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The Secular Undone:
Contemporary Anglo-American Literature and the Question of Time

by

Kyra Sutton

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

and the Designated Emphasis

in Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Daniel Boyarin, Chair
Professor Niklaus Largier
Professor James Porter

Spring 2024

Abstract

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Recently, disciplines such as religious studies, anthropology, and sociology have been revolutionized by an interrogation of the secularization narrative and of the secular more generally in light of its dialectical relationship with “religion.” Literary studies, however, has undertaken less disciplinary self-examination. As a result, literary texts are often still analyzed based on uncritical assumptions about religion and the secular: that which is “modern,” “Western,” and “a-religious” is presumed secular, while the postcolonial and diasporic becomes the site of that which is named “religion.” “The Secular Undone: Contemporary Anglo-American Literature and the Question of Time” challenges this binary mode of reading and criticism by revealing what I term a postsecular sensibility in contemporary Anglo-American literature. Such a sensibility works to deconstruct the secular-religious binary, troubling the oppositions that secularism erects. This sensibility, I argue, is evinced in textual forms whose temporalities cannot be reduced to what is often considered to be the homogeneous empty time of secular modernity. Deploying a postsecular formalism, I thus examine formal structures that are mobilized beyond the rubric of the secular, and that necessitate or engender a complex multitude of temporalities. Reading such forms beyond secularism’s structuring antinomies reveals impulses, forms of life, and modes of being that demand conceptualization beyond a “return of the religious” or “secularity.”

The Secular Undone analyzes works by Cormac McCarthy, J.D. Salinger, Ben Lerner, Maggie Nelson, Fred Moten, Anne Carson, and Ariana Reines. Each chapter considers a formal structure, or what I call “forms under pressure”: forms that variously respond to and are shaped by the pressures of their presents, whether of neoliberalism, of climate catastrophe, or of a secularism that seeks to conscript them. In each chapter, I seek to uncover a text’s postsecular sensibility as it has gone unnoticed by critical scholarship, as well as to consider how each text’s form mobilizes and engenders its sensibility. In other words, I examine how form creates affective discursive effects as well as temporalities that exceed and collapse the notion of homogenous empty time traditionally associated with the secular modern. In Chapter One, I argue that the allegorical form of McCarthy’s *The Road* generates a space of disjunctive repetition and reiteration that allows the novel to retain a sense of tentative “ongoingness” against the apocalyptic vision of non-futurity its landscape seems to impose throughout. Here, allegory mobilizes a temporality beyond the

teleological or the so-called “secular modern,” offering, through its fragments and figures, a time both recursive and cumulative. In Chapter Two, I explore how the metafictional form of both Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* and Lerner’s *10:04* ungrounds the secular-religious binary by destabilizing the supposedly stable subject—author, narrator, protagonist—of secularism and religion. Here I consider how the postsecular sensibility I identify emerges as simultaneously a product of and reaction to neoliberalism. In Chapter Three, I read Nelson’s *Bluets* and Moten’s *All That Beauty*, uncovering in them serial structures that, in the case of the former, stage the dissolution of the subject, and in the case of the latter, function as rupture and undoing-towards-flesh. Such serial forms complicate the standard account of modern time—as well as the standard account of the serial—as homogeneous and empty. Chapter Four explores what I term “the elliptical,” a form that encompasses the use of omissions, silences, and blanks, in Carson’s *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* and Reines’s *A Sand Book*. I read both works alongside the Kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum*, tracing how the texts play with ellipsis and the processual expansion of divine absence in a subversion of the standard account of secular modernity as the moment of God’s evacuation from the world. While Carson turns to the elliptical and to that which language cannot capture, Reines moves from decreation to creation, transforming the elliptical into a kind of prophetic speech.

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INTRODUCTION:

Toward a Postsecular Formalism

...of all the binaries to which...suspicion directs our disciplined scrutiny, the secular/religion binary is last to yield to critical pressure because it lies closest to the heart of professional identity.

— Tracy Fessenden, “‘The Secular’ as Opposed to What?” (2007)

Canadian author Sheila Heti’s 2022 novel *Pure Colour* opens with the following passage:

After God created the heavens and the earth, he stood back to contemplate creation, like a painter standing back from the canvas.

This is the moment we are living in—the moment of God standing back. Who knows how long it has been going on for? Since the beginning of time, no doubt. But how long is that? And for how much longer will it continue?

You’d think it would only last a moment, this delay of God standing back, before stepping forward again to finish the canvas, but it appears to be going on forever ...¹

How to approach this text—one from a writer known for her work in a realist and even autobiographical mode? What can we glean, I ask, by turning to the striking *form* of its opening? To form, in this passage, is to stage, a process both the novel and God enact, setting the scene on their canvases. Indeed, the omniscient narrator takes up the tone of Genesis, elaborating on the story of Bereshit—the story of *embodying form*. But this is no straight-forward theological invocation: even as *Pure Colour* emulates Genesis, it also stages its world “in the moment of God standing back.” Some will recognize this image, as it aligns with *tsimtsum*, or the Kabbalistic notion popularized by sixteenth-century kabbalist Isaac Luria as the “contraction” of God.² In this conception, the amorphous and all-filling God must contract in order to create a void, a space for his creation. God, in other words, must transform infinitude to cosmos, must himself *disembody* space before he can create or form. Heti’s project, I would argue, lies precisely in animating—embodying—this site of Godly contraction, collapsing any easy distinction between the religious and the secular that we might assign to it as she reforms and restages—sometimes playfully, sometimes earnestly—materials from the Jewish tradition. Indeed, with its fabular structure, Heti’s novel is invested in portraying what it calls “the first draft of existence”: current civilization in the moment of God’s contraction, before he destroys this draft for the next.

¹ Sheila Heti, *Pure Colour* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022), 3.

² For more on *tsimtsum* and the history of its Kabbalistic context prior to Luria, see Chapter Four, page 104.

Heti is rarely read in such terms, however,³ and though her earlier work—such as, for example, her 2010 *How Should a Person Be?*, which catapulted her to fame, as well as her 2018 *Motherhood*—contained Kabbalistic elements, these especially flew under the radar of critics, as such texts were more often read as “autofictional,” and thus cast—along with the genre—far too hastily on the side of the secular. Heti’s most recent publication, *The Alphabet Diaries* (2024), an Oulipo-esque experiment in which the author alphabetized over ten years’ worth of diary entries, plays with the form of the spiritual exercise, its constraints of form and ritualistic exhortations innovating on the confessional. Throughout her oeuvre, but especially in *Pure Colour*, Heti confounds an easy label of “religious” or “secular,” her forms playing with and repurposing a range of traditions and archives from across any reified secular-religious divide.

Take, for example, the way death is described in *Pure Colour*—when the protagonist’s father dies, she feels literally embodied by him: “...how to explain the great joy and calm that settled in her the moment the life left his body, and she felt his spirit enter her, and fill her up with joy and light.... It came in through her chest and she felt it there in her entire body—near the top of her skull, down in her toes, swirling wonderfully inside her.”⁴ The moment of disembodiment is here refigured as *filling*, a movement of spiritual contraction and displacement not unlike Luria’s conception of *tsimtsum*. This contraction is amplified in a later scene of grief: “Now walking outside, her hands quake, and her heart quivers and quakes, and there is a quivering and quaking in her chest and heart, from the whole world breathing on her, and she had never known that it was all so alive.”⁵ Here, the movements and rhythms of the body are echoed by those of the quaking, breathing, contracting world, its spirit or *ruach*, we might imagine, withdrawing and filling, processually. Heti’s novel turns to the language of embodiment to stage a grief that defies explanation, playing with theological motifs. Rather than a discourse that shies away from the visceral and the sensory to construct a bounded secular subject, this is a text whose very plot is motivated by animation, an embodiment that collapses any easy distinction between the religious and the secular. In *Pure Colour*—arguably an allegorical text about climate change, and thus the end of futurity—we are offered a cyclical temporality, one of cosmic renewal, in which spirits and traditions are recycled, put to new use. Such a novel defies the bromide—one this dissertation will explore at length—of a modernity whose temporality is “homogeneous [and] empty.”⁶ Time here is heterogeneous, resolutely full.

In his “Secular Aesthetics: Form, Theme and Method in the Study of American Literature,” Jordan Alexander Stein provocatively argues that “to speak of aesthetics (or, more precisely, of ‘form’) is indirectly but significantly to evoke a history of the secularization of knowledge.”⁷ Stein tracks how American advocates for form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century “tend

³ The few recent reviewers who have taken note of Heti’s “mysticism” include Judith Shulevitz and Nora Biette-Timmons. See Judith Shulevitz, “The Smutty Mystic: What everyone gets wrong about Sheila Heti’s fiction,” *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/sheila-heti-pure-colour-review/621312/>; and Nora Caplan-Bricker, “Fables of Finitude,” *Jewish Currents*, March 14, 2022, <https://jewishcurrents.org/fables-of-finitude>.

⁴ Heti, *Pure Colour*, 57.

⁵ Heti, *Pure Colour*, 72.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261.

⁷ Jordan Alexander Stein, “Secular Aesthetics: Form, Theme and Method in the Study of American Literature,” *Comparative Literature* 65, no. 3 (2013): 326.

to use ‘form’ with a sense that means ‘social but objective’ ... rather than ‘metaphysical or transcendent,’”⁸ solidifying the gradual revaluation between human knowledge and divine truth, and indeed, the norms of secularity that would come to characterize critical study of literature in the American context.

In all the recent talk of form and formalism—the reboots, the takedowns, the “reimaginings”—few have attended to American form’s secular history and to what its secular disciplinary frame might entail for its inheritors. I would posit that one such consequence might lie in the domain of the body: if we find, in American discourses of formalism both old and new, a disavowal of the body, this would seem to align with what anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has described as the tendency for secular discourses to reject visceral, sensory dimensions, those that, in the secularist imaginary, are associated with the realm of the religious.⁹ In this sense, as Hirschkind explains, practices or discourses that we might understand under the rubric of the secular “are those that have emerged through a process of differentiation structured by the binaries of religion-secular, belief-knowledge, sacred-profane, and so on.”¹⁰ Here, as Hirschkind puts it, “the secular marks a relational dynamic more than an identity.”¹¹ If secular texts and practices are those that emerge through this process of differentiation between “secular” and “religious,” staging themselves as *objective* in relation to an imagined religious counterpart, *postsecular texts*, I want to proffer, are those that overturn or unground that differentiation, complicating the distinctions that secularism erects between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane. What would it look like to think with a formalism that is able to read for the forms of such postsecular texts—forms that mobilize the sensory, the affective, and a whole range of discursive effects, moving beyond the sense of form as “social but objective”? And how, too, might we read for forms that catapult us beyond the body, withdrawing from it, not in a quest for some kind of objectivity, but in one for decreation, mystical union, a form that moves beyond subjectivity? Indeed, how might we revive or revise a formalism for Anglo-American literature that moves beyond its secular provenance?

