

15. Duvall points out that “Each section [of the novel] has an artist figure that either narrates or focalizes the reader’s perceptions”: Russ Hodges, Ismael Muñoz, Lenny Bruce, Klara Sax (52).

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### DETERMINED AGENCY: A POSTSECULAR PROPOSAL FOR RELIGION AND LITERATURE—AND SCIENCE

Everett Hamner

Like all creation myths, genetics...re-poses traditionally religious or philosophical questions of will and determinism in the language of science.  
—Priscilla Wald

Priscilla Wald’s decade-old observation about the increasing confluence of biological and religious questions may seem an odd way to begin my assigned task of assessing postsecular literature and criticism. Articles in *Religion and Literature* routinely demonstrate that the relationship between these fields is complex enough without introducing science. However, I begin with an appeal for bridge-building between all three disciplines, challenging though it may be, not to muddy the waters unnecessarily but because

of several strong convictions. First, literary studies needs to keep becoming more hospitable to textual interpretations that critically engage religious and theological concepts and contexts. If the last decade's growth in this direction is to continue, I argue that it will require confronting criticism's tendency to neglect not just religious but also scientific contexts. Second, the evolving relationship between the religious and the secular is just as fruitful a dialectic as those between black and white, male and female, and mass-culture and elite. In fact, scholars of literature and culture can actually engage race, class, and gender more effectively by resisting easy equations of religion with fundamentalism and science with militant atheism. Third, American popular culture's century-long, superficial warfare between science and religion (which some would like to see expand in Islamic nations and elsewhere) can only do further damage to science education and peace between religious traditions, but story and metaphor have unique capacities to defuse these battles by cultivating both cognitive estrangement and increased empathy. In short, literary and critical mediation can reveal far more compelling, productive tensions between the measurable and the immeasurable than can the endless arguments between religious and secular extremists.

Admittedly, everything I have said so far is based on assumptions about the words "religious," "secular," and "scientific." I began *in medias res*; but now for some terminological triage. First, as scholars like Tracy Fessenden and Michael Kaufmann have been demonstrating for several years, and as many members of this forum note, discussions of religion and literature quickly derail when they fail to see how their vocabularies revolve around uniquely American Protestant conceptions of the religious and the secular. This subcategory of Christianity—especially the brand that has dominated media and political landscapes over the last several decades—heavily shapes colloquial use of the term "religion." Not surprisingly, the born-again language of personal devotion also tends to shape what both adherents and skeptics interpret as the "secular." The paradigm is so dominant that we forget, for example, how opposing spiritual otherworldliness and physical materialism is the habit of a relatively local, recent Christianity, not something inherent to all Christianity or all religion. Similarly, we assume it is possible to simply reject this monolith, ignoring how the resulting secular performances never quite reach the blank-slated, wide-open ideologies they idealize, and most often constitute only variations on the theme of "not-Protestant."

Not coincidentally, similar mistakes are endemic to the rhetoric of "science," which is often silently equated with secularism. This is why I argue that literary criticism must reengage science alongside religion: because so

many, in the United States especially, unquestioningly regard the scientific and the secular as analogs in a battle against faith. Of course to do so fails to grasp that what counts as secular depends heavily on surrounding cultural and religious traditions, or that science is actually an attempt to maintain relative objectivity across those divides. Total objectivity is illusory, whether one studies scripture or speciation, but as it is practiced in rigorous, peer-reviewed contexts, science pursues a testable, falsifiable knowledge that can be measured across wide geographical and temporal gaps and still generate accurate predictions. This is radically distinct from the all-seeing, all-knowing god of science (or more accurately, scientism), that white-coated figure to which modern advertising appeals whether the product is a pharmaceutical, a self-help book, or an oil filter. I am not a scientist in real life, but I watch it on TV, and the more I learn about sexual selection, genetic drift, and serotonin receptors, the larger the gap feels between science's public image and its day-to-day reality. Indeed science and religion—whether quantum physics or Sunni Islam—share the curious problematic of standing for vastly different things depending on whether one consults expert investigators or popular opinion. The worst mistakes are easily corrected with widely-available evidence, but roughly half of Americans continue to assume that Genesis and evolution are incompatible. Whether the science or the theology has been mangled first matters less than whether we as scholar-teachers and public intellectuals can effectively confront the mistakes, rather than just siding one way or the other, or more often, avoiding the controversy altogether. Without such efforts, our students and cultures will likely continue to conflate science and the secular, and from there be more likely to essentialize and unthinkingly partition the religious and the secular.

