story only to insist on the narrative’s complete dissociation from anything resembling an actual history of the Brook Farm experience.⁶⁰ Whereas Hawthorne’s third-person narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of*

the Seven Gables deftly managed the excesses of religious fervor and supernatural interpretations of the world from outside of the narrative, giving readers access to both the public and private lives of the characters, Coverdale as Hawthorne's avatar stunts our access to outside perspectives. This formal shift that discards the third-person narrator follows another turn of the screw in the evolution of Hawthorne's theory of the romance as it converges with his relationship to the world that was being produced by the emerging Secularist movement. The writing of *Blithedale* is the point at which the romance for Hawthorne becomes the literary production of the private world. This is why we can at the same time scoff at Hawthorne's assertion that the characters in the novel are "entirely fictitious" but completely believe him when he says that his novel does not aim to "put forward the slightest pretensions to illustrate a theory, or elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, in respect to Socialism."⁶¹ These conflicting attitudes toward Hawthorne's declarations open up the preface as part of the machinations of the novel to completely inscribe itself in the private sphere, not just disconnected from the public discourse (i.e. in this case, a debate over the political apparatus of socialism) but wholly uninterested in it. We cannot take seriously that the characters who inhabit Blithedale come fully from Hawthorne's imagination because it is necessary for the novel to act out the rejection of the historical figures. But we must take seriously the notion that *Blithedale* isn't meant to sway any opinions about socialism because the novel, as a form of the private, must remove itself from the concerns of the public.

We can also see how this formal expression of the privatization of literature tames the romance as a literary form: of all of Hawthorne's texts, *Blithedale* least fits Richard Chase's assessment of the American romance as a literary mode that "tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience."⁶² When Coverdale reveals his love for Priscilla, for

example, he drums up a kind of suspense, as if his revelation was something akin to Dimmesdale's revelation.

There is one secret—I have concealed it all along, and never meant to let the least whisper of it escape—one foolish little secret, which possibly may have had something to do with these inactive years of meridian manhood, with my bachelorship, with the unsatisfied retrospect that I fling back in life, and my listless glance towards the future. Shall I reveal it? ...But it rises in my throat; so let it come.

I perceive, moreover, that the confession, brief as it shall be will throw a gleam of light over my behavior through the foregoing incidents, and is, indeed, essential to the full understanding of my story.⁶³

Except the confession falls flat, not (as we saw in *The Scarlet Letter*) because anyone has any particular investment in the meaning of the secret, but because it ultimately doesn't make that much of a difference whether or not Coverdale loves Priscilla. Knowing of Coverdale's feelings does not change the way we understand the main events of the novel, nor does it change the stakes of the Blithedale community. To the contrary, it underscores the inability of any of the characters in the novel to have any meaningful access to the public world, since it reduces the social experiment of Blithedale to nothing more than personal relations. Even more than that, the triviality of Coverdale's revelation demonstrates secularism's remarkable ability to make the private feel consequential to the individual but remain unimportant to the public sphere.

Coverdale as narrator, often because of this very revelation, has vexed a great number of critics, and many have interrogated what his closing confession means in terms of his reliability.⁶⁴ And what I have been arguing is *Blithedale's* attempt to formally produce the secularized world picks up on some of the critical irritations of the characterized narrator, particularly in relation to the other main thread that I have been tracing throughout this chapter, which is Hawthorne's vision of the romance as defined chiefly in terms of, and more precisely in opposition to, literary realism. Hawthorne's move to a first-person narrator that distinguishes *The Blithedale Romance* among Hawthorne's other novels certainly enables questions about the reliability of the narrator and Coverdale's confession does, on a certain

level, make his reliability suspect. But Coverdale as narrator is not particularly insistent about the truthfulness of his account in same the way that, to give one example, some of Edgar Alan Poe's narrators do, perhaps most famously in "The Tell-Tale Heart."⁶⁵ The question of whether Coverdale can be trusted is less about what kinds of manipulation of perception the narrator has subjected his readers to and more about the bifurcation of accounts that the unreliable (which really amounts to any subjective first-person narration) narrator necessarily implies: namely, that a real account exists somewhere outside of the text that we are given. This split between the suspect narrative and the reliable real is created precisely through the use of a characterized narrator. Hawthorne's third-person narrators, by virtue of their access to the entire world of the text and their habit of surveying the different possible interpretations of an event in the text, invest the text with a certain objectivity that precludes the question of reliability because there seems to be no alternative way of accessing the story, no world not already presented in the text. For these narrators, what counts as the real (the precise measurement of the A, for instance) is just as much a part of the romance as the unexplainable (the mysterious heat the letter emits). The formal move that Hawthorne makes by shifting to a first-person narrator, then, is not about opening up questions of the narrator's reliability but about his attempt to jettison the real from the romance, to have it exist somewhere else entirely.

This returns us, importantly, to the discussion of Hawthorne's understanding of romance and its relationship to history. In his introduction to *The Blithedale Romance*, Tony Tanner dwells on what he sees as the novel's blurred lines between the real and the imaginary, encapsulated by Coverdale's description of his return to town after a break with Hollingsworth: "At one moment, the very circumstances now surrounding me—my coal-fire, and the dingy room in the bustling hotel—appeared far off and intangible. The next instant, Blithedale looked vague...and so shadowy, that a question might be raised whether the whole affair had been

anything more than the thoughts of a speculative man”⁶⁶ Tanner sees this moment as a significant indication that “whatever it is he [Coverdale] is now writing, it is not history,”⁶⁷ which opens up Tanner’s discussion of the novel as an exercise in searching for the real even as it keeps returning to images that are “concerned with the evacuation of the real.”⁶⁸ For Tanner, history and the real are essentially one and the same—that is, Coverdale is not writing history because what he is writing is not real. As Hawthorne insists in the preface, as much as *The Blithedale Romance* was inspired by Hawthorne’s real experience at Brook Farm, he has evacuated the text of the historical reality of that experience. Whether or not readers believe him doesn’t matter—the point is to position the text in opposition to history. At this point in his career, then, the romance as a literary form has evolved from having a kinship with history as a kind of embellishment of the historical past to completely refusing the historical, and as I have been arguing, that shift reflects Hawthorne’s response to the changing definitions of the private and public spheres that Secularism was beginning to reify. The primary function of Hawthorne’s use of the first person, then, is to refuse history, not because the romance doesn’t have to be true but because romance has become completely identified with the private sphere, which stands in opposition to the public sphere where history takes place. Consequently, the romance and the first-person narrator completely go together as a way of envisioning its removal from the historical public, envisioning what it means to produce a literature that is committed to the private sphere. More than that, Hawthorne seems to apprehend by the time he writes *Blithedale* that the secular separation of spheres restricts the romance author’s access to the public sphere. Unlike the narrators of his previous novels, which have the ability to exist and move in between both the private and public spheres, the narrator of *Blithedale*—diminished to the first person—cannot help but exist only in the private sphere. The public world is no longer available to him and by extension no longer available to the romance.

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- ¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," *The Scarlet Letter*, (1850; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 32
- ² Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 32
- ³ Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 31
- ⁴ Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 31
- ⁵ Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 31
- ⁶ Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, for example, begins with a preface written ostensibly by the fictional protagonist, who assures the reader that the narrative is based on his own experiences and that, aside from the first few pages, is written entirely by himself. The facts of the story, more importantly, are accurately represented.
- ⁷ Frederick Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2013), 4
- ⁸ Vernon Louis Parrington, *Beginnings of Critical Realism in America*, Main Currents in American Thought, Vol. III (1927; repr. New York: Routledge 2017), 4.
- ⁹ Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997)
- ¹⁰ Several historians have traced the increasing importance of numbers in modern society. See Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); I. Bernard Cohen, *The Triumph of Numbers: How Counting Shaped Modern Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). These studies show how the nineteenth century, in particular, saw a growing interest in the apparent objective authority of numbers. We can easily connect that interest to the appearance of numbers in the novel, a literary form that also thought of itself as an object of the modern world.
- ¹¹ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or History of a Young Lady* (1747-8, repr. London: Penguin Books, 1985), 263
- ¹² Laurence Sterne, *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67, repr. London: Penguin Books, 2003), 254
- ¹³ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719; repr. London: Penguin Books, 2001), 52
- ¹⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 48
- ¹⁵ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 49
- ¹⁶ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso 2013), 37-39
- ¹⁷ Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 30 (original italics)
- ¹⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 141
- ¹⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 138
- ²⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect." *The Rustle of Language*, Trans. Richard Howard, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 147-8
- ²¹ Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, 37

²² Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 11

²³ Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 11

²⁴ Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 11

²⁵ Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 31

²⁶ Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 148 (original italics)

²⁷ Many of the giants of American literary realism were fascinated by Hawthorne's work. The most famous example of this is Henry James' book, *Hawthorne* (London: Macmillan, 1879). William Dean Howells published a study of Hawthorne's female characters: "Hawthorne's Heroines: II III IV" *Harper's Bazaar*, 33, no. 4 (Nov. 3, 1900); For Twain on Hawthorne, see Ann M. Ryan, "Standing in Some True Relation: Mark Twain Visits 'The Custom House'" *The Mark Twain Annual*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2017, 145-161.

²⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 49

²⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 47

³⁰ Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 21. Interestingly, the term *epistemology* was coined by James Ferrier, himself part of the Scottish Common Sense school of philosophy but deeply critical of Thomas Reid's work.

³¹ Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 22, 23

³² Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977)

³³ Massachusetts was the last state with a tax-supported church. For more on the long history of disestablishment and its impact on religious membership in the United States, see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005)

³⁴ *Boston Investigator* (Boston, Mass., 1831-1904)

³⁵ For a detailed account of the development of the term "Secularism" see Holyoake, "How Secularism Arose," *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1896)

³⁶ Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism*, 12

³⁷ Holyoake, *Secularism: The Practical Philosophy of the People*, 11

³⁸ Dekker, George. *The American Historical Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 131. "Scott was [Hawthorne's] boyhood favorite among novelists; Abbotsford and the Scottish Highlands were places of pilgrimage during his middle age; and reading the Waverley novels aloud to his family was one of the pleasures that lightened the gloom of the Civil War years at the close of his life."

³⁹ Dekker, *American Historical Romance*, 131

⁴⁰ See Michael Cody, "As Kinsmen, Met a Night": Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne as American Gothic Romancers" *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, 38, no. 2 (Fall 2012), 111, n1

⁴¹ Gretchen J. Woertendyke, "History, Romance, and the Novel," *Oxford Handbook of Charles Brockden Brown*, Ed. 2 Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), 155

⁴² Woertendyke, "History, Romance, and the Novel," 155

⁴³ See Michael Colacurcio, *The Province of Piety: Moral History in Hawthorne's Early Tales*

⁴⁴ Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, 3

⁴⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846, repr. New York: Modern Library, 2003) 66

⁴⁶ Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," 67

⁴⁷ Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," 70

⁴⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 170

⁴⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 176

⁵⁰ Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," 66

⁵¹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 6

⁵² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 215

⁵³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 211

⁵⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 224

⁵⁵ Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 119

⁵⁶ Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 122

⁵⁷ Hawthorne, *Blithedale* 122

⁵⁸ Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 80

⁵⁹ Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 242

⁶⁰ "In the 'Blithedale' of this volume, many readers will probably suspect a faint and not very faithful shadowing of Brook Farm, in Roxbury, which (now a little more than ten years ago) was occupied and cultivated by a company of socialists. The Author does not wish to deny, that he had this Community in his mind, and that (having had the good fortune, for a time, to be personally connected with it) he has occasionally availed himself of the actual reminiscences....He begs it to be understood, however, that he has considered the Institution itself as not less fairly the subject of fictitious handling, than the imaginary personages whom he has introduced there. His whole treatment of the affair is altogether incidental to the main purpose of the Romance" (1)

⁶¹ Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 1

⁶² Richard Chase, *American Novel and Its Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1957), 1

⁶³ Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 247

⁶⁴ See, for example, Kenneth Kupsch, "The Modern Tragedy of Blithedale." *Studies in the Novel*, 36, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 1-20; Keith Carabine, "'Bitter Honey': Miles Coverdale as Narrator in The Blithedale Romance." *Nathaniel Hawthorne: New Critical Essays*, Ed. A. Robert Lee. (London: Vision, 1982), 110-30; J.C. Stubbs, *The Pursuit of Form: a Study of Hawthorne and the Romance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970); Kelley Griffith, Jr. "Form in *The Blithedale Romance*," *American Literature*, 40, no. 1 (Mar. 1968), 15-26; William L. Hedges, "Hawthorne's *Blithedale*: The Function of the Narrator," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 14, no. 4 (Mar. 1960), 303-16

⁶⁵ Poe, "Tell-Tale Heart," 187. The story opens with narrator's urgent need to be believed, which of course puts the question of reliability front and center: "True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them.

Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.”

⁶⁶ Hawthorne, *Blithedale*, 146

⁶⁷ Tony Tanner, introduction to *Blithedale* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, vii-xli (1852, repr. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), viii

⁶⁸ Tanner, introduction to *Blithedale*, viii

Chapter 2.
WHO WROTE *OUR NIG*?:
RACE, REALISM AND SECULAR EXCLUSION

One of the somewhat unusual features of Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig* (1859) is that, while the narrative is told exclusively in the third person, the first three chapter titles are in the first person—"Mag Smith, My Mother," "My Father's Death," and "A New Home For Me." This discrepancy has not gone unnoticed. John Ernest, wondering whether "we even have terms to identify the genre of this book," argues that the incongruity in narrative perspective suggests that "the book is about the need to turn to fictional representations in order to construct an autobiography."¹ The standard way of thinking about it, as Ernest obliquely confirms, comes out of the assumption that Wilson, the author of *Our Nig*, is identical to the narrator, who is also identical to the protagonist, Frado. That is, because the plot of the novel so closely aligns with Harriet Wilson's own biography,² readers have presumed that there is no difference between the author and narrator and protagonist, which means that a discrepancy between the first and third person isn't really a discrepancy at all since all three figures are effectively interchangeable. That interchangeability is also part of a larger understanding of the novel as a generic hybrid of the sentimental novel and the slave narrative. Indeed, the vast majority of readings of *Our Nig* in some way rely on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s initial take that as "'[w]hite women were writing sentimental novels, and black men were writing autobiography in their slave narratives,...Mrs. Wilson, a black woman, combined the two forms."³ What I want to argue, however, is that the discrepancy between the first-person chapter titles and the third-person narration matters beyond the question of generic hybridity. The presence of both

first and third-person voices in the opening chapters purposefully calls attention to the difference between the two voices as a way to mark Wilson's refusal of the interchangeability between author, narrator, and protagonist. And Wilson's refusal of that interchangeability is an important part of the reason why the novel does not function simply as a hybrid of abolitionist literary forms, but instead marks something new—the emergence of the free black person into the public sphere and the new difficulties that shift would produce.

Our Nig is, in many ways, an ideal example of a novel that thinks about the afterlives of slavery, a certain ghostly continuation of the conditions of enslavement which the work of scholars like Saidiya Hartman has illuminated. The issues at the heart of Frado's experience as a free black woman caught in a position of indentured servitude under the authority of the violent and inhumane Mrs. Bellmont speak directly to Hartman's apprehension of emancipation as "less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection."⁴ What is especially compelling about Hartman's work is the way she reads the continued subjection and exclusion of black people after slavery as constitutive, rather than a failure, of "the recognition of humanity...and justified on the grounds of liberty and freedom."⁵ As much as my reading of *Our Nig* is indebted to these insights, I contend that the conceptual language of law on which Hartman largely depends does not quite have the capacity to account for the generic ambiguities for *Our Nig*. Rather, if we, as *Our Nig* does, recognize race as a theologically saturated category,⁶ we can begin to see how secularism offers a more exacting conceptual framework to fully understand not just Wilson's novel, but the stakes of emancipation and liberation.