The Secular Undone sets out to offer a prospective and speculative methodology to this end, one that draws on the resources of Critical Religious and Secularism Studies to rethink and reimagine approaches in Anglo-American literary criticism to address the proliferation of literary forms in the present that strain against the secular norms of literary criticism. Heti’s *Pure Colour* is by no means a singular example; the Anglo-American contemporary, I would argue, abounds with figures whose work troubles the boundaries of the secular within literary form—though many of these figures may not themselves identify as “religious.” And yet this feature of such writers

⁸ Stein, “Secular Aesthetics,” 327. For example, Stein cites Barrett Wendell’s influential formalist account of American literature, *A Literary History of America* (1900). Wendell writes, “Lasting literature has its birth when a creative impulse, which we may call imagination, moves men to break the shackles of tradition, making things which have not been before; sooner or later this impulse is checked by a growing sense of the inexorable limits of fact and of language; and then creative imagination sinks into some new tradition, to be broken only when, in time to come, the vital force of imagination shall revive.” As Stein reads him, “Wendell believes that literature belongs entirely to the ‘homogeneous, empty time’ ... of secular history” and form, as well as a formalist method, are instrumentalized as part of this process. Barrett Wendell, *A Literary History of America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 5, quoted in Stein, “Secular Aesthetics,” 335.

⁹ Charles Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (November 2011): 634.

¹⁰ Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?,” 641.

¹¹ Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?,” 641.

often escapes the notice of literary critics, for whom tacit assumptions about religion and the secular still reign: all that is viewed as “modern” and “Western” is tacitly presumed secular, while the postcolonial and diasporic becomes the site of that which is named “religion.” Heti, as a white, coastal author, is most often cast on one side of this binary: the side of “the secular.” When the critical formal dimension—what I will go on to define as a text’s “postsecular sensibility”—of her work is remarked upon, it tends quickly to be subsumed by the labels of “religious,” “mystical,” or “spiritual.” And yet, in works such as *Heti*’s, the opposition of the secular and the religious is not reinscribed; rather, forms, practices, and experiences resist and undo such categorizations. In such cases, I argue, to employ the unreflective vocabulary of “secular” or “religious” is to obfuscate something else at work in the text, a different set of discursive effects. Devoting close attention to textual form—to the temporalities and affects that it can generate—might allow us to see that which is occluded by the secular-religious binary, that which, in other words, cannot be named, determined, or paraphrased in advance.

This introductory chapter proceeds in five parts. In Part I, I outline the use of my term “postsecular sensibility.” As I explain, I am interested in thinking the grammatical “post” beyond the terms of linear succession, thus departing from other prominent uses of the term. In Part II, I further elaborate the temporal dimensions of the postsecular as I deploy it. My study considers the postsecular as it is amplified, I argue, in the contemporary, dialectically related to the postsecular form of neoliberalism itself; but it also considers how the postsecular operates—and how we might think *with* a postsecular formalism—across time. How might the postsecular, as I conceptualize it, allow us to rethink the categories of the secular across time, to consider how certain reified concepts (the “pre-modern” or the “non-contemporaneous,” for example) work their way insidiously into philosophies of history and temporality, even those that attempt to move beyond theses of secularization? In this section, I take up a brief reading of Jacques Derrida, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Reinhardt Koselleck, considering how the terminology of periodization maintains what I refer to as the secular-religious binary. In Part III, I engage with the notion and legacy of formalism, asking how attention to the postsecular potential of literary forms might allow us to understand a postsecular contemporary as it is refracted through—and sometimes in tension with—such forms. Finally, in Part IV I offer an outline of the dissertation chapters that follow, which explore the postsecular potential of the forms of allegory, metafiction, seriality, and the elliptical in works of late-twentieth and twenty-first-century literature. Such forms, this study argues, generate temporalities, textures, and affects that exceed the rubric of “homogeneous empty time”¹² long associated with the secular modern. However, rather than read such texts—or the postsecular—as means of *resisting* or *disrupting* a hegemonic empty homogeneity, my project asks how a postsecular formalism can reveal the incoherence of the ongoing premise of homogeneous, empty time in the first place.

I. POSTSECULAR SENSIBILITY

The “post” of postsecularism as I deploy it is not, critically, a temporally successive “post”: it does not signal that the era or episteme of secularism is, somehow, over. It is, rather, a sensibility, project, and indeed, mode of reading and critique that works to trouble the neat binary secularism

¹² Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 261.

erects between that which it deems “secular” and that which it names “religious.” We might understand the postsecular as stemming from a “desire to resist any master narrative—whether ... a narrative of secularization or a triumphal narrative of the return of religion.”¹³ Postsecularism denotes a deconstructive reading of the secular project, an acknowledgement of its contingency and historicity. The postsecular is founded on the very structural undecidability and unknowability that lead to a skepticism regarding its own ends and yields. The question, then, becomes, what it would look like to read “postsecularly”: in other words, to read beyond the impulse to diagnose as “secular” or “religious,” to read while conscious of the secularist concepts that we, as critics, impose on a text. What affects and temporalities might become visible through an attention to a form that does not prescribe in advance, but attends, anew with each reading, to what exceeds, recedes from, and distorts our inherited categories?

To rethink contemporary literary forms as postsecular in the sense proposed above involves a reflection on the secularist assumptions of the discipline of literary studies itself. For the past several decades, disciplines such as religious studies, anthropology, and sociology have been revolutionized by a re-examination of the secularization narrative and of the secular more generally: thinkers as varied as Charles Taylor¹⁴, José Casanova, Rodney Stark, Peter Berger, and Talal Asad have critically interrogated secularism in its various forms. In the work of Asad in particular, secularism is called into question as not merely that which limits the reach of religion, but as that which “define[s], transform[s], or generate[s] the meaning and structure of religion.”¹⁵ Put simply, if the traditional understanding of secularism is a separation of church and state, or a separation of religion from public life, then in order for the state to separate out that thing called religion, it must first determine what it is. Definition is therefore immanent to the process of separation, and that activity of defining is never neutral.¹⁶ This is how, in what Asad would term

¹³ Michael W. Kaufmann, “Locating the Postsecular,” *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 68.

¹⁴ It is important to note that the Asadian approach to the secular, from which this study departs, varies from the account of Charles Taylor in his well-known *A Secular Age*, in which the episteme of the secular is defined as that in which the choice between belief and unbelief is given equal legal protection—and perhaps, more importantly, is seen as equally viable. Taylor’s goal in *A Secular Age* is to argue against typical narratives of liberation from illusion, the inevitable disappearance of religion, or a “substitution story,” in which secularist humanism comes to fill the void of the transcendent. However, Taylor’s entire project is structured around a division between “premodern” and “modern,” one that he aligns with the *before* of his so-called secular age and the present. The secular, in other words, becomes synonymous for Taylor with modernity, where modernity is not, as in Asad, an ideal or a project, but a period. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), ix.

¹⁶ This means, also, that the category of “religion” itself comes under scrutiny in the discipline of Critical Religious Studies, regarded as the product and construction of a definitional act. As Jonathan Z. Smith famously put it, “...there is no data for religion. Religion is the creation of the scholar’s study.” (Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998]: 282). Though the exact historical account varies depending on the scholar, most agree that the term religion became reified among European thinkers somewhere around the seventeenth century. For just some of the canonical works in this vein, see Brent Nongbri *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

a “discursive operation of power,”¹⁷ secularism comes to designate what is and is not religion and generate whole spheres of human life, assigning religion its proper, often Protestant-inflected content. Indeed, as many have now argued, it is the terms of Christianity that dictate those of the distinctions between the “religious” and “secular.” In many secular states, what is determined as properly religious, and proper *belief* (a notion based on the interiority inherited from Protestantism) is determined within the confines of a Christian model.¹⁸ One arm of secularism’s discursive power is the university—it is not only the government official who defines, transforms, or even generates religion but the anthropologist, the scholar, the religious studies department.

Literary studies, however, has undertaken far less disciplinary self-examination in light of such findings than have anthropology or religious studies. I am not interested in offering here a story of the discipline’s secularization, one of its “rise and fall,” as it were. To do so would be far too simplistic and would recapitulate the very secularization thesis that has come under suspicion in the other disciplines listed above. What I mean, instead, is that literary studies, in its various transitions in the US from the New Criticism, to the reign of theory, to the New Historicism, has largely failed to consider its own discursive construction of the secular and religious at various points throughout its history. As Michael Kaufmann has put it,

In terms of literary studies ... the fact that many histories of the profession act as if the narrative of secularization has concluded allows them to treat (or ignore) both the secular and the religious as if they were normative, fixed categories. But the simple fact that secularization *has* a narrative suggests otherwise: that along with religion, the secular was and continues to be a product of historical contingency and change.¹⁹

Kaufmann, therefore, follows Asad’s claim that the secular and the religious are intertwined, mutually dependent for meaning, and attempts to consider how what is constructed—enforced, diagnosed—as “religious” and what as “secular” will change according to time and setting.

Lori Branch, in her “The Rituals of Our Re-Secularization: Literature Between Faith and Knowledge,” offers a narrative of the discipline in crisis: supposedly secular literary studies must grapple with its own disavowed faith, she claims, an inexorable specter that returns, whether in the form of questions left unresolved from Derridean deconstruction or other voids in meaning-making. Branch proposes her own postsecular studies as a way through this impasse, a means of “grappling with the ineradicable reality of believing.”²⁰ My stance is that Branch is right to identify a governing secularism across contemporary literary studies—it is this reigning secularism that, as Kaufmann describes, too often produces and asserts the secular and the religious “as if they were

¹⁷ Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?*, ix.

¹⁸ Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?*, ix. On this point, see also Tracy Fessenden, who has argued, through an analysis of American literature from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, that secularism functions through the attempt to withhold legitimacy from those forms of life that do not resemble the dominant Protestantism. See Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Michael W. Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession,” *New Literary History* 38, no. 4 (2007): 608.

