CHAPTER ONE

THE CRITICAL TRADITION AND THE MODERN NOVEL: FROM DANIEL DEFOE TO JAMES WOOD

This is surely the true secularism of fiction—why, despite its being a kind of magic, it is actually the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity. —James Wood, The Broken Estate

As a starting point for thinking about secularism in literature, no literary critic is more helpful than James Wood. In his introduction to The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief (2000), Wood is confidently secular in a way that might be taken as representative of much modern thinking about literature. In identifying modern fiction as “the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions,” Wood presumes that whole categories of modern literature—where the novel is held to be the most important—contribute to a broad secularizing project in accord with the aims of liberal nation-state planners, and modern science and social theory. It is a position for which one can find ample support. There are, for instance, any number of examples of writers and critics who have spoken out directly against religious orthodoxies in their works—one thinks of James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and, more recently, Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, and V.S. Naipaul. Against this array of canonical writers (some of them newly canonical) who have publicly affirmed a secularist perspective, the number of expressly religious serious writers is quite small—figures like G. K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis are among the best respected of twentieth century writers who were avowedly religious, but even their status is somewhat less than canonical. And writers (many of them from outside Europe) who do publicly identify with specific religious traditions—such as Israel's A.B. Yehoshua or India's Khushwant Singh—have heterodox or heretical relationships to their religious traditions. Still, Wood's view of fiction is such a broad generalization that it practically invites doubt. Do novels really work that way upon readers (i.e., to destroy religious belief)? Are the novelists themselves aware of this phenomenon? Through close, careful reading and a respect for historical context, one finds a more complex truth. The literary secularism Wood describes is a real phenomenon, which crosses national as well as religious boundaries, but it is not as stable as a political platform. If anything, the secularism of modern literature is a nuanced, complex phenomenon, as many of the great writers named are deeply haunted by the fabric of religious
upbringings they have only partially disowned.

Admittedly, the question about secularism in literature could start at a much more fundamental level than Wood’s “slayer of religions.” Basic questions could be raised, for instance, about what exactly is meant by the “secular” and “religious,” terms which are widely contested in religious studies, the sociology of religion, and even theology. There are many frames within which this course of inquiry might be located, including the sociology of Max Weber, political philosophy in the vein of Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” as well as broad trends in philosophy, such as the controversy over Nietzsche’s “death of God.” This is not to mention the problem of cross-cultural comparison, in which postcolonial theory and the Subaltern Studies school of historiography would figure strongly. But in all of these there is a severe danger of diverting an investigation of a question of literary form through sociology, politics, or theology. James Wood is a better start because he takes a clear, straightforward approach to the problem, emphasizing the formal properties of literary works, especially in fiction. Through engaging Wood’s ideas about the secularism of fiction, a course emerges through which at least some of the above questions about literary secularism can be addressed substantially, without the exclusion of politics or history. The goal is to dispense with excessive framing, and get right into the argument.

Though statements like the above suggest a very muscular approach to secularism in the novel, a second glance reveals that Wood’s own relationship to religion in literature is quite a bit more complex. Despite his emphasis on secularism, at several moments in his essays Wood expresses hostility to secularization, faulting nineteenth-century critics like Matthew Arnold and Ernest Renan for opening the gateway to secularization, but unconsciously. Wood prefers writers to be either openly religious or openly atheist, against those who occupy the in-between space of Matthew Arnold’s “religion of culture.” ¹ But literature thrives on ambiguities; there are dozens of examples of major writers in the nineteenth as well as twentieth centuries whose works as well as lives reflect a nuanced, ambiguous relationship to religious texts, themes, and institutions. In the Indian tradition, this sense of ambiguity can be found as far back as the boundary-crossing Bhakti poets of the late Medieval period—chief among them Kabir. In England, such ambiguity is especially interesting in the Romantic Poets, whose verses reflect a profound secularization of ethos, even while retaining (especially in Blake and Wordsworth) a prophetic sensibility deeply connected to Christianity. This phenomenon has, however, been amply discussed, in M.H. Abrams’ Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Poetry, ² as well as in the subsequent exchange with

¹ Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings, 49.
J. Hillis Miller in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*. It has not, however, been discussed as extensively in the modern novel, which is what I therefore propose to do here.

Through close readings of novels by George Eliot, Rabindranath Tagore, James Joyce, V.S. Naipaul, and Salman Rushdie, I will argue that the apparent firmness of these authors’ respective models of secularism and secularization is undone, along four lines. The first is mimetic: each of these novelists represents the continued power of religious communities and institutions have in the modern world. It may not be the determining or the only available world-view, but all of these writers suggest that it continues to be a viable one. The second is more structural: the deep co-imbrication of modern, secular discourses such as nationalism and individualism with particular religious traditions inflects the form of the narratives themselves. This need not be a matter of emulating the shape of religious scriptures; in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, a seemingly conventional heterosexual marriage plot between Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda is diverted by the latter's discovery of his connection to Judaism. The third point of interaction between the secular and the religious is essentially thematic: one sees the continued reference to religious scriptures, narratives, and metaphors in all of these works, even as the authors seem to be transforming classical religious icons (such as the Hindu image of “Sita,” the devoted wife) through modern recontextualizations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, through their assertion of creative will as literary authors, novelists assert a measure of power over religious scriptures, producing texts of human rather than divine provenance. This final point might seem obvious, but the question of the location of authorship becomes the core issue in the dream-fragments in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

Theologians and anthropologists such as Diana Eck and Karen Armstrong have in recent years questioned the received wisdom that there is in modernity a decisive, universal movement towards secularization as a historical event with a definite end. A non-teleological concept of modernity is also present in the works of these authors: the secular and the religious exist in an intimately antinomian, mutually defining opposition in many aspects of cultural life, including literature. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, Biblical allegory impinges on the secular engagement with Irish nationalism. Similarly, a kind of sacralized

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spirituality is central to Rabindranath Tagore’s conception of an independent Indian nation in *Gora*. The social and intellectual worlds of England, Ireland, and India are in fact rather closely tied together, through the shared history of colonialism, the problematic of nationalism, and the conflicted rise of individualism as a dominant mode of defining social identity.

**The Emergence of Literary Secularism in the Critical Tradition**

To begin with, Wood's critical secularism is placed in plain view in the introduction of the book, where he sketches a theory of fiction. Let us return to the quote above, this time including the preceding paragraph for full context:

Nevertheless, the reality of fiction must also draw its power from the reality of the world. The real, in fiction, is always a matter of belief, and is therefore a kind of discretionary magic: it is a magic whose existence it is up to us, as readers, to validate and confirm. It is for this reason that many readers dislike actual magic or fantasy in novels. . . . Fiction demands belief from us, and that is demanding partly because we can choose not to believe. However, magic—improbable occurrences, ghosts, coincidences—dismantles belief, forcing on us miracles which, because they are beyond belief, we cannot choose not to believe. This is why almost all fiction is not magical, and why the great writers of magical tales are so densely realistic.