To see the relevance of the public sphere in *Our Nig* is to give greater importance to the fact that, despite the title's indication that Frado's story is a story of slavery's "shadows" in the North, *Our Nig* is not an abolitionist novel. And if we de-emphasize the novel's relation to

abolitionist literature and read it instead as a post-abolitionist novel not about the problem of enslaved black people but about the problem faced by free black people, then the question of the racialization of black people emerges as distinct from the question of their enslavement. This allows us to see *Our Nig* in context with the looming possibility of free blacks entering the public sphere; furthermore, it makes it possible to see the relation between that entry and the new accounts of the public sphere that emerged in the Secularist movement, in part in relation to abolition, and then more strongly after the war. Rather than a wrinkle in the abolitionist debates and what many have seen as a critique of Northern hypocrisy, what *Our Nig* offers is a much more pointed critique on the effect of the conceptual turn inaugurated by Secularism, which as it works to institute a distinction between the public and private spheres, under the auspices of the Enlightenment ideal of disestablishment, it simultaneously installs new divisions governed by the disciplines of secular belonging. *Our Nig*, then, is a novel that looks past the question of freedom for the enslaved and concerns itself instead with the question of what access to a public might mean for free blacks in the secularized world.



How the novel understands the theological underpinnings of racial difference and its ties to the separation of public and private spheres becomes visible in an exchange between Frado and James, the Bellmonts' oldest son. After a particularly violent encounter with Mrs. Bellmont, Frado laments to James over her unfortunate social position. "Oh, I wish I had my mother back" Frado tells James, "then I should not be kicked and whipped so. Who made me so?"

“God,” answered James.
 “Did God make you?”
 “Yes.”
 “Who made Aunt Abby?”
 “God.”
 “Who made your mother?”
 “God.”
 “Did the same God that made her make me?”
 “Yes.”
 “Well, then, I don't like him.”
 “Why not?”
 “Because he made her white, and me black. Why didn't he make us BOTH white?”
 “I don't know; try to go to sleep, and you will feel better in the morning,” was all the reply he could make to her knotty queries.⁷

Frado's line of questioning with James in this scene follows a pattern of questioning that mimics the catechisms used by many denominations to teach children and new converts the doctrines of the faith. Many of them begin with the exact question Frado asks of James: who made them? Catechisms from Southern churches were published with the express purpose of teaching Christianity to slaves and reinforcing their doctrine of a Bible-sanctioned system of slavery. As the abolitionist movement spread, newspapers in the North occasionally published excerpts from these catechisms to show how slaveowners were perversely using the Bible to manipulate their slaves into submission. An excerpt from a catechism published in Charleston, South Carolina was reprinted in *The Liberator* in 1854. Here, we can see how the questioning resembles the conversation Wilson includes in her own text:

Who keeps *snakes* and all bad things from hurting you?—God does.
 Who gave you a master and a mistress?—*God gave them to me.*
 Who says the you must obey them?—*God says that I must.*
 What book tells you these things?—The Bible.⁸

When this excerpt appeared in *The Liberator*, the article drew a comparison to similar strategies of indoctrination in Russia, claiming that the resemblance between the two “shows the affinities of despotism the world over.”⁹ But while Wilson formally reproduces a catechism's question-

and-response structure, reminding her readers of the formal methods of indoctrination, she notably reverses the roles in the exchange. Typically, the person asking the questions is the religious teacher and the one responding is the religious novice, but in Wilson's formulation, Frado is asking the questions and James is responding. By structurally flipping the roles, Wilson transforms the exchange from rote learning to active logical inquiry and shifts the catechetical form to an exercise in freethought. Frado's momentary agency, however, ends when James refuses to answer her final question, underlining the fact that Frado is only given the liberty to question Christian doctrine with the permission of her white employers.

Frado uses James' answers to her questions not to receive answers to religious questions but to arrive at the impasse between religious doctrine and racist doctrine. The allusion to the catechisms used by slaveowners also makes markedly clear that Frado's concerns are about her race, rather than her position of servitude, which nudges readers not just to see how religion fails as a solution to the problem of slavery, but also that *Our Nig* does not see slavery as the primary problem. In this exchange, God is not exactly an agent of the system of slavery but of racial inequality, an assertion James can neither justify nor refute. And the fact that that assertion is not explicitly stated brings the novel's concern over racism under the Secularist framework of the public and private spheres. We can see how Wilson uses the physical features of the text, the page itself, to formally reconstruct the public and private spheres by placing the rote expression of Christian doctrine in the "public" mode of the visible text and Frado's skepticism over that very doctrine, while activated within the text, in the register of the implicit. It is James' prerogative to choose to answer Frado's question about why God wouldn't make everyone white; his answer would bring what would inevitably be an expression of religious skepticism into "public" expression. James chooses not to answer the question, which simultaneously forecloses Frado's ability to express it herself.

Understanding the crossed wires of Frado's race and her religious agency throws into relief the way the novel thinks about secularism as not just interested in the role of religion in the public sphere but also its investment in the already racialized conceptions of the public sphere.¹⁰ As Eddie Glaude, Jr. has shown, formations of a black public were deeply entangled with black religious organizations. Early nineteenth-century black churches were formed not just as places to "worship and have fellowship without the burden of white Christian racism,"¹¹ but also as "sites for a public discourse critical of white supremacy and the American nation-state as well as the spaces for identity construction."¹² Notably, these black religious organizations are not represented in *Our Nig*. The version of religion Frado is exposed to, rather, is a white Christianity, which has already come to understand itself to be separate from the public sphere in accordance with the principles of secularism. Still, Frado's access to religious life carries the valence of a threat to the political power the Bellmont family has over her. Throughout the novel, Frado is not only kept confined to the private sphere of the domestic space but limited in her ability to participate in religious activities. Mrs. Bellmont and Mary, for instance, deliberately exclude Frado from attending church with them, instead forcing Frado to drive them to church on Sundays "then return, and go for them at the close of the service, but never remain."¹³ At the same time, the members of the Bellmont family clash and collude with each other over Frado's religious education. Aunt Abby takes her to evening meetings "and impart[s] to her lessons of truth and grace as they walked to the place of prayer."¹⁴ When she communicates to James that Frado "'seems much affected by what she hears at the evening meetings,'"¹⁵ James encourages her to keep up her efforts and while he remains at the Bellmonts' house, he regularly calls Frado to his room to give her "religious instructions."¹⁶ The private sphere imagined by *Our Nig*, which contains both home and church,

operates according to a spectrum of proximity to the public sphere, from which Frado is excluded by both her adversaries and advocates in the Bellmont family.

Julia Stern has written persuasively on what she sees as Wilson's reversal of the public and private spheres, which she claims exposes the entanglement of race and gender prejudice in the antebellum era.¹⁷ Frado, as the child of a white woman, embodies the linkage between and vulnerability of a woman's whiteness and her economic standing.¹⁸ In Stern's reading, Wilson injects the gothic into the structure of the sentimental novel form both as a rebuttal to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its idealization of the redemptive power of the domestic space, and a critique of the ways in which women are interpolated into a political structure that ultimately disenfranchises them.¹⁹ Stern sees Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter Mary (Frado's main tormentors) as utilizing their dominion over the domestic space (and its commensurate privacy as a shield from public scrutiny) to entrench a racial hierarchy, which mirrors their own subjugation in relation to the public domain of white men. Where the private sphere (the Bellmonts' house) is the space of gothic violence and terror for Frado, the public sphere becomes the place of safety and liberation.²⁰ For Stern, the publication of the novel itself, written ostensibly by "Our Nig," indicates an investment in the public sphere as the only space capable of providing a solution to the terrors of slavery and racism.²¹

Stern's insight into the novel's manipulation of the public and private spheres proves incredibly useful for thinking about how the novel's anti-sentimentalism functions as a kind of anti-secularism. Indeed, *Our Nig's* departure from the generic conventions of sentimentalism and the slave narrative shows us how Wilson aligns secularism with literary realism, both of which were gaining coherence in the 1850s. Nancy Glazener has argued that this decades-long project of defining realism as the highest form of American literature had political implications. The bourgeois gatekeepers of American literary culture, Glazener argues, "promoted realism as

the literary form that made room for the common man and woman”²² at the same time it insulated the privileged class from politically marginalized classes, instead offering “a means by which privileged readers could come to understand their social inferiors” from a safe distance.²³ Realism was characterized as a kind of literary maturity by virtue of its depictions of modern life, Glazener argues, and romance consequently came to be associated with immaturity and childish fancy; early attempts to distinguish realism against romance in the 1850s attractively presented realism as “narrative compensation...for the diminished human drama that results from isolating secure bourgeois life from the insecure lives of the people whose labor makes it possible,” which Glazener points out means “insulating bourgeois men from the ‘private griefs’ of women and tempering white people’s awareness of African Americans’ oppression.”²⁴ This latter problem is precisely what Lindsay Reckson means when she writes in her study on post-Reconstruction literature that “the production of race has been utterly bound up in narratives of secularization”²⁵ and that we must “understand realism and secularism as interlocking...a set of conjoined practices or comportments that reinforce one another without being exactly the same.”²⁶ Following Tomoko Masuzawa’s observation that the emergence of the idea of religion as such coincided with its being used as an othering discourse, Reckson identifies secularism as fundamentally “a drama *at* or *of* the skin.”²⁷ Reckson’s work touches on how the machinery of secularism makes both religion and blackness more visible as something that doesn’t belong to, indeed must be kept out of, the public sphere. *Our Nig* enacts this implicit connection between literary realism and secular logic, and through the novel’s formal complexities, Wilson’s book challenges Secularism’s own self-understanding as the horizon of racial inclusivity by articulating the paradox of Secularism with respect to raced persons, in which Secularism, while perhaps effective for making an argument against slavery, fails to do the same against racism.

We can see *Our Nig's* relationship to the problem of Secularism in the way that the Bellmont family reproduces the structural problem of the Secularist critique of abolition. The familiar narrative of abolition is often told as a triumph of liberal Christianity. Both the Baptist and Methodist churches famously split over differences in whether members and church leaders could own slaves. The Quakers, one of the earliest religious groups to denounce slavery, were instrumental in leading enslaved people to freedom through the Underground Railroad. And many of the key figures in the story of abolition practiced some form of Christianity.²⁸ Of course, while our historical memory of the debates over slavery and abolition has consolidated to make it seem as though Christian abolitionists organized a unified campaign to end slavery, the host of anti-slavery publications that proliferated from the 1830s to the Civil War shows that the religious arguments against slavery were much more fractured. And while religious actors hold a prime spot in the story of the abolitionist movement, it wasn't just religious actors who were interested in debating the question of slavery. Less than a decade before the debates over abolition erupted into the Civil War, the Secularist movement emerged in England and quickly found followers in the United States, many of whom were also supporters of abolition. As these American Secularists sought to reframe the abolitionist debates to skirt religious ways of arguing against slavery, they found that bringing a Secularist perspective to the issue of slavery also catapulted Secularism and its principles to the level of national debate.

For nearly two decades, competing Christian perspectives essentially made the abolitionist campaign a religious one, and as such, religious arguments took up much of the conceptual space in the debates over slavery.²⁹ We might usefully categorize the religious arguments against slavery into two camps: one that focused on Biblical exegesis and one that focused on Christian morality.³⁰ In the 1850s, however, Americans were introduced to a new ideological movement called Secularism. The Secularist perspective shifted the debate away

from whether slavery was sanctioned by God's word or God's moral code and instead framed the problem around the question of whether matters of theology should be used to make arguments about matters of the state. Many freethinking abolitionists regarded Secularism as a way out of what they saw as a gridlock produced by the Christian arguments against slavery.

Indeed, the national anxiety over the institution of slavery gave Secularists an occasion to argue effectively for Secularism as a universal framework for dealing with the moral dilemmas of the country. To do this, Secularists needed to consolidate the varied religious arguments in order to clearly delineate between matters of religion and matters of law. One of Holyoake's most ardent American supporters and frequent contributor to *The Liberator*, Joseph Barker frames slavery as chiefly a legal issue, rather than a theological issue. It is the law that keeps people enslaved, not the Bible. What the Bible does is support the law.

When the Fugitive Slave Law or the other provisions of the Constitution are under discussion, it is common for the abolitionists to talk of a *higher* law...and the abolitionists are, in general, agreed, that when the two laws clash, the lower law must be set at nought. But here is the difficulty among a people who believe the Bible to be the word of God. The Bible, by commanding men to be subject to the ruling powers, to obey every ordinance of man, etc. has made the laws of men the laws of God. It has joined the higher and the lower law together. It has made the *lower* law into the *higher* law.³¹

Barker implies here, at least with respect to abolition, that hypocrisy is less a blemish on an otherwise pure religion (committed by a sinful minority) than it is a structural defect in Christianity itself, since so long as Christians believed in the Bible as having divine origin, it gave the state laws the authority of divine law. What Barker's Secularist critique did, in effect, was make *all* Christian positions in the abolitionist debate look like religious hypocrisy—either Christian slaveholders were hypocritically going against the golden rule or Christian abolitionists were hypocritically going against the Biblical injunction to obey the laws of the state. In other words, rather than arguing that the practice of slavery produced two Christianities, the Secularist perspective argued that slavery produced two versions of

Christian hypocrisy. And in particular, Secularists contended that Christian abolitionists who found their moral convictions in conflict with their public duty could only reconcile their personal morality and their public duty by subscribing to the Secularist idea of religion as private. Breaking the public-private link, Secularists proposed, would allow the laws of man to be subjected to the kind of moral scrutiny demanded by the abolitionist cause because all arguments in favor of abolition would need to be made specifically for the public sphere, not based on religious principles. That is, Secularism promised the ability to preserve abolitionism as a movement of Christians by rejecting the idea that the movement required Christianity.

Wilson's Belmont family reflects in miniature Barker's critique of Christian abolitionism. Mrs. Belmont and her daughter Mary serve as figures of the Christian slaveholder, who profess to be Christian but both violently abuse their house servant. The characters who do practice a "virtuous" Christianity and recognize Frado as a human being on equal standing with them—chiefly, James and Aunt Abby and to a lesser extent, Jack and Jane—are versions of the Christian abolitionists who face a conflict between their personal convictions and their public actions. Their failure to protect Frado from Mrs. Belmont's abuse or remove her from her position as servant is ultimately a structural problem, since Mrs. Belmont maintains the rules of the household and Frado's would-be protectors are compelled to follow them. Frado's best hope to escape the Belmont home lies in James, who exemplifies the purest version of an abolitionist stance. He tells Aunt Abby of his own agony over Frado's suffering and attempts to comfort Frado by assuring her that "in our part of the country there were thousands upon thousands who favored the elevation of her race."³² James promises that he would eventually take her into service at his house in Baltimore. But James ultimately becomes sick, moves back into the Belmont home and dies leaving Frado with no prospect of an escape. Her other main ally, Aunt Abby, has even less emancipatory agency. Herself a ward

of the Bellmont home, Abby can only offer momentary respite from Mrs. Bellmont's abuse, since she fears that any gesture of protection "in Mrs. Bellmont's presence, would only bring reserved wrath on her [own] defenceless head."³³ Even as Frado contemplates running away, Abby counsels her not to, "mapp[ing] the dangers of her course, her liability to fail in finding so good friends as [Mr. Bellmont] and herself."³⁴ Importantly, James and Aunt Abby's failures to emancipate Frado have nothing to do with their relation to their religion, but their relation to the household authority.