²⁰ Lori Branch, “The Rituals of Our Re-Secularization: Literature Between Faith and Knowledge,” *Religion & Literature*, 46, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn 2014): 29.

fixed categories,” in much the way that Branch herself does in her invocation of “religiousness” and even (the very Protestant-inflected) “faith.”

Accordingly, my own “postsecular” formalist analytic seeks not to reinvest texts or authors with “belief” or “faith”—critical religious studies has long revealed the Christian genealogy of such terms.²¹ Nor does my method subscribe to the Habermasian call for tolerance and pluralism that has followed his now famous use of the term “postsecular” in 2008.²² Such studies, in their aim to complicate the secularization thesis, tend to align themselves with a successionist notion of the “post,” one that often, thereby, underestimates the ongoing relevance and consequences of political secularism even as the postsecular challenges its hegemony.²³ Habermas invokes the term “post-secular” in a literal, temporal way: “The controversial term ‘post-secular society’ can only be applied to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where people’s religious ties have steadily or rather quite drastically lapsed in the post-World War II period. These regions have witnessed a spreading awareness that their citizens are living in a secularized society,” he writes. “Today, public consciousness in Europe can be described in terms of a ‘post-secular society’ to the extent that at present it still has to ‘adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment.’”²⁴ One must approach living in a post-secular society thus defined, Habermas claims, with “tolerance”: it is through tolerance that “religious fundamentalists” and “secularists” alike can “live together in a self-reflective manner.”²⁵ Such views are echoed in literary monographs like John McClure’s *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* and Manav Ratti’s *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature*. What McClure describes as partial, open, “weakened” faiths “are selectively dedicated to progressive ideals of social transformation and well-being,”²⁶ implying “the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects.”²⁷ “In all these respects, of course,” McClure is at pains to remind readers throughout, “postsecularism is at odds with resurgent fundamentalisms.”²⁸ Ratti, meanwhile, is guided by the Habermasian call for a “mature engagement with the full diversity of religions, secularisms, beliefs, and practices within nation-states.”²⁹ Although he is invested in imagining narratives that “the received ideas of the

²¹ For an excellent analysis of “belief” in this vein, see Donald S. Lopez, “Belief,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21–35.

²² Habermas elaborates his notion of the “post-secular” most famously in Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 17–29.

²³ In designating “political secularism,” I mean here to distinguish it from something like the epistemic category of “the secular,” or what Saba Mahmood would call “secularity.” In her terms, where secularism is associated with legal-political discourse, a “statist project” that reorders religious life and community while embedding the norms of the majoritarian religion into its laws, institutions and practices, secularity is the epistemological ground on which religions are defined in modernity. See Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 181; 206.

²⁴ Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” 17, 19.

²⁵ Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” 29.

²⁶ John McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), ix.

²⁷ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 2.

²⁸ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, ix.

²⁹ Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2013), xxiii.

religious” have otherwise eclipsed, the project often reads as an apologia for religion, with lines like the following: “The task then is to explore secular alternatives to secularism: ones that can gesture to the inspiring features of religious thought, without the violence that can attach itself to religion.”³⁰ All three projects, in other words, are driven by their dedication to secularist, Enlightenment values, and such dedication is reflected in the construction of an aspirational “post-secular” that emerges in opposition to an image of religious violence and fundamentalism from which it is distinguished.

The Secular Undone aims, in the wake of these prior invocations of the “postsecular” (and “post-secular”), to read without religious or secularist imposition, ever conscious of the critic’s own institutional situatedness, and it aims not merely to trace the contingency of designations of “religious” and “secular,” as Kaufmann suggests, but in fact to see what emerges in our analysis when we venture outside of such constructions.³¹ This aligns with what Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman have referred to as the current phase of postsecular criticism, one that moves beyond the mere dislodging of the triumphant progress narrative of secularization (as we find it in Habermas, McClure, and Ratti), in its aim to “envision how the postsecular might rewrite our understanding both of the objects of Americanist literary study and of our styles of addressing them.”³² The text becomes anthropological object, and the critic a self-reflexive ethnographer who must insist on preserving the unknown as unknown, rather than reducing or homogenizing fissures and figures to a sovereign, predetermined literary-theoretical modality.³³ Without the blinders of the secular-religious binary, many texts begin to speak on their own terms.

II. THE POSTSECULAR AND TIME

This project, as mentioned earlier, situates itself beyond a merely successionist use of “postsecular.” It does not, as in Habermas’s work, consider a postsecular sensibility to be present only in those societies where “people’s religious ties have steadily or rather quite drastically lapsed in the post-World War II era,” reading literally for *secularization* and a subsequent *deseccularization*. Instead, I read the postsecular in several ways vis-à-vis time: first, as in the term “postmodernism,” the post- of postsecularism is retroactive, looking back to the term to which it is appended, deconstructing its constitutive exclusions. But so too, as Graham Huggan points out, is it anticipatory, signaling not that we have moved *beyond* the secular or the violent impositions of political secularism, but “looking forward to a future society in which the structuring antinomies

³⁰ Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination*, xxv, xx.

³¹ In this way, I will note, my invocation of “the postsecular” varies considerably from something like Jane Bennett’s use of the term “enchantment.” Bennett’s theorization emerges with discomfort around the Weberian secularization thesis, or the disenchantment of modern life: “in my alter tale,” she writes, “even secular life houses extraordinary goings-on.” Enchantment for Bennett thus does not entail a challenge to secularism and its categories, but a mood that one can cultivate within them, within “this life.” *The Secular Undone*, on the other hand, is interested in literature that mounts a challenge to the political and disciplinary force of secularism and its structuring categories, its ways of knowing. See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

³² Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, “Introduction: After the Postsecular,” *American Literature* 86, no. 4 (December 2014): 647–648.

³³ Here I riff on Daniel Boyarin’s claim that “We will never find the other as long as we persist in reducing the unknown to the known.” See Daniel Boyarin, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in American Religious Studies,” *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 1 (September 2, 2017): 36.

of our existence ... may be productively undone.”³⁴ The postsecular, as my literary readings will reveal, entails this stance of both retroaction and anticipation, or, as will be explored in Chapter One, what Kierkegaard calls recollection and repetition.

Second, while the “postsecular,” as I use it here, is not limited to the contemporary, I argue that the sensibility has been amplified in our current moment. Indeed, reading for the postsecular as I have defined it—unencumbered by notions of successionist temporality—would reveal a multitude of works of contemporary postsecular Anglo-American literature, as this dissertation goes on to explore. This includes work by authors such as Cormac McCarthy, Ben Lerner, Maggie Nelson, Fred Moten, Nathaniel Mackey, Lisa Robertson, Sheila Heti, Ariana Reines, Anne Carson, and Lucy Ives, to name but a few. Such literature, I posit, is both the product of and a reaction to a neoliberal moment that is itself *not secular*. This claim might seem counterintuitive at first glance: after all, neoliberalism would certainly seem to operate within the US secular apparatus, an economic instantiation of the tenets of freedom, autonomy, and individuality that have gradually come to pervade all spheres of life. However, as I argue in detail in Chapter Two, drawing on the work of Adam Kotsko and Joshua Ramey, neoliberalism, in its values, its aspirations for a totalizing worldview, and its exploitation of a non-knowledge-based economy, straddles the secular-religious binary in such a way that it too might be called postsecular.³⁵ It is important to note here, then, that I assign no specific (and certainly no redemptive) ethics or politics to the term “postsecular.” The postsecular, as will become clear in the chapters that follow, can be instrumentalizing and instrumentalized, just as it can work to deform reigning hegemonies and to trouble the concepts imposed by secularism. Much of the literature in my study, as I argue, stands in dialectical tension with the neoliberal postsecular that is its backdrop: largely antagonistic to the political rationality of neoliberalism, such texts are still refracted, and sometimes remediated, by the temporality and telos of neoliberalism.

However, and third, what I am terming postsecular is certainly not limited to the historical moment of neoliberalism. While the postsecular, as a critical capacity, sensibility, and project, becomes thinkable only with and after the emergence of political secularism, the concept can function retroactively to recognize and deconstruct the secular-religious binary as it operates even in our understandings of antiquity. Indeed, a postsecular formalism can allow us to grasp the categories of the secular as they operate across time; in many instances, it allows us to see beyond their anachronistic and colonial impositions. Such projects are already underway in Critical Religious Studies: take, for example, Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin’s *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*, which reveals the nuances of the ancient Roman *religio* and ancient Greek *thrēskeia* when understood beyond the common mistranslation to the category of “religion.”³⁶ Severin Fowles, meanwhile, argues in his study of the Ancestral Pueblo societies of the American Southwest that the Pueblos did not have a “religion” prior to missionization, but rather what Fowles calls “doings,” an indigenous concept that collapses “our

³⁴ Graham Huggan, “Is the ‘Post’ in ‘Postsecular’ the ‘Post’ in ‘Postcolonial’?,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 4 (2010): 766.

³⁵ See Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018) and Joshua Ramey, *Politics of Divination: Neoliberal Endgame and the Religion of Contingency* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

³⁶ See Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*.

secular analytic categories.”³⁷ Such thinking across time might also demand that we revise forms of periodization that uphold the secular-religious binary. Reading with an eye to the postsecular can attune us to a multitude of temporalities—those that are irreducible to what is usually considered to be the linear time of secular modernity. Here the overwrought and all-too-easy identification of “homogeneous, empty” time with the time of modernity must be rethought: for we can find forms of linear, mechanized time across history, but so too can we find full, heterogeneous times, times that move cyclically, recursively, serially.³⁸ Reading “postsecularly” allows us to see beyond the standard categories and associations prescribed by secularism, and to see an “other”—multiple others—to the secular beyond the category of “religion.”

In this sense, I am engaged critically with the objections that religious studies scholar Tracy Fessenden has justifiably raised to literary criticism’s “postsecular” turn: the operative narrative of secularism, she claims, continues to govern the postsecular criticism that seeks to destabilize it.³⁹ The most difficult element of the secularization narrative to shake is that of time: postsecularism is envisioned as pluralizing, liberating us not only “from a constraining past, in this case from the analytic and existential confines of secular categories that no longer serve,” but also from “the burdens of *religion* ... from the competencies, obligations, and complicities associated with a putative past tense of shared religious belief and practice.”⁴⁰ The worry about the emerging field of postsecular literary criticism is twofold: first, that the specificities of particular histories and contexts are reduced to the interchangeable and unnamable; and second, that the postsecular constructs a monolithic religious past “gone to ruin.”⁴¹ Why can we assume that the spiritual lives of our predecessors were any more homogeneous than our own? Here “spirituality” comes to play the role of “good religion” against a constructed, imagined once-uniform religious past.