The gentle request to believe is what makes fiction so moving. Joyce requests that we believe that Mick Lacy could sing the tune better than Stephen's father. . . . It is a belief that is requested, that we can refuse at any time, that is under our constant surveillance. This is surely the true secularism of fiction—why, despite its being a kind of magic, it is actually the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity. Fiction moves in the shadow of doubt, knows itself to be a true lie, knows that at any moment it might fail to make its case. Belief in fiction is always belief “as if.” Our belief is itself metaphorical—it only resembles actual belief, and is therefore never wholly belief.5

This is a refreshingly strong claim. For Wood, the emergence of the novel in particular marks a transition from the dominance of absolute Biblical narratives (authored by “God”) to the much more contingent world of fiction. Fiction is a kind of storytelling invented by writers whose authorship is specified and (eventually) advertised, and where belief in the worlds created in its pages is strictly notional. It may be that at moments in the passage quoted above Wood's rhetoric is excessive; it is hardly self-evident that fiction is the “slayer of religions” and the “scrutineer of falsity.” The claims can, however, be tested in

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novels themselves, as well as cross-referenced against the critical tradition. Starting with the latter project, I will briefly survey the ideas of some major literary critics for whom secularization has been an important theme. My discussion below, I should say, goes considerably beyond Wood: in my readings of critics like Ian Watt, Northrop Frye, and T.S. Eliot, I am less interested in establishing literature's role as an *engine* of secularization than I am in tracing how modern literature came to be a primary site where secularism as a philosophical and political program is expressed. I am, in other words, looking at secularization as a story that unfolds primarily *within* literature, but in parallel with philosophical, cultural, and political phenomena.

Wood's account of the secularization of literature rhymes quite well with Ian Watt's Weberian account in *The Rise of the Novel*, though it also shares some of the problems in Watt's argument. Watt's idea of secularization depends on his distinguishing between two eighteenth-century works, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and William Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Though the two novels are formally quite similar (and Bunyan predates Defoe by some years), Watt argues that Defoe's novel should be properly understood as the first truly modern novel because of the "secularization of [Defoe's] outlook," which is for Watt closely shaped by the progress of historical events in England at the time:

> The relative impotence of religion in Defoe's novels, then, suggests not insincerity but the profound secularisation of his outlook, a secularisation which was a marked feature of his age—the word itself in its modern sense dates from the first decades of the eighteenth century. Defoe himself had been born at a time when the Puritan Commonwealth had just collapsed at the Restoration, while *Robinson Crusoe* was written in the year of the Salters' Hall controversy, when, after the last hopes of Dissent in a compromise with the Anglican Church had been given up, even their effort to unite among themselves proved impossible. In *The Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe* Defoe's hero meditates on the ebbing of the Christian religion throughout the world; it is a bitterly divided minority force in a largely pagan world, and God's final intervention seems remoter than ever.6

Watt's historical reference points are undeniably important, but his conclusions are questionable. In effect, the events he mentions represent the failure of the Dissenting churches to organize themselves effectively against the Anglican Establishment. But they don't speak to the true decline of the authority of the Establishment in the early and mid-nineteenth century, which was linked to nothing else than the continued expansion of the Dissenting churches, and with that expansion a probable increase in the prevalence of a strict form of expressive religious piety in everyday life.7 As in the United States, English

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7 This history is well described in lay terms in Susan Jacoby's *Freetinkers: A History of American Secularism*. It is also detailed more technically in chapter 2 of Monsma and
secularization was by and large an event initiated by the proliferation of competing religions, not the straightforward diminishing of religion as a whole.  

More importantly, England’s secularism or lack thereof doesn’t determine Defoe’s own attitude—far from it. Watt has to acknowledge, at times uncomfortably, the pervasiveness of Puritan ethics and theology in Defoe’s novel. Though his actions are not always harmonious with a strict interpretation of Puritan religious principles, Crusoe is haunted by a sense of “original sin,” quotes scripture relentlessly, and is evidently dependent on his faith and “blessings from Providence” for his survival. Watt's distinction of Defoe from Bunyan primarily on the basis of Defoe's greater investment in the material world (material acquisition) and in productivity thus seems only partially correct, and the “secularization” he insists on is driven more by historical events than it is on the evidence in the text. It may be that it is unnecessary to pose a sharp distinction between the two forms of Puritan prose-writing, or to assert a clear connection between the rise of the novel and the idea of secularization as presented in Watt. Watt's distinction between Defoe and Bunyan does not, in short, hold. Both of the authors named are situated at a critical distance from the Establishment, and are interested in defining religion separate from Church doctrine. And while Defoe is considerably more secular in terms of his use of characterization and his relatively contained use of Biblical reference, neither are truly “secular” in the sense implied by inventing a world devoid of God's involvement. If we are looking for what Wood calls the “fiction's true secularism,” we are not going to find it in these early eighteenth-century novels.

A stronger sense of secularity can be found in the writing and criticism of Romanticism, beginning in the latter years of the eighteenth century, and continuing through the early nineteenth century. As the literary movement unfolds in parallel with the Enlightenment, it is certainly a time of breakthroughs for secularism, especially in the domain of philosophy. But even here, the story is not so simple. A number of recent theorists in the sociology of religion, most prominently Talal Asad, have put forth arguments rethinking the hard line between pre-modern and modern discourses of religion. While pre-modern and early modern periods may not be as straightforwardly “religious” as is commonly thought, close scrutiny of the true heterogeneity of the modern era, with the continued prevalence of superstition and myth even in quite secularized contexts, as well as the emergence of “substitute” discourses such as nationalism, suggest that European modernity may be “secularized,” but it is not unambiguously “secular.”

A literary critic who points in this direction in his approach to Romanticism

Soper’s *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies*.  
\(^8^\)See the discussion of Thomas Jefferson and the role of the evangelical churches in achieving disestablishment in Virginia in Susan Jacoby's *Freethinkers*, 30-31.  
is Northrop Frye. In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye lays out the idea of two literatures operating in parallel with each other, one “high”—Establishment literature, in both of its senses—and the other “low,” popular, and irreverent (“secular” in its Latinate sense, worldly). Frye's use of typology and his “archetypal” thinking, though often problematic, do address the issue of literary secularism conceptually. Frye affirms the border between secular literature and Biblical (or high mythological) storytelling, but argues that the two have been coexistent throughout European literary history, going back as far as Homer.

Early in *The Secular Scripture*, Frye marks a distinction between the “serious” narratives a society tells about itself—its “high” mythology (this includes religious and scriptural narratives), on the one hand—and, on the other, the lighter narratives found in folktales and romance. An obvious example of high mythology is certainly the Bible, but equally important is the type of myth defined by Plato in *The Republic*—myth as an allegory, used to explain abstract concepts to sub-abstract minds.  