It is easy to see how critics might want to read *Our Nig* as a novel about slavery and by extension a novel about hypocrisy in the abolitionist movement. For decades, critics have seen Wilson's novel as, at least in part, a critique of Christian hypocrisy. While readers recognize that, since the protagonist is a free black woman living in the North, *Our Nig* is not a novel about slavery per se, they do tend to foreground its relation to the abolitionist literature of the time, and as a result tend to look at it through the categories central to abolitionist texts, in particular the problem of hypocrisy. In their estimation, Wilson's unusual setting for what essentially reads as a slave narrative signals the novel's critique of Northern hypocrisy on race, which they see in tandem with a critique of Christian hypocrisy in the same vein as the critique of hypocrisy of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. Neil Lester, for instance, has written that "Wilson unveils the moral perils of Christian hypocrisy and chauvinism of western Christian ideals."³⁵ Laura Elwood-Farber similarly notes that "Frado rejects notions of religion because of the hypocrisy of it all," further remarking that "[as] true womanhood demands, women in the nineteenth century represented model Christians who personified charity, compassion, and love of God. Frado's only two examples prove just the opposite."³⁶ In her reading on Wilson's use of comic performance to burlesque racial constructions, Elizabeth Boyle characterizes the novel as a "passionate attack on racial and religious hypocrisy."³⁷ Even as critics have broken

open the generic classifications of the novel, expanding it to theatrical performance, minstrelsy, and the gothic, any assessment of the novel's depiction of religion has remained myopically focused on the problem of hypocrisy.

Yet hypocrisy is not mobilized as the chief problem of *Our Nig*. Nowhere does the narrator—or any of the other characters, for that matter—suggest, for example, that Mrs. Bellmont needs only to practice the right kind of Christianity in order for her cruelty towards Frado to stop. Nor does the novel suggest that James and Aunt Abby should separate their private concerns from their “public” place in the household in order to find a way to remove Frado from the Bellmont home. But while the novel does not suggest that a corrected hypocrisy is the solution to Frado's suffering, the novel *is* interested in the vision of Christian hypocrisy inaugurated by Secularism, which made the distinction between the public and private spheres the primary issue. In this sense, we can see the novel's interrogation of both the promise and the problem presented by the conceptual turn brought by the Secularist critique.

Outlining *Our Nig's* dialectical relationship to Secularism and literary realism returns us to the novel's curious slippage between first and third person in the early chapters. More than simply scolding the North for its hypocrisy, *Our Nig* reproduces the structural limitations instituted by the Secularist regime. It does this first by drawing attention to its deliberate departure from key formal features of anti-slavery literature. The first-person elements that appear at the beginning of the book, for example, align the novel with the slave narrative genre, which would typically feature a preface by the author and would often start with some account of the author's birth. Most slave narratives, however, were written in the first person and “verified” by the book's editor or white supporter. In some cases, it was the editor who transcribed the narrative told by the former slave; in others, someone who simply organized the text for public consumption. One constant feature (either in the editor's introduction or the

author's preface or both) was a statement about the factual nature of the events contained within the narrative. In *Twelve Years a Slave*, for instance, the editor attests to Solomon Northup's commitment to the truth, noting that "he has...carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appeared."³⁸ Northup himself declares the purpose of the narrative is "to give a candid and truthful statement of fact: to repeat the story of my life without exaggeration."³⁹ A version of these statements appears in almost any slave narrative one can find; many acknowledge the ability or temptation to fictionalize these narratives only to insist on the total absence of fictional embellishments. The editor of *Slave Life in Georgia*, the narrative of John Brown, admits that while "[it] would have been easy to fill up the outline of the picture here and there, with dark shadows, and to impart a heightened dramatic colouring to some of the incidents," Brown insisted on producing "a plain unvarnished tale of real Slave-life, conveyed as nearly as possible in the language of the subject of it."⁴⁰ The preface to *The Life of Josiah Henson* declares that Henson's narrative "has this advantage, that it is not fiction, but fact" (an assertion made more interesting by the fact that Josiah Henson would be the basis for Stowe's very fictional Uncle Tom).⁴¹ One especially exorbitant claim to fact can be found in *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*, which contains several pages of a report by a committee who investigated the veracity of Bibb's story and concluded that "this thrilling and eloquent narrative, though stranger than fiction, is undoubtedly true"⁴² The genre of the slave narrative, in short, was marked by its insistence on the text as factual record or testimony, demonstrated by both the first-person narration and the accompanying certification of the narrative from an outside source.

Our Nig does not quite do that, even as it does incorporate the same features that classify the slave narrative. Wilson's preface indicates that the narrative relates Wilson's own

experience, but it does so only to undercut any claim to factual testimony. “I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home.” In declaring these editorial choices, Wilson links her text to the slave narrative genre in a way that simultaneously shows how she intends to break from it, by divorcing her narrative from the category of documentation. The apparent slippage between writer and narrator in the preface, while useful in generating biographical insight into Wilson herself, is in my reading, important for the way that it underscores the switch to third-person perspective in the narrative text, a switch made even more pronounced by the way the third-person narration is juxtaposed with the first-person chapter titles. Wilson herself makes a similar move in letters of support. The letters resemble the statements of verification found in other slave narratives, but they notably at the end of *Our Nig*, rather than the beginning. This alone would indicate Wilson’s notion that the text does not need to be verified by others, but more importantly, the letters themselves have little to say about the veracity of the narrative at hand. Instead, they dwell primarily on the author’s current circumstances—the mother of a young child, abandoned by her husband, in failing health with few opportunities to earn money—in order to encourage readers to “lend a helping hand, and assist our sister, not in giving, but in buying a book”⁴³ Whether readers believe the story to be Wilson’s own is immaterial. These departures thus become a crucial point, not because they indicate anything about whether or not we can read the novel as autobiographical, but because the formal difference made in refusing the first-person account pushes the slave narrative out of the realm of factual testimony and begins to establish her text in the realm of literary realism.

The way *Our Nig* also differentiates itself from abolitionist sentimental fiction gives even greater force to the novel's interest in being understood as a realist text. Unlike the slave narrative, sentimental fiction, which was largely written by white women, tended to take the third-person perspective where the narrator's role was to make emotional appeals on behalf of the characters, often as a way of guiding the moral message of the text.⁴⁴ The sentimental novel that was mobilized for the abolitionist cause sought to achieve essentially the same goal as the slave narrative, which was, in Philip Fisher's terms, to gain "the right to human regard by means of the reality of their suffering."⁴⁵ To achieve its goal, the sentimental novel relied chiefly on its ability to develop the subjecthood of its main characters, and in the case of the abolitionist sentimental novel, to use its ability to humanize its characters as an argument against the practice of slavery. The slave narrative was able to do this through the first-person account, since a first-person narrator would rhetorically place the reader into the subject position of the author and subject of the text; that is, the reader would experience the text *as if* it were happening to her. In place of having a first-person account, sentimental authors used the third-person narrator as a kind of mediator, who would step in to instruct the reader in sympathetically identifying with the characters. No one did this more fiercely than Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her frequent narratorial intrusions often address her readers directly, asking them to reflect on their emotional reactions to the text and encouraging them to feel the force of the subjectivity of her slave characters. Stowe also went a step further, overlapping her text with the documentary nature of the slave narrative when she published *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, essentially a collection of documentary evidence and annotations published a year after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to show that the novel was "a mosaic of facts."⁴⁶ While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is perhaps the most extreme example, the sentimental novel nevertheless clings to the slave narrative in the sense that in its effort to

assert the humanity of the slave, its literary mode works to break down the distance between the reader and the text.

By contrast, *Our Nig*'s narrative neither appeals to outside documentation, nor requires the narrator to function like a sentimental narrator. *Our Nig* instead makes a claim to a literary mode that not only refuses the need for documentation but thinks of itself as functioning as if it were the documentation. This, fundamentally, is a claim to literary realism, and importantly, it is a claim also made by way of its implicit rejection of other literary modes, which had been mobilized in support of the anti-slavery cause. In its rejection of both the slave narrative and the sentimental novel, *Our Nig* achieves a significant formal shift: moving the focus from the realization of sympathetic identification to the realization of critical distance. The achievement of a certain critical distance is what ultimately marks the narrator of a realist text as politically different from the narrator of a sentimental text. Where the sentimental narrator is a figure of moral authority, the narrator of a realist text is the fantasy of a fully secularized figure, who works to manage the separation of public and private belief. Again, Wilson's narrator meaningfully breaks from Stowe's narrator, who famously interjects at key moments in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to address the readers and insist on a certain moral perspective about the evils of slavery. One example of this comes from the chapter, "Eliza's Escape," in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which Stowe depicts the slave traders planning to recapture the escaped slaves, Eliza and Harry. Stowe's narrator makes the following appeal:

If any of our refined and Christian readers object to the society into which this scene introduces them, let us beg them to begin and conquer their prejudices in time the catching business, we beg to remind them, is rising to the dignity of a lawful and patriotic profession. If all the broad land between the Mississippi and the Pacific becomes one great market for bodies and souls, and human property retains the locomotive tendencies of this nineteenth century, the trader and catcher may yet be among our aristocracy.⁴⁷

We might note here how Stowe's narrator particularly addresses "Christian readers" and entreats these readers to view the slave trader's "lawful" behavior as both un-Christian and un-American. In other words, Stowe wants her readers to understand the Christian concern over the selling of "bodies and souls" as a public concern over the nation's laws. Wilson's narrator makes a structurally similar appeal to readers when Frado's mother Mag "gives in" to the African Jim's proposal early in the novel: "You can philosophize, gentle reader, about the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher."⁴⁸ We can clearly see a version of the Stowe narrator in this passage. The first sentence of this interjection acknowledges the reader's imagined (presumably Christian) moral opinion in the same way Stowe's narrator assumes her reader's objection to the slave traders. The second sentence, however, in a break from Stowe's narrator, stops short of imposing a moral stance. Crucially, Wilson's narrator does not seem to take a stance on whether beliefs about "the evils of amalgamation" are either right or wrong. Instead, the narrator pivots the focus to the material problem of poverty, which relegates the moral questions of interracial marriage to more or less a matter of private concern. Wilson's narrator, then, establishes itself as a figure of the secular, a figure that has access to all points of view yet stands outside of them in a kind of space of universal neutrality.

The narrator's independence from the subject of the narrative, Frado, ultimately drives Wilson's most pointed critique of the novel—that the secular ideal is utterly unattainable as a lived reality, since the narrator's the ability to do what Frado cannot relies entirely on the narrator's disembodiment. Whereas in the slave narrative, the first-person narrator is useful in establishing the veracity of the embodied subject, and in the sentimental novel, the third-person narrator serves to produce sympathy for the embodied subject, the narrator of *Our Nig* functions as a critical foil to the embodied subject. The disembodied narrator, neither raced nor

sexed, achieves, if only in the text, the kind of emancipation Frado so earnestly desires. The point here is that the problem is not that Frado's body belongs to someone else (it doesn't) but her *embodiment* has become the central problem of the text. There is no question that both Frado and the narrator are in some way versions of Harriet Wilson, but there is a crucial distinction between Frado, who is the embodied version of Harriet Wilson and the narrator, who is the disembodied version of Harriet Wilson. And it is only through the text can Wilson separate herself from her own embodiment and achieve the agency of the narrator. This is what it means to say that the novel's primary concern is with racism—and indeed, sexism—because both racism and sexism are problems of free people, embodied as black and embodied as women. While she is free, Frado's embodiment as both black and a woman puts her into the private sphere of the domestic servant and excludes her from accessing the public sphere. Through *Our Nig*, then, we can see how race emerges as a problem for the Secularist distinction between the public and private. Only in the context of Secularism are we able to fully grasp the meaning of Wilson's third-person narrator, which seems to acknowledge the emancipatory power of the Secularist anti-slavery arguments even as it highlights the extent to which freedom governed by Secularism is enforced along racial lines.

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¹ John Ernest, *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2009), 81

² See R.J. Ellis, *Harriet Wilson's Our Nig: A Cultural Biography of a 'Two-Story' African American Novel* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003); Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Richard J. Ellis (New York: Vintage Books, 2011)

³ Leslie Bennetts. "An 1859 Black Literary Landmark Is Uncovered," *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1982

⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 6

⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 6

⁶ Jared Hickman and Peter Coviello have both examined the racializing logic of secularism in interesting ways. See Hickman, *The Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2017); Coviello, *Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2019)

⁷ Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House, North: Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* (1859; repr., Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 51. Quotations from the novel come from this edition.

⁸ "A Catechism for Slaves." *The Liberator*, Jun 16, 1854, 96 (original italics)

⁹ "A Catechism for Slaves." *The Liberator*, 96

¹⁰ Over the last decade, the question of race and secularism has produced a number of interesting texts. See, for example, Vincent Lloyd and Jonathan S. Khan, *Race and Secularism in America*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2016). In their introduction, Lloyd and Kahn question why whiteness has characterized "not only the secular but also, all too often, critiques of the secular," noting that the conversations about secularism that have emerged in the last few decades often "take their starting point from European intellectual history or from complicating that history," and as such, critiques of secularism have not ventured terribly far from the Eurocentric narrative of secularization (6). The problem with that entanglement, Lloyd and Khan argue, is that approaching secularism "as an intellectual-historical phenomenon conceals the way secularism and race together manage bodies and lives" (7).

Christopher Cameron has similarly pushed back against the historical accounts of secularism, positing that "while the origins of deism and freethought among whites lay in liberal Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy, black freethought grew out of the institution of slavery and the conditions blacks endured within it." Rather than a response to the political power of religious institutions, then, black freethought emerged out of a problem of theodicy—the existence of a just or benevolent God irreconcilable with the evil of slavery. To that end, Cameron traces the strains of religious skepticism, freethought, and absolute rejection of religion that are evident in African American writing from the antebellum period through the Civil Rights movement, and in doing so, offers a history of what he terms African American secularism, which follows a different path than the secularism associated with whiteness. See Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: History of African American Secularism* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2019)

¹¹ Eddie Glaude, Jr. *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 25

¹² Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!*, 22

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- ¹³ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 68
- ¹⁴ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 68
- ¹⁵ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 74
- ¹⁶ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 76
- ¹⁷ Julia Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*" *American Literature*, 67 no. 3 (Sept 1995): 439–466
- ¹⁸ Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 440, 458
- ¹⁹ Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 439–440
- ²⁰ Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 448
- ²¹ Stern, "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*," 458
- ²² Nancy Glazener. *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850–1910* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 48
- ²³ Glazener. *Reading for Realism*, 40
- ²⁴ Glazener. *Reading for Realism*, 43
- ²⁵ Lindsay Reckson. *Realist Ecstasy: Religion, Race, and Performance in American Literature* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2020), 7
- ²⁶ Reckson, *Realist Ecstasy*, 30
- ²⁷ Reckson, *Realist Ecstasy*, 7
- ²⁸ Sojourner Truth was a Methodist preacher; William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the hugely influential anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*, characterized slavery as a national sin against God; John Brown, who led the raid on Harpers Ferry, was a Congregationalist for most of his life; and Congregationalist minister Henry Ward Beecher was a prominent voice against slavery whose equally devout sister Harriet wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the quintessential abolitionist novel.
- ²⁹ See Sydney E. Ahlstrom (1972) "Slavery, Disunion, and the Churches," *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Eddie Glaude, Jr. *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016)
- ³⁰ Those who used Biblical exegesis to make a case against slavery were directly responding to pro-slavery advocates who pointed to passages in the Bible that depicted slavery without criticism or even seemed to sanction slavery—the tenth commandment, for instance, instructs Christians against coveting their neighbor's "manservant or maidservant" alongside the other things he owns, suggesting that the Bible, and therefore God, finds treating

other human beings as property an acceptable practice. Anti-slavery Christians countered with interpretations of the Bible that claimed there was no real resemblance to the slavery that was being practiced in the United States, that in fact the word that was translated as “slave” in the King James Version of the Bible was really something closer to what nineteenth-century readers would understand as “servant,” who was *voluntarily* serving someone and who enjoyed the same civil rights as his or her master. Other abolitionists sidestepped primary reference to the Bible and instead made abolition a question of Christian morality. The controversy that ultimately split the Northern and Southern members of the Methodist church, for instance, centered around the question of whether slavery was a violation of the golden rule. The weekly abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, was a particularly strong voice in this discourse; William Lloyd Garrison saw appeals to Christian morality as the best chance to gain support for the cause and made it the guiding principle of the paper.