Such notions of temporality are where I part ways from much existing postsecular literary criticism. First, the texts I designate as “postsecular” are varied in their temporalities—there is no singular, monolithic “postsecular time.” To my mind the postsecular present—if such a thing can be said to exist—must always be viewed alongside an equally heterogeneous and postsecular past. This is to say: where the secular-religious binary can be reexamined in the contemporary, so too can it be rethought throughout before modernity, even, so to speak, *avant la lettre* of the political imposition of secularism, as texts reconfigure prescribed boundaries of the sacred and the profane. As I will further explore in Chapter Three, I am convinced that, in spite of dominant trends in historical thinking, the time of what is termed modernity is not exclusively “homogeneous [and]

³⁷ Severin Fowles, *An Archaeology of Doings: Secularism and the Study of Pueblo Religion* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 67. Fowles situates his project as an attempt to move beyond the analytic categories of secularism, to see what emerges in their wake: “Let us acknowledge ... that premodern religion isn’t there to be found at all. Freed of this category, we stand in a better position to be surprised by the past and to learn something new about it.” (262)

³⁸ As Talal Asad has put it, “The homogeneous time of state bureaucracies and market dealings is of course central to the calculations of modern political economy.... But there are other temporalities—immediate and mediated, reversible and nonreversible—by which individuals in a heterogenous society live and by which therefore their political responses are shaped.” See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.

³⁹ Tracy Fessenden, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” *American Literary History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 154–167.

⁴⁰ Fessenden, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” 157.

⁴¹ Fessenden, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” 162.

empty”⁴² and what is termed pre-modern is not devoid of the imposition of the calendrical, unifying temporality that Benedict Anderson describes.⁴³

My concern is not to revise definitions of the modern, but to ask what such binary oppositions—between the “modern” and “non-modern” (or “pre-modern” or “medieval” as it is variously termed)—occlude and reify. As recent work on the logic of periodization has shown, though many have critiqued theories of secularization, even such critiques tend to reaffirm an imagined divide between the modern and medieval, the homogeneous and empty and a temporal alterity (“precapital,” “pre-modern”) with which to combat it.⁴⁴ In the following subsections, I undertake readings of three critics of classical historicism who, in their poststructuralist, Marxian-Heideggerian decolonial, and conceptual histories, respectively, offer various challenges to the prevalent notion of modernity as “homogeneous, empty time.” Writing variously in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, about the contentious historiography of the Indian nation, and from post-war Germany, Jacques Derrida, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Reinhart Koselleck each seek to complicate reigning notions of “modernity.” What I find, however, is that though these accounts each offer generative notions of temporality—whether Derrida’s concept of inheritance, Chakrabarty’s gap, or Koselleck’s sediments—in their turn to either the non-secular or non-contemporaneous as a source of alterity immanent to the present, such readings, often tacitly, rely upon the legitimacy of secularization even as they may seek to complicate it. My own readings are not intended to indict any of these thinkers, but rather to reveal how the project of secularism often colors and conscripts our concepts, and how difficult it is to move beyond them even in the attempt to decouple the “modern” and the “secular.” It is through reading with a postsecular analytic that we can become attentive to such structuring binaries, and begin, per Coviello and Hickman, to deterritorialize our thought.⁴⁵

A Purified Messianic

Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale (*Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New Internationale*) served as Derrida’s response to the question “Whither Marxism?,” the title of the conference at which his lectures were delivered at University of California, Riverside in 1993. Derrida charts a complex relationship to Marx within this volume, attempting to mark a sense of the political beyond the normative institutions of justice, law and “politics,” and yet indebted, in his very conception of

⁴² Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 261.

⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). For a powerful example of one such premodern text that displays this calendrical “homogeneous, empty” temporality as Anderson describes it, see Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Kosmin offers a brilliant reading of the Seleucid Empire as the inaugurator of a new temporal ideology—one that was linear, numerical, and imperial. The year 1 SE begins when Seleucus I Nicator (one of Alexander the Great’s generals) returned from exile to establish claim over his territory. Before times, Kosmin claims, were intended to be rendered politically unthinkable from this point forward while the future stretched into possibility.

⁴⁴ As Kathleen Davis writes, “theories of modernity rely upon the legitimacy of secularization to shore up the period divide.” See Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 6–7.

⁴⁵ Coviello and Hickman, “Introduction: After the Postsecular,” 647.

radical critique, to a Marxian spirit. And yet Derrida's sense of critique, and his notion of the messianic, both seek to destabilize the temporalities of their successors: critique transforms *messianism* into the messianic, casting not just religion but Hegel, Marx, and Fukuyama as part of the teleological and eschatological regime that Derrida's work seeks to think anew. As Derrida writes:

Critiquer, appeler, à l'autocritique interminable, c'est encore distinguer entre tout et presque tout. Or s'il est un esprit du marxisme auquel je ne serai jamais prêt à renoncer, ce n'est pas seulement l'idée critique ou la posture questionnante...C'est plutôt une certaine affirmation émancipatoire et *messianique*, une certaine expérience de la promesse qu'on peut tenter de libérer de toute dogmatique et même de toute détermination métaphysico-religieuse, de tout *messianisme*. Et une promesse doit promettre d'être tenue, c'est-à-dire de ne pas rester « spirituelle » ou « abstraite », mais de produire des événements, de nouvelles formes d'action, de pratique, d'organisation, etc.⁴⁶

If the messianic promise that structures Marxism is its phantasmatic core, Derrida seeks to liberate that ghost: to forefront the *messianic* quality of Marxian critique that Marx himself disavowed.⁴⁷

This Derridean messianic, is, however, crucially, a “*messianique sans messianisme*.” Derrida is interested in borrowing from the structure of Jewish temporality while breaking from the content of the tradition.

Le messianisme abrahamique n'était-il qu'une préfiguration exemplaire, le prénom donne sur le fond de la possibilité que nous tentons de nommer ici ? Mais alors pourquoi garder le nom, ou au moins l'adjectif (*messianique*, préférons-nous dire, plutôt que *messianisme*, afin de désigner une structure de l'expérience plutôt qu'une religion), là où aucune figure de l'arrivant, alors même qu'il ou elle s'annonce, ne devrait se prédéterminer, préfigurer, prénommer même ?⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: L'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993), 146–147. “To critique, to call for interminable self-critique is still to distinguish between everything and almost everything. Now, if there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is not only the critical idea or the questioning stance.... It is even more a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any *messianism*. And a promise must be promised to be kept, that is, not to remain ‘spiritual’ or ‘abstract,’ but to produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth.” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 111.

⁴⁷ Derrida's project here thus both complicates the linear temporalities of those who precede him and participates in a successive, Enlightenment notion of liberatory inheritance.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, 266. “Was not Abrahamic messianism but an exemplary prefiguration, the pre-name given against the background of the possibility that we are attempting to name here? But then why keep the name, or at least the adjective (we prefer to say *messianic* rather than *messianism*, so as to designate a structure of experience rather than a religion), there where no figure of the *arrivant*, even as he or she is heralded, should be pre-determined, prefigured, or even pre-named?” Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 210–211.

Two things should be noted within this passage: the first is Derrida's refusal to let his category of the messianic be a predetermining one. The messianic is here the obverse of the eschatological, and is instead the utterly unknowable, open, revolutionary expectation for which one never waits. Secondly, we should note Derrida's dissociation of his term—messianic—from the term “religion.” As he uses it, the messianic is more of a “structure of feeling,” he claims, invoking Raymond Williams's term. *Spectres of Marx* can thus be read as an attempt to break from the tenets of both secular, progressivist time and theological, eschatological time alike. Instead we are thrust within a conception of time that is at every moment—as Derrida so often reminds us—out of joint.

Derrida is thus interested in moving us beyond the presentist paradigm (which he ascribes to most of Western metaphysics) of “homogeneous, empty time”; he destabilizes the very ground of the present in deconstructing *both* non-theistic philosophical and theological accounts of history that rely on salvific narratives. This conceptual work, along with its concomitant notion of ethics, would seem to trouble any clear boundary between the secular and the religious—a boundary that is itself historically inscribed by secularism. Viewed from such a lens, one might be tempted to situate Derrida's work within the category of the postsecular as I have thus far defined it. Indeed, Derrida would seem here to align with Alex Dubilet's description of the postsecular “as a site that experimentally engages with the limits of the category of the secular, its metaphysics, and its politics.”⁴⁹ Rather than a designation of temporality, the postsecular serves as one of epistemological disruption and incommensurability; one could conceive of it as a site of minoritarian thought that radically repurposes various archives, both philosophical and theological (can there ever be strict purification?) against triumphalist visions, whether secular or religious.

One could then generously read Derrida's repurposing, his translating and transforming of a Judeo-Christian imaginary in an attempt to radically deconstruct our conception of temporality and envision the ethical and the political anew. It is his repeated insistence that his own practice is distinct from “religion” that tows the line between conscious, postsecular repurposing and the more insidious secular practice of reifying the borders between that which is designated religion and that which is not that might complicate such a reading. The adamance with which Derrida marks his “structural” messianic sans messianism while his rhetoric betrays its Judeo-Christian intellectual inheritance and cultural context might suggest that he is striving toward a secular purity that cannot hold. This would be the ghost of religion—or maybe, more aptly, of secularism—haunting Derrida's thought, and it's one that made sense given the moment: *l'affaire du voile* began in '89 and sparked fears about the “return of the religious” to which the text alludes.⁵⁰ I would argue that the use of this phrase is telling of both Derrida's desire to take religious forms seriously and his need to disavow the category—politically, theoretically—from his own thought. If he believes in

⁴⁹ Alex Dubilet, “The Catastrophic Joy of Abandoning Salvation: Thinking the Postsecular with Georges Bataille,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 16 no. 2 (Spring 2017): 163.