Myths are also the key explanatory (rationalizing) component of rituals, which are widely present in secular aspects of life, including secular narratives (romances take forms that are ritually prescribed) and dramas (which are presented ritually). Romance, on the other hand, is exemplified by first Chaucer as well as Shakespeare, as a countervailing narrative format.

The import of this distinction between romance and myth for Frye is the way it opens insight into the paradoxes and complexities of the great Romantic poet, William Blake, especially given Blake's simultaneous secularizing and prophesying tendencies. Frye solves one aspect of the Blake problem via his distinction between secular romance and mythical/religious storytelling traditions that exist in parallel with each other historically:

Meanwhile, an early absorption in Blake had expanded in two directions. One direction took me into the Bible by way of Milton: this is to be explored in another book. The other direction was on that connected Blake with two other writers in particular, Spenser and William Morris, both writers of sentimental romance. So Spenser, Scott, and Morris appeared as three major centers of romance in a continuous tradition, and these once identified, other centers, like the tales of Chaucer and the late comedies of Shakespeare, soon fell into place. This left me with a sense of a double tradition, one biblical and the other romantic, growing out of an interest in Blake which seemed to have contained them both.

It's a rather different way of framing literary history than the “great tradition”

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10 Arguably this particular deployment of myth is still in use in our own, current age. Rationality itself continues to be dependent on mythical shapes—and is still used in many contexts as part of managing (or ruling) large masses of people.

espoused by critics like F.R. Leavis and Harold Bloom, which sees a direct line from Shakespeare, Milton, to Blake. For Frye, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser—even William Morris—fall on one side, while Milton and the Bible fall on the other. Blake, at the end of this era in literary history, collapses the two traditions in his poetry, using his verse to perform hieratic as well as romantic functions.

Frye's understanding of Blake is unique in that he never claims that Blake is a secularizer, in part because his system does not require any teleological movement towards secularization. Frye's understanding of secularization in general is probably not so different from that seen in Watt, Weber, or for that matter Wood. But his understanding of how secularism works in literature is in fact radically different:

The secession of science from the mythological universe is a familiar story. The separating of scientific and mythological space began theoretically with Copernicus, and effectively with Galileo. By the nineteenth century scientific time had been emancipated from mythological time. But in proportion as the mythological universe becomes more obviously a construct, another question arises. We saw that there is no structural principle to prevent the fables of secular literature from also forming a mythology, or even a mythological universe. Is it possible, then, to look at secular stories as a whole, and as forming a single biblical vision? This is the question implied in the ‘secular scripture’ of my title. In the chapters that follow I should like to look at fiction as a total verbal order, with the outlines of an imaginative universe in it. The Bible is the epic of the creator, with God as its hero. Romance is the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest.12

I find it intriguing that Frye's language is so close to Wood's at some instances (“fiction as a total verbal order, with the outlines of an imaginative universe in it”), while his meaning is clearly different. For Wood, in the passage I quoted above, modern fiction is a secularizing force because of the way it creates a world that is believed in by the reader voluntarily and contingently. For Frye, belief is essentially irrelevant. What counts is form, and in this instance he is arguing that the form of Romance is not in fact so different from that of the “Epic of the Creator,” the Bible. The difference between the two narrative genres is really to be found in their subject. Though I believe Frye means to strengthen the secular tradition in literary history, his phrasing introduces a powerful possibility for secular/religious crossover.13

12 Ibid., 14-15.
13 In that sense, Frye is quite different from Romantic critics like M.H. Abrams, who in The Mirror and the Lamp uses related language to describe the advent of Romanticism. But while Frye considers the changing relationship to religion one of the key elements of Romantic thought, Abrams gives this important theme fairly short attention: 'The
With the continued prevalence of what M.H. Abrams called “natural supernaturalism,” Romantic poetry is often only softly and ambiguously secular. While the movement is often seen as dominated by radical figures like Blake and Keats, it also produced the pro-Establishment writer Coleridge, who published a pamphlet on this subject in 1837, called *On the Constitution of Church and State.* But the process of political secularization experienced revolutionary advances through the middle years of the nineteenth century, leading to the enfranchisement of all religious minority groups (culminating in the enfranchisement of the Jews, in 1856), the decriminalization of atheism, and the advent of secular public education (with the founding of London University and, much later, the Education reforms of 1870).

The latter half of the nineteenth century also, incidentally, saw the advent of the specific word “secularism,” as a pragmatic political invention of the reformer George Jacob Holyoake. The change in the culture was palpable, though the complete divorce of religion from the social agenda was still in doubt in the writings of a number of prominent intellectuals.

Wood describes this phenomenon and this moment in his essay “The Broken Estate,” which represents Wood's most substantial engagement with the question of literary secularism. Wood does not particularly dwell on Europe's social and political transformations up through the middle of the nineteenth century, and approaches Matthew Arnold and Ernest Renan in a rather unforgivingly theological manner:

But the moment at which Jesus became the hero of a novel, of a 'prose-poem,' he also became fictional. The old estate broke. Jesus lost his divinity, became only an inspiring fantasist. We may wonder what use Jesus is if he is a figure no paramount cause of poetry [in Romanticism] is not, as in Aristotle, a formal cause, determined primarily by human actions and qualities imitated; nor, as in neo-classic criticism, a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause—the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression, or the compulsion of the 'creative' imagination which, like God the creator, has its internal source of motion' (22).

This phrase was echoed by Edward Said in his characterization of the Romantic movement in *Orientalism,* where he argued that the continuing religious frame of mind in Romanticism can be contrasted to the more scientific, contemporaneous discourse of Orientalism.

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16 See Monsma and Soper, especially 124-128.

17 This was first brought to my attention by Talal Asad, who describes it in a footnote in *Formations of the Secular* (23). I have confirmed it via Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and its Critics.* Holyoake articulates his idea of secularism in *The Principles of Secularism* [1870], which is available online: <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~stolley/scholarship/atheism/secularism/secularism_plaintext.htm>.
different from Socrates on the one hand and Daniel Deronda on the other. Why should we heed his difficult words, what is the flavor of his command once the taste for his authority has evaporated? Secularists perhaps relish that point in intellectual history at which Christianity loses its theological prestige and begins to fall into the secular ranks. Yet, intellectually, a new pettiness was the first replacement of the old, divine Jesus, and it is hard not to lament the passing of actual belief when it is replaced with only a futile poetry. Christianity was not, of course, shoveled away, it was coaxed into sleep by nurses who mistakenly thought that they were healing it. Indeed, it might be said that in the last forty years of the nineteenth century, until Nietzsche's decisively canceling work began to dominate, the feeblest evasions and weak-mindedness passed for theological thinking. Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold are the chief nurses of the sleep of nineteenth-century Europe, and in their work one finds much false medicine.18