³¹ Joseph Barker. “Letter to Richard D. Webb” *The Liberator*. April 23, 1852, 68 (original italics)

³² Wilson, *Our Nig*, 76

³³ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 45

³⁴ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 108

³⁵ Neal A. Lester, “Play(Writing) and En(Acting) Consciousness: Theater as Rhetoric in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 34, no. 3 (Fall 2010), 348

³⁶ Lisa Elwood-Farber, “Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*: A Look at the Historical Significance of a Novel that Exposes a Century’s Worth of Hypocritical Ideology,” *Women’s Studies*, 39, no. 5 (Jul 2010): 485, 486

³⁷ Elizabeth Boyle, “‘Twisting herself into all shapes’: blackface minstrelsy and comic performance in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” *European Journal of American Studies*, 9, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 11

³⁸ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana* (1859, repr. Bedford: Applewood Books, 2008), xv

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18

⁴⁰ John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England*. edited by L.A. Chamerovzow (London: W.M. Watts, 1855), i

⁴¹ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*. (Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849), iv

⁴² Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. (New York: Published by the Author, 1850), ii

⁴³ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 140

⁴⁴ Ann Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture* has been particularly influential in showing how female authors assumed a kind of moral authority through sentimental fiction. More recently, Claudia Stokes’ *The Altar at Home* explores how sentimental fiction writers arbitrated doctrinal conflicts, which made them voices of authority on religious matters, and Dawn Coleman’s *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* examines the development of the sermon voice, focusing particularly on Stowe’s narrator in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

⁴⁵ Philip Fisher. "Making a Thing into a Man." *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 99

⁴⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe. *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story is Founded, Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*. (London: G. Barclay, 1853), 1

⁴⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852, repr. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 132

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Our Nig*, 13

Chapter 3.
“THAT DREADFUL HEAVEN”:
UNDOING THE SECULAR BINARY¹

*previously published as Buchmeier, Sarah. “‘That Dreadful Heaven’: Secularism Post Postsecularism” *Religion & Literature*, 5, no. 1 (2023)

In 1871, George Jacob Holyoake published *The Principles of Secularism*, a thin volume that was meant to detail the distinguishing beliefs and practices of the Secularist movement, which he had started twenty years earlier. In its opening pages, Holyoake muses on the early controversy of the term “Secularism”—many had taken the Secularist movement to be a cover for what was thought to be more radical challenges to religious belief, like atheism or freethought. Secularism, Holyoake insisted, was instead a set of ethics that prioritized “human welfare by material means.”² Of course, what set Secularism apart from atheism or freethought was less important than what set it apart from religion, particularly Christianity. Unlike theology, which, as Holyoake put it, “regards life as...a scene of tribulation through which we pass to a better world,” Secularism “rejoices in this life, and regards it as the sphere of those duties which educate men to fitness for any future and better life, should such transpire.”³ This distinction not only carved out a space for a new ideological movement, it helped to institute a radically different understanding of what was meant by the relationship between the religious and the secular. Where the concept of the secular was once an integral part of religious life (secular clergy, for example, simply referred to priests or deacons who did not live in a religious institute), the emergence of Secularism in the mid-nineteenth century activated the question of what was religious and what was secular and predicated that question on a fundamental

opposition between the two. To be a Secularist meant to be committed to the secular, to the material world, in contrast to those who were religious, who were committed to the promise of the afterlife and thus indifferent, if not averse, to the material world. Holyoake's Secularism, in short, claimed the ability to value this life as its exclusive property, and as the movement gained traction, increasingly denied that ability to religious adherents.

What it means to be religious and to value this life is the question at the center of one of the best-known theological novels in American literature: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's 1868 novel *The Gates Ajar*. The novel appeared at a time when the Secularist distinction between the religious and the secular, while rapidly reifying into lived social fact, had not yet done so entirely. Written on the heels of the Civil War and the incalculable loss of life that came with it, Phelps wrote a story depicting a young woman mourning the death of her brother in the war, which, to "comfort some few...of the women whose misery crowded the land,"⁴ offered readers a vision of the afterlife as a version of life on earth, complete with houses and gardens, a place where family members are reunited. Phelps's earthly heaven contradicted what was established doctrine among orthodox Protestants, who followed the Calvinist conception of heaven as an abstract spiritual existence completely divorced from earthly existence. The fact that *The Gates Ajar* made the commonplace a part of an alternative vision of heaven made Phelps's book not only a bestseller, but also, to some readers, completely scandalous. The impact of *The Gates Ajar* has typically been understood in terms of its place in the larger trend in sentimental literature, as a critique of Calvinist doctrine in favor of the more liberal religious movements like Methodism or Spiritualism, or as an expression of feminist resistance to traditional religious ideology. I argue, however, that we might more accurately understand *The Gates Ajar* as a novel that reframes religiosity in an emerging Secularist era, one that was on the cusp of coming into solidity.

This chapter will examine how Phelps's novel attempts to offer a rejoinder to the Secularist claim that to be religious involves a commitment to eternity as a necessary rejection of the material world. Using the genre of the sentimental novel, and resting on its standard tropes of female religious authority and religious conversion, Phelps refuses the Secularist opposition between the religious and the secular by framing the novel's conflict not around whether the protagonist Mary believes in the afterlife, but what kind of afterlife she believes in. That is, *The Gates Ajar* imagines a world in which the question of the secular is itself a matter of religious doctrine, not a choice between opposing ideologies. The narrative of Mary's conversion from one doctrine to another works to undo the separation between the religious and secular by showing how a commitment to eternity can simultaneously function as a commitment to life on earth. In doing so, however, Phelps reveals the inescapable bind into which secularism places religion. As I will detail later, the response to her attempt to unite the belief in eternity with the value of this life and thereby eliminate the opposition established by Secularism shows the extent to which religious actors themselves had accepted that opposition and allowed Christian doctrine to be defined in Secularist terms. Phelps's attempt at critiquing Secularism, then, only served to bolster its claims. Reading *The Gates Ajar* in the context of the history of secularism helps us to understand the extent to which the novel (even the sentimental novel which is typically understood to be deeply committed to the expansion of Christian belief) is both a secular and secularizing form.



We can see the difference secularism made to how Americans understood the place of religion just by briefly noting the history of the Sunday laws. Sunday laws, or blue laws,

restricted certain activities—the sale of alcohol, for instance—on Sundays as a way of preserving the Sabbath for rest and worship. The question over the Sunday laws, which came under scrutiny in the 1840s and was resolved by the Supreme Court a little more than fifty years later, gives us a sense of the shift the introduction of Secularism brought to ways of thinking about and understanding the world. At first, in a period we might justifiably call the pre-Secularist 1840s, the debates around Sunday laws centered around the question of whether the Christian majority should make rules that don't apply to other religious minorities in the country. Most of the opponents to Sunday laws were not anti-religious people, but rather Jews and Seventh Day Baptists, who observed the Sabbath on Saturday.⁵ By 1896, a Supreme Court decision in the *Hennington v Georgia* case, which upheld the state's law forbidding trains to run on Sundays, made clear that the question had shifted from whether the Christian majority should take precedent over other religious minorities to whether the Sunday laws were religious or secular. If the law was religious, it was in violation of the Establishment Clause, but if it was secular, it was contributing to the general welfare of the population, and it just so happened to fall on a day convenient for the majority of Christians. Even if the affirmed Sunday laws preserved a Christian practice, it could only do so if the intention behind the laws was fundamentally separate from that practice.⁶

Looking at *The Gates Ajar* in this context allows us to recapture a moment in the history of secularism when Secularist principles were becoming more embedded in American society but had not yet become so naturalized as to make it practically impossible to see outside of its framework. It also helps us to make sense of the different ways readers have understood *The Gates Ajar*. Many readers have taken *The Gates Ajar* as a response to the pitfalls of religion for nineteenth-century women. Ann Douglas, whose book *The Feminization of American Culture* situated sentimental literature in a decades-long struggle between the masculine rigor of

Calvinist ministers and the more doctrinally vague piety of the housewife, sees *The Gates Ajar* as part of a “sub-genre of consolation literature,”⁷ which used death and the afterlife to “establish a new balance of power in the free-for-all, intensely competitive democracy of American culture.”⁸ She argues that the novel’s commitment to “the denial of death as a separate state” contributes to the ways in which millennialism shaped “a larger discussion over the nature of heaven.”⁹ Claudia Stokes examines the sentimental novel in the context of the Second Great Awakening, its themes and tropes “evidence [of] the active participation of sentimental writers and texts in contemporary religious debate.”¹⁰ Stokes puts *The Gates Ajar* alongside Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* as an example of a trend in sentimental novels to “attribute religious authority to girls and women whose chief qualification is...experience with trials and sympathetic identification with the sufferings of others.”¹¹ In her introduction to the collected *Gates* novels (of which there are three), Nina Baym similarly focuses on Phelps’s “vision of the afterlife as profoundly domestic—therefore, profoundly feminine” and as such, her books “never overturn the domestic model; instead, they perfect it.”¹² That Baym marks Phelps’s later novels, like *Hedged In* and *The Silent Partner*, as “unlike” the *Gates* novels because “they are secular works” is emblematic of the way readers have read *The Gates Ajar* as primarily interested in religious doctrine and domesticity. That focus, however, has also precluded readers from seeing the novel’s engagement with secularism, its primary goal not to claim religious authority for women, but to dispute secularism’s claim to take over the public sphere.¹³

Some of the recent work on *The Gates Ajar* has tried to read the novel without focusing too closely on the religious elements. Lisa Long, for instance, looks to rescue Phelps’s novel from the “damaging consensus that *The Gates Ajar* is largely a religious tract” by situating it in the tradition of Civil War literature, arguing that “Phelps responds to a lifeless, enervated faith

with a visceral, re-embodied alternative.”¹⁴ Nancy Schnog similarly encourages readers to “read beneath *The Gates Ajar*’s pervasive religious rhetoric” to find Phelps’s critique of the social constraints and demands on female mourning practices.¹⁵ In Schnog’s reading, the apparent Spiritualism in the novel functions as an “application” of religion to what is actually a “therapeutic program” executed by Aunt Winifred.¹⁶ Others have focused on Phelps’s vision of heaven as nothing more than a bourgeois utopia, a point almost always emphasized by mentioning the fact that Phelps’s heaven includes pianos. John J. Kucich, for instance, reads all three *Gates* novels as participating in a “postbellum revitalization movement of European-American bourgeois culture”¹⁷ by attempting to produce a vision of society as a “pious modernity.”¹⁸ For these readers, in order for the novel to be understood in secular terms, it must not only be separated from its religiousness but it must also meet a kind of Holyoakean standard of expressing values deemed appropriately secular. The point here is that the novel has so far looked to twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers either like a religious text, consistent with the traditionally religious sentimental genre, or a secular text whose religious claims are irrelevant. What readers have not been able to see is that the apparently religious claim of the novel is actually precisely what gives force to its rebuttal to the rising influence of the Secularist movement.

While one of the core principles of Secularism was a complete disinterest in debating doctrine, Holyoake does take up the question of the afterlife several times in his writing. At times, he dismisses the idea of an afterlife as “seemingly improbable” and questions whether Christians themselves believe in it. “If the Christian actually believed that the future was real, would he hang black plumes over the hearse, and speak of death as darkness? No! the cemeteries would be hung with joyful lights, the grave would be the gate of Paradise. Every one would find justifiable excuse for leaving this for the happier world.”¹⁹ More frequently,

though, he uses the subject to reinforce the idea that Secularists have no interest in religious debate and dismisses it as “excluded from Secularism which exacts no denial of deity or immortality, from members of Secularist societies.”²⁰ This allows him to drive home the Secularist commitment to the material improvement of life on earth, regardless of whether an afterlife awaits us after death. If there is an afterlife, Holyoake argues, “it will befall those who do not expect it as well as those who do,” and in any case, the best preparation for “a future state” is to commit yourself to the service of others while on earth.²¹

Given Holyoake’s aversion to considering the existence of heaven, he predictably has very little to say about what heaven might look like if it exists. We have a glimpse of the kind of heaven he has in mind when he discusses the Christian belief in eternity in one article in *The Reasoner*, where he references “gilt trumpets and angels’ wings.”²² This vision of heaven nods to the kind of scene imagined by orthodox Protestants. Religious reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin helped establish this orthodoxy because their emphasis on individual piety put worship of God at the center of Christian life.²³ Puritan sermons that described heaven tended away from the concrete, instead emphasizing the primary activity of the afterlife, eternal worship. All other details were glossed over. Jonathan Edwards called it “the palace, or presence-chamber, of the Supreme Being” where everyone and everything is “infinitely lovely.”²⁴ In his *Meditations upon the Glory of the Heavenly World*, Increase Mather declared that “the happiness of Saints in heaven is beyond all Conception; therefore beyond all Expression.”²⁵ He speculated that “the *Souls* in heaven will swim in holy Pleasures”²⁶ and repeated the promise that heaven will be “wonderfully great.” In this orthodox version of heaven, earthly activities like eating, drinking, and sleeping would be removed, as would the distractions that keep us from continuous communion with God, like family and work. The Puritans’ emphasis on

establishing a personal connection to God meant that the reward of the afterlife would be eternal sustenance through and by God's presence.

It is this abstract version of heaven that produces the conflict in *The Gates Ajar*. Phelps's protagonist, Mary, clearly functions as a figure of the grieving nation, particularly the women whom Phelps had in mind as she wrote.²⁷ The novel, written in the form of a series of journal entries, opens with Mary in the throes of grief having just learned that her brother Roy, a Civil War soldier, has died. In her grief, Mary finds herself unable to function in the social world. She turns away guests who come to pay consolation visits; she refuses to participate in communion at her Evangelical church. The few conversations Mary does have with members of the community seem only to aggravate her grief further. Importantly, Mary's inconsolable state comes not just from the fact that her brother died but from the "dreadful heaven" she imagines him to have gone to. Deacon Quirk articulates what that heaven looks like in his attempt to comfort Mary: "All *his* affections are subdued to God,--merged, as you might say,--merged in worshipping before the great White Throne. He doesn't think this miser'ble earthly sphere of any importance, compared with that eternal and exceeding weight of glory."²⁸ We can see Quirk rehearsing the vision of heaven here that Phelps's readers would have easily recognized as orthodox. But it is precisely the fact that, in this heaven, her brother Roy is no longer Roy, that he is "away in that dreadful Heaven"²⁹ where he no longer thinks of her and she no longer has meaning to him that Mary feels she cannot overcome her state of mourning.

Just as Mary's social environment only provides reminders of the orthodox doctrine of heaven wholly separated from one's life on earth, the natural world begins to take on the kind of abstraction common in the sermonic descriptions. "Something is wrong with the sunsets; they come and go, and I do not notice them....Why it seems to me as if the world were spinning around in light and wind and laughter, and God just stretched down His hand one

morning and put it out. It was such a dear, pleasant world to be put out!”³⁰ As she is confronted with death, Mary can only see the world from the standpoint of the orthodox vision of the afterlife, the abstracted spiritual landscape with no relation to life on earth. With her focus on her brother’s passage into eternity and his transformation into a spiritual being, the world that she inhabits reflects that same eternity—unchanging and unfamiliar. The sunsets reinforce the sense of loss that comes with such a concept of eternity; rather than events that mark the linear passage of time, Mary registers the sunsets as cyclical, coming and going without notice, a symptom of the version of eternal existence where spirits do not experience time but are in a continuous cycle of worship. The moment Mary recognizes the sunsets as part of a cyclical eternity rather than a linear history, she also seems to recognize that existence from the standpoint of eternity necessarily entails a complete indifference to what happens on earth. In other words, what makes the orthodox heaven “dreadful” is that it leaves no room for the commonplace; in fact, just as heaven is incomprehensible from the perspective of life on earth, the perspective of heaven, by removing all attachments to life on earth, makes the commonplace incomprehensible.

