

## Is Critique Secular? Thoughts on Enchantment and Reflexivity

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Is critique secular? I should say at the outset that I don't have an answer to the question posed in the title of this gathering. I take it that that's OK—perhaps that's even the point, since to even begin to answer it we would have to ask first: whose critique? which secular?

For example, is the question “is critique secular?” different from the question, “Is critique a form of secularism”? Bearing in mind the distinction between “the secular” and “secularism” that Talal Asad for example makes, it would seem that these two questions *are* different. Some modes of critique (again we'd have to be precise here) are doubtless examples of secularism, *if* we take that term to name a set of doctrinal positions or at least assumptions about which it is unreflexive. But then, of course, could anything unreflexive legitimately be called “critique”? Some definitions of critique, after all, could be reduced simply to the demand of endless reflexivity. This is merely to point out how much hinges on the definitions of these terms—not, again, in the name of answering the question but rather in the name of asking it, or rather grasping the various ways it could be asked.

The first section of this paper briefly explores a number of different possible approaches to the question posed by the title of this event. The remaining sections take up the question of reflexivity in what I hope are increasingly sophisticated ways: first with the help of Jurgen Habermas, second with an assist from Charles Taylor, third by way of Akeel Bilgrami, and last through a consideration of a romantic-era poem. Throughout, I will keep referring to the romantic provenance of the relationships among secularism, critique, enchantment, and reflexivity. My argument will be that through its meditations on reflexivity, (some) romantic literature models the various relationships between enchantment and reflexivity in a more nuanced and sensitive manner than does theoretical discourse. Inescapably, this is itself a romantic argument. That's a bullet I will have to bite, though I hope by the end of the paper to have offered some reasons for biting it.

### 1. Preliminaries

One might come at the question “is critique secular?” from different directions. Here are a few of them.

**1.** There are fairly restrictive definitions of “critique,” such as that associated with Frankfurt School critical theory. Here the normative and emancipatory elements are dominant, and certainly the preferred terminology of such critical theory—false

consciousness, domination, and so on—suggests a secular orientation. At the same time, emancipation and normativity are over-riding concerns of religious discourses.

2. There is, too, a somewhat more expansive definition of “critique”—a rather *ad hoc* and fluid definition, to be sure, which would be something like “critique is what people like us *do*,” where “people like us” names, well, people like us. Putting the matter this way allows us to ask questions about modes of group identification. Is “critique” the price of admission to the club, where “the club” is members of the cosmopolitan intellectual humanities-oriented cultural left, a group with a certain amount of power, at least in certain spheres?

If “critique” is clubby in this way, so too is secularism. Peter Berger, for one, has called attention to “an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that is indeed secularized....While its members are relatively thin on the ground, they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the ‘official’ definitions of reality, notably the educational system, the media of mass communications, and the higher reaches of the legal system. They are remarkably similar all over the world today.”<sup>1</sup>

3. Is critique a stance, a posture that one assumes toward all forms of affirmative culture, or is it an act—as in “the critical act”—suggesting that it is something that can be put down and picked up again? Or is it a practice, something learned, something that requires training and internalization but that is also perhaps lived into slightly differently than one lives into a posture? Critique as posture, act, and practice. To be sure, there is a family resemblance here. But the nuances matter. The first set of possibilities takes us to Bourdieu; the idea of critique as a practice, in contrast, would call on a longer philosophical tradition. This is what Kant meant by “critical philosophy”: a disciplined reigning-in of the temptation toward speculative metaphysics.

4. The new “critique of religion.” Cognitive psychologists like Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, and Paul Bloom, who propose that religious belief is a byproduct of evolutionary history. Philosophic critics like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, who have a more familiar evolutionary story to tell. In different ways, both groups want to offer a natural history of religion. To that extent they would need to be placed in an intellectual history that begins at least with Hume, and probably goes further back yet. It is worth noting that in this tradition religion tends to be conceptualized almost exclusively in terms of “belief.” There is also, of course, the assumption that if you’ve explained the origin of something you’ve explained it away.

5. Non-secular forms of critique: individuals and groups who are anti-secular who practice critique. In increasingly controversial order:

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger, ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 10.

- a. *prophetic/performative critique*: a critique of modern moral order grounded in a normative appeal to something “higher”: Cornel West, but also Jerry Falwell.
- b. A critique of modernity from the perspective of a sophisticated and intellectual defense of the past. For example, the Radical Orthodox theologians.
- c. *Occidentalism*. Most dramatically, of course, what goes in the West by the name of “Islamism,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” and the like.

To any of these last, a purest might object that any stance that contains a residue of faith or dogmatism is not “really critique.” I might be wrong, but I take it that this objection has less purchase now than it might have ten or 15 years ago. One could site many reasons for this.

Against this diverse array of approaches to the question (and there are surely others I have not thought of), let me offer four points of general agreement motivating much of the best recent work on secularism:

1. Secularization, whatever we mean by the term, cannot be understood as simply a subtraction story, as if the modern secular self was always there, waiting to be liberated from superstition. This premise can (and often does) get linked up with broader claims about “multiple” or “alternative” modernities.
2. Secularism is not a neutral governance structure but has its own interests. It authorizes certain kinds of subjects and marginalizes others. It is coercive (but frequently disguises this fact with a benign and smiling face, on the order of Foucaultian governmentality). So to analyze secularism we need also to analyze power.
3. “The Religious” is not the opposite of “The Secular.” Rather, secularism *produces* the distinction between the religious and the secular, and then naturalizes it. This is one of the ways in which secularism manages to tilt the playing field to its own advantage. Religion appears as marked, set against the neutral or unmarked background of the secular.
4. Secularism is a product of a particular historical process in the West. It does not travel very well, and it is unlikely that it can be plunked down somewhere else. (Indeed it may be ethically questionable to even try.)