What is initially surprising about this passage is Wood's reference to the “flavor of [Jesus'] command,” and his seeming self-distancing from the “secularists,” amongst whom it ordinarily seems proper to place him. But even here, Wood is not particularly hostile to the finality of secularization, which for him was made definitive by Nietzsche, and which evidently continued without pause through the twentieth century. No, what irks him is the “false medicine” of Arnold and Renan, who espouse views about the rationality of religion and its moral necessity that today might seem “conservative” (in Culture and Anarchy, Arnold supported the Anglican Establishment as an essential component of the best in English culture), but which were intended as political buzzwords rather than rigorous theological concepts. For Wood, the true tragedy is not Nietzsche's rejection of God (and of Jesus), but the secularization of the Biblical narrative, such that it becomes merely another kind of novel.19 We see the fulfillment of the phrasing in the earlier quote about fiction as the “slayer” of religion. For Wood, the novel destroys strong belief as a matter of form, by introducing the option of the provisional, non-committal type of belief that is typical of a reader's approach to a Dickens novel. Once that way of reading—which is also a way of being—comes to dominate, it subsumes all other kinds of narrative.

Frye might disagree. In Frye, religious and secular classes of narrative expression have a tense, possibly even competitive relationship with each other, but it is unlikely that one can ever destroy the other. Other objections might arise from Wood's own examples in the passage just quoted. For instance, it's interesting that he mentions Daniel Deronda, whose ethical development—away from a secularized Christianity and into devout Judaism—is among the most complicated in English language literature. For Deronda, eponymous hero of

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19 Interestingly, in Wood's second book of criticism, The Irresponsible Self, he describes Coleridge as doing something rather similar, only he doesn't seem as bothered by the aestheticization of the Bible in Coleridge's works as he is by that in Arnold.
Eliot's final novel, the advent of true belief in Judaism is always social (and rational) in some sense, but, as a property of Deronda's maternal Jewish heritage, it is also shown to be decidedly not voluntary. It is curious that Wood cites Deronda as the key example of what happens when Jesus falls into fiction, since Deronda is hardly a “secular” figure (unless Judaism and secularism are identical for Wood; but that formulation would raise other problems).

In my own close reading of Daniel Deronda in chapter 2 of the present study, I find that the protagonist's Judaism is encoded in the novel before he himself learns of it, and in a rather unusual way. Eliot marks Deronda's difference in the way she represents his face (and especially his nose) as somehow different from the aristocratic “Mallinger nose” seen in the portraits on the wall of his adoptive father's house. Through Deronda's struggle with the conflicting demands on him as both an English gentleman and a person of Jewish descent at a time of rife anti-Semitism, Eliot's novel plays with the idea that Jewish difference might in fact be central to the main stream of English life in the 19th century. She questions the racialization of Judaism common in nineteenth century life throughout Europe, and foregrounds its living religious traditions, which are “still throbbing in human lives.” Her aim is to further the cause of British secularism, not by disposing of religious traditions and communities, but by humanizing Judaism through its first realistic literary representation—by a non-Jew—in modern European literature.

Other examples of writers who challenge the hard line between the secular and religious functions of fiction come from outside of Europe, and by implication, outside of the Christian tradition. Wood, like many English critics before him, does not seriously concern himself with many non-European—or even non-Christian—writers. In the cases of colonial Ireland and India, the question of secularism is complicated by the religious impositions associated with colonialism. In the Irish case, the effect was to suppress the dominant religious tradition of the society by imposing an Anglican Establishment (“The Church of Ireland”) whose goal was in direct alignment with the economic and cultural interests of continued British dominance. In the Indian case the religious imposition was considerably less, though it did grow throughout the early nineteenth century, only to decline in a dramatic way after the Rebellion of 1857, which led to the passing of secularizing laws, of which many continue to be practiced after Indian independence. In both the Indian and Irish cases, it is impossible to speak of the “natural” development of political or cultural secularism, though many intellectual historians have retroactively discovered important pre-colonial experiments with religious tolerance. Moreover, the development of laws pertaining to the rights of individual and minority groups

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20 More recently, Wood has written incisive reviews of books Monica Ali’s Brick Lane, V.S. Naipaul’s letters Between Father and Son, Zadie Smith’s White Teeth, and Salman Rushdie's Fury. All of these reviews are compiled in the volume The Irresponsible Self.
in light of the religious beliefs of the majority after independence in both states has been deeply affected by the earlier history of colonial intervention in the religious practices of the “natives,” in both Ireland and India.

No one is more difficult to place along the scale of religiosity or secularism than the poet and critic T.S. Eliot. Bucking the modernist trend towards secularization, Eliot's life in the late 1920s and 30s seemed to be driven by a reaction to secularism rather than by a positive interest in furthering it. He published several controversial essays that directly advocated the Establishment of the Anglican Church in England, along the way criticizing secularism in England, and even, in one infamous instance, expressing a somewhat anti-Semitic bent. And his attitude to literature seems, on the surface, to support this anti-secularist turn, as when he writes that “the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over natural life.” And yet, I believe Eliot should still be called a secularist (of Arnold's sort, not James Wood's), particularly in regards to his contribution to literary criticism. Even as he complained about Secularism, Eliot continued to advocate a form of it as a mode of reading, understanding, and ordering literature.

As is well known, Eliot quietly converted to Anglicanism in 1927, abandoning the faith of his father and grandfather, both of whom were accomplished Unitarian ministers in Saint Louis, Missouri. While some critics and biographers have questioned how devout an Anglican the author of The Waste Land could actually have become in five short years, the truth of Eliot’s religious convictions will always be unknowable—though placing the event in context is helpful. Though it was a private conversion ceremony, the conversion soon became public knowledge, as Eliot announced his interest in

21See Anthony Julius, T.S. Eliot: Anti-Semitism and Literary Form. Julius argues that anti-Semitism was central to T.S. Eliot's aesthetic project, using a small amount of primary evidence and a great deal of inference. The argument won over a number of critics, including The New Yorker's Louis Menand, but other critics criticized Julius's account of Eliot, accusing Julius of alternately of exaggeration and of saying nothing new (Eliot was criticized for his anti-Semitic remarks and early poems as early as 1935). One example of a particularly strident critique of Julius is James Wood's “T.S. Eliot's Christian Anti-Semitism,” from The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief. As I mention, the strongest evidence against Eliot is found in a few poems published before 1920, and in one lecture/essay that appeared in 1933. The evidence of anti-Semitism from the poems seems incontrovertible, though potentially minor, as the great body of Eliot's writing comes later, and does not reflect explicit anti-Semitism. And the evidence from After Strange Gods is real, and disturbing. The quote is as follows: “The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely to be either fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.”