⁵⁰ See Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, 265–266: « Il y va d'abord de ce qui prend la forme originale d'un retour du religieux, qu'il soit ou non fondamentaliste, et qui surdétermine toutes les questions de la nation, de l'État, du droit international, des droits de l'homme et du *Bill of Rights*, bref de tout ce qui concentre son habitat dans la figure au moins symptomatique de Jérusalem, ou ici et là, de sa réappropriation et du système des alliances qui s'y ordonnent. » “At stake first of all is that which takes the original form of a return of the religious, whether fundamentalist or not, and which overdetermines all questions of nation, State, international law, human rights, Bill of Rights—in short, everything that concentrates its habitat in the at least symptomatic figure of Jerusalem or, here and there, of its reappropriation and of the system of alliances that are ordered around it.” Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 210.

something like a “return of the religious,” we might better understand his need to conceptualize religion as *fantôme*, as that which returns, which must, in turn be transformed in some way. It is these efforts towards purification that, however inadvertently, reify a secular epistemology, and even as *Specters* sets out to liberate us from the progress of history, Derrida remains reliant on a notion of progressive inheritance. If there is a way in which Derrida is *uncritical*, it is in his own critiques of what he dismisses as dogma, as metaphysical-religious—in other words, of the privileging of his own situated secularism and Enlightenment-inherited critique as transcendent above and against other forms of knowing, thinking, and being.

The Constitutive Breach of Modernity

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his 2000 landmark *Provincializing Europe*, similarly seeks to examine dominant modes of historicism, particularly as they appear in their Marxian, postcolonial inheritors. Chakrabarty takes issue with those in Subaltern Studies who unquestioningly adopt the language and concepts of Marxian historicism and questions of the act of translation that such history writing always entails. This is, put otherwise, a historian thinking critically about the imposition of secularism’s concepts. His concern is the incompatibility of life-worlds: between the universalizing language of “capital,” for example, and other secular historicist concepts that govern institutional historiographical narratives, and those histories that, as Marx put it, are not inherent to capital’s process. These Chakrabarty terms “History 1” and “History 2,” respectively: where Marx sees History 2 as ultimately sublated within the tide of capital’s universalizing wake, Chakrabarty’s reading hinges on a difference he wants to read into Marx, where the local, singular History 2—what he elsewhere terms “precapital,” as I will discuss later—is a resource for resistance. “I try to produce a reading that ... sees the undertow of singular and unique histories, my History 2s, as always arresting the thrust of such universal histories and producing the concrete as a combination of the universal logic of History 1 and the heterotemporal horizons of innumerable History 2,”⁵¹ he writes.

Central to Chakrabarty’s reading is the secularity that he claims subtends modern conceptions of time, and historicism more generally—his History 1s. He offers the following understanding of historicism:

It tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first, as an individual and unique whole—as some kind of unity at least in potential—and, second, as something that develops over time.... Needless to say, this passage of time that is constitutive of both the narrative and the concept of development is, in the famous words of Walter Benjamin, the secular, empty, and homogeneous time of history.⁵²

Here we have the standard association: the time of the institution, the time of History, and the time of modernity (a periodizing frame that inserts itself unelaborated throughout *Provincializing*

⁵¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), xvii.

⁵² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 23.

Europe) is a godless time; “in employing modern historical consciousness ... we think of a world that, in Weber’s description, is already disenchanted.”⁵³ The secularization thesis is assumed; the time of “modernity” is chiefly incompatible with the other times Chakrabarty explores *not* because of local and cultural relativism (as he is quick to assure his readers), but because History 2 remains imbued in a world of spirits and gods where History 1 does not.

This makes his designation of such aseular histories as the “nonmodern” even more curious: “At this point I want to acknowledge and learn from the modes of translation that I have called nonmodern,” he writes, “the barterlike term-for-term exchanges that bypass all the implicit sociologies of our narratives of capitalism.”⁵⁴ Chakrabarty, unlike the many secularists he is writing against, does not of course use the term “nonmodern” pejoratively: the “nonmodern” he ascribes to these present life worlds is a precious resource for him with which to deconstruct—and perhaps resist—the homogeneity he ascribes to modernity. He elaborates his use of “precapital” to this end:

The prefix *pre* in “precapital,” it could be said similarly, is not a reference to what is simply chronologically prior on an ordinal, homogeneous scale of time. “Precapitalist” speaks of a particular relationship to capital marked by the tension of difference in the horizons of time. The “precapitalist,” on the basis of this argument, can only be imagined as something that exists within the temporal horizon of capital and that at the same time disrupts the continuity of this time by suggesting another time that is not on the same, secular, homogeneous calendar...⁵⁵

Within capital itself is inscribed precapital; within the commodity itself, Chakrabarty claims, is inscribed the difference between “real” and abstract labor, a gap that capital can never quite close. It is in this gap that he seeks to unsettle capital’s conscriptions, the homogenizing impulses that he himself describes. “History 2 is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1,”⁵⁶ he argues.

The turn here is to an aseular time that is envisioned as nonmodern and thus non-contemporaneous—out of joint, we might say—with the time of History, and yet immanent to it. In order to envision and mobilize this source of alterity, Chakrabarty must reify the secularization thesis, reinscribing the designations of the modern and nonmodern as that which has “secularized” and that which has not. One wonders, if we follow his schema, why the life-worlds of which he writes in History 2 have not proved more resistant to the tempos of global capital—why more traditions have not withstood museumification and homogenization, instead providing robust alternatives immanent to calendrical time. And one wonders, too, how we can conceive of the

⁵³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 73. He continues: “...this time is empty because it acts as a bottomless sack: any number of events can be put inside it; and it is homogeneous because it is not affected by any particular events; its existence is independent of such events and in a sense exists prior to them. Events happen in time but time is not affected by them. The time of human history—as any popular book on the evolution of this universe will show—merges with the time of prehistory, of evolutionary and geological changes that go back to the beginning of the universe.”

⁵⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 88.

⁵⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 93.

⁵⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 66.

enchantments of so-called institutional time within this account: those of secular consumer culture, of modern science and technology,⁵⁷ those at play within Marxian time itself. In other words, Chakrabarty's mode of inscribing difference, what he terms heterotemporality, involves an arbitrary bifurcation of time into two distinct and ultimately homogenizing categories that disallow much beyond their borders.⁵⁸

Interruptions Immanent to Time

Twentieth-century German historian Reinhart Koselleck is also famous for his challenges to historicism. As we will see, Koselleck both offers a periodizing story bound up in a secularization thesis and complicates the conception of modern time as empty and homogeneous; all time, for Koselleck, is resolutely *full* in that it is composed of sediments (*Zeitgeschichten*), layers of varying speeds of transformation and change that occupy a single "present." The question for us becomes: does Koselleck, whose analysis, unlike Chakrabarty's or even Derrida's, is centered around the structure of time itself,⁵⁹ succeed in offering a portrait of modernity that decouples it from the secular, liberating it from its age-old Weberian counterpart?⁶⁰ Or does his very reliance on the category—*modernity*—no matter how elaborated, fall prey to what Kathleen Davis calls the periodizing impulse, one that is always intertwined with an attempt to distinguish (however arbitrarily) "the religious" and "the secular"?

Koselleck is perhaps most famous for his articulation of *Neuzeit*, which is often translated to modernity, but quite literally means "new time": time as experienced structurally differently. His thesis is that "during *Neuzeit* the difference between experience and expectation," two constitutive axes through which past and future inflect the present, "has increasingly expanded; more precisely that *Neuzeit* is first understood as a *Neue Zeit* from the time that expectations have distanced themselves evermore from all previous experience."⁶¹ This transformation is conceived as both a historical break—a widening expansion, more accurately, in the very fabric of time, that is registered as a constitutive shift—and as one result of a process of secularization. "As long as

⁵⁷ I am here thinking of a remark Asad made when commenting on Charles Taylor's claims about the "waning of belief" in modernity: "One may suggest, incidentally, that it is because Taylor is here working with an intuitive definition of religion in terms of *transcendent* — Christian — *beliefs* that he ignores the enchantments imposed on individual life by secular consumer culture — as well as by modern science and technology." Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, edited by Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 49.

⁵⁸ Pheng Cheah offers distinct but strong critiques of Chakrabarty in his *What is a World?* He writes: "This view of subalterity's exteriority to capital, however, is perilously close to nostalgia for a pure past that could moreover be a cultural relativist and utopian disavowal of the pervasive reality of capitalist modernization at the socioeconomic level." He also takes issue with the conflation of the Marxist and deconstructive understanding of time within Chakrabarty. See Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature and World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 204.

⁵⁹ He investigates what he often refers to as "metahistorical categories."

⁶⁰ For Weber's famous thesis of the disenchantment, or *Entzauberung* of modernity, see Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 129–156 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

⁶¹ Reinhart Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories," *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 263.

the Christian doctrine of the Final Days set an immovable limit to the horizon of expectation (roughly speaking, until the mid-seventeenth century), the future remained bound to the past,”⁶² Koselleck writes of “pre-modernity.” So-called worldly experience and Christian expectation could exist “without contradiction,” so long as the space of experience was not fundamentally altered—it was only with the advent of “progress” that such a change was effected. Progress shifted the horizon of expectation to the transformation of *this world* as opposed to the hereafter. The emergence of modern politics, and of the philosophy of history, as Koselleck details in *Critique and Crisis* (the dissertation Koselleck wrote in 1959), was imagined to replace Absolutist sovereignty. Religion evacuates the public sphere just as freedom of decision, progress, morality—the “modern” itself—assumes sovereignty.⁶³

There is, thus, particularly in Koselleck’s early work, a secularization thesis that underpins and legitimates his thesis on modernity and on temporality more broadly. Secularization as it operates within Koselleck, as Davis points out, would seem to stand in contrast to the secularization of Carl Schmitt’s famed *Political Theology*, where “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”⁶⁴ Schmitt’s dictum relies on a structural continuity that precisely transcends the secular-religious binary, where Koselleck’s designation of periods relies on a notion of structural rupture that reinforces it. Things become more complicated, however, when we consider his notion of the “contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous”—“Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen”—a phrase popularized by Ernst Bloch to denote a temporal lag, or uneven temporal development.⁶⁵ Koselleck’s use of the concept is distinct: within a single “temporal refraction is contained a diversity of temporal strata which are of varying duration, according to the agents or circumstances in question, and which are to be measured against each other.”⁶⁶ This would seem to offer an alternative to the homogeneous, empty time of Benjamin’s historians—modernity consists not of the emptiness that Chakrabarty and so many others have described,⁶⁷ but of a simultaneity intrinsic to the very structure of time.