Most of what I say in this paper will take these premises for granted. It should however be noted that all four of these premises, at least as I have described them here, are themselves critiques of secularism. At a minimum they are offered in order to make secularism visible as an object of study. Call this “1” on a scale of 1 to 10. At the maximum they are offered as an indictment of secularism as an entity that systematically marginalizes and distorts those who are already modernization’s losers. Call this “10.” I would put myself somewhere around 4 or 5. I agree for example that it is important to historicize and to provincialize secularism, important for intellectuals to reflect critically on their own secular presuppositions, and important to resist reifying “religion.” But I

also think it is worth pointing out that if we give a strong reading to these four premises, then the command to historicize, provincialize, reflect, and resist is a very difficult one to carry out, since taken at their strongest the premises paint a picture of secularism lurking everywhere and doing everything. There is nothing outside it, no way to get a handle on it. There is no way to be reflexive about it, because it makes us who we are. One might want to ask, therefore, what authorizes the current critique of secularism, and where its own modes of agency lie.

## **2. Enchantment and Reflexivity, a first pass (Habermas)**

Enchantment and reflexivity seem to be opposites. If we are enchanted, we are unthinkingly or unconsciously drawn to something or someone; we can't help it, and we aren't even aware of not being able to help it; in enchantment, we "lose" ourselves. If we are reflexive, on the other hand, we are always aware of ourselves; we are conscious of taking up a position with regard to someone or something; the whole point of reflexivity is that we don't lose ourselves. One might think that religious people are enchanted, and secular people are reflexive.

Alternatively, one might think that religious people *used* to be enchanted, but now, under the pressures of modernity, find themselves in a reflexive relation to their own faith. This seems to be what Jurgen Habermas is after in a recent article that wrestles with the continuing presence of religion in the modern west. Habermas suggests that there has been a "change in religious consciousness" since the advent of modernity, driven by pluralism, modern science and the spread of "profane morality." These developments place significant cognitive burdens on religious adherents. They must "develop an epistemic attitude toward other religions and world views that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own religion." They must "develop an epistemic stance toward the independence of secular from sacred knowledge and the institutionalized monopoly of modern scientific experts." Finally, they must "develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons enjoy in the political arena."<sup>2</sup>

We can note very quickly two features of this account. First, Habermas casts the matter exclusively as one of epistemology; second, he tends to treat "religious citizens" as a single entity. These two features of his account are related insofar as Habermas understands religious adherence as a matter of being convinced that certain beliefs are worth holding even within the context of modernity. This in turn suggests that Habermas presupposes much that puts him at odds with the current consensus regarding secularism captured in points 1-4 above.

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<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:1 (1-25); 13, 14.

Within the context of the analyses and critiques of secularism made in recent years by Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, William Connolly, John Milbank, and others, it is perhaps too easy to dismiss Habermas's formulation. It is worth remembering, perhaps, how much Habermas thinks he is giving up here.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the fact that Habermas thinks of his attention to the cognitive burdens faced by religious persons as a major concession tells us something about how seemingly incommensurate are the various philosophical positions within the secularism debate. That incommensurability is rooted in disagreements that are by this time awfully familiar to those who work in and around the humanities. For shorthand, we could sum them up as the Foucault-Habermas debate.

It would be a shame if the secularism debate were to be held hostage to this debate and its various permutations, which are unlikely to be resolved any time soon and which have in any case been losing steam in recent years. So I want to try to avoid these treacherous waters by asking a different question, which is this: how does Habermas's interest in religious reflexivity lead him to conceptualize religious subjectivity?

Consider this statement: "Every [religious] citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations. But all that is required here is the epistemic ability to consider one's own faith reflexively from the outside and to relate it to secular views" (9-10). I wish to focus on that last sentence: "all that is required is the epistemic ability to consider one's own faith reflexively..." and even more specifically on that word "all."

At first blush the kind of minimalist optimism on display here appears woefully inadequate. It seems to miss the emotional burdens entailed in asking someone to be reflexive about their faith. But at this point Habermas can appeal to history. "It's not that I'm asking them to suddenly become reflexive," he might say. "I'm simply pointing out that they already are, whether they like it or not. You just can't live in the modern world and not be reflexive—even about the things you hold closest to your heart." Put this way, it's really an empirical rather than a normative question. I suspect Habermas would *not* want to put it this way, but I think he could have done so had he been willing to think of reflexivity as more than simply an epistemic matter. In this respect words like "all" and "consider," with their aura of detached philosophical contemplation, represent a missed opportunity precisely because they block access to what reflexivity feels like in the first person.

Could we even have a first-person account of reflexivity, however? Doesn't the concept, by its very nature, imply a third-person perspective? Or, to return to the original terms of my own discussion here, wouldn't it require a reflexive consideration of enchantment? If this is right, then the question that I am imagining Habermas might have asked, namely "what does reflexivity feel like from the inside?" cannot be other than a secular question. But it is not secular because it treats religion exclusively as a matter of belief, nor

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<sup>3</sup> A point made by Craig Calhoun during a recent discussion of this essay at the "Varieties of Secularism" colloquium sponsored by the SSRC, May 12, 2007, New York, NY.

because it presupposes liberal democracy and the nation state. Rather, it is secular because it demands—if you will permit an unlovely phrase—a reflexive grasp of reflexivity itself.

This is a first pass at sketching the conceptual conundrums that tend to trail behind invocations of reflexivity. In the rest of this paper I will develop these conundrums in two related directions: first through Charles Taylor's recent meditations on reflexivity and enchantment that do try to give a first person account; and second, through what I regard as the historically most sophisticated attempt to deal with the conundrums of reflexivity—namely the writings of those German and British writers of the early nineteenth century generally referred to as “Romantics.”