The indifference Mary feels toward the sunsets is magnified a bit later in the novel into absolute disdain for the natural world. In this moment, Phelps takes advantage of the frequent use of natural imagery in sermons to conjure heaven’s infinite loveliness (even if that imagery is only evoked to say that it is an insufficient comparison), and in doing so, makes the point that such imagery isn’t just insufficient but becomes something unbearable in the context of an eternity that is permanently separated from life on earth.

The lazy winds are choking me. Their faint sweetness makes me sick...the great maple, just reaching up to tap at the window, blazes and bows under its weight of scarlet blossoms. I cannot bear their perfume; it comes up in great breaths, when the window is opened. I wish that little cricket, just waked from his winter’s nap, would not sit there on the sill and chirp at me. I hate the bluebirds flashing in and out of the carmine cloud that the maple makes, and singing, singing, everywhere.³¹

Once again, the passage speaks to Mary's preoccupation with the afterlife. The "singing, singing, everywhere" plainly alludes to the incessant singing that many theologians of the time promised to be the chief occupation of the saints in heaven. The landscape itself is aggressive: Mary feels choked by the breeze, is made sick by its sweet scent, and hears the chirping of the cricket as an intrusive affront against her. The pleasantness of the spring day doesn't make Mary feel more connected to the heaven that she imagines Roy is in but reminds her of the notion that she can't possibly imagine the state that Roy is in, which in turn transforms the world into an eternally insufferable state of existence.

Mary's desire to be reunited with her brother is completely dependent on what she can imagine. As long as this life reminds her of her inability to imagine eternity, whatever this life offers is meaningless. It is only after the arrival of Mary's Aunt Winifred and her daughter Faith that Mary is able to remove herself from the preoccupation with eternity that so severely disrupts her ability to function in the world. Winifred offers Mary a completely different account of heaven. In Winifred's account, that natural imagery is not an insufficient metaphor for the experience of heaven but a literal description of the landscape. Heaven, in short, is an idealized version of earth. Winifred expects heaven to have all of the things we are used to on earth, only better. "...[The] *ideal* of mountains which we catch in rare glimpses, as we catch the ideal of everything. Trees as they look when the wind cooes through them on a June afternoon...."³² Winifred also insists that not only does Roy retain his earthly personhood in a spiritualized form, he also remembers and watches over Mary while she remains living. With this new conception of the afterlife's close proximity to life on earth, Mary's relation to nature becomes more positive.

The low branches swept with a little soft sigh across the grave; the May-flowers wrapped me in this fragrance thick as incense; the tiny sparrow turned her soft eyes at me over the edge of the nest, and chirped contentedly; the "blessed sunshine" talked with me as it touched the edges of the ivy-leaves to fire.³³

It's easy to pick out the natural features that appear in both this passage and the passage earlier in the novel—the branches of trees, the scent of flowers, the sound of chirping. Of course, in this iteration, the aggression of the first passage has been replaced by the language of comfort. When she is able to think of the things that populate life on earth as also part of life in heaven, nature no longer reminds Mary of the incomprehensible separation between her and Roy, but of their connection.

Phelps's depiction of a young female protagonist in the midst of a spiritual crisis who comes into contact with someone whose spiritual wisdom helps her to become newly reconciled with her faith makes *The Gates Ajar* a typical example of the sentimental genre. So, too, does the apparent critique of Calvinism in favor of the newer forms of belief that developed as a result of the Second Great Awakening. But as a novel written in the form of a personal journal, *The Gates Ajar* also sharply departs from other sentimental novels that came before it. For most sentimental novels, the narrator functioned as a kind of sympathetic observer, a mediating voice who brings the readers into an emotional identification with the characters. Claudia Stokes sums up a way of reading the sentimental novel from Ann Douglas through Jane Tompkins and Dawn Coleman³⁴ when she says that the standard trope of sympathy in sentimental fiction is a way for authors to “replicate the dynamics of sympathetic spectatorship employed by revivalist preachers to engender an emotional state ripe for conversion.”³⁵ Thinking of the sentimental narrator in this way—as ministerial—highlights a certain orientation to the reader, in which the reader is being addressed directly or indirectly by the narrator and is thus positioned to either reject or accept the narrator's invitations to be transformed by the story.

We might be able to characterize the first-person narration of *The Gates Ajar* as something like a religious testimony, putting it in line with the ministerial aspects of other

sentimental fiction, but the novel's narration as journal suggests a certain rejection of that ministerial purpose. In her autobiography *Chapters from a Life*, she recounts how her "little book" came to be, dismissing the idea, not just that the book had a ministerial purpose, but that she "had any 'object' at all in its creation."³⁶ Phelps describes her writing process as "[m]ore of nature than of purpose," claiming that she "scarcely knew [she] wrote it."³⁷ Of course, it would be a mistake to take this account at face value. But whatever degree of truth there is in Phelps's account of her own writing, it's important to see that she represents the unwitting quality of her writing process in the text itself. If we look, for example, at the way the first person narrates time, it is clear that Phelps is seeking to produce within the novel itself the impression of a woman writing without any particular object in mind. Rather than addressing a perceived audience, the first-person journal form creates the effect of absorption—the protagonist narrating to herself. The marking of time, which appears at the head of each journal entry, indicates an indifference to an audience, since the entries are sometimes marked with the month and date, sometimes just the date, and sometimes merely "Night" or, in one case, "The Sabbath." In other words, they are not there to guide a reader through time in a series of events, but simply as a custom of the journal's author, an inconsistent habit. The absorptive attitude of the novel effectively encloses it from the outside world. This is what makes it impossible to imagine *The Gates Ajar* doing the same kind of work of conversion that other sentimental novels had done, since it refuses the very idea that it is addressing itself to anyone, including its reader.

Just as the novel's journal form serves to remove the acknowledgement of two perspectives in opposition to each other—the narrator inside the text and the unconverted reader outside of the text—this kind of formal enclosure also functions to remove the acknowledgement of a secular perspective that exists outside of the religious one and to which

the religious perspective must address itself. The conflict over the doctrine of heaven, narrated through Mary's journal, thus becomes internal, a depiction not of opposing beliefs but of the different possibilities of interpreting scripture. Over the course of the novel, the materialism of the secular, which at first looks like a challenge to a religious doctrine, ends up looking more like a variation of that doctrine—the secular enclosed in the religious perspective. Indeed, Aunt Winifred's earthly vision of heaven initially strikes Mary and the rest of the community as “shockingly heterodox.”³⁸ But the bulk of the novel is made up of scenes that show how her material heaven is grounded in Biblical teaching, even if it is somewhat different from established doctrine. Indeed, a scene between Winifred and Deacon Quirk seems to anticipate the possibility that readers will identify Winifred as a Spiritualist, a member of an informal religious movement based on the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg,³⁹ and as such, not a proper Christian. Quirk brings up “rumors...rife about town, that [Winifred] is a Swedenborgian.”⁴⁰ Winifred patently rejects the idea:

Aunt Winifred broke out laughing, and laughed merrily. The Deacon frowned. “I used to fancy that I believed in Swedenborg,” she said, as soon as she could sober down a little. The Deacon pricked up his ears, with visions of excommunications and councils reflected on every feature. “Until I read his books,” she finished.⁴¹

Many passages like this one demonstrate Winifred's insistence on her own religious conventionality—not only has she read, and rejected, Swedenborg, but she tells Deacon Quirk that she is the widow of a Congregational minister and that she belongs to an orthodox church in her hometown. Winifred's claim to orthodoxy is coupled with her vast theological knowledge, which she reveals nearly every time she speaks. In one conversation between Mary and Winifred on the experience of death, Winifred cites the Apostle Paul and references several Biblical passages, sometimes quoting them directly, along with religious thinkers like Richard Whately, Isaac Taylor, and Thomas Chalmers.⁴² In another, she evokes Martin Luther, the

founding father of Protestantism, recalling his description of heaven as a garden in a letter to his son.⁴³ All of these secure Winifred's character as conventionally Protestant even as she challenges the conventional concept of heaven.

The religious drama of the novel, then, is as much about Winifred's incorporation into the novel's orthodox religious community as it is about Mary coming to terms with her brother's death, if not more. Winifred herself is an outsider; she arrives to the New England town from Kansas and her commitment to the materiality of heaven seems to oppose the beliefs of the community. But Winifred is able to argue that even the spiritual vision of heaven, which Deacon Quirk imagines to be filled with "[h]arpers harping with their harps," embraces a certain element of materiality. When Deacon Quirk accuses her of spreading the "irreverent" and "dreadfully material" idea that there might be pianos in heaven, she challenges him to explain "wherein a harp is less 'material' than a piano."⁴⁴ By the end of the novel, Winifred has convinced not just Deacon Quirk but several others in the community that a material vision of heaven is as valid as a spiritual one. Even the town's minister, Dr. Bland, comes to recognize the validity of Winifred's heaven, admitting to her that passages of the Bible "may be capable of other interpretations than I have formerly given them."⁴⁵ By showing Dr. Bland's "conversion" as one of choosing between competing interpretations of the Bible, Phelps takes what has come to seem in her time to be the opposite of religion—the secular—and reframes it as a constitutive part of religious doctrine. By advocating for the belief that heaven is an extension of earthly life, the novel enacts a commitment to this life that can be claimed by those of religious faith.

While *The Gates Ajar's* material heaven proved enormously popular, Phelps's effort to produce a continuity between the secular and the religious was far less successful. The reactions Phelps received from her orthodox Christian readers shows the degree to which

Secularism had already gained significant ground in establishing the boundaries between the religious and the secular, and indeed, in remaking the religious itself as a thing defined by the secular. Theologians took the novel's earthly heaven to be a direct challenge to accepted doctrine and thus to Christianity writ large. The novel attracted so much attention as to provoke a book-length response, whose anonymous author declared that it was "hard to believe the hand that writes this [book] can be the hand of a Christian."⁴⁶ Many contemporaneous reviewers saw the novel as at best childish and at worst deviant. Some bristled at the fact that Phelps "triumphantly flaunts her brilliant heresies into the face of her village Church"⁴⁷ or worried that her book represented a "modern style of religion" which meant "a contempt of real serious Godliness."⁴⁸ Even reviewers who took the comforting influence of the book "to be for good" did so under the caveat that they "regard speculations upon Heaven as, in the main, dangerous."⁴⁹ This faction of readers who disapproved of *The Gates Ajar* reveals an important point about how Secularism fundamentally altered the way we understand religion. Before Secularism instituted the idea that there was an essential difference between the religious and the secular, it was customary to view things that were "of the world" as compatible with things that were "of the Lord." To describe someone as "religious" or "secular," for example, was to describe that person's formal connections to religious institutions, not his or her commitments or beliefs.⁵⁰ Secularism's effort to redefine the separation between the religious and the secular along ideological lines meant that, for people like Phelps's readers, the religious and secular could no longer be seen as compatible, but were instead seen as being in competition.⁵¹ Phelps's attempt to turn the afterlife into a version of this life produced a problem for her orthodox readers because what they understood to be "real serious Godliness" meant to reject the things of this world in favor of things of the Lord; in other words, Secularism made them see a commitment to pianos as in competition with a commitment to harps. As such, these readers

reflexively took her effort to claim a commitment to the secular in religious terms to be inherently anti-religious, since the idea that the secular can exist as part of religious belief had come to be seen as a Secularist position, rather than an ordinary fact of religious life. Though Phelps is arguably trying to reclaim the compatibility of the secular and the religious by insisting in a sense that pianos are no different from harps, her effort could only be understood to affirm Holyoake's idea that religious and secular commitments can coexist; similarly, her readers who disagree that the two can coexist affirm Holyoake in another sense by insisting on an essential difference between the religious and the secular. Phelps's book and the disapproving responses it received ultimately dramatize the inescapable bind secularism puts on religion: though they are at odds with each other, both see themselves as anti-Secularist and yet, in their insistence on an elemental and non-navigable distinction between something called "religion" and something called "the secular," they both end up reinforcing the Secularist framework.

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- ⁴ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1896), 97
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- ¹² Nina Baym, introduction to *Three Spiritualist Novels by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2000), xii
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- ²³ See Gary Scott Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011)
- ²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “Sermon Fifteen: Heaven is a World of Love.” Jonathan Edwards Center

²⁵ Increase Mather, *Meditations on the glory of the heavenly world*, Evans Early American Imprint Collection, 14

²⁶ Mather, *Meditations*, 22

²⁷ See Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 97: "Into that great world of woe my little book stole forth, trembling. So far as I can remember having had any 'object' at all in its creation, I wished to say something that would comfort some few...of the women whose misery crowded the land"

²⁸ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar* in *Three Spiritualist Novels* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2000), 13; The phrase "exceeding and eternal weight of glory" comes from 2 Corinthians 4:17 in the King James Version of the Bible; it a phrase that appears often in James McGready sermons of the late 18th century.

²⁹ Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, 13

³⁰ Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, 3-4

³¹ Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, 19

³² Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, 77

³³ Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, 56

³⁴ Since Ann Douglas's study of the rise of sentimental fiction in the nineteenth century, the idea that the sentimental narrator functions as a kind of female minister has frequently shaped scholarship on the genre. Both Jane Tompkins and Dawn Coleman have compared the narration of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a jeremiad, which, as Tompkins put it, "through the vigor of its representations, attempts to move the nation as a whole toward the vision it proclaims" (140). Coleman expands on this idea to show that Stowe's narrative voice takes on a sermonistic quality, which "shifts over the course of the novel from sentimental to prophetic, from an acceptably feminine tone to a controversial masculine one" (160). For work on the intersection of gender and secularism which more obliquely inform the concerns of this essay, see Linell Cady and Tracy Fessenden, ed., *Religion, the Secular and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2013); Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018)

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³⁶ Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 97

³⁷ Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 99

³⁸ Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, 62

³⁹ While the sheer scope of beliefs and practices that have been included in Spiritualism makes it difficult to define, Spiritualist doctrine primarily focused on the close relationship between earth and the spiritual realm—the world we see separated only by a thin veil from the world we can't see—and those doctrines demanded a revision of the orthodox idea that the spiritual realm had no resemblance to life on earth. The practices of Spiritualism included an eclectic mix of spiritual communication, coded rapping as well as trance-induced writing, singing, and speaking; early versions of the Ouija board appeared in the 1880s as a divining tool, and some claimed to be able to travel to the spirit world themselves and report back what they had seen. The informal movement found intellectual grounding in Swedenborgianism, a religion based on the writings of eighteenth-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg who claimed to have visited heaven. Not only was Swedenborg's version of the afterlife different for its earthly features like houses and lawns and human forms, but it also rejected the idea that God determined anyone's fate on the spiritual hierarchy. Andrew Jackson Davis, the Seer of Poughkeepsie, later built upon Swedenborg's vision of heaven in a series of lectures (published in 1865 as *Death and the Afterlife*), which detailed a version of the spirit world which he called the Summerland. See Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 1989; John J. Kucich,

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⁴⁰ Phelps, *Gates Ajar*, 95

⁴¹ Phelps, *Gates Ajar*, 95

⁴² Phelps, *Gates Ajar*, 61-70

⁴³ Phelps, *Gates Ajar*, 106

⁴⁴ Phelps, *Gates Ajar*, 86

⁴⁵ Phelps, *Gates Ajar*, 122

⁴⁶ *The Gates Ajar Critically Examined by A Dean* (London, 1871), 31

⁴⁷ "Literature and Fiction," *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, 473

⁴⁸ "Satan's Pictures of Heaven Seen Through *The Gates Ajar*." *The Christian Cynosure*. 98

⁴⁹ *Moore's Rural New-Yorker*

⁵⁰ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 12-17

⁵¹ Holyoake reinforces this notion of competition when he writes in *Principles of Secularism*, that "we have found opponents claiming [Secularism], and disputing with us for its possession" (10).