Enter the “postsecular,” then. As Magdalena Mączyńska helpfully outlines elsewhere in this forum, theory's recent attention to religion often suggests the need for new vocabulary. A telling example is Bill Brown's *PMLA* exposé of “the religiosity of secular vision,” an article illuminating how the Enlightenment's gift of methodological naturalism mutates into a cancer of *metaphysical* naturalism (748). In other words, science's rational investigation of the material world becomes scientism's rationalized insistence that the material must be the *only* world, a slide that quickly makes the religious and the secular seem necessary enemies. Meanwhile, theory and criticism indicate widely-divergent understandings of secularism: for those like Brown, this relatively positive term indicates non-religion or at least not-necessarily-religion, a pluralistic realm in which religion is welcome so long as it plays well with others. For those Brown pillories, however, secularism means anti-religion, a world where anything remotely spiritual

must be eschewed with religious devotion. Here again science lurks below the surface: those who regard religion as inherently anti-scientific are also likely to view secularism as anti-religious. Given the term's divided usage, the question becomes whether it is better to repair an old wineskin or buy a new one. Postsecularism strikes me as a worthy but still embryonic attempt to do both at once.

My ambivalence reflects equal but opposite reactions: while I am convinced that literary criticism must reach beyond easy oppositions of the sacred and the profane and the natural and the unnatural, the term "post-secular" only helps if one has first understood secularism according to the definition Brown attacks: if not as an absolutist rejection of all religion, at least as a self-satisfied disdain. In this sense, of course postsecular criticism is attractive: it reaches beyond the warfare model, not by superseding religion or secularism, but by recognizing they never were the stark, monolithic opposites they once appeared. The problem, though, is that for many secularism already describes a state of tolerance (even if only of the passive, politically correct kind), making postsecularism sound like an attempt to tiptoe around the separation of church and state and reintroduce religion under a clever new guise. From this perspective, the relationship between the religious, the secular, and the postsecular seems akin to that between young-earth creationism, evolution, and intelligent design. Fellow forum participants Laura Levitt and David Harrington Watt, who assess postsecularism quite warily, are right to see such ideological shape-shifting doing more harm than good. We must not reaffirm the binary while pretending to eliminate it.

Still, why not understand the postsecular as a move beyond the former brand of absolutist secularism and toward a more self-reflective version of the latter, pluralistic sort? In this sense, postsecularism seems a useful descriptor of work that actively deconstructs the religious-secular binary. Scholars might build upon John McClure's proposal that postsecular fictions "produce new, weakened and hybridized, idioms of belief" without fearing an absolutist religion's readmission (4). To my mind, this would uncover an essential question: what exactly *is* the "weaken[ing]" McClure repeatedly describes? My answer, not surprisingly by now, is that this elephant in the room is science. Literary scholars' discomfort with that unruly beast is what makes me agree with John Caputo's insistence that "the 'postsecular' style should arise by way of a certain *iteration* of the Enlightenment, a continuation of the Enlightenment by another means, the production of a New Enlightenment, one that is enlightened about the limits of the old one" (60, emphasis in original). If the postsecular is what we need, Caputo urges that it must not merely replace a supposedly-expired secularism, but revise it in a manner that hearkens backward as well as forward. In other words,

if Caputo's mentor, Jacques Derrida, warned that we cannot continue to "oppose so naïvely Reason *and* Religion, Critique or Science *and* Religion, technoscientific Modernity *and* Religion" (65, emphasis in original), we also must guard against the illusion of complete supersession. We must interpret the religious and the secular in tension and according to local and particular cultural contexts, not in a vacuum.