### **3. Reflexivity and Enchantment, a second pass (Taylor)**

Reflexivity and enchantment are two of the key concepts in Charles Taylor's forthcoming book *A Secular Age*. Like Habermas, though much more fulsomely, Taylor seems to think that reflexivity is an historical inevitability. But unlike Habermas, he tries to make his reader intimate with that process, to bring her along on a 500 year-journey, to give her a feel of what reflexivity feels like on the inside.

In *A Secular Age* Taylor distinguishes among three different meanings of secularity. The first is the secularization of public spaces, which have been emptied of God. This can be put in terms of the familiar distinctions between church and state; it can also be described in terms of differentiation. The second meaning is the falling off of belief and practice—what we often mean when we refer to the “decline of religion.” And the third meaning—and Taylor's chief focus—is a change in the conditions of belief. “The change I want to define and trace,” he writes, “is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (1.2). Taylor's argument is that there has been a shift in what it means to believe. All the background conditions have shifted, so that to identify as a believer in 1500 is fundamentally different from what it means to identify as a believer in 2000.<sup>4</sup> Most of this very long book is dedicated to tracing this shift, which of course extends into almost every facet of modernity.

There is no way to summarize all the facets of Taylor's argument. Here I shall focus on one important aspect, namely the narrative of disenchantment. Taylor begins by considering the obstacles to unbelief, those things that have to be overcome in order for an exclusive humanism to become thinkable. He offers three such obstacles: a meaningful hierarchical cosmos; a social order, grounded in that cosmos, in which the demands of perfection and self-transcendence are held in complimentary tension with the

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor puts a lot of weight on the category of “belief” here. I would want to lighten that burden somewhat, perhaps by saying that the conditions for identifying oneself as “religious” have changed.

demands of ordinary life; and an enchanted universe, in which human beings live in a field of spirits, demons, and moral forces (1.3, 1.6). A good part of the book is taken up with narrating how these “bulwarks of belief” eventually gave way (the negative pole), and with discussing what replaced them (the positive pole). Thus the meaningful cosmos was eventually replaced by a neutral universe, the old social order replaced by the public/private distinction and the empty time of modernity, and the enchanted world replaced by what Taylor calls the “buffered self.”

What is the buffered self? Before, in the enchanted world, human beings thought of themselves as “open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers” (1.3). There was a continuity between the mundane world and that spirit world; the two impinged on each other, intersected in numerous ways. And thus, in that world, you couldn’t just rely on yourself, your own thoughts or powers, to keep darkness and evil at bay. You depended on, you *needed*, to line yourself up with a higher power—not the Christian God, necessarily, but some power capable to securing you. But now, in the disenchanted world, we don’t think in such terms. We draw the boundaries between ourselves and everything else in a much different way. Thus the disenchanted world is

a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans; and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, etc. are situated ‘inside’ them. This space within is constituted by the possibility of introspective self-awareness. This doesn’t mean that everything within is capable of being brought to this awareness. The possibility remains that some things ‘in the mind’ are so deep, and perhaps hidden (repressed), that we can never bring them to consciousness. But these [still] belong to this inner space....The ‘inward’ in this sense is constituted by what I have called ‘radical reflexivity’.

All of us—religious and irreligious alike—live in the disenchanted world, live with the buffered self. Taylor apparently agrees with other current analysts of secularism that there is no getting outside of it. But for him this does not make secularism an ominous presence; rather, it is a condition of everything else, like gravity.

Given such reflexivity, what are the prospects for enchantment? In the world of the buffered self, what would enchantment look like? From the third person perspective, enchantment in a secular age cannot mean a return to the old, enchanted world, in which spiritual forces impinge directly upon us. An enchanted self today is still a buffered self, which means it is still reflexive, which means that it must work its own partiality into its enchantment, which means that “enchantment” will have to be recast. Thus far, Taylor seems to agree with Habermas.

But because Taylor gets to this point by way of a lengthy and rich historical narrative, rather than simply referring in passing, as does Habermas, to what “sociologists have described [as] ‘modernization of religious consciousness’” (13), his evocation of the changes in background conditions that have brought about modern reflexivity lends itself to what he calls a “phenomenology of the secular”—an attempt, that is, to describe what

it feels like, in the first person, to live in a secular age. This is an important effort, and to my knowledge it is unique in the current literature on secularism. When Habermas says that “all that is required is the ability to consider one’s own faith reflexivity,” Taylor’s entire book could be viewed as an attempt to understand what that “all” means.

But an interesting tension emerges here between Taylor’s analytic, or third person, approach, and his phenomenological, or first person, approach. From the third person perspective, the shifts in background conditions that Taylor describes apply equally to those who identify as members of a religious tradition and those who do not. But when it comes to the first person perspective, Taylor’s emphasis falls more heavily upon those who wish to identify as members of a religious tradition. Believers, in his account, seem to bear heavier cognitive burdens than non-believers, because they must live with the knowledge that the universalizing discourse to which they have committed themselves is not, in fact, universal. In other words, the phenomenology in which Taylor is interested is the phenomenology of a religious person in a secular age—the person who must live with knowledge that his or her faith is an option. Reflexivity is the general condition of modernity, but, again, such reflexivity seems to be felt in a particularly acute way if you are a religious person. And because that reflexivity is felt more acutely, so too is enchantment, its counterpoint, felt more intensely. Modern religiosity, for Taylor, seems to equal an intensification of reflexivity *and* enchantment.