Anglicanism (if not his conversion *per se*) in the famous preface to the 1928 collection, *For Lancelot Andrewes*. There he declared himself, "classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-catholic in religion.” As his thinking developed, it began to be clear that Eliot's turn to religion was largely a reaction against the negating tendencies of much modernist writing on religion and English secular “culture.” In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot argued that a conservative Anglicanism—and not the atheistic liberalism of peers such as Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, and Bertrand Russell—would be the best and only bulwark against the twin evils of Fascism and Communism.

While the essays on social theory and politics from the 1930s have been largely erased from the Eliot tradition because they failed to have much impact at the time, the latter engage the complex relationship between *reading* and *belief*, including the problems that arise from attempting to read the literature of secular modernism from the standpoint of belief. Eliot's literary criticism has had an immense impact on the constitution of literary criticism as an academic field in the twentieth century. Initially, his critical output was instrumental in the early formation of the New Criticism. And as volumes such the recent *Close Reading* anthology show, the influence of Eliot and New Critical methodology remain, invisibly woven into the fabric of secular reading practices that are taught and practiced to this day.

Several of Eliot's essays in literary criticism address the question of the role of religion in modernism specifically, which is only fitting. In “Religion and Literature,” one of the more compelling essays in this line, Eliot expresses his frustration with the secularism of the modernist movement, but nevertheless continues to affirm it in his own critical appraisal of the British literary tradition. Eliot begins the essay by defining a scale of religiosity, which begins with overtly theological writing, including the Bible as well as the key theological writers of the Church (he mentions Jeremy Taylor with regard to Anglicanism). This writing is to be thought of as sacred in the direct sense; mere appreciation of its literary value is insufficient because it is inappropriately secularized: “Those who talk of the Bible as a 'monument of English prose' are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity.” Here, one notes the similarity to Wood's response to secularization in Matthew Arnold, quoted above (“But the moment at which Jesus became the hero of a novel, of a 'prose-poem,' he also became fictional”), a similarity which is not accidental. For while Eliot and Wood differ in the surface content of their response to religion, the form of the response—their resistance to unconscious secularization—is quite similar, and similarly contradictory.

The most significant contradiction in Eliot's critical response to secularism is in fact rather congenial—he embraces a thoroughly secular concept of literary

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value despite his stated disavowal of secularism. It happens when he addresses the category of “religious poetry,” which has traditionally remained rather marginal in the English tradition: “For the great majority of people who love poetry, 'religious poetry' is a variety of minor poetry: the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit, but a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them.”

Surprisingly, here Eliot agrees with the critics who would call these religious poets “minor,” since their writing seems to spring from a “special religious awareness,” rather than the “general awareness which we expect of a major poet.” By requiring a “general awareness” of major poets, Eliot contradicts his own interest in furthering religious literary criticism, and supports the interests of literary secularism.

It's not quite that simple. Later passages in the same essay reinflect his comment about the “general awareness.” Eliot argues that there are some religious poets who are minor, but there are also some “great religious poets” (he names Dante, Corneille, and Racine). These writers combine a “special religious awareness” with a “general awareness,” but it is worth noting that none of these three writers are his contemporaries, and none are English.

Finally, Eliot lists a third type of religious literature, the output of modern writers such as G.K. Chesterton, which he dismisses as a form of religious propaganda. This type of literature is too self-consciously religious, too instrumental:

But my point is that such writings do not enter into any serious consideration of the relations of Religion and Literature: because they are conscious operations in a world in which it is assumed that Religion and Literature are not related. It is a conscious and limited relating. What I want is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian: because the work of Mr. Chesterton has its point from appearing in a world which is definitely not Christian.

What Eliot is looking for is “great” literature that demonstrates that the world is in fact Christian. He wants to be able to see signs of unconscious religiosity, signs that confirm what he believes to be true—signs, in short, of England's positive Christianity in a “general” (universal and secular) framework. So what does “secular” mean to him? Perhaps Eliot wants secular literature to occupy something akin to the role of the unconscious in a Freudian model of the psyche. The conscious mind wears Christianity on its sleeve, but there is also an unconscious area, at times unformed, that preexists any crude ideological packaging. This is what he wishes to see in the modern writers he admires—

25 Ibid., 99.
26 Eliot, Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, 100.
But with the exception of Joyce, the unconscious adherence to belief is simply not there, and “the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over natural life.”

It is worth noting that despite Eliot's complaints about secularism in modern literature, his influence has a critic has been based on his secular judgment. Followers of Eliot's critical method as disparate as I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis have generally claimed Eliot as a supreme influence in a wholly secular way. They generally ignore Eliot's various religious investments; Leavis's famous “great tradition,” controversial as it is, is essentially a secular book-list. The subsequent Anglo-American critical tradition, though it has not been free of occasional bigotry or narrow-mindedness, has been more or less straightforwardly secular until the advent of some recent challenges from critics like Wood. However, even if the mainstream of Anglo-American literary criticism remained somewhat complacently secular through the New Criticism and into the early writings of poststructuralism, some strong challenges to literary secularism can be found in writings from Anglophone regions outside of England. Two such sites are Ireland and India.

**Literary Secularism in Ireland and India**

Indian and Irish writers in particular wreak havoc on the categories of the secular and the religious. The sources of the complication are many. For one thing, since ideas of the secular are deeply intertwined with—dependent upon—the local concept of “religion,” differences in religious culture need to be considered. The role of religion in public life in a Catholic country is different from that experienced in Protestant or Hindu contexts. Both Catholicism and Hinduism are, traditionally, “embodied” faiths, heavily oriented to practices such as the Communion, or ritual cleansing in Hinduism. The difference in the experience of religion changes the possible parameters of secularism and secularization in ways that are not always easy to map. There are also major differences in the history and structure of religious institutions, where Ireland and England seem to have much in common, and where India—without a centralized “church” or a history of intra-religious sectarian wars—is sharply at odds. However, what may end up being the most important factor for our purposes is India and Ireland's shared experience of extended colonial occupation, which deeply marked their experience of religious freedom. In both contexts, the imposition of foreign religious authority was an essential part of the colonial establishment, and consequently, the religious identity of the local majority became an essential component of the nationalist movement. In Ireland

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27 Ibid., 104.
the imposition of an Anglican “Church of Ireland” with preferential treatment for Irish Protestants was particularly destructive, and lasted nearly two centuries. The incursion was less severe in India, where no definitive religious authority was imposed, and where religious missionaries only began to play a significant role beginning in the early 1800s. Interestingly, between 1855 and 1870, the era when secularizing reforms internal to England were reaching their peak, similar reforms were enacted in the colonies in support of religious freedom. Ireland in 1869 saw the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, leading to equal rights for the Catholic majority, while in India the 1857 Mutiny led to the implementation of a series of “personal” laws designed to protect local religious traditions from British rule. Though latter years of British colonialism in both England and Ireland were marked by a “hands-off” attitude to religion on the part of the colonial authority, the atmosphere of tolerance was not enough to fend off violent struggles at the moment of independence of both nations, leading to political Partitions along religious lines, which continue to scar Ireland, as well as the entire Indian subcontinent.