However intrinsic this simultaneity, though, its conception still relies on the periodizing gesture that characterizes Koselleck’s thought. The imagined homogeneity of modernity is indeed troubled, and yet, in order to think “the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous,” we must

⁶² Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” 264.

⁶³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, translated by Berg Publishers Ltd. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998). See: “The moral new beginning is so profoundly at odds with the Absolutist system that the political legitimation of the State, namely the subjugation of ‘morality’ to the power of the sovereign, becomes the legitimation of revolution.... sovereign power, so long as it bases itself on the sovereign freedom of decision, in itself conjures up civil war.” (156)

⁶⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, translated by George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 36; see Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, 95.

⁶⁵ Bloch first used the phrase to discuss the rise of National Socialism. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times [Erbschaft dieser Zeit]*, translated by Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991 [1935]).

⁶⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, “History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures,” *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 95.

⁶⁷ In fact, Chakrabarty’s claim, that “this time is empty because it acts as a bottomless sack: any number of events can be put inside it; and it is homogeneous because it is not affected by any particular events; its existence is independent of such events and in a sense exists prior to them. Events happen in time but time is not affected by them,” is directly contradicted by Koselleck. Here the structures of time depend precisely on experiences and expectations, all of which are determined by events past, present, and future. Time is not merely a shell; the structural difference Koselleck claims occurs in modernity would seem to be evidence of this. See Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 73.

entertain a notion of the *out of time* and the in, of a unified present from which one can be out-of-sync, however immanently.⁶⁸ This is, in many ways, similar to the move we witnessed Chakrabarty make in *Provincializing Europe*: he attempts, as he claims, to “think difference,” which relies on too simple a binary between his History 1 and History 2, his own contemporaneity and non-contemporaneous (“pre-capital,” “premodern”).

We witness Koselleck’s own instrumentalization of this figure of “non-contemporaneity,” I argue, in “History, Law, and Justice,” a text that appears later in Koselleck’s oeuvre (1986). Originally delivered as a lecture for German legal historians, Koselleck’s essay asks whether justice is inherent in history. He offers five typologies in answer to this question: the Herodotean, the Thucydidean, the Augustinian, the Absurd History, and the Idealist. The latter two are cast as part of the advent of modernity—it is specifically only in “post-theological” modernity, without the notion of the Last Judgment, he claims, that history can be seen as absurd, while the idealist typology, which is largely associated with Hegel, is the most pervasive.⁶⁹ This final structure is that which “shapes our modern experience [and] has also impregnated historicism and has given rise to all liberal democratic and social models of history,”⁷⁰ and yet here it does not inaugurate a decisive break from the past: all five frameworks remain accessible, and moreover, “all modern historical hypotheses and scholarly representations that construct historical findings can be traced back to these five modes of experience.”⁷¹ All five—even the ancient—continue to suffuse modern historical methodology.

Like Chakrabarty’s nonmodern History 2s, the premodern frameworks act as interruptive force in the modern: they “retain their force ... remind[ing] us of the burden placed upon human beings forced to have recourse to law in order to survive. Any attempt to relate to history and justice to each other leads to disillusionment.”⁷² It is because the modern did not succeed in a whole-sale transformation of the present—because, we might say, of present pasts—that any utopian conception of law and justice can be, simultaneously, suffused with a premodern skepticism about the absurdity of such notions. If Chakrabarty insists on the constitutive “gap” of modernity, on its inherent incompleteness, Koselleck’s use of the non-contemporaneous—whether through the “premodern,” as in this example, or of the “Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen”—can be read in parallel, in that it allows him to complicate the picture of an autonomous *Neuzeit* characterized by total rupture. However, this complication relies on and reifies categorical distinctions that eclipse much else: pre-modern and modern, secular and religious. Koselleck is hyperattentive to singularized concepts that he ascribes to modernity, but the aforementioned are left unexamined. It is because his notion of time is fundamentally structured by such dichotomies that one has difficulty imagining how he might integrate forms of life that fall beyond them: as Talal Asad reminds us, in writing on Koselleck, “unilinear time together with its breaks ... in spite

⁶⁸ Alexandra Lianeri makes a similar claim. She attempts to resolve this problem through translation and the untranslatable. See Alexandra Lianeri, “A Regime of Untranslatables: Temporalities of Translation and Conceptual History,” *History and Theory* 53 (December 2014): 473–497.

⁶⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, “History, Law, and Justice,” in *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, translated and edited by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 124.

⁷⁰ Koselleck, “History, Law, and Justice,” 126.

⁷¹ Koselleck, “History, Law, and Justice,” 127.

⁷² Koselleck, “History, Law, and Justice,” 127.

of its being essential to thinking and acting critically, is only one kind of time people imagine, respond to, and use.”⁷³

My project, like those of Derrida, Chakrabarty, and Koselleck, is interested in complicating the premise of modernity as one of “homogeneous, empty time”—a premise that, as I explore in Chapter Three, has had surprising staying power in a variety of fields, from philosophy, to literary studies, to media studies. However, I would distinguish my project from those I have just outlined in an important way: rather than think the postsecular, or the literary forms that I examine, as a means of resisting or disrupting homogeneous, empty time—in other words, as that which is “nonmodern,” “pre-modern,” or “noncontemporaneous” to the present—my project asks how a postsecular formalism reveals the incoherence of homogeneous, empty time as a unifying, lived, and literary aesthetic premise in the first place. *The Secular Undone* thus sets out to disarticulate a set of associated concepts that has come to dominate certain theories of modernity and history: *the secular; the modern; and homogeneous, empty time*. This triangulation, I argue, has been adopted by and is indeed foundational to Anglo-American literary criticism. My study thus turns to literature itself to disaggregate these concepts.

III. POSTSECULAR FORM(S)

I turn to the fraught and contentious terrain of form, rather than, say, genre, to consider how we might conceive modernity beyond the terms of empty homogeneity and thus so too beyond its “disruption.” The designations of genre have historically been bound to market forces in the US, such that genres like Sci Fi, noir, the western, and fantasy did not receive scholarly attention until recent decades and were not read alongside so-called “literary fiction.”⁷⁴ Reading for form allows us to break past some of these market distinctions, to see resonances in the “high” and “low,” as well as to read across periods. This project assembles works from across poetry and prose, the short story and the novel, the lyric essay and more—certain texts are generically hybrid or even unclassifiable. I am less interested in a discussion of such genres—where such books are shelved or how they are marketed—than in thinking across form and what the forms of such texts enable. Yet the moment I invoke form, it signals a commitment to one of several contemporary camps invested in “new formalism” and form’s reboot, and the question arises: what exactly do I mean by form, and what exactly is my formalism, my affiliation?

Marjorie Levinson has identified the two major strains of “new formalism” as “active formalism” and “normative formalism.”⁷⁵ The former, she explains, includes “those who want to restore to today’s reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form,” while the latter encompasses “those who campaign to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form (regarded as the condition of aesthetic experience as traced to Kant—i.e., disinterested autotelic, playful, pleasurable, consensus-generating, and

⁷³ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 223.

⁷⁴ For more on the production of genres in a US context, see, for example, Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), and Dan Sinykin, *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

⁷⁵ Marjorie Levinson, “What is New Formalism?,” *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (March 2007): 560.

therefore both individually liberating and conducive to affective social cohesion) the prerogative of art.”⁷⁶ In other words, if the first group is in some ways continuous with new historicism, the second is a backlash to it. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, meanwhile, see another (perhaps overlapping subgroup) of “the millennial reboot of formalism” as inspired by dissatisfaction with “those norms called critique and with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick first diagnosed as its paranoid structure.”⁷⁷ Such formalisms tend to equate form with *surface*, “and surface with things like ‘structure’ or ‘pattern’” in an effort to think against the norms of depth that pervade Marxian, Freudian, and other “critical” modes of reading.⁷⁸ In spite of its variety of uses—Sandra Macpherson, for example, defines form as “nothing more—and nothing less—than the shape matter (whether a poem or a tree) takes”⁷⁹—Kramnick and Nersessian claim that “form” need not be deployed consistently for it to have purchase:

That form appears sometimes as shape, sometimes as pattern, sometimes as habit, line structure, model, design trope, and so on suggests not that formalism is incoherent but that form, like cause—perhaps like any useful and compelling term—is not a word without content but a notion bound pragmatically to its instances.⁸⁰

If “form,” as it is invoked in this particular project, emerges from dissatisfaction with the norms of literary critique, it is a dissatisfaction with those that, whether critical or post-, new historicist or new formalist, are too quick to conscript literature to the “secular” or “religious,” that lack the reflection to read textual forms as they diverge from secularism’s conscripting project. My form is not divorced from the historical—I don’t believe that any notion of form could be⁸¹—and indeed, the following chapters consider the historicity of the forms I discuss and identify. However, form, for me, is not simply a shorthand for a new type of new historicism: I take seriously attention to shape, repetition, pattern, and the work and affordance that such textual features do as they mobilize and engender affects, temporalities, and embodied experiences.

A host of other literary scholars have recently considered the affordances of reading for form. Caroline Levine, in her *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, defines form quite capaciously in an effort to expand the aesthetic to include the sociopolitical, inviting historicization into the realm of formalism. Form is cast as “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetitions and difference.”⁸² Anna Kornbluh, meanwhile, in her *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* is interested in forming and forms “as a value that animates literature” against what she describes as a dominant orientation toward *formlessness*

⁷⁶ Levinson, “What is New Formalism?,” 560.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, “Form and Explanation,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 653.

⁷⁸ Kramnick and Nersessian, “Form and Explanation,” 654. As Kramnick and Nersessian point out, this “chain of association” between form, surface, structure, and pattern is “enabled by borrowing Fredric Jameson’s own notion of form as a ‘surface category’ that eclipses the content of history.” (654)

⁷⁹ Sandra Macpherson, “A Little Formalism,” *ELH* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 390.

⁸⁰ Kramnick and Nersessian, “Form and Explanation,” 662.

⁸¹ As Susan J. Wolfson writes, “To set formalist attention against claims of contextual determination may obscure the way formal choices and actions are enmeshed in, and even exercise agency within, networks of social and historical conditions.” See Susan J. Wolfson, “Reading for Form,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 7.