Habermas worries that secular liberalism imposes an asymmetrical burden on religious citizens. Taylor seems to agree that the burden is asymmetrical, but his book reads as an extended and very subtle *celebration* of this fact. I don’t think this is intentional; that is, I don’t think Taylor *intended* to imply that religious people actually experience the secular age more intensely and hence more completely—but I think he does imply this, and moreover that he is driven to this implication by his interest in the first person or phenomenological perspective.

#### **4. Enchantment and Reflexivity, a third pass (Bilgrami and romanticism)**

I want to turn now to an analysis that wields enchantment as a tool of critique. Akeel Bilgrami’s recent essay “Occidentalism, the Very Idea” investigates the possibility that stereotypes of the West, distorting as they might be, nonetheless create a space for critical engagement.<sup>5</sup> Bilgrami is clear that his project involves identifying an expanded definition of Occidentalism that would include also a persistent response to western-style modernity originating from *within* the west itself. As Bilgrami wants to define it, then, Occidentalism is not only an aspect of modern Islamic fundamentalism but is to be found in Gandhi, in Nietzsche, in aspects of German romanticism and eighteenth-century English deism. The engine driving this claim, is Bilgrami’s defense of “enchantment” as an epistemically-legitimate counterpoint to narrow constructions of scientific rationality.

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<sup>5</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, “Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006) 381-411.

If the Left could find a non-condescending way to talk about enchantment, he argues, then it could rescue talk of cultural difference from both the neo-conservative rhetoric of the “clash of civilizations” (which hypostatizes such terms as “culture” and “civilization”) and from left-liberal reductions of culture into underlying economic and political forces (which misses the phenomenological or first-person nature of cultural experience). According to this latter analysis, to speak of cultural differences misses what is really going on, where “what is really going on” can be revealed through the act of translating culture into its “proper” geopolitical cause. Bilgrami detects this attitude in the “tendency ... on the part of much of the traditional Left to dismiss the cultural surround of political issues” in favor of an analysis of geopolitics, globalization, or capitalism (388). He has his doubts about such acts of translation. Bilgrami has written intelligently about secularism before, most notably as a contributor to the landmark collection *Secularism and its Critics*.<sup>6</sup> He is worth listening to.

In order to use and acknowledge “culture talk” without resorting to sweeping Huntington-style categories, Bilgrami turns to modes of dissent and ambivalence *within* enlightened modernity. The “Enlightenment,” as many have pointed out, was not a monolithic entity; rather, it experienced its own forms of internal critique almost from its inception. Bilgrami’s own example is the development toward the end of the seventeenth century of a resistance to “scientific rationality:”

The metaphysical picture that was promoted by Newton ... and Boyle, among others, viewed matter and nature as *brute and inert*. On this view, since the material universe was brute, God was *externally* conceived as the familiar metaphoric clock winder, giving the universe a push from the *outside* to get it in motion. In the dissenting tradition ... matter was *not* brute and inert but rather was shot through with an *inner* source of dynamism that was itself divine. God and nature were not separable as in the official metaphysical picture that was growing around the new science, and John Toland, for instance ... openly wrote in terms he proclaimed to be pantheistic. (396; emphasis on original)

Bilgrami rightly emphasizes that the deist dissenters were every bit as *scientific* as Newton and Boyle. They opposed not science itself “but a development in *outlook* that emerged in the *philosophical surround* of the scientific achievements” (396; emphasis in original). In other words, deism was a critique not of science but of “scientific culture.”

Bilgrami’s point is that the critique of western enlightened modernity sometimes described today as “Islamic” or “fundamentalist” picks up on this thread of self-critique within the enlightenment itself. Isolation, alienation, the ravages of a largely unregulated market, the transformation or outright destruction of indigenous and local forms of solidarity – this is the disenchanted world that Toland and others anticipated, and whose effects they tried preemptively to blunt. And this critique of modernity is not confined to the contemporary non-Western world. Referring to the 2004 U.S. presidential race and

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<sup>6</sup> See Akeel Bilgrami, “Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity,” in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 380-417.

the phenomenon of so called “values voters,” Bilgrami notes that “in the local habitus of the West itself ordinary people have to *live in and cope with* the disenchantment of their world, seeking whatever forms of reenchantment are available to them” (407; emphasis in original).

The conceptual point is that geopolitical analyses alone cannot account for those phenomena variously labeled in the mainstream media as “values.” Ideology-critique or analyses of false consciousness will not suffice here. In order to do their work, such critical languages need to hold their objects steady. But the fact is that things are always moving, that cultures and historical moments differ internally from themselves and are continually spinning off counter-discourses and producing renegades. This is a “multiple modernities” thesis: the fight is not between rationality and irrationality, between modernity and tradition, but rather between different accounts of what counts as reason, and what counts as modern. Bilgrami’s second point, though, is that there are still winners and losers. Thus seventeenth-century deists, Islamic fundamentalists, and opponents of evolution in Kansas are all responding, in culturally various ways, to a particular construction of what it means to be modern that has systematically marginalized their ways of being in the world.

I want to honor the attempt—no small one—to describe “enchantment” in analytically precise language. I also want to claim that this attempt is a romantic one. I think we can get at its romanticism by returning for a moment to the example of deism and the scientific revolution. The discussion is important for Bilgrami because it allows him to contrast the orthodox model of the scientific revolution with the more epistemically generous and thickly contextualized dissent of the deists. I think this account oversimplifies both in reading Newton and Boyle as brute materialists (and thus underplaying their extensive theological ruminations) and in reading Toland and the Deists as pantheists (and thus underplaying their often strident anti-clericalism). If this were a discussion of deism and science we would need a very nuanced account of the many, many inter-relations and surprising connections between science, natural theology, nature, and the church during the period from 1680 to 1720.