Chapter 4.
FROM CLAREL TO CAPTAIN VERE:
MELVILLE'S QUARREL WITH SECULARISM

In 1857, Herman Melville joined the growing number of American tourists who wanted to wander through the Biblical landscape of the Holy Land. A number of expeditions to the region in the 1830s and 40s by Biblical scholars and archaeologists had made the journey not just desirable, but possible, by publishing books that literally put the stories of the Bible on a map. If the other tourists found themselves in awe of the area's deep history and sacred significance, Melville's journal entries from his trip reveal a displeasure with the mundanity of it all. "All is glitter & nothing is gold. A sickening cheat,"¹ he wrote at the site of Christ's tomb. Elsewhere, he grumbles over the habit of the guides to juxtapose commentary on meaningful sites and vulgar consumerism: "Yonder is the arch where Christ was shown to the people, & just by that open window is sold the best coffee in Jerusalem."² Melville's disappointment in the fact that the Holy Land turned out to be just another place in the world and not the transformative spiritual experience he may have been anticipating highlights the growing opposition between the religious and the secular. Indeed, as the controversy over *The Gates Ajar* has already demonstrated, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Christian belief and practice faced a number of challenges. What ruined Melville's trip, though, was not doctrinal debates but the rise of High Criticism, the historical account of Biblical events, which had ushered in a discipline of historical theology and turned the Bible itself into an archival document, rather than a sacred text of divine origin. And while that scholarship may have

facilitated Melville's Biblical tourism, it also threatened to reduce the scenes of the Bible to "mere natural variations of the stony landscape."³

As his epic poem *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (published in 1876) makes clear, Melville found it difficult to get over that sort of spiritual distress. The poem puts a young theology student, Clarel, on a journey similar to the one Melville took, and like Melville, Clarel is confronted with the various mid-nineteenth century debates surrounding Biblical history, scientific advancement, and religious belief as he struggles to make sense of and resolve his own religious doubt. Clarel's spiritual dithering parallels Melville's own uncertainty over both his own faith and the state of faith writ large, an affliction Hawthorne famously recorded at the time of their last known meeting, just before Melville embarked on his trip.

I think [Melville] will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists — and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before — in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.⁴

Hawthorne's impressions seem to anticipate and contextualize the poem's themes of wandering "to-and-fro over...deserts," of Clarel's vexation at his inability to "get hold of a definite belief." But they also capture the kind of tension that will feature in Melville's last two major works, *Clarel* and the posthumously published short novel, *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Though these two texts are chronologically close in terms of Melville's body of work, critics tend to treat *Clarel* on its own or with his other poetry, and the overt religious themes have led readers to separate it from a more political work like *Billy Budd*. But in the background of both of these texts is the presence of the Secularist movement. While *Billy Budd* looks like a dramatic departure from the religious themes of *Clarel*, the formal and thematic differences between the two texts, in fact,

reveal the progression of Melville's quarrel with Secularism. Because secularism had become so embedded into modern society in the nearly forty years between *Billy Budd's* composition and its publication in 1924, it was and continues to be difficult for scholars to see what I argue is central to understanding the relationship between these two texts—that with both texts, Melville is trying to find a way to formally escape the epistemological regime that Secularism had established. In other words, Melville looks to the poetic voice in *Clarel* to push back against a changing religiosity in America that would threaten Calvinistic epistemologies of the unknowability of the world; Melville returns to the novel with *Billy Budd*, mapping those concerns onto the generic distinction between romance and realism, and produces a narrator that goes beyond registering the limitations that concerned Hawthorne when he wrote *The Blithedale Romance*. The narrator of *Billy Budd* is not simply limited—in fact, Melville uses the third person—but rather no longer has control over the generic boundaries of the text. That lack of control figures into a relation to a particular vision of the state depicted in *Billy Budd*, one in which the opposition between religion and science that mattered to Melville in his epic poem *Clarel* has been transformed into an opposition between religion and secularism, and in which the state is identified above all with the secular. The shift is significant, in my reading, because it registers the reification of secularism as retreating from view as a recognizable movement and beginning to take shape as a nonsectarian, universal default.

Melville's concerns that give shape to his later works helps us to understand the process by which the epistemologies of religion became delegitimated in relation to what would quickly become the hegemonic epistemology of secularism in the nineteenth century. Moreover, reading Melville's concerns about the state of faith in what has come to be called "the age of Darwin" makes legible the extent to which an unwitting commitment to a secularist worldview has made literary critics blind to the critiques of secularism that were already circulating in the

nineteenth century. In *Clarel*, Melville puts on display the emerging opposition between religion and science, which meant, for him, the consequent devaluing of religious faith as a necessary epistemological option. Secularists in the mold of Holyoake essentially claimed ownership of the material as their exclusive commitment, which in turn defined the religious as being concerned only with the spiritual and divine. This was what drove Melville's disappointment in his own travels, since an interest in the material seemed to negate the divine significance of the places he visited. Nowhere is that more clear than in the rainbow images that appear in *Clarel*. The first rainbow appears on the heels of a desolate scene, full of antipodal imagery, as one character expresses skepticism on whether the more mystical elements can survive in the climate of historicism in Biblical exegesis. Here, Melville clearly wants to draw on the rainbow's status in Christian iconography as a representation of both God's benevolence and divine communication.

“Ah, look!” cried Derwent, “Ah, behold!”
 From the blue battlements of air,
 Over saline vapors hovering there,
 A flag was flung out—curved in fold—
 Fiery, rosy, violet, green—
 And, lovelier growing, brighter, fairer,
 Transfigured all that evil scene;
 And Iris was the standard-bearer”⁵

The moment itself has elements of mysticism: the rainbow “[transfigures] all that evil scene;” the depiction of the rainbow as “a flag...flung out” draws attention to the divine force behind its appearance. While the speaker acknowledges material elements—air and vapors—the rainbow transcends its material elements to become something more meaningful. In this instance, the rainbow is the conventional symbol of faith's ability to rally in the face of doubt. When the rainbow appears a second time, however, the context is notably different:

They turn; and, in that silence sealed,
What works there from behind the veil?
A counter object is revealed--
A thing of heaven, and yet how frail:
Up in thin mist above the sea
Humid is formed, and noiselessly,
The fog-bow: segment of an oval
Set in a colorless removal...It showed half-spent--
Hovered and trembled, paled away, and—went⁶

No longer the “fiery, rosy, violet, green” arc against “blue battlements of air,” this rainbow is “frail,” noiseless, and trembling, a “segment of oval/Set in a colorless removal.” The rainbow, which before had transformative powers, is instead reduced to an “object,” a reaction between mist and light. Stripped of its capacity to communicate divine meaning, the verbs, in turn, are more passive—the rainbow is “revealed” instead of “flung”—and unlike the earlier event, this rainbow doesn’t require a spiritual leader to point it out; rather, the group seems to come across it en masse and simply acknowledges its anemic presence.

The tension between these two rainbow images—the differences between a rainbow that is a material object and a rainbow that is a message from God—reverberates throughout the poem. Through an ensemble of characters, each representing a different relation to religion, *Clarel* voices the degrees of concern for the threat science poses to religious belief, from Rolfe’s insistence that science will never be able to eradicate the spiritual world, however much doubt it manages to raise⁷ to Derwent’s liberal Protestant tendency “to mediate/ ‘Tween faith and science”⁸ to Ungar, who delivers the poem’s darkest premonitions on the effects of a faithless society: “In glut of all material arts/A civic barbarism may be:/Man disennobled—brutalized/By popular science—Atheized/Into a smatterer—.”⁹ As *Clarel* constellates the different views surrounding the opposition between faith and science, it also builds anxiety through the voice of the speaker, who worries over the ability of faith to survive in a world where scientific knowledge is so valorized.

William Braswell (1943) noticed Melville's suspicion of science decades ago, as have many other readers of the poem. But science for these readers is consistently synonymous with Darwin. Braswell observes that Melville's "appreciation of Darwin's importance is shown by the prominent place he gives Darwin in *Clarel*, where the effect of science on religion is seriously discussed."¹⁰ In the "Historical and Critical Note" of the Northwestern-Newberry edition, Walter E. Bezanson calls it "an intricate documentation of a major crisis in Western Civilization—the apparent smash-up of revealed religion in the age of Darwin."¹¹ Elizabeth Renker's more recent reading positions the poem similarly in the context of "the drained legacy of Western Christianity after the convulsive nineteenth-century crisis of faith caused by theories of evolution and the Higher Criticism."¹² Modern readers will likely agree with these critics that Melville's frequent mentions of science in *Clarel* refer to Darwin's theory of evolution, which would have appeared some fifteen years before *Clarel*. But a closer look at how science figures in the poem reveals something completely different. Darwin, in fact, only gets two direct mentions in the entire poem and no other images allude to his theory of natural selection. The word "geology," by comparison, appears four times, and more oblique mentions in the copious imagery of "rocks" and "stones" collectively appear over 150 times (not to mention Margoth, the Jewish geologist who is one of the poem's primary characters). Even general references to "science" more often than not allude to geological discoveries of the era, as opposed to evolution. The science Melville has in mind is not Darwin's theory of evolution, but rather geology. This makes sense when we remember that although Melville was certainly writing *Clarel* in the age of Darwin,¹³ his source material comes from his own trip to the Holy Land in 1857, two years before *The Origin of Species* would be published. At that time, the most influential scientific text was Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830), which proposed that the earth was older than 6,000 years and had gone through a series of gradual changes

governed by natural laws. The rocky terrain seems to have dominated Melville's impressions of the Holy Land. "We read a good deal about stones in Scriptures," Melville wrote in his journal, "...no wonder that stones should so largely figure in the Bible. Judea is one accumulation of stones—Stony mountains & stony plains; stony torrents & stony roads; stony walls & stony feilds [sic], stony houses & stony tombs; stony eyes & stony hearts."¹⁴ Melville also notes that Jerusalem from a distance "looked exactly like arid rocks"¹⁵ and, notably using a geological term, writes, "There are *strata* of cities buried under the present surface of Jerusalem."¹⁶

If Melville wasn't thinking about geology specifically when he traveled through the Holy Land, he most certainly was as he wrote *Clarel*. As the "accumulation of stones" Melville noted in his journal accumulate in his poem, they become more than reminders of the Bible; they are the central figure for the tension between science and Christian doctrine and the robust negotiations among American religious and scientific thinkers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The introduction of geological time threatened to disprove Biblical timelines and, as a consequence, call into question the very foundations of Christianity. This crisis produced two different responses from the religious community. One was to use geological methods to prove key events in the Old Testament, thereby confirming the Biblical creation narrative. Several scriptural geologists, for instance, studied the geological evidence of Noah's flood on the assumption that from verification of one significant Biblical event one could extrapolate verification of the rest. The other, launched largely by Christian geologist Edward Hitchcock, was to reinterpret the Bible to address challenges presented by the new scientific knowledge. In 1835, Hitchcock published an article proposing that a "day" as written in the book of Genesis could be understood to mean an "epoch," which would reconcile the differences between geological time and Biblical time, effectively preserving the credibility of the creation myth.¹⁷

The problem with these responses was that, while they may have succeeded at accomplishing a certain compatibility between science and Biblical exegesis, their methods for doing so reinforced the idea that the only legitimate form of knowledge was that produced by empirical proof. In this way, they failed at preserving the core of religious belief because they implicitly denied faith as a sufficient way of knowing the world. So as much as the efforts of Hitchcock and others to reconcile science and the Bible look like a path toward saving religion, geology's revisions of the history of the earth actually forced a new relation to the Bible and irrevocably transformed it from a sacred text to an historical document, one that could potentially be verified by scientific methods. That transformation simultaneously revised the power dynamic between religion and science—the Bible's authority no longer came from its divine origins (that is, was no longer an authority unto itself), but instead, was granted authority by its verification through science. This was a problem for Melville because he saw science as shallow knowledge, an incomplete epistemology that was taking over the entire epistemological landscape. That sentiment that finds expression repeatedly in *Clarel*. "Science but deals/With Nature; Nature is not God" says one passing character, "...Shall Science then/which solely dealeth with this thing/Named Nature, shall she ever bring/One solitary hope to men?"¹⁸ Rolfe, in his defense of the endurance of God, claims that if seeing God in the natural world is ignorance, "[t]his ignorant state/Science doth but elucidate—Deepen, enlarge,"¹⁹ and later, speaks in typically Melvillean terms:

Much as a light-ship keeper pines
Mid shoals immense, where dreary shines
His lamp, we toss beneath the ray
Of Science' beacon. This to trim
Is now man's barren office.—²⁰

In this nautical simile, the idea that science lacks depth cannot be mistaken. A light-ship is a vessel that is anchored in shallow waters to act as a lighthouse, and because its purpose is to aid

navigation rather than to navigate, does nothing more than “toss” about, a movement that has no real purpose. The “beacon” of light provided by science in this comparison, though helpful for navigation, can only illuminate the surface of the water. Putting the “dreary” light of knowledge—a subtle allusion to the Enlightenment—in this context emphasizes the myopic nature of scientific advancements, since the light is useless in plumbing the depths of the water—in fact, shining a light on the water actually makes it harder to see below the surface—and can only reach a short distance from the ship’s location. Moreover, Melville’s imagining of the light-ship keeper as bound to the boat, unable to reach the deeper waters indicates his conviction that science, even when its limitations are apparent, cannot be escaped. Indeed, the poem’s general attitude toward science suggests that Melville believes the pervasive idea that the only legitimate way of knowing is scientific removes the burden of science to disprove religious claims because it necessarily destroys religion by destroying it as a legitimate category of knowledge. In short, the Christian who looks for material evidence of the Bible in the Holy Land to verify his faith is, like the light-ship keeper, bound to the vessel that precludes him from accessing it.

This emphasis on the tension between science and religion—the sense that it’s not the religion of Christianity that is endangered by science, but rather an entire category of knowledge not based on empirical proof—helps us understand Melville’s other central topos for imagining the problem: the American Indian. In Melville’s imagination, the rocks unite two important debates in the nineteenth century: first, over the compatibility between religion and science, and second, over the assimilation of the Native Americans. In fact, in one canto, the speaker’s meditation on the status of religion quite literally intersects the two:

But in her Protestant repose
Snores faith toward her mortal close?
Nay, like a sachem petrified,
Encaved found in the mountain-side,

Perfect in feature, true in limb,
Life's full similitude in him,
Yet all mere stone—is faith dead *now*,
A petrification? Grant it so,
Then what's in store? what shapeless birth?
Reveal the doom reserved for earth?²¹

It's an unusual choice to use an epic simile to connect liberal Protestantism with a petrified Native American chief. Native Americans appear elsewhere in the poem, however, most notably in the figure of Ungar, a half Cherokee, half Anglo former Confederate soldier, who rails against American democracy and materialism in Part IV. And this image of a dead-but-seemingly-alive figurehead resonates with one Rolfe offers a few cantos later, that of “The King a corpse in armor led/ On a live horse” through a battlefield.²² While these allusions may help us understand the image of the petrified sachem in one sense, the force of the image comes in its appeal to see the debate between faith and science in light of the assimilation of the Native Americans. As Brian W. Dippie has observed,²³ U.S. policies regarding the Native American tribes wavered between removal and assimilation. Just as geological discoveries presented theories of an earth that had evolved in stages, similar theories were applied to human societies, where Christian society was deemed at the top of the civilization hierarchy. As such, the vision for the assimilation argument was to bring the various Native American tribes up through the stages of civilization by Christianizing them and replacing their hunter-gatherer way of life with an agricultural one. In a kind of structural irony, then, Melville puts the Christian who wants to preserve the epistemology of faith in the position of the Native American. What that trope makes immediately clear to Melville's readers is how dire a position that kind of Christian is in. After the Civil War, the recognition of the tribes as nations was effectively abandoned, and the Native Americans were considered to be under the jurisdiction of the U.S. government. The project of assimilation was jettisoned in favor of isolation through the allotment of reservations. “It remained a popular axiom,” Dippie writes, “that the Negro was a pliable or

‘plastic’ race, in contrast to the ‘petrified’ or granite Indian,”²⁴ who was doomed to become extinct because he either could not or refused to assimilate to modern life. Of course, modern life, as Melville depicts it in *Clarel*, is increasingly defined by the strengthening concept of a Secular sphere. The “full similitude” of the sachem, then, points to what it means for the religious to refuse assimilation to secular modernity, where the culture of science has replaced Christianity as the highest tier of modern society. Melville makes us see in the sachem the futility of the desire to reconcile religion with science by representing it as an act of assimilation, since the core of religion—faith—is destroyed by the efforts to give it a scientific foundation.