⁸² Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

across a variety of literary critical theories.⁸³ As she puts it, “there remains uniform in so many literary critical practices a code of particularizing and concretizing, of destabilizing norms, disassembling systems, undoing universals—of taking things apart.”⁸⁴ To *deform*—and in recent years, I would add, particularly Georges Bataille’s concept of *l’informe*—has become particularly attractive to think with as a mode of resisting the hegemonic, or “form” as ordering of the world.⁸⁵ While I am interested in moving beyond the reigning hegemonies and antinomies wrought by secularism, it is, thinking with Levine and Kornbluh, precisely through the affordances of form, rather than a notion of formlessness, that we can begin to see beyond secularism’s conceptual inheritances. Indeed, in the literary forms at work in the literature I explore—from allegory, to metafiction, to seriality, to what I term “the elliptical,” itself a certain form of formlessness—are the resources for thinking beyond the conceptual conscripts of the secular. It is, perhaps paradoxically, with form, that we can move beyond the governing binaries of literary criticism, attending to what lies in their excesses.

I read for form, thus, to shore up the way forms defy the logics of “the secular” or “the religious,” the way they operate across the so-called modern and pre-modern divide. While I use form to think about those aspects of literary texts that are typically seen as distinct from its content, I follow Tom Eyers in that my readings “serve to trouble the very distinction between form and content as it has traditionally and more recently been received.”⁸⁶ I read, at the broadest level, for the forms of allegory, metafiction, seriality, and the elliptical, but more minutely, for the effects of repetition, dissonant rhythms; conflicting images, metaphors, and metonymies; shifting narrative focalization; moments of rupture, and more. As will become clear, history is not occluded by such a reading practice, but becomes visible as it is enfolded and refracted in literary form. As my chapters progress from the allegorical, to the metafictional, to the serial, to the elliptical, they chart a progression from the most seemingly “formed”—that is, the form with the longest literary-critical history—to the most “formless”: the form of the elliptical, or texts that deal with omissions, emptiness. Even in this mystical movement, as the forms seem to hollow out, I maintain that a “form” of some kind remains operative—that, as Anne Carson would put it, referring to a kletic hymn, a poem that invokes an absent deity, “It is an impossible motion possible only in writing.”⁸⁷ But the writing—the form—still remains.

IV. CHAPTER OUTLINE

The project explores a postsecular sensibility in the works of Cormac McCarthy, Ben Lerner, Maggie Nelson, Fred Moten, Anne Carson, Ariana Reines, and, in a moment of brief historical comparison, J.D. Salinger. I begin my study primarily after 1991, as it is threshold

⁸³ Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 4.

⁸⁴ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 4.

⁸⁵ See Georges Bataille, “Formless,” *Documents 1*, Paris, 1929, 382, translated by Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr., *Georges Bataille. Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

⁸⁶ Tom Eyers, *Speculative Formalism: Literature, Theory, and the Critical Present* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

⁸⁷ Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 179.

moment, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, that many see as what allowed neoliberalism to fully triumph in the United States. It also marks the start of the decade when literary scholars claim that neoliberalism became immanent to literary form and theory, the ideology extending into noneconomic domains of life.⁸⁸ However, the chapters are not organized chronologically, but instead around forms as I read them: not as keys that determine the texts in advance, but as reigning structures that help us to unfold each text anew in the moment of reading. These are forms, as I call them, “under pressure”: forms that variously respond to and are shaped by the pressures of their presents, whether of neoliberalism, of climate catastrophe, or of a secularism that seeks to conscript them. I do not offer my readings as a “solution” to these texts—as, in other words, the only way to interpret them. The forms I identify across one group of texts are non-exhaustive; while I see the serial as an entrée into Nelson and Moten, for example, this is not to say that one could not also read their works for an elliptical form. Most crucial is that I strive to read for a postsecular sensibility in each text that has, for the most part, gone unnoticed by critical scholarship, and to think about how the text’s form mobilizes and engenders such a sensibility. In other words, I ask how form constructs an affect, discursive effect, or a temporality as it extends beyond and collapses the notion of an envisioned homogeneous and empty secularity.

Chapter One, “Between Transience and Eternity: Allegory in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” takes up an exploration of allegory by turning to one of the most prominent contemporary novels in the discourse of “postsecular” literature: Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Road*. While many critics have remarked upon McCarthy’s “biblical style,” and *The Road*’s, in particular, godly invocations, few have analyzed the prominence and significance of its allegorical features. A post-apocalyptic tale that tracks father and son’s journey through a desecrated and desolated wasteland from Appalachia to the Gulf of Mexico, *The Road*’s father flickers between (seemingly appropriate) nihilism and (irrational) hope, marching on in a world where living seems both impossible and undesirable. Father and son are “carrying the fire,”⁸⁹ McCarthy’s nameless father reassures his son repeatedly, the only light in a barren land. I read the text for its multiple allegories: most obviously, that of climate change—father and son are figured as remnants of an uninhabitable land—but also the biblical allegory of Abraham and Isaac, particularly as the episode of the Akedah is interpreted by Søren Kierkegaard. When such allegories are read together, I argue, they point neither to mere nihilism amid climate catastrophe nor to a salvific messianism, but instead to an indeterminate, postsecular faith. Indeed, the father maintains an Abrahamic faith in his own survival—and more crucially, that of his son—that, in light of roaming cannibals and limited resources, can appropriately be deemed absurd. I draw on Benjamin to argue that allegory moves us to a space of disjunctive repetition and reiteration that enables the novel to retain a sense of what I call “ongoingness” against the non-futurity its catastrophic landscape seems to impose throughout. If it is Benjamin’s notion of “homogeneous, empty time” that I have sought to complicate as it is ascribed universally to modernity, secularism, and life-worlds, then it is Benjamin’s notion of allegory, his contemplative recovery of a tradition, that is perhaps most suitable for conceptualizing our present of horizonless futures and iterative catastrophe.

⁸⁸ See Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald-Smith, eds., *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 8.

⁸⁹ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 83.

Chapter Two, “Just a Little Different: Postsecular Metafiction in J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04*,” turns to the form of metafiction, exploring two instances of it from the mid-twentieth and early-twenty-first century so as to consider how the postsecular is reconfigured as neoliberalism becomes increasingly hegemonic. I look first to poet, novelist, and essayist Ben Lerner’s *10:04*—a metafictional text that takes up its own mechanisms of production, playing with the spectral modes of finance capital, what I call *messianism*, only to subvert them in its own *messianic* operation. Lerner’s narrator coincides very nearly in biographical detail with Lerner the author and is commissioned, in the opening scene, to write a novel. Yet the novel the narrator will ultimately deliver is, in a refrain that recurs throughout, “just a little different,” thus subverting the promissory mode of late capitalism.

While *10:04*’s metafictional tension is generated by its messianic operation, *Franny and Zooey*’s happens in its narrator’s overt denial of the story’s mystical content. *Franny and Zooey*, originally published as two short stories in the *New Yorker*, details the college student Franny Glass’s spiritual awakening or mental breakdown: which of the two depends on the perspective we inhabit. The story plays with multiple layers of fictionality, drawing attention to its narrative construction and its simultaneous reliance on and denial of the various spiritual sources that undergird the text. In both *10:04* and *Franny and Zooey*, I argue, metafiction comes to destabilize the site of the stable subject that grounds theories of secularism and religion, as author, narrator, and protagonist are reconfigured, blurred. Such a metafictional (and here postsecular) operation begins before the contemporary; my exploration of *Franny and Zooey* reveals that post-war fiction was already grappling with the limits of the secular conception of the subject. This metafictional destabilization of the secular subject, I argue, is related to the increasing destabilization wrought by neoliberalism itself, the seeds of which are visible even in the post-war years of “liberalism” proper at the time of Salinger’s writing. In comparing these two metafictional forms at two historical junctures, I ultimately argue that these postsecular literary forms exist in a dialectical relationship to neoliberalism: they are antagonistic toward its reigning rationality, the transformation of all men to *homo oeconomicus*,⁹⁰ and yet they are refracted by and produced in a neoliberal moment that is, as I argue, itself postsecular.

If metafiction works to trouble the site of the subject, what happens when plot—still present in novels like Lerner’s and Salinger’s—gives way to something episodic and reiterative? Two authors working in the realm of both contemporary poetics as well as criticism are Fred Moten and Maggie Nelson; for both, the two genres are not always separable. Chapter Three, “Seriality Beyond Secularization: Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* and Fred Moten’s *All That Beauty*,” attends to Moten’s *All that Beauty* (2019), a book published by a poetry press, though brimming with the author’s usual theoretical references and movement of the sort that one finds in the essay, and to Nelson’s *Bluets* (2008), a text much more difficult to categorize generically but which I call a lyric essay. Both these works, this chapter argues, can be characterized by an iterative, serial quality. Like Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, each poem of Moten’s or “proposition” of Nelson’s moves and builds episodically, eschewing narrative temporality for that which accrues and reiterates. I begin the chapter by examining *Bluets*, arguing that its serial aphoristic structure stages the kenotic dissolution of the will and the subject. Next, I turn to Moten’s seriality, arguing that it functions not as dissolution but as rupture, trouble, and undoing-towards-flesh. Moten draws on a

⁹⁰ See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

form he calls “arpeggiation” to shuttle between a linearity and, to use Nelson’s terminology, a kind of “static eternity.” The chapter then draws on the resources of psychoanalysis to read Moten and Nelson for an asynchronous *Nachträglichkeit* and, most importantly, for their serial cuts. Here, I am interested in what defies the linear within serial forms, which have often been cast as mechanistic, monotonous, modern, and—of course—secular. The chapter finally turns to such contemporary writing on the serial from across a range of disciplines to ask how we might revise our understanding of both the form and “the modern” in light of what lies in the cut.