But this would be the subject of another paper; Bilgrami is hunting different game. And the point I wish to make is the congruence of Bilgrami’s account of scientific rationality with that of romanticism. On at least one traditional understanding, at any rate, romanticism is but a short step away from a freethinking deism pitched toward pantheism. Thus from Bilgrami’s description of “[a] desacralized world” that “could not move us to engagement with it on *its* terms” (398) we might move to Blake’s statement in “There is no Natural Religion” that “He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only,” and then on to Coleridge’s claim in the *Biographia Literaria* that “all the products of the mere reflective faculty partook of death, and were as the rattling twigs and sprays in winter” and then finally to M. H. Abrams, whose seminal 1965 essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” sums up this romantic attitude as follows:

To the Romantic sensibility such a [dualist] universe could not be endured, and the central enterprise common to many post-Kantian German philosophers and poets, as well as to Coleridge and Wordsworth, was to join together the 'subject' and 'object' that modern intellection had put asunder, and thus to revivify a dead nature, restore its concreteness, significance, and human values, and re-domiciliate man in a world which had become alien to him. The pervasive sense of estrangement, of a lost and isolated existence in an alien world, is not peculiar to our own age of anxiety, but was a commonplace of Romantic philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

This story of romanticism's relevance to modern alienation depends, of course, upon a series of simplifications, which could be discussed at length. My goal here is simply to draw attention to the way that this particular story of romanticism extends Bilgrami's story of enchantment as the Enlightenment's own internal critique. Taken together, the story stretches from the dawn of the scientific age to the alienation of red-state values voters, and it tells of a reaction to enlightened modernity that, while not the exclusive property of romanticism, has been given a powerful and influential inflection by romantic writers and their twentieth-century interpreters. I would guess, in fact, that the very romanticism of this story is what accounts for its appeal.

Abrams's romanticism, of course, is itself the product of a particular historical moment, dominated by left-liberal agnostic humanists whose intellectually formative years were the 1950s and 1960s, when anomie, alienation, and the Cold War seemed greater threats to human values than did religious fundamentalism. Ecumenicism was the spirit of the age: the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948, the reforms of Vatican II (1962-1965), the development of mythological criticism, the growth of religious studies, and the widespread agreement among sociologists and some theologians that if God was not dead, he was at any rate in retreat. Bilgrami's account, too, is secular in the way that Abrams's account is secular: not because it is anti-religious (far from it) but because of the particular *kinds* of spiritual subjectivities it authorizes. At its center is a certain ethos of spiritual generosity, able to grant legitimacy to a variety of culturally embedded orientations because it is not existentially committed to any of them but can as it were see why someone *might* be existentially committed to them.

That last sentence suggests how much Bilgrami's account owes to reflexivity in order to make its argument about enchantment. Importantly, however, this remains largely unremarked in his actual text. Indeed Bilgrami's account is in this way the inverse of Taylor's. If Taylor underplays the dynamics of enchantment in order to focus on

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<sup>7</sup> William Blake, "There is No Natural Religion," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 3; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson, rev. ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 232; M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984) 96.

reflexivity, Bilgrami underplays the dynamics of reflexivity in order to focus on enchantment.

## 5. Enchantment and Reflexivity, a fourth pass (Byron)

Under the influence of historicist criticism, romanticism's theoretical and philosophical investments have been understudied during the last decade or two. But the tide seems to be turning a bit: romanticism's philosophical engagements have been recently explored by Thomas Pfau (*Romantic Moods*) and Simon Jarvis (*Wordsworth's Philosophic Song*). And romanticism's exploration of reflexivity has been defended in recent books by Leon Chai (*Romantic Theory*) and Paul Hamilton (*Metaromanticism*). Although diverse in their aims and methods, all of these books begin with the thought that (some) romantic writing exceeds in complexity and sophistication the theoretical articulations into which it is sometimes translated. In turning to Byron's poem *The Giaour*, therefore, I want to propose that it models the experience of reflexivity in ways that are in fact more adequate to the work that Taylor wants reflexivity to do than Taylor's own text is able to be. And I also want to propose that the poem models the experience of enchantment in ways more adequate to the work that Bilgrami wants enchantment to do than Bilgrami's own text is able to do. In brief, I propose that literature does these things better than theory does. In this respect I am interested in what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy identified many years ago as the "Romantic Absolute"—that is, the endeavor by the Jena Romantics (Friedrich and A. W. Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Novalis) to carry on philosophy's in another idiom, that of *poesis*, after philosophy itself had run stuck in the immediate aftermath of Kant.<sup>8</sup>

One could do worse than read *The Giaour* (1813) as an allegory of pluralism, in which truth is determined by context and presupposition, and whose larger textual apparatus strives to bring rational order to a world of competing loyalties and dispositions. The first part of the poem, set in a homogenized eastern location, presents several different voices describing what the reader eventually understands to be the murder of a slave woman named Leila for running away from her master to join her lover. The master, Hassan, has her tied up in a bag and thrown overboard. Leila's lover, the Giaour, avenges her murder by killing Hassan. The second half of the poem is the Giaour's lengthy and unrepentant confession to a nameless monk in a Christian monastery, once again in an indeterminate location. The Giaour himself is a stateless and nameless man who operates on the borderlands of cultures, traditions, and beliefs. The poem named after him, meanwhile, is a collection of fragments apparently arranged by an editor, in which different and anonymous voices take up small bits of the story before themselves disappearing from it. The same fictive editor also provides footnotes to the fragments, and these footnotes vary in tone from scholarly and pedantic to wittily informative to a few in the first person that conflate the editor with Byron himself. Taken together, these

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (SUNY Press, 1988) orig. pub. 1978.

various elements place a tremendous burden upon the reader: it is difficult enough to figure out the plot, let alone who speaks, whom to trust, and whom, in the end, to believe.