While it may seem at first that *Clarel* voices the familiar refrain of what’s often called the Victorian crisis of faith—where evolutionary theories forced religious adherents to question the validity of their beliefs—the images Melville uses suggest a different stance. As I have argued, for Melville, the opposition between faith and science is an opposition between two epistemological frameworks. While the larger share of the poem takes a pessimistic view of faith’s ability to survive in a culture centered around science, the “Epilogue” takes a more hopeful turn. “If Luther’s day expand to Darwin’s year,” the speaker posits, “Shall that exclude the hope—foreclose the fear?”²⁵ In these closing stanzas, the speaker offers a series of images that reiterate the opposition between faith and science, suggesting that faith can survive the apparent dominance of science if it can only muster the resolve to assert its autonomy. Here, in a stark contrast to the petrified sachem, faith is figured “[with] blood warm oozing from her wounded trust...[inscribing] even on her shards of broken urns/The sign o’ the cross—*the spirit above the dust!*”²⁶ These last images of faith’s survival suggest that Melville sees the poem as somehow triumphant, even if marginally, in its resistance to the epistemic regime of secularism.

When the problem of faith as an epistemological category re-emerges in Melville's work, it is in his unfinished final novel, *Billy Budd*. Unlike *Clarel*, whose religious concerns are at the forefront of the poem's content, the story of a sailor forced onto a British warship and executed for the accidental killing of the ship's master-at-arms seems to suggest at first glance that Melville has left behind the crisis of faith that loomed over *Clarel*. In fact, the narratorial intrusions that appear throughout the novel, not its religious themes, have attracted a large share of critical attention. Attending to the formal features of the novel makes sense; in contrast to *Clarel*'s persistent lament over the declining status of religion, the narrator of *Billy Budd* worries more over the form of the novel itself, such as when the narrator asserts that Billy "is not presented as a conventional hero, but also that the story in which he is the main figure is no romance."²⁷ While some have described these moments as a depiction of the struggle for formal unity or as Melville calling attention to the construction of the novel in a kind of proto-modernist move, these intrusions share a common concern over the problem of genre, namely, the difference between romantic and realistic fiction.²⁸

As we have already seen, Nancy Glazener has argued that the rise of realism as the standard for high literary art in the second half of the nineteenth century is primarily a story of the triumph of realism over romance, a triumph she claims was achieved by aligning realism with modernity and progress and pitting it against romance's immature fancies.²⁹ It's easy to see how this narrative corresponds to the conventional narrative about the secular, in which secularism triumphs over religion in more or less the same way that realism does over romance. The nineteenth century's diminishing regard for romance as a legitimate literary art, then, would logically function in much the same way as the supposed diminishing adherence to religious beliefs and practices. From this standpoint, what many readers of *Billy Budd* have noticed—the religious allusions that portray Claggart as a figure of Satan and Billy Budd as

both a figure of Adam and Christ as well as the formal anxieties of the narrator—helps make sense of what readers have missed, which is the importance of the relationship between the two in understanding Melville's critique of secularism.

Far from leaving the crisis of faith behind, then, *Billy Budd's* generic anxiety suggests that what Melville has done instead is transpose the tension between religion and science in *Clarel* into the generic tension between romance and realism in *Billy Budd*. Over the course of his literary career, Melville witnessed American literary tastes shift from romance to realism, a shift he dramatizes in the novel's structure. The narrator insists repeatedly that he is writing a realist narrative, yet the text itself cannot maintain the realistic register—not only is the novel set in the distant past, during the French Revolution, but as we've already noted, the characters slide in and out of allegorical categories; Billy Budd is a foundling with no discernable past, a common feature of romantic heroes; even the narrator himself admits that the conflict between Claggart and Billy Budd is "as much charged with that prime element of Radcliffian romance, the mysterious, as any that the ingenuity of the author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* could devise."³⁰ The narratorial intrusions, then, create a tension between the intentions of the fictionalized figure of the author to create a realist narrative and his inability to adhere to standards of realism.

We might read this formal tension as Melville's comment on his own literary career and his declining readership after the publication of *Moby Dick*, as Melville's way of formally reproducing the gap between the literary mode in which he has built his career and the literary tastes of his audience. But putting this formal trope in context with the concerns of his previous major work, *Clarel*, shows that Melville sees a parallel between the rising influence of secularism and the growing preference for realism in literature. As he did in *Clarel*, which contains several references to the idea that empirical knowledge is an incomplete way of

understanding the world, Melville makes use of a short anecdote in *Billy Budd* to reiterate his concern that the declining status of religion severely limits what counts as legitimate knowledge. It's worth quoting it at length:

Long ago, an honest scholar, my senior, said to me in reference to one who like himself is now no more, a man so unimpeachably respectable that against him nothing was every openly said thought among the few something was whispered, "Yes, X— is a nut not to be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan. You are aware that I am the adherent of no organized religion, much less of any philosophy built into a system. Well, for all that, I think that to try and get into X—, enter his labyrinth and get out again, without a clue derived from some source other than what is known as 'knowledge of the world'— that were hardly possible, at least for me."

"Why," said I, "X—, however singular a study to some, is yet human, and knowledge of the world assuredly implies the knowledge of human nature, and in most of its varieties."

"Yes, but a superficial knowledge of it, serving ordinary purposes. But for anything deeper, I am not certain whether to know the world and to know human nature be not two distinct branches of knowledge, which while they may coexist in the same heart, yet either may exist with little or nothing of the other. Nay, in an average man of the world, his constant rubbing with it blunts that finer spiritual insight indispensable to the understanding of the essential in certain exceptional characters, whether evil ones or good. I have seen a girl wind an old lawyer about her little finger. Nor was it the dotage of senile love. Nothing of the sort. But he knew law better than he knew the girl's heart. Coke and Blackstone hardly shed so much light into obscure spiritual places as the Hebrew prophets. And who were they? Mostly recluses."³¹

Like the image of the lightship keeper that appears in *Clarel*, this anecdote makes use of the concepts of surface and depth, suggesting that knowledge that is removed from "organized religion" fails to reach a deep understanding of human nature. And this is precisely the difference between the romantic text, which goes beyond the observable world to depict the mysteries of human nature, and the realistic text, which seeks to merely describe the human condition as objectively as possible. Melville seems to be suggesting here that, as secularism expands its influence, authors who champion literary realism are contributing to the contraction of human knowledge.

This anecdote also foreshadows Captain Vere's inability to properly judge Billy Budd's accidental murder of Claggart. The allusion to knowledge of the law versus knowledge of the

heart speaks directly to Vere's comments during Billy Budd's trial. "Speculatively regarded," Vere admits to a member of the drumhead court, "[the case] well might be referred to a jury of casuists. But for us here, acting not as casuists or moralists, it is a case practical, and under martial law practically to be dealt with."³² Indeed, a crucial aspect of Captain Vere's character is his apparent objectivity in deciding the appropriate consequences Billy should face for his action, that he focuses on what can be known—his action—rather than what remains a mystery—the motive behind his action.

Vere, with little variation, is seen by critics as the embodiment of the law or of the state. As captain of the warship, Vere is an agent of the King and the figure of authority. In the novel's climactic scene, at the moment of his execution, Billy Budd, turns to face the men of the *Bellipotent* and says, "God bless Captain Vere!"³³ As critics have examined the ambiguity of Billy Budd's utterance, they have focused predominantly on the question of sincerity. Some of the most influential readings of *Billy Budd* fall on opposite sides: Joseph Schiffman saw Billy Budd's benediction as irony used to censure against injustice while Michael Rogin understood Billy Budd to be sincerely voicing Melville's sanctification of the state.³⁴ Barbara Johnson reconciles the two polarities, arguing that the ambiguity of "God bless Captain Vere" is actually the point, that through that ambiguity, Melville highlights "the deadly space...between" the political act of reading and interpreting.³⁵ The point here is that the critical interest of Billy's benediction revolves entirely around the interpretation of Vere, and Vere is consistently seen as the embodiment of the state. If anything has seemed puzzling about Vere's symbolic significance, it comes from the mysterious relationship between Billy and Vere intimated by Billy's blessing, which recent readers of the novel see as a depiction of homosexual desire in response to "the newly fraught state of male relation...with the advent of that new identity category *the homosexual*" (Coviello xxiii). Even in these readings, though, Vere's identification with the law

remains intact, his disinterested demeanor a figure for nineteenth-century social and political standards.

What gets less attention is the fact that the language through which Melville either accepts or censures the state is the language of religion, and this is precisely the moment through which the tension between the authority of religion and the authority of the state are put on display. The question of authority that gets portrayed in this moment hinges on what nineteenth-century theology professor JRW Sloane argued was the character of the state. Indeed, this way of thinking about the state—as something that has a character—comes out of an effort by a Protestant coalition, The National Reform Association, to add religious language to the Constitution’s preamble.³⁶ In his remarks to the association’s 1872 convention, Sloane appealed to the idea that “a nation is possessed of moral character.”³⁷ He painted the picture of the state as the “practical expression” of justice, which is “an attribute of God.”³⁸ While the movement for the so-called Christian Amendment began as a matter of the country’s prosperity in 1863, by 1872, it had clearly become a matter of the country’s morality. For the National Reform Association members, the authority of a state’s moral character had to come from God. Perhaps ironically, the freethought movement (which would later take on the Secularist label) began to fight more staunchly against any trace of religion in state affairs, though they had previously been more interested in protecting the right to criticize the church than in promoting a political agenda. More importantly, the freethinkers used this moment to mobilize their argument for a morality independent of religion. One article published in *The Index*, for instance, defended what the anonymous author called “scientific ethics” in order to show “how the atheist may be as highly and purely moral as the theist.”³⁹ This set the stage for the establishment of what would become the American Secular Union, which spread the idea that the moral character of the state came from its commitment to the law, not God.

In the context of this debate over the relationship between religion and the state, Vere's embodiment of the law necessarily implicates his embodiment of the secular ideal. The character of Captain Vere, then, must be read as not just the state, but the state structured by the principles of secularism. Melville paints Vere as an intellectual with a "bias...toward those books...treating of actual men and events no matter of what era—history, biography, and unconventional writers like Montaigne, who, free from cant and convention, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities."⁴⁰ The reference to Montaigne, whose philosophy of moral autonomy is a clear gesture toward Vere's secularism, is shortly followed by another reference to "common sense," likely an allusion to Thomas Paine's foundational text—still considered required reading for secularists—or perhaps to the Common Sense school of Scottish philosophy. What's more, Vere's insistence that the drumhead court's sole focus should be Billy Budd's action, that "Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose,"⁴¹ but rather "a matter for psychological theologians"⁴² eerily echoes Holyoake's conviction for the "purity of material conditions" and the maxim that "doing well is higher than meaning well" in *The Principles of Secularism*.⁴³ Had the novel been published in the 1890s, these clues would likely have registered more clearly with Melville's contemporary readers as an allusion to secularism, not just the state or the law.

It's important to note that even though he is the catalyst for the deaths of both Claggart and Billy, Vere escapes the mark of a villain. Of course, as a figure of secularism, Vere's ability to resist that negative label is precisely what makes him dangerous. While Claggart and Billy Budd are ascribed clear Biblical analogs, which put them on one side of good and evil, Vere in his "unobtrusiveness of demeanor"⁴⁴ is absent such characterization. In fact, Melville marks Vere's tendency to avoid any distinction at all. Even on the ship he captains, he is "not conspicuous by his stature and [wears] no pronounced insignia" so that anyone "might have

taken him for the King's guest, a civilian aboard the King's ship."⁴⁵ Vere's indistinguishable character, however, gets counterbalanced by his omnipresence in Billy's trial. Vere occupies nearly every role afforded by the execution of the law— he arranges the jury; he serves as the sole witness that both accuses and attempts to produce a sympathetic depiction of the crime; he theorizes the legal obligations of the men hearing the testimony; he communicates the final sentence to Billy; and he oversees the execution. That paradox of invisibility and omnipresence amplifies the force of Billy's unusual blessing. By employing the language of religion, Melville evokes the question of the moral character of the state by conjuring up its opposing authority, God, and, as such, also sheds light on the invisible predominance of secularist ideology in American statecraft. Billy's subsequent death at Vere's command points to the failure of the Christian Amendment campaign to unite religion with the state, implying that such efforts can only reinforce the power of the secular state, which has stolen the Christian purchase on morality. Billy's tragic fate is not the consequence of a separation of church and state, but rather the consequence of state fusing its identity with secularist ideology.

What ultimately unites Melville's final major works is a concern for the threats secularism introduced in the postbellum era. Melville's purpose of figuring the opposition between religion and science in *Clarel* is, in my reading, to make a case for religious faith as a necessary epistemological option, since its autonomy from the need for material evidence is precisely what makes it productively irreconcilable with scientific knowledge. By lamenting that the effort to reconcile religion and science only serves to reinforce the primacy of empirical knowledge, though, Melville ironically reifies the opposition he is writing against. As we see the opposition between religion and science transform into what I have been arguing is an opposition between religion and the secular state, we see these distinctions reemerge. In the same way the attempt to reconcile religion and science was doomed to fail, the attempt to

reconcile religion and the state through the Christian Amendment was also doomed to fail, precisely because reconciling them was, in reality, only a way of acknowledging the power of the state, which by extension, was acknowledging the power of secularism. But in *Billy Budd*, Melville continues to insist on the fundamental nature of this opposition; it's only at the level of the narrative, however, that something that truly escapes the state can be imagined. This, in Melville, is the point of the opposition between romance and realism and the narrative self-consciousness which (as nearly every reader has noted) insists at every moment that the novel is a text that in a certain sense must be understood as realist, but then, in another sense, takes on a form that is not entirely assimilable to the model of the real. Even though the opposition between romance and realism is one that the story itself cannot make survive, it's an opposition that Melville wants to uphold in order to highlight its irreducibility. To insist on maintaining the visibility of secularism's influence on the state by persistently conjuring its apparent opposite, even if that amounts to nothing more than a rhetorical gesture, is, in fact, Melville's final will and testament.