The complex nexus of political and religious concerns led to diverse responses by Indian and Irish writers, which I will consider in turn, beginning with India. Just as the historical emergence of literary secularism in England is a long and twisty road, there is no simple progress from “secular” to “religious” in modern Indian literature. Early Bengali writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, show the strong influence of Hindu myths and narrative strategies, but the Bengali Renaissance also produced Sukumar Ray and Bibhutibhushan Bannerjee, both of whom were self-consciously “modernist” and highly secular in orientation. Other writers in the modern Indian canon, writing in a dozen or so languages all over the Indian subcontinent, have shown quite various responses to religion in their work. R.K. Narayan appears to be quietly

28 For more on the Church of Ireland, see T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin, Eds., *The Course of Irish History, Fourth Edition*. (Lanham, Maryland: Roberts Reinhart, 2001). As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the status of the Catholic Church in the Nationalist movement of Joyce's day was complicated by the Church leadership's betrayal of the Irish leader Parnell after his divorce scandal in the early 1880s. Afterwards, the 'Republicans' adopted a fairly secular posture, defiant of both Church and State. This posture is Stephen Dedalus's in the early chapters of *Ulysses*, and it is also explored in the famous dinner scene in the first chapter of *Portrait of the Artist*.

29 See Gary Jeffrey Jacobsohn, *The Wheel of Law: India's Secularism in Comparative Constitutional Context* (2004). Jacobsohn links the reforms initiated in the wake of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 to the crisis of Indian secularism that erupted in the early 1990s, following the razing of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. Among other things, his constitutional analysis is helpful because it introduces a distinction between 'positive' secularism, which is aimed to ameliorate the human rights conditions in a society, and 'negative' secularism (the U.S. model), which aims to erect a wall between Church and State. I will discuss this at greater length in Chapter 5, with reference to V.S. Naipaul and secularism in India.
spiritually inclined, while Khushwant Singh and Qurratulain Hyder are determinedly secular, even as they deal intensely with religion as a social and intellectual problem in modern India. But of all the modern South Asian writers who precede the postcolonial emergence of V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, it is Rabindranath Tagore who is the most important and most difficult to place. With his independent education, his facility in both Bengali and English, and his participation in the nationalist movement from an early era, no writer is more important to defining the idea of “literary secularism” than is Tagore. But Tagore's writings also pose a difficult problem of interpretation along the religious/secular axis. Though Yeats, Tagore's first western champion, saw the Indian poet as a lyricist with elements of spirituality, Yeats never truly understood the subtleties of Tagore's relationship to spirituality or religion. Tagore was for his early western readers a kind of esoteric Indian saint, whose naïve lyricism made him seem all the more suspect to readers less tolerant of spiritualism than Yeats. But the influence of Yeats on subsequent interpretations of Tagore's work has been so powerful that most readers, even today, question Tagore's relationship to religion.

In light of Tagore’s biography and other contextual writing, it becomes clear that Tagore was in fact decidedly “secular,” though this label requires critics to de-emphasize the discourse of belief in favor of that of social identity and caste. In the latter framework, Tagore's novels and essays are decidedly secular, as Tagore relentlessly criticizes both Brahminical religious orthodoxies and social caste in his many novels, plays, and essays. In chapter 3 of Literary Secularism, I show how Tagore's critique of religious orthodoxy even extends to nationalism, which he sees as a terrible modern substitute for the discourse of religion in the modern European nations. This critique comes in its most direct form in Tagore's 1917 lectures on nationalism (collected in the volume Nationalism and in the 1909 novel Gora, in which the caste-obsessed protagonist is torn apart when he realizes he is in fact adopted; his blood is European, which completely invalidates his sense of caste-identity.

As I have already indicated, many late colonial novels of literary secularism engage the tension between national identity and religion. This interest overlaps with the question of the relationship of religious identity with an idea of “blood” heritage along racial lines. As critics like Sander Gilman have noted, English Jews were often represented in racial terms, and certainly, ethnic identity is a huge part of the constitution of the idea of caste in the Hindu tradition. Both Eliot and Tagore make a plea for secularism by choosing protagonists whose blood-heritage transgresses religious and racial lines. It is also seen in Joyce's Ulysses, with the famous characterization of Leopold Bloom, an Irish Jew who has (repeatedly) converted to Christianity, without ever fully disavowing his Judaism.

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30 Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism (1917).
In contrast to Tagore, who was always in some sense a Hindu (albeit an unusual kind of Hindu), James Joyce is an unambiguous secularist. The inimitable Stephen Dedalus, protagonist of both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, states his feelings about religious orthodoxy with a famous phrase: “I will not serve.” But these words, like so much of Joyce's best imagery, take their force from theological tradition—“I will not serve” refers to the Biblical incident of Satan's rejection of God. Notably, when Stephen makes this statement near the end of *Portrait of the Artist*, he speaks in English rather than Latin (or Irish, but that's another matter). The translation of the Biblical *Non Serviam* says something about both Stephen's and Joyce's interests in the efficacy of language in its everyday, secular context. One of the reasons Stephen turns away from Catholicism, it seems, is the transcendent irrelevance epitomized by the continued use of Latin, which might also be described (literally) its failure to enter the *saeculum* of the modern. In translating Satan's language in the Bible to an English epithet, the content of Stephen's rejection of the Church is reinforced by the form of its enunciation.

At the same time, Joyce's “I will not serve” is in some sense weakened by its association with religious discourse—it is a rejection of the Church in the Church's own terms (if not its literal language). And this is a familiar pattern in both *Portrait of the Artist* as well as *Ulysses*, where Joyce develops an extended metaphor of Ireland as the “Promised Land” through several sections of the novel. Though the metaphor is occasionally deployed quite seriously—in effect, sacralizing Irish nationalism—in some instances it is also satirized, and its sacramental qualities are deflated. One such satirical moment is the parodying of the Citizen at the end of the “Cyclops” Episode. Another is Stephen's “Parable of the Plums” at the end of the “Aeolus” episode. In these passages, Joyce mocks the apparent masculinity of Imperialist conquest and the apparent impotence of Dublin's dominance by the Catholic Church.

Beyond the mere textual influence of religious metaphors, in *Ulysses* Joyce also engages religious identities and beliefs as a social and political problem in modern Ireland. It is not an accident that Stephen's co-protagonist in *Ulysses* is an Irishman of Jewish descent, who faces considerable hostility from colleagues and strangers alike in the course of his wanderings around Dublin. Joyce uses the experience of Bloom to identify an alternative to the revivalist and nativist ideas of Irish identity, which tend to emphasize racial purity as well as a pre-modern past that bears little resemblance to the problems besetting Ireland in the present day. Bloom is an Irishman by affiliation and acculturation rather than blood, and in his experience of Dublin he is Joyce's quintessentially modern, quintessentially secular man.