Against this world of interpretive complexity and incomplete attempts to organize it through textual apparatus, the poem sets two examples of orthodoxy. The first is Hassan himself; the second is the monk to whom the Giaour confesses. Both fulfill the stereotypes of (Islamic and Christian) religious orthodoxy. And neither is of much interest to the editor, who goes so far as to excise a harangue that the monk delivers to the Giaour, telling us in a footnote that it will interest nobody:

The monk's sermon is omitted. It seems to have had so little effect upon the patient, that it could have no hopes from the reader. It may be sufficient to say, that it was of the customary length ... and was delivered in the usual tone of all orthodox preachers.<sup>9</sup> (204)

The poem, then, does not derive its energy from a clash of civilizations; indeed, Christian orthodoxy never meets Islamic orthodoxy, and in any case both are so emptied of content as to become literal invitations for readers to fill in the blanks for themselves. Instead, the poem concentrates on the complex space between orthodoxies, in which a curious kind of understanding seems to be possible. When he's making his confession, the Giaour remarks that he and Hassan are not so very different:

Yet did he but what I had done  
Had she been false to more than one.  
Faithless to him, he gave the blow;  
But true to me, I laid him low:  
Howe'er deserved her doom might be,  
Her treachery was truth to me (1062-67)

The Giaour says, in effect, that he would have killed her too. He is able to imagine himself in Hassan's place, and from that perspective approves of what he's done; he also imagines importing Hassan's perspective into his own, taking it as a guide for his own future actions. The Giaour's code and Hassan's code do not reduce to the same thing, and yet, these lines suggest, Hassan's code of conduct can be re-written in the Giaour's language.

This may be simply a fantasy of liberal tolerance, but if so its act of transposition depends upon the rather alarming idea that Leila's fidelity to her lover meant that she deserved to die. The translation is not symmetrical: Hassan kills Leila because she is his property, but the Giaour would kill for love (that is, he would kill Leila *because* he loves her). This difference is crucial to the poem's project; by distinguishing between unfreedom and freedom it keeps Hassan's code and the Giaour's code from collapsing into each other.

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<sup>9</sup> All quotes from *The Giaour* are from *Lord Byron: Selected Poems*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning (London: Penguin, 1996).

Hassan murders Leila from within his tradition; as the poem's "Advertisement" tells us, she was "thrown, in the Mussulman manner, into the sea for infidelity" (167). The Giaour, by contrast, imagines murdering Leila in the name of a love described as unique and personal and thus deliberately counterposed to all traditions. To murder in the name of love is to murder freely; as Gulnare tells Conrad in *The Corsair* (another of Byron's Turkish Tales), "love dwells with—with the free" (II.502). Love, or more specifically the death inevitably attached to it, is thus linked to a freedom that orthodox tyrants like Hassan cannot understand, and for which the poem's code-word is "heart:"

To me she gave her heart, that all  
Which tyranny can ne'er enthrall (1068-9).

As the Giaour's sympathy for Hassan suggests, the heart can understand orthodox tyranny. But orthodox tyranny can never understand the heart. When Leila chooses to follow her heart rather than the dictates of her culture, she crosses from the realm of orthodox unfreedom into an ambiguous space defined by its *distinction* from culture and tradition. Such movement, the poem implies, is deadly.

One result of this contrast between love and orthodoxy is that love itself comes to seem like a substitute religion. This is only incidentally because the Giaour uses religious language to describe his love; primarily, love looks like religion in this poem because it is not a feeling at all but an enacted discipline. The Giaour spends the remainder of his days in mourning for Leila, dedicated to her idea to the exclusion of all else, experiencing visions of her, and unable even to hear alternative creeds such as the orthodox sermon excised by the editor. The Giaour's goal, he tells the monk, is "To die—and know no second love" (1166). And he scorns inconstant men and what he calls their "varied joys" (1175). Such constancy is predicated upon the utter hopelessness of his love. Because Leila deserves to die according to a tradition that neither she nor her lover can alter, there is nothing for the Giaour to do but mourn her as the lost object whose very irrecoverability is the condition of his constancy toward her.

Is the heart, then, in opposition to orthodoxy, or is it simply another kind of orthodoxy? More abstractly: is human love the opposite of religion or another version of it? Does the poem take love seriously, and treat religion as its foil? Or does it take religion seriously, finding in human love another image of it? The Giaour himself says both things. Or rather, he *says* that love is the opposite of orthodox tyranny, but the poem forces him to experience love as simply another and more complex kind of orthodox tyranny: the tyranny of that very tradition which he claims cannot "enthrall" the heart but which in killing Leila has bound him more firmly to it than it ever could have were she alive. At the level of plot, moreover, love and orthodoxy *must* be mutually exclusive—for if they weren't, Leila wouldn't have left Hassan, and so there would *be* no plot. Two paradoxes, then: the Giaour's liberal ability to understand religious orthodoxy depends upon orthodoxy's power to kill those who would leave it—depends upon, that is, its illiberalism; and the poem's own motivating distinction between love and religion is likewise a paradox, for if the poem is to proceed that distinction must both exist (at the

level of plot) and not exist (at the level of the Giaour's subsequent experience) at the same time.