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- ² Melville, *Journals*, 89
- ³ Melville, *Journals*, 91
- ⁴ “Hawthorne’s complete account of Melville in Liverpool and Chester.” in *Journals*. edited by Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth. *The Writings of Herman Melville*. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1989), 628
- ⁵ Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, pt.2, canto 25, lines 119-24
- ⁶ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 2, canto 39, lines 148-161
- ⁷ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 1, canto 31, lines 243-4
- ⁸ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 3, canto 16, lines 167-8
- ⁹ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 4, canto 21, lines 122-33
- ¹⁰ William Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought: An Essay in Interpretation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1943), 17
- ¹¹ Walter E. Bezanson, “Historical and Critical Note,” *Clarel*, 506
- ¹² Elizabeth Renker, “Melville the Poet in a Postbellum World,” *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), 135
- ¹³ The composition history of *Clarel* remains unclear. In the “Historical and Critical Note” of the Northwestern-Newberry edition, Walter E. Bezanson posits that “the best hypothesis would seem to be that Melville began his poem about 1867” (531), after securing a position in the New York Customs. though he also acknowledges that the project had likely “been maturing in his mind for a decade” (531). By contrast, as Bezanson himself notes, French critic Jean Simon believed that a notable shift in *Clarel* indicated that Melville had written much of the first volume before writing *Battle-Pieces*.
- ¹⁴ Melville, *Journals*, 90
- ¹⁵ Melville, *Journals*, 84
- ¹⁶ Melville, *Journals*, 90 (original italics)
- ¹⁷ Edward Hitchcock. “The Connection Between Geology and the Mosaic History of the Creation.” *Biblical Repository* 5 (April 1835): 439-51; 6 (October 1835): 261-332.
- ¹⁸ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 2, canto 25, lines 149-50, 158-61
- ¹⁹ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 1, canto 31, 195-6
- ²⁰ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 2, canto 21, 99-102
- ²¹ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 3, canto 5, lines 74-83
- ²² Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 4, canto 16, lines 207-9

²³ Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982)

²⁴ Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 253

²⁵ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 4 canto 35, lines 1-2

²⁶ Melville, *Clarel*, pt. 4, canto 35, lines 8-10 (original italics)

²⁷ Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., (1924, repr. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), 53

²⁸ Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* mostly closely aligns with the way the narrator in *Billy Budd* differentiates the two: "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation." A Romance, he writes has "more to do with the clouds overhead than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex"

²⁹ Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997)

³⁰ Melville, *Billy Budd*, 74

³¹ Melville, *Billy Budd*, 74-5

³² Melville, *Billy Budd*, 110

³³ Melville, *Billy Budd*, 123

³⁴ Joseph Schiffman, "Melville's Final Stage, Irony: A Re-Examination of *Billy Budd* Criticism." *American Literature* 22, no. 2 (May 1950), 128-136. Schiffman argues that, contrary to the standard thinking about *Billy Budd*, it is "a tale of irony, penned by a writer who preferred allegory and satire to straight narrative, and who, late in life, turned to irony for his final attack upon evil" (128); Michael Paul Rogin. "The *Somers* Mutiny and *Billy Budd*." *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979). Rogin puts the novel in context with the mutinous affair on the USS *Somers*, which brought up tensions between religious and political authority. Rogin writes, "Religion no longer joined nature to culture. Drained of religious meaning, state authority offered no redemption, but religion blessed it nonetheless. Echoed by the crew, Billy's last words quieted the threat of mutiny...[and] sanctified the state" (316).

³⁵ Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of 'Billy Budd'" *Studies in Romanticism* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1979), 599

³⁶ *The Proceedings of the National Convention to Secure the Religions Amendment of the Constitution of the United States* (Philadelphia: James B. Rodgers Co., Printers, 1872), vi. The NRA's proposed amendments went through several different versions, but the version presented to President Lincoln and Congress in 1864 is as follows (additions in bold):

We, the people of the United States, **humbly acknowledging the Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, His revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government,** and in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure **the inalienable rights and** the blessings of **life**, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to ourselves and our posterity, **and all the people**, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

³⁷ Sloane, J.R.W., "The Moral Character and Accountability of the Nation." *Life and Work of J. R. W. Sloane, D.D.* Ed. William M. Sloane (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1888), 266.

³⁸ Sloane, *Life and Work of J.R.W. Sloane, D.D.*, 273

³⁹ "'Natural' and 'Christian' Morality," *The Index*, 7 May 1874, 223.

⁴⁰ Melville, *Billy Budd*, 62

⁴¹ Melville, *Billy Budd*, 112

⁴² Melville, *Billy Budd*, 108

⁴³ Holyoake, *Principles of Secularism*, 12

⁴⁴ Melville, *Billy Budd*, 60

⁴⁵ Melville, *Billy Budd*, 60

EPILOGUE: SECULARISM POST POSTSECULARISM¹

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The Secularist movement fundamentally changed our relationship to the secular by essentializing its difference from the religious, so much so that, as both *The Gates Ajar* and *Billy Budd* demonstrate, it was difficult to see outside of the Secularist framework. In our own moment, we have seen renewed attention given to the ideology of secularism in the form of postsecular critique. What we call postsecularism represents a commitment to dismantling the claims to universality and neutrality made by secularism and critiquing the overly influential (and largely invisible) role secularism has had in shaping our understanding of what it means to be modern. The postsecularist argument asserts that there is no firm ground on which we can claim anything as essentially secular or essentially religious. Indeed, this claim helps explain why a novel like *The Gates Ajar*, which understood itself as a religious text could have been understood by other religious readers as a Secularist text, since while the Secularists established the idea that there is a difference between the religious and the secular, postsecularists have shown that the line of separation is constantly being redrawn. In light of the challenges postsecularists have made to the claims of secularism, the argument in defense of secularism has re-emerged with Martin Hägglund's *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, which seeks to promote secularism by establishing it as the only means by which we can value our lives on earth. In *This Life*, Hägglund returns to the core position of secularism, arguing that we are, in fact, insufficiently secular, that what we need is not a more critical

perspective on the secular, but a more earnest embrace of it. His argument is predicated on the separation between two faiths—one that he calls religious because it is committed to eternal existence, and one that he calls secular because it is committed to the finitude of time and thus of the life we all experience here on earth. According to Häggglund, all versions of religious faith from Christianity to Islam to Buddhism function as “a devaluation of our finite lives as a lower form of being”² because they see an eternal existence as the ultimate goal. Secular faith, on the other hand, imbues earthly life with its own inherent value precisely because it understands our time on earth is finite and does not look to another world to continue or enhance our existence. “Only a secular faith,” Häggglund writes, “can be committed to the flourishing of finite life...as an end in itself.”³

Häggglund’s treatment of secularism is clearly at odds with the body of work that postsecular critique has produced. He is interested neither in dismantling the secularist opposition nor in critiquing its influence. In fact, quite the opposite: Häggglund works to *affirm* the idea that secularism is universal and that its difference from religion is not only easily identified but crucial to demonstrating secularism’s universality. To claim that Häggglund’s secular faith is a vision of secularism post-postsecularism, as the title of this section implies, is to claim that Häggglund has not argued for a return to secularism but instead has completely redefined what it means to be a secularist in light of postsecular critique. When Holyoake described Secularism as a kind of “religiousness to which the idea of God is not essential, nor the denial of the idea necessary,” he meant in that instance that people could perform sacraments—weddings, funerals, and the like—without mentioning God. For Häggglund, though, in calling secularism a faith, he moves beyond a set of sacraments or rituals that remove God and makes secularism a conscious embrace of a creed at the exclusion of others. That is, even as Häggglund rests his argument on an essential difference between religious faith

and secular faith, he does so only to encourage his readers to imagine a world in which that difference is eliminated because it is a world in which secular faith is the only option.

Hägglund's dedication to the differences between religious faith and secular faith but also to the necessity of having to choose one over the other functions, not as a revival of Secularism, but as an inverted endorsement of the kind of orthodoxy that existed before Secularism. What Hägglund ultimately argues for, then, is a post-postsecularism that, rather than offering a critique of secularism, tries to undo the opposition between the religious and the secular by universalizing secular values and eliminating the possibility for religion to have a place in society. *This Life* marks a moment in which secularism has moved beyond postsecularism and has emerged as something else entirely—a faith in its own right. Hägglund puts us, then, in a different kind of postsecular moment, one that has produced secularism as a faith in direct competition with other faiths, and one in which what it means to be postsecular has now also become a territory of the secular.

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¹ A previous version of this section is forthcoming in *Religion & Literature*, 55, no. 1 (2023)

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³ Hägglund, *This Life*, 9

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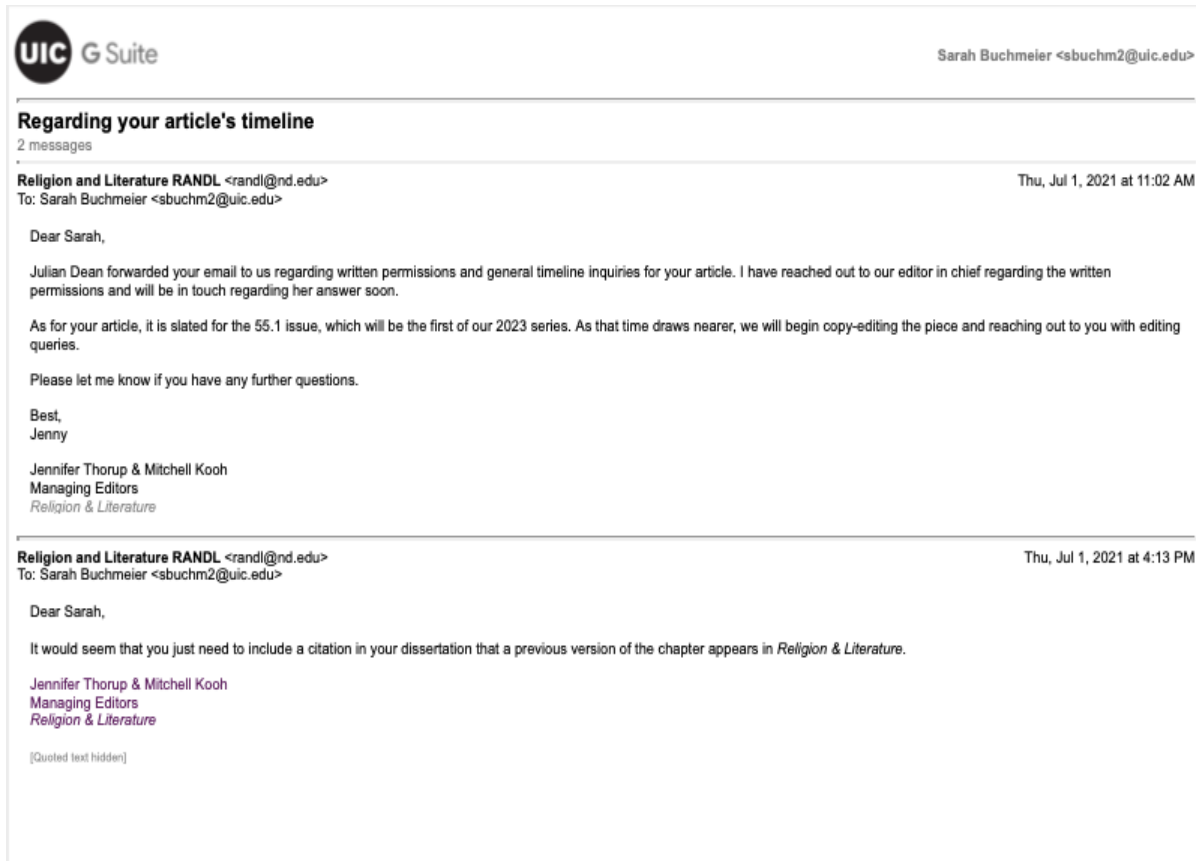
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APPENDIX

A previous version of “That Dreadful Heaven’: Undoing the Secular Binary” and the “Epilogue: Secularism Post Postsecularism” represent a single published manuscript forthcoming in *Religion & Literature*, 55, no. 1 (2023), for which I am the sole author. Please see the attached email from the Managing Editors for copyright permissions.



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University of Illinois at Chicago | PhD in English, expected 2021

Northwestern University | Master of Arts in Literature, 2011

Beloit College | Bachelor of Arts in English, 2005
Secondary Teacher Certification, 2005

HONORS

Anne Hopewell Selby Award for distinction in Graduate Studies in English, 2020, 2021 (runner-up)

MLA Career Development Bootcamp Fellow, 2020

Charlotte W. Newcombe Dissertation Fellowship, 2019

Universität Heidelberg Center for American Studies Spring Academy Participant, 2019

C19 Graduate Student Travel Award, 2018

Distinguished Thesis Award, Northwestern University, 2011

Beloit College Presidential Scholar, 2001-2005

Hattie May Chamberlain (1899) Award for Education, 2005

Marjorie Leff Music Scholarship, 2001-2005

Mary F. Hodge Writing Prize, 2005

PUBLICATIONS

“‘That Dreadful Heaven’: Secularism Post-Postsecularism.” *Religion & Literature*. (forthcoming)

PRESENTATIONS

- 2022 “‘Like a sachem petrified’: *Clarel* in the Age of Secularism.” Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Washington DC (accepted)
- 2021 “Who wrote *Our Nig*?: Narration and the Secular Black Subject.” Midwest Modern Language Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (accepted)
- 2021 Invited Respondent for “Neuromatic, Or; A Particular History of Religion and the Brain,” Lecture by John Modern, Institute for the Humanities, UIC Religion in the World Working Group
- 2020 “Pullman, Public Humanities, and Dissent,” C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists Sixth Biennial Conference, Coral Gables, Florida
- 2020 “Territorial Disputes: Literature and the Contested Spaces of Secularism,” Invited Panelist for C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists Sixth Biennial Conference, Coral Gables, Florida
- 2019 “Interpreting Pullman: What Chicago’s National Monument Can Teach Us About the Dualities of Public Humanities,” Midwest Modern Language Conference, Chicago, Illinois
- 2019 “Pianos in Heaven: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and the Secularization of the Afterlife,” Midwest Modern Language Conference, Chicago, Illinois
- 2019 Lead Respondent for “Pre-Philosophical Moments: American Transcendentalism, Education, and the Social Reproduction of Privilege” by Clemens Spahr, Newberry Library American Literature Seminar
- 2019 “The Secularist Re-Formation: How Secularism Changed the Shape of American Literature,” Universitaet Heidelberg Center for American Studies Spring Academy, Heidelberg, Germany
- 2018 “Mutiny on the *Bellipotent*: Melville's Quarrel with Secularism,” Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association Annual Conference, Bellingham, Washington
- 2018 “‘A thing of heaven, and yet how frail’: Herman Melville's *Clarel* and the American Religious Climate,” C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists Fifth Biennial Conference: Climate, Albuquerque, New Mexico
- 2018 “What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Postsecularism,” British Modernities Group Conference: Stranger Things: The Weird, The Paranormal, and the Problem of Belief, Urbana, Illinois
- 2015 “Sacred Beauty: Hawthorne, Typology, and American Literary Aesthetics,” American Literature Association Symposium: God and the American Writer, San Antonio, Texas
- 2013 “Economic Fears: Review of ‘Dead Pledges: Debt, Horror, and the Credit Crisis’ by Annie McClanahan,” Critical Conversations, UIC English Department, Chicago, Illinois

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Illinois at Chicago | 2012 - present

English 101: Understanding Literature

English 105: British and American Fiction

English 109: American Literature and Culture

English 111: Women and Literature

English 113: Introduction to Multiethnic Literatures of the United States

English 241: Beginnings to 1660 (TA)

English 242: British Literature 1660-1900 (TA)

English 243: American Literature: Beginnings to 1900 (TA)

English 160: Academic Writing I

English 161: Academic Writing II

Summer Academic Writing Workshop

Roosevelt University | 2017-2018

English 101: Critical Reading and Writing

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

National Park Service | 2018, 2019, 2020

Park Guide, Pullman National Monument

Walking Tours:

“Building Solidarity: Pullman and the Strike of 1894” Daily Walking Tour

“Ladies of Labor: The Women of Pullman,” 2019 Labor Day Celebration, *Women and Work*

“Pullman Adventure Tour” Junior Ranger Tour

DEPARTMENTAL AND UNIVERSITY SERVICE

WitH: A Humanities Gender Alliance, Founding Member, UIC, 2019

UIC Senate, Student Senator, 2017 – 2018

English Graduate Student Association, President and Founder, UIC, 2016 – 2018

Advisory Committee, Graduate Student Representative, UIC, 2016 – 2018

UIC Graduate Student Council, English Department Representative, 2016 – 2018

Research Assistant, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Professor of English and of Gender and Women's Studies

Emerita, 2015 - 2017

Critical Conversations, Graduate Student Coordinator, UIC, 2014-15

Search Committee, English Department, Beloit College, 2004

Beloit Fiction Journal, Editorial Board, Beloit College, 2004

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists

Midwest Modern Language Association

Modern Language Association

National Council on Public History

Pacific and Ancient Modern Language Association