With that aim in mind, this essay's epigraph offers one example of how postsecularism might be worth its definitional salt. Wald's description of genetics as an emerging cultural "creation myth" reaches past the obvious, tired opposition between religious soul and secular body toward a more dynamic relationship. Recognizing how the tension between agency and determinism has migrated from predominantly religious and philosophical terms to increasingly scientific ones, she makes what seems a quintessentially postsecular move by dismissing neither field, but instead inviting consideration of their unique capacities. She does not call science just another form of religion, nor its replacement, nor does she imply that everything is religion and therefore nothing. Instead, she plans to investigate how recent discussions of stem cell research, genetic testing, and enhancement technologies leave the religious and philosophical categories of body and soul resistant to previous means of disentanglement. Her essay does not proselytize or essentialize but opens a new discussion with major implications for epistemology, biology, and literature. Evading the assumption that faith means only verbal allegiance to a list of predefined dogmas, Wald's work points to the belief at work every time we make uncertain, risk-embracing decisions. Similarly, her writing evokes a human genome that is far more complex than reductive notions of a "gay gene" or a "God gene" suggest. The hyper-deterministic, binary logic of scientism—secularism in its militant, exclusive form—is as absent here as religious absolutism.

If this shows how postsecular theory might help, what about postsecular literature? In an earlier draft of this essay, I hesitated about this category, worrying that to label one group of texts "postsecular" might caricature earlier works as religious or secular. I remain cautious about that mistake because my teaching must combat it so regularly: my elective on the Bible, for instance, helps students realize that this ancient library is far from "religious," not in the overly pious way they understand the term. The Song of Songs is sexy, Amos rages about neglect of the poor, and Jonah relies heavily on comedy and fantasy. While dismissing some texts through such sanctification is a problem, though, an even more common error is to sterilize much larger piles as entirely secular, in the process treating any amount of religious metaphor or history as incidental. If identifying some works as postsecular becomes a means of oversimplifying others, count me

out. However, forum participants like Kathryn Ludwig have convinced me this effect is unnecessary. Mączyńska's analogy with feminism is especially helpful: just as we are indebted to a tradition of feminist theory, we also acknowledge particular literature as feminist because it explicitly resists the logic of sexism. This does not mean we consider non-feminist works sexist, nor does it mean literature predating first-wave feminism cannot display feminist attributes. In the same way, we can recognize postsecular works that "openly question or destabilize the religious/secular dichotomy," as Mączyńska puts it, without fearing any impact on other literature.

Let me conclude with a brief attempt both to employ a postsecular lens and to identify a postsecular narrative. Octavia Butler's 1987 near-future short story, "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," invites exactly the postsecular, scientifically-attuned approach modeled by Wald. Imagining a mental-degeneracy disease called DGD caused when a popular inoculation against cancer backfires, the story revolves around two main characters doomed to manifest the affliction sometime in middle adulthood. Knowing this part of their futures, Lynn and Alan search for a meaningful sense of personal agency in the face of both biological determinism and painful experiences of scapegoating. (Butler crosses the Nazi practice of forcing Jews to wear the Star of David with Christian fundamentalists' more recent condemnations of AIDS patients and homosexual lifestyles.) Most impressive is that Butler avoids setting up religious commitments against scientific realities, instead drawing simultaneously on her Baptist roots and long fascination with genetics to show how freedom and limit constitute as much a biological as a theological dialectic. In other words, "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" becomes postsecular fiction not only by refusing the easy routes of sentimental religiosity and militant scientism, but by showing how a theological quest for rational faith might reemerge as a biological pursuit of what I will call "determined agency."

It would be possible to read the religious and scientific elements of Butler's story as mere opponents in a fictional culture war. On one hand, Lynn and Alan's search leads them to a retreat center for DGD victims run by a woman named Beatrice, and it might seem that her name implies a religious solution to a scientific problem. Like Dante's idealized woman and heavenly tour guide, this Beatrice shows how human beings marred by disease-induced self-mutilation might be rehabilitated in a setting characterized by love and relative freedom. The problem originated with a drug called Hedeonco, a label that seems to warn against hedonism. Alan's name means "rock"; Beatrice's last name, Alcantara, refers to St. Peter of Alcantara, confessor to Teresa of Avila; Alan's mother's name is Naomi, a nod to the Bible's Ruth. Taken by itself, this nomenclature could make Butler's story appear a

fairly direct Christian allegory. On the other hand, the tale insists upon the disease's materiality, even including a component whereby victims' violent tendencies are most easily subdued by rare women who inherit DGD from both parents and secrete a particular pheromone. Indeed Alan's discovery that Lynn has been unknowingly utilizing this scent sends him into a rage, wherein he calls himself a "puppet" who has been "controlled...by a damn smell!" (65). At such moments the story seems to adopt a blatant biological determinism, casting notions of actual human choice and of religious meaning as equally delusory distractions from reality.

Just as quickly, however, Butler swirls those religious and biological elements together, confounding the assumption that they are opposed or that they were ever the absolute categories they once seemed. Ultimately, biology and faith converge in Lynn Mortimer, whose two names mean "waterfall" and "still water" and together create a potent image of apparent opposites composed of a single substance. Her very existence testifies to the potential interpenetration of religious and scientific reason: aware of DGD's devastating consequences, but opposed to abortion, Lynn's parents "had trusted God *and* the promises of modern medicine and had a child" (37, emphasis added). And ultimately it is Lynn's gift—her biologically determined gift—that opens the floodgates of personal agency. Both freed and limited by her capacity to guide (but not dictate) fellow sufferers' paths, Lynn must decide whether to accept Beatrice's invitation to become a caregiver. Meanwhile, Alan must "decide what to think" about Beatrice's suggestion that biological determinants do not eliminate but enable individual choice (67). Butler does not reveal her characters' final decisions, but the story's final conversation leans heavily toward embracing personal willpower. When Lynn quietly asks if Alan ever really had any chance to resist her pheromone, Beatrice insists, "That's up to you. You can keep him or drive him away. I assure you, you *can* drive him away" (68, emphasis in original). This is what I am calling determined agency, humanity's paradoxical freedom to simultaneously embrace and expand our limits.

Something similar might be said of the present window for literary criticism holding together and reassessing the seeming oppositions of religion and science—and of religion and secularism. This need has been implicit in earlier stages of this conversation, as when Kaufmann explained in 2007 how the secular research university arose as "the place for a public discourse based on scientific evidence, objective reason, and disciplined methodology" (607), and in response, Fessenden pointed out that "both science and conservative Christianity continue, in their respective arenas, to enjoy a kind of no-questions-asked status that a disciplined refusal to engage religion has done very little to disturb" (635). By calling more attention to science, my

contribution here is simply another attempt to raise that ruckus. Whether we choose the language of postsecularism or some alternative approach, those of us who teach and write about religion and literature must make regular efforts to distinguish science from scientism. Otherwise, our calls for more complex treatments of the religious and secular will likely fall on deaf ears.

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#### LITERATURE AND THE POSTSECULAR: *PARADISE LOST*?

Lee Morrissey

##### I.

The current discussion of postsecularism is connected to an overlooked aspect of the debate, a few decades ago now, over postmodernism. In part, the issue is, as Magdalena Mączyńska points out in her contribution to this volume, how we understand the "post" in both the postmodern and the postsecular. What Jean-François Lyotard addressed in "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-'" nearly a quarter century ago could just as well be invoked for the