In naming this complexity, I use the word "paradox" deliberately, for I mean it to recall a central moment in the history of literary study. In his essay "The Language of Paradox" Cleanth Brooks undertakes a reading of Donne's poem "The Canonization," in which the paradox is precisely the one that appears in Byron's poem. Here is Brooks (at some length):

The basic metaphor which underlies the poem (and which is reflected in the title) involves a sort of paradox. For the poet daringly treats profane love as if it were divine love. .... The poem then is a parody of Christian sainthood; but it is an intensely serious parody of a sort that modern man, habituated as he is to an easy yes or no, can hardly understand. He refuses to accept the paradox as a serious rhetorical device; and since he is able to accept it only as a cheap trick, he is forced into this dilemma. Either: Donne does not take love seriously; here he is merely sharpening his wit .... Or: Donne does not take sainthood seriously; here he is merely indulging in a cynical and bawdy parody.

Neither account is true; a reading of the poem will show that Donne takes both love and religion seriously; it will show, further, that the paradox is here his inevitable instrument. But to see this plainly will require a closer reading than most of us give to poetry.<sup>10</sup>

If the Giaour's philosophy of love is a paradox, then, so is he himself a paradox—a possibility hinted at in his name itself: just as paradox literally "stands beside" the doxa, so the non-Muslim "stands beside" the Muslim. More precisely, the Giaour is a figure for the very paradox that structures the poem's presentation of the conflict between love and religion. Here we can appeal to John Guillory's discussion of the New Criticism in *Cultural Capital*, which nicely sketches the theological resonances of Brooks's formulation of paradox. Paradox, Guillory points out, gestures *toward* doxa rather than naming or promulgating a particular orthodoxy. "Paradox names the very condition by which the poem does not *name* the truth to which it nevertheless gestures," he writes (159). In a manner to which we shall return later in this essay, paradox thus becomes a technique for skirting irreconcilable religious differences and the clash of civilizations upon which competing versions of orthodoxy are predicated. Positioned between civilizations (the competing worlds of Christian and Islamic orthodoxy), the Giaour is the site of a "nameless spell, / Which speaks, itself unspeakable" (838-39), the very figure of what he cannot say. His unspeakable spell offers up the possibility of a reading practice whose very elusiveness and indirection avoids simply replaying a clash of civilizations.

The name for that reading practice is of course largely coterminous with the New Criticism itself: close reading. Glance again at Brooks's final sentence: "But to see

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<sup>10</sup> Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (San Diego: Harvest, 1947; 1970) 11.

[paradox] plainly will require a closer reading than most of us give to poetry.” The close reading of which “most of us” are incapable is a reading that begins by recognizing the highly nuanced way in which literary language gestures toward doxa rather than naming it. In this way, close reading displaces religious dispute, with its always-lurking potential for violence, into the interpretive arena. Where there was once the distinction between the orthodox and the heretical, there is now the distinction between those few who can read and the majority who cannot. Although New Critical close reading has sometimes been labeled crypto-religious, then, it is important to understand that in replacing orthodoxy with paradox, close reading is functionally congruent with a secular project that seeks to restrain religious violence by making it the proper domain of hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup>

For Brooks, reading for orthodoxy reduces a poem to doctrine: it simply extracts truths from a poem, paraphrasing it rather than attending to the movements of its language. Under the new, non-dogmatic dispensation of paradox, paraphrase becomes a deviation, literally a heresy from secular reading practices. (Readers will recall that *The Well-Wrought Urn*, which opens with a celebration of paradox, closes with an essay entitled “The Heresy of Paraphrase.”) The heresy here is a heresy against literary language; to resist that heresy means constantly rescuing literature from the ravages of naïve readers who still want it to fight their cultural battles for them, who wish to flatten paradox into paraphrasable doctrine and thus re-ignite a clash of civilizations. The reader must be continually re-educated in the new method, a method not content to rest on the surface, or with an easy paraphrase, but that constantly searches out that which is hidden—not in order finally to say it, but rather to show how the text as it were doesn’t say it, for the “it” here is precisely doxa itself, that which by definition goes without saying. Translated from the political to the literary arena, the clash of civilizations is thus remade into literary paradox. The final withholding of the “it” is what makes literature *literature* and not orthodoxy.

In his typical Byronic mysteriousness, then, the Giaour invites us into the experience of secular reading, reading that blunts and deflects conflict through the invention and preservation of depth. But there is one moment in the poem when the hero, instead of being read, actually tries to do the reading. It comes after he has vanquished his fundamentalist opponent. As Hassan lies dying on the battlefield, the Giaour leans over him:

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<sup>11</sup> For a contemporary example of this process, see Saba Mahmood’s discussion of a U.S. government program called Muslim World Outreach, which seeks to identify and support moderate, pro-democratic Islamic reformers. Mahmood writes: “The core problem from the perspective of U.S. analysts is not militancy itself but interpretation, inasmuch as the interpretive act is regarded as the foundation of any religious subjectivity and therefore the key to its emancipation or secularization.” Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006) 323-327; 329.

I gazed upon him where he lay,  
And watched his spirit ebb away;  
Though pierced like Pard by hunters' steel,  
He felt not half that now I feel.  
I search'd, but vainly searched to find,  
The workings of a wounded mind;  
Each feature of that sullen corse  
Betrayed his rage, but no remorse. (1085-92)

Like the Giaour's earlier discussion of why Leila in effect deserved to die, this encounter demonstrates both an extraordinary intimacy between the two men and a careful delineation of difference. In the former instance, the difference was that Hassan killed Leila for tradition's sake, whereas the Giaour imagines killing her for love's sake. In this instance, as the two men stare into each other's faces, the difference is that the Giaour's face hides a "wounded mind," while Hassan's hides no such complicated interiority. In looking at Hassan the Giaour is apparently looking for another version of himself, which is to say, he is looking for one who acknowledges life's tragedy but is also able take up a meta-position in relationship to that tragedy—to acknowledge that what looks like tragedy to some might be comedy to others. Instead he finds only rage. Thus can he conclude that Hassan "felt not half that I now feel"; absent evidence of a wounded mind, Hassan becomes simply an example of mindless fundamentalist anger. And that anger, powerful and all-defining as it may be, is denied equal epistemic status with the Giaour's self-aware woundedness. Hassan's face is not an interesting text; it is too easy to read.