The complexity of Joyce's literary secularism is a helpful model for that seen in the work of numerous writers in the postcolonial world. With Indian writers especially, a secular attitude faces a significant number of obstacles. Religious discourse is widely prevalent in India's public life, and religious identity
continues to play a fundamental part in how individuals are identified socially (this identification extends to the level of naming; most names are marked by religious origin and social caste). The struggle of postcolonial Indian writers to identify themselves both socially and artistically as secularists is in some sense a mirror of the struggles of the Indian state to define exactly what secularism means on its own terms.

For V.S. Naipaul, despite his frequent fierce attacks on religious orthodoxies (both Hindu and Muslim), “literary secularism” is in fact an elusive ideal, which unravels at certain crucial moments in his body of work. Naipaul is a writer of Indian descent who derives considerable freedom of perspective from his status as a member of a “displaced” community in rural Trinidad. As such, the strong secularism of Joyce and other European writers is readily available to him, and in his early works Naipaul embraces it, offering sharp criticisms of religious orthodoxies in the Islamic world as well as those of Hindu India and its diaspora. However, somewhere near the mid-point of his career, Naipaul's work began to take a more self-reflexive tone, and his relationship to religion changes. In essays such as “Prologue to an Autobiography,” Naipaul begins to directly engage his struggle with Hindu rituals, symbolism, and social caste. Naipaul also began to reflect seriously on the profession of the writer, which had appeared to him early on as the secular profession par excellence. But, as my close reading of his memoirs, travel narratives, and essays will reveal, the Brahminical religiosity Naipaul has striven to expunge from his persona is in fact closely tied to his conception of the writer's life. Most troublingly, many of the weaknesses of Naipaul's model of literary secularism have reemerged in his recent comments on communal politics in India, where Naipaul has expressed sympathy for the actions and beliefs of Hindu extremists.

In contrast to Naipaul, Rushdie's upbringing in a liberal Muslim household in Bombay did not result in the kind of traumatic scarring that troubles Naipaul so much. Rather, Rushdie's challenge—like that of so many contemporary writers and thinkers—is to assemble two seemingly divergent critiques into a single line of thought. On the one hand, Rushdie aims to present a model of western multiculturalism, which is inclusive of religious difference, and respect for religious minority rights. The postmodern form of Rushdie's novel seems to be especially well-suited to this project—as the decentered and pluralistic frame of the novel seems to mirror in form what Rushdie wants to say thematically. In parallel with the pursuit of a literary and philosophical hybridity, however, Rushdie aims to sharply criticize the growing culture of religious intolerance, in the West as well as in the Middle East, especially within Islam. To this end, Rushdie adopts a strong secularism, which requires a clear demarcation of “battle lines” between those who defend individual rights in line with western liberalism, and those who are complicit with theocracy.

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But these two parallel projects can be self-canceling, and ultimately Rushdie's literary secularism in *The Satanic Verses* is not quite as stable or sure-footed as it might seem. In my reading of *The Satanic Verses*, I argue that it is in fact impossible to decide whether Gibreel Farishta's dreams of himself as the Archangel Gibreel are symptoms of his own unconscious desires, or actual interventions from a divine agent (God or Shaitan). The undecidability of Gibreel's will points to the limits of any assignation of agency in fiction; the character's agency is always defined by the will of the author. But that very blurring of the line between self and other (or self and *author*) also blurs the lines between religious and secular worlds.

This blurring is one that has been discussed at some length in the ongoing debates over secularism in India, many of which refer to the famous line near the end of the novel, uttered by the character Zeenat Vakil: “Battle lines are being drawn up in India today . . . Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on.” Some writers, Meera Nanda and Kumkum Sangari among them, have amplified this perspective in their works. Others, including Partha Chatterjee, Akeel Bilgrami, and Madhu Kishwar, have argued that this model of “hard” secularism, imposed by the state on a reluctant populace, is both ethically questionable and probably doomed to failure. In a separate chapter, I work through some of the critical issues in the Indian debate over secularism in the “uniform civil code” debates. I find that, while the “soft” secularists are certainly correct in identifying a strategy for sustaining secularism, in the long run the interest of human rights—and women's rights especially—requires a concept of secularism based not on the interests of religious groups, but on justice in the liberal universalist tradition.

After postcolonial India, it seems appropriate to meditate at least briefly on the crises in secularism that have been unfolding around the world since 9/11. For questions about religious freedoms are being discussed nearly everywhere, from the Middle East, to Europe (with its growing Muslim minority population), to the United States, to Southeast Asia. Two specific focal points have been chosen in light of two especially remarkable works of literary secularism that have appeared in recent years—Turkey (Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow*) and the United States (Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*). Both are experimental works of fiction, and neither propose solutions to extremely fraught and complicated social situations in their respective national contexts. The dark, apocalyptic tone of both novels illustrates how bad the situation has become, and reminds the reader how essential it is to continue to find new imaginative routes to engage the problem of secularism.

**Full Circle: James Wood's *The Book Against God***

By way of concluding this introductory discussion of literary secularism, it might be profitable to return to James Wood, who, in his recent novel *The Book*
Against God, has explored these issues in a rather more nuanced way than he has in the critical writings discussed earlier. The conflict between “hard” secularism and “soft” secularism as philosophical positions form the core problem for the novel’s protagonist—and impacts his political strategies, his intimate interpersonal ethics, as well as the narrative form itself, forming the core concern of the text. According to some reviews of the novel, 32 The Book Against God is somewhat autobiographical, and while one should be careful in referring to biographical interpretations, the parallels between the upbringing of Wood's protagonist Tom Bunting and Wood's own experience as a child in an Evangelical Anglican household are striking. Wood does not shy away from offering some traces of that memoir in the latter sections of “The Broken Estate”: “My childhood, which was a happy one, was spent in the command economy of evangelical Christianity. Life was centrally planned, all negotiations had to pass by Jesus' desk.”33 Several passages in Wood's novel The Book Against God closely mirror Wood's autobiographical experience. Tom Bunting's father, Peter Bunting, is, at the start of the story, a vicar in a small town in northern England. The novel is really Tom Bunting's elegy for his father, whose death marks the core event of the plot. As importantly, it is a confession of the protagonist's unique ambivalence towards religious belief, the shades of which only emerge in the latter chapters of the book. It begins with Tom Bunting's memory of his father's model of a religious being seamlessly merged with everyday life:

I had a happy childhood, I'm sure of it. I loved the vicarage, even the church. It was painful to witness my widowed mother having to abandon the vicarage this summer for a bungalow in Durham. Now that little church is vacant, vicarless, while the idiot bishop decides who should fill the post. I suppose I should take the bishop's tardiness as a compliment to my father's irreplaceability. . . . He dispensed a Christianity that was inseparable from life. The rhythms of the village, and of the seasons, were also the rhythms of my father's ministry: rising Easter, and sun-favoured summer, and census-gathering Christmas, when, as if in mimicry of the story of Caesar Augustus, all the villagers came to be counted and for once the church was truly full.34

Narrator Tom Bunting's description of his father's religious practice is surprisingly complimentary, given how corrosive his own atheism is in his personal life. Tom sees his father, Peter Bunting, as inhabiting Christianity “that was inseparable from life,” rather than as a source of dogma or oppression. Elsewhere, he indicates that though his father's status as a Christian is never

really in doubt, Peter's belief is soft rather than hard: “Peter, the supposed believer, the great parish priest, the former lecturer in theology, aerated his faith with so many little holes, so much flexibility and doubt and easygoing tolerance, that he simply disappeared down one of these holes.” In the sense that his religion is “full of holes,” motivated more by a concept of social order and responsibility than it is by a desire to affirm strong belief, Peter Bunting might be similar to the late nineteenth-century writers (Arnold and Renan), about whom Wood writes so critically in “The Broken Estate.” And indeed, there is considerable anger and resentment in Tom's feelings for his father, which seem to be oriented to his frustration with his father's holey faith.

If the first half of *The Book Against God* is an image of a proud atheist, the second half of the novel undermines the same atheism as a kind of social, ethical, and philosophical failure. Tom Bunting's character, which had initially seemed to embody a kind of philosophical honesty (he was the only one who seemed to be serious about the problem of God), soon comes to seem riddled with holes. When he is not railing against his father, Tom Bunting is a graduate student in philosophy at University College London, habitually unable to complete his dissertation. Instead of writing it, he's developed at length a private “Book Against God,” in which he plans to definitively dismantle the theological arguments of philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, who argue for the presence of God through the back door of negative theology. But the excerpts of the “Book Against God,” when they are finally inserted in the novel, tell a much more idiosyncratic story. Tom Bunting's book is not a decisive and brilliant work of philosophy, but a hyper-elaborated, obscure, but still personal confession of his feelings for his girlfriend Jane.

Against Tom Bunting's atheism, which demands the confinement of religion to a single philosophical problem, in which one is either absolutely devout or an atheist, a series of counter-examples show a much broader role for religious experience in everyday life, sometimes through rituals that are not even explicitly religious. For instance, Tom observes that Jane has a mystical relationship to music, which requires her absolute commitment, and a ritualized kind of performance not so different from praying. Ritual means commitment, which Tom rebels against wherever he finds it (be it his professional advancement, his romantic life, or his understanding of himself as an individual).

When she plays, she raises her head and closes her eyes, and seems to leave the world a little, to be alone with her notes in almost religious silence. I have sometimes to struggle with selfish resentment—resentment that she is so free, that she can so easily slip out of reality, that she cannot take me with her, that she seems almost to be at prayer (which as a secularist I am bound to disapprove of).

We do indeed differ on religious matters, though Jane is so mystical that we have

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35 Ibid., 49.
never really argued about the subject. She pities me a little, I think, for having no God to believe in. But if Jane does believe in God, then, as far as I can tell, He is really little more than a bearded old patron of music, a male saint Cecilia. 'A note,' she once said to me, 'is an extraordinary thing. It wasn't created by humans. Humans reproduce it; they borrow it and lend it to each other, by using instruments.'

In the reference to the external Truth of the musical note, Tom Bunting suggests a theological center to Jane's musical universe. Passages like this hint at a longing for a kind of religious basis of experience suggesting that Tom Bunting's atheism is either unsustainable, or a very elaborate kind of self-deception. Tom Bunting sees the advantages of a positive relationship to religion too clearly, and is evidently paralyzed by atheism. It cracks open in the final paragraphs of the book, which ends with Tom’s lament for his losses—of his father, and of his childhood—that is strikingly similar in form to a confessional:

Oh father, there were days so exciting when I was a little boy that each morning was a delicious surprise, a joy adults can only mimic when they are fortunate enough to make a long journey by night and rise in an undiscovered place in the morning and see it in the first light.

In a not-entirely unpredicted twist, Wood's Book Against God ends with its protagonist reaching, haltingly for the faith he thought he had lost. It's an ending that humanizes and restores Tom Bunting, but it also seems to undo the hard line between belief and unbelief that Wood draws in essays like “The Broken Estate.”

Wood's opening to the possibility of a restorative role for religious faith at the end of his novel ties the book to other the other primary texts in this study. Like Wood, nearly all of these writers tell powerful stories of the loss of faith at some point. George Eliot, for instance, had such an experience early, leading to a major falling out with her religiously devout father, when as a young woman she decided she would no longer attend church. James Joyce's fall from Catholicism is even more famous—or perhaps, notorious. Tagore and Naipaul's respective struggles with Hinduism are also noted, as is Rushdie's struggle with Islam. What these writers and their works have in common, despite their myriad cultural differences and chronological spread, is the sense that the loss of faith is not the end of the story for literary secularism. The rise of the individualist framework, in which authorship and narrative agency are defining aspects of literary production, are challenged by the continued prevalence of religious texts and religion as a social identity in their respective works. In Wood's case in The

36 Ibid., 84.
37 Ibid., 257.
Book Against God, that excess comes from Tom Bunting's feelings for his father, which are in some unconscious way responsible for his antipathy to Christianity. Another example of this is in Naipaul's work, where Naipaul's strong desire to establish himself in the secularized occupation of the “writer” (a desire evident in the themes of Naipaul's early novels, as well as in his memoirs and essays) is undercut by the almost primordial attachment to a concept of Hindu caste and ritual. In both Wood's and Naipaul's cases, the continued influence of religion enters the story as a kind of psychic trauma. A similar reading might be applied to Gibreel Farishta's turn to schizophrenia in The Satanic Verses, though the parameters are somewhat different because of the postmodern form of Rushdie's novel.

The readings I provide in the following chapters do not provide a definitive exploration of the theme of secularism in modern literature. Many other authors might merit chapters, including writers as diverse as Iris Murdoch, Ajeet Cour, or Marilynne Robinson. My goal here is to show that the history of literary secularism has led, not to an ending (literature as comprehensively secularized), but to an extremely heterogeneous present free from telos. Secularization never ended as a historical process—nor will it end; it is still in process, in Europe (where debates about religion in public life have been extremely important in recent years), in the United States (a highly religious country with a thoroughly secularized public sphere), and elsewhere. As in history, so in literature. With every generation of modern writers—indeed, with every novel written—the struggle for literary secularism is rewritten, reinvented as if for the first time.