The final chapter, “‘The void which is fullness’: The Elliptical in Anne Carson and Ariana Reines,” examines works by Canadian classicist, poet, translator and essayist Anne Carson as well as American poet Ariana Reines where the elliptical and negative space reign. I read Carson’s *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (2005) alongside brief forays into her *Glass, Irony and God* (1995) and *Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* and Reines’s *A Sand Book* (2019). I attend to the figure of emptiness within each alongside the Kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum*, tracing how the texts play with ellipsis and the processual expansion of divine absence in a subversion of the standard account of secular modernity as the moment of God’s evacuation of the world. Carson is fascinated by the absences that structure Sappho’s Fragment 31: what begins as a seeming love poem, a poem of jealousy, even, develops, in Carson’s reading, into the spiritual. Key to Carson’s interest in ellipsis, and in silence, is language’s structural inability to fully translate the ineffable. As she describes in an interview: “There is the space where a thought would be, but which you can’t get hold of. I love that space. It’s the reason I like to deal with fragments. Because no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn’t be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, so spooky.”⁹¹ Some thoughts remain fundamentally unknowable, inarticulable within language. Silence allows for mere suggestion, for a speculative *as if* that operates beyond a certainty either theological or secular. Reines’s work, meanwhile, mobilizes content from various religious traditions, drawing them together in a mosaic of quotidian, New York life. Various referred to as “occult”—the author is also a practicing astrologist—Reines, like Carson, can be better understood as concerned with the structural failures of language and striving to capture the invisible precisely as words—and the world itself—fail. As in Lerner, Reines moves between playfulness and sincerity, camp and messianism: until such humor makes way for a final section of *A Sand Book* titled “Mosaic,” a transcription of words that “aren’t mine” but were delivered, didactically, from the sun in a moment of bliss and spiritual transformation. While Carson turns to the elliptical and to that which language cannot capture, Reines moves from decreation to creation, transforming the elliptical into a kind of prophetic speech.

What *The Secular Undone* sets out to argue, then, is that Fessenden is right to claim that much of the existing literary criticism that engages the “postsecular”—and indeed, much of literary criticism writ large—has been bound to a secularist portrayal of temporality: one that is progressive, where what is named postsecular promises liberation from the shackles of secularist ideology and an imagined monolithic religion of days’ past alike.⁹² And yet this project aims to

⁹¹ Anne Carson, “Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88,” Interview by Will Aitken, *The Paris Review*, No. 88, Issue 171, Fall 2004, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5420/the-art-of-poetry-no-88-anne-carson>.

⁹² As Fessenden points out, Hungerford’s conception of “postmodern belief” epitomizes this progressive temporality in that she defines such belief as a “belief without content”—a belief freed of religious institution and context. I will go on to further discuss Hungerford in Chapters One and Two. See Fessenden, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” 157.

reveal that the term “postsecular” itself can yet be salvaged if it takes as its premise the instability and contingency of the relationship between the secular and the religious. The texts in this study serve as examples of works whose discursive and material effects cannot be adequately described by the usual vocabulary of the secular order—indeed, I would say that to call Nelson’s *Bluets* “religious” or “secular” would be to obfuscate its myriad operations, which cannot be subsumed to such a binary but work instead to trouble it. Such a reading of this varied archive of contemporary literature does not serve as yet another way of understanding one particular site of alterity, but instead as a means of seeing that *time has never been only homogeneous and empty*—even the time of modern Western literature.

CHAPTER ONE:

Between Transience and Eternity:

Allegory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Allegory is most abidingly there where transience and eternity most nearly collide.

— Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (2019)

This study begins where perhaps any study must in 2024: with the question—controversial though it may be⁹³—of the Anthropocene, and how we and contemporary literature are formed and deformed by it. In the years since the renowned chemist Paul Crutzen revived the term Anthropocene, suggesting it as a way to register “the central role of mankind in geology and ecology”⁹⁴ in our current geological epoch, the field of what has been named “Climate Fiction” (“Cli-fi”) has only continued to proliferate in Anglo-American literature. Of course, such works long predate the new millennium as well: as Adam Trexler points out,

[h]uman-altered climates were of grave concern to authors before greenhouse gas emissions attracted wide scientific interest. Terraforming—the purposeful transformation of a planet’s climate (usually) to make it more hospitable to humans—surfaced in science fiction at last as early as 1951, with Arthur C. Clarke’s *The Sands of Mars*; Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965) introduced terraforming to a wide audience....The first novel directly concerned with anthropogenic greenhouse effect seems to have been written in 1971 (Ursula LeGuin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*), and several others appeared in the late 1970s, but it wasn’t until the late 1980s that climate change novels began to be written in significant numbers.⁹⁵

The 1990s saw more climate fiction alongside a growing body of scientific evidence for climate change and emerging “calls for international climate policy.”⁹⁶ In Trexler’s analysis, almost all contemporary Cli-fi addresses the tension between the now indisputable existence of global warming and the human failure to act. To address this tension is no easy formal or aesthetic task—indeed, as Amitav Ghosh puts it, “the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture

⁹³ Indeed, a panel of two dozen geologists recently voted down a proposal by the Anthropocene Working Group to end the Holocene (which began 11,700 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age) and officially inaugurate the Anthropocene. See “The Anthropocene is dead. Long live the Anthropocene,” *Science*, March 5, 2024, <https://www.science.org/content/article/anthropocene-dead-long-live-anthropocene>.

⁹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time,” *History and Theory* 57, no. 1 (March 2018): 3.

⁹⁵ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 8.

⁹⁶ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 9.

in general.”⁹⁷ Climate Fiction often reinvents and refigures the genres of narrative as “the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire.”⁹⁸ In such a contemporary literary landscape, it is *form*, as opposed to genre, that will be instructive in our investigation, as the boundaries and contours of genre are being remixed, reformulated.

But amidst the boom of Climate Fiction—and the concurrent boom of criticism that has scurried to keep up with it⁹⁹—few have remarked upon another boundary shift that the archive refigures: not just one of genre, but one in the relation between fiction and the secular. Indeed, the recent scholarship on Cli-fi has largely failed to acknowledge that much in this new archive exceeds and collapses the boundaries of the secular, reexamining the human and sometimes humanism in a mode neither religious nor secular but, along the lines that I have outlined, *postsecular*. Take, for example, Sheila Heti’s *Pure Colour* (2022), as discussed in the introduction, which reworks Kabbalistic tropes in its narrativization of “the first draft of existence”¹⁰⁰ in advance of its destruction by God; Margaret Atwood’s post-apocalyptic *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013), which draws on Augustine, Taoism, and more; or, finally, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), whose Kierkegaardian vision of a faith beyond universal ethics will be explored in this chapter. Through the production of wonder and enchantment amidst ecological dread, and through new cosmologies—often fashioned in texts that otherwise bear the hallmarks of narrative realism—many works of Climate Fiction present a challenge to the category of the secular.¹⁰¹ This is, perhaps, hardly a surprise: the very concept of the Anthropocene transforms our relationship to temporality and recenters (as well as *decenters*) the human, demanding new concepts, imaginaries, and terminology. As Claire Colebrook writes, the Anthropocene serves as “a threshold at which

⁹⁷ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 18. Ghosh, remarking on Climate Fiction’s segregation from so-called literary fiction, concludes that there exist “peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents to what is now regarded as serious fiction.” (15) *The Road* will prove an interesting case study precisely because it challenges this genre distinction, occupying the terrain of both Cli-Fi and Ghosh’s “serious fiction.”

⁹⁸ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 14.

⁹⁹ For a sample of just a few of the recent anthologies, monographs, and articles that have sprung up around the genre, see Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra, eds, *Cli-Fi: A Companion* (Bristol: Peter Lang, 2019); Ann E. Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Susanne Leikam and Julia Leyda, eds, “‘What’s in a Name?’ Cli-Fi and American Studies,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 62, no. 1 (2017): 109–38; Manjana Milkoreit, “The Promise of Climate Fiction: Imagination, Storytelling, and the Politics of the Future,” *Reimagining Climate Change*, ed. Paul Wapner and Hilal Elver (London: Routledge, 2016), 171–91; Debra J. Rosenthal and Jason de Lara Molesky, eds., *Cli-Fi and Class: Socioeconomic Justice in Contemporary American Climate Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023); and Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, “Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre,” *Dissent* 60, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 58–61.

¹⁰⁰ Heti, *Pure Colour*, 4.

¹⁰¹ On the productive tension between disenchantment and enchantment in works of ecofiction, see Ryan Palmer, “Enchanting Irruptions. Wonder, Noir, and the Environmental Imaginary,” Uppsala: Department of English, Uppsala University, 2017. Palmer frames “re-enchantment” as “an antidote to environmentalist inertia” (9) and to the disenchantment that tends to accompany defeatist climate narratives, but he stages the dialectic between such disenchantment and re-enchantment within the terms of Max Weber and Jane Bennett. In other words, he does not imagine his archive as refiguring the grounds or terms of the secular.

all ‘our’ concepts of horizon, milieu, ethos, and polity are voided”¹⁰²—it only makes sense that the concepts endowed by secularism would begin to erode, unravel too.

But of course, as Pieter Vermeulen points out, the anticipation that our world, or the world as we know it, will soon end, hardly begins with the contemporary dawn of the Anthropocene discourse, or even with earlier centuries of eco-awareness.¹⁰³ The earlier apocalyptic intimation “is customarily traced back to ancient Iranian prophet Zarathustra”¹⁰⁴ (c. 1500-1000 BCE), the founder of Zoroastrianism, whose “sense of urgency about the demise of the world”¹⁰⁵ is thought to have influenced Jewish and Christian traditions. As Vermeulen argues, such intimations of the world’s destruction did not simply disappear with the advent of so-called secular modernity, as is evident in contemporary literary fiction. “That the institutions of modernity itself are at stake explains the affinity between apocalyptic musings and the Anthropocene: the Anthropocene is, among other things, a name for the exhaustion of modern forms of life,” he writes. “Anthropocene apocalypse ... is just as much *post*-apocalyptic (as it imagines the aftermath rather than the destruction event itself) as it is *pre*-modern (as it obsesses over the demise of modern achievements).”¹⁰⁶ Vermeulen’s claims are worth unpacking: here, the *post*- (future-oriented) Anthropocene aligns with what Vermeulen calls the *pre*- (modern) traditions of apocalyptic thought, the former drawing on the resources of the latter as the very forms of modernity reveal themselves as voided (to echo Colebrook), exhausted, *not up to the task*. By invoking the long tradition of apocalyptic thinking—all that is designated by the “premodern”—Vermeulen gestures toward the spiritual, gnostic, and other textual elements that destabilize the boundaries of “the secular modern.” And yet in retaining the designation of “premodern,” he relegates apocalyptic thinking (by his own admission, continuous) to a binary past, retaining the very dyadic categories (modern and pre-) he claims the Anthropocene exhausts. This chapter takes up a reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, a foundational text in Climate Fiction often read as seminal to the genre of the “post-apocalyptic,”¹⁰⁷ revealing how its dual allegories—of both climate change and the Kierkegaardian Akedah—in fact catapult it beyond an apocalyptic or eschatological temporality, and demand that we understand it not in light of a “pre-modern” but a postsecular, indeterminate faith.

Much scholarship has been produced on the Pulitzer-prize-winning *The Road*, a