The difference between the Giaour and Hassan, couched in the language of a "wounded mind," may thus be understood to be *reflexivity* itself. And so, even though one of the text's consistently surprising points is that the two men are remarkably similar in their aims and in their behavior, it also distinguishes them by insisting that in reality we are witnessing a face-off between modernity and tradition—or perhaps more accurately, we are witnessing tradition's rage *at* modernity, with all its talk of complexity, its complicated and self-aware position-taking in relationship to its own beliefs.

But—to add another twist—what the poem also documents is how the Giaour subsequently slips into his own kind of enchanted fundamentalism through his single-minded and fanatical devotion to the dead Leila. Earlier I described this as a paradox in Brooks's sense of the term: for this poem to work it must be simultaneously true that love and religion are mutually exclusive models of fidelity *and* that love and religion model precisely the same kind of fidelity. We can now identify the moment when the Giaour reads Hassan's face as the hinge of this paradox, the point at which the Giaour begins his gradual transformation from reflexivity into enchantment. Crucially, however, even as he slides into fanaticism he retains his wounded mind, and this makes him, as the poem obsessively demonstrates, a text worth reading precisely because it never gives up all its secrets. That, indeed, is the appeal of the Byronic hero: that he promises more than he will ever deliver, which makes him an endlessly fascinating, because ultimately unsatisfying, object of study. Such indeterminacy, in turn, pushes the poem's motivating

paradox to the breaking point. For if we track the Giaour's development from the figure who searches Hassan's face to the figure whose face is searched by the curious monks, we see that his single-minded devotion to Leila is an effect of the very woundedness, the reflexivity, that he celebrates. This is a more precise analysis than the relatively familiar conundrums of relativism (namely that it is incoherent) and reflexivity (namely that it cannot be reflexive about itself). The point is that to take reflexivity as a ground-level commitment is to make certain anthropological assumptions about which one cannot reflect critically. This occlusion at the very heart of things that is engine that produces the unanalyzable, unspeakable, enchanted thing called "Byronism" itself.

Yet even though the Giaour himself is necessarily oblivious to this effect, the poem's fictive editor seems to grasp it. Thus while the editor is unable to keep his hero from coming under the spell of his own Byronism, he nevertheless arranges the raw materials of the story in such a way that the reader can observe how intimately the reflexivity at the heart of Byronism is bound up with (self-) enchantment. This editorial apparatus is crucial: unlike a theoretical text or a lyric poem, with their single authoritative voices, *The Giaour* offers multiple unreliable voices, and in so doing it places the reader in a meta-position considerably more reflexive than anything the Giaour himself manages. If we take the Giaour's wounded mind as a figure for the reflexivity of the modern critic who searches the face of fundamentalism for a shared Occidentalism, *The Giaour* itself frames that act within the context of a literary object. In so doing, it shows us that there is no shared Occidentalism here. Hassan's rage cannot be rewritten as another version of the Giaour's woundedness. But because the reader is allowed to watch this encounter, and watch too the Giaour's own slide into fanaticism, true reflexivity comes to reside at the level of an ideal reader, whom the text constructs as capable, in principle, of holding together these shifting terms, in all their coimbrication, hostility, and misunderstanding. In its various encounters, then, *The Giaour* both proposes a Romantic Occidentalism and also frames and distances Romantic Occidentalism through the auspices of the literary object itself. In principle, the poem allows its ideal reader to see that both woundedness and rage are traumatized reactions to modernity, but it also blocks the temptation to see those reactions as the same, or even as translatable. This is a singularly vexed place to be.

## 5. Conclusion

Historically, one could argue that there never was enchantment—not only because there was always a village atheist, but because even the faithful didn't live into their faith as unself-consciously as a word like "enchantment" implies. In order to be tempted in the first place Adam and Even must have known that there was a world outside Eden, as Stanely Cavell once noted. And if they knew that, then Eden wasn't really Eden. God's mind-bending question "Who told you that you were naked?" is accordingly a bringing to consciousness of a reflexivity that was always already there.

Conceptually, one could say that a notion like enchantment misses what is distinctive about the religious postures it is trying to describe. These people aren't enchanted: they're disciplined, orderly, engaged in various projects of self-care, self-overcoming,

and so on. One response to this would be that for there even to be a concept of “Self” to be worked on, at least some kind of disembedding or disenchantment must have already taken place, and so there must therefore be a prior form of enchantment. Can critical language reach back to such enchantment without changing it? Here is Marcel Gauchet: “hidden in the depths of time is another humanity whose secret has been lost, and needs to be rediscovered, one that found a way to be at one with itself in its accepted dependency and its passive relation with the world.”<sup>12</sup> How, one might wonder, can this secret be “rediscovered” without destroying or distorting it? This is a conversation that could go on forever, and I don’t in principle see a way to bring it to an end.

My impulse at moments like this is to look to literature—not to solve the problem, but rather to find there models of it and embodiments of possible solutions. Consider again *The Giaour*. My argument has been it models the interplay of reflexivity and enchantment more subtly than Habermas, than Taylor, and than Bilgrami. *The Giaour* doesn’t tell its readers what to think—but it does model a variety of ways to go about thinking, and indicates what their consequences might be.

Of course, as I admitted at the beginning of this paper, to appeal in this manner to literature, to its particular form of reflexivity, is itself a romantic thing to do.

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<sup>12</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, 1997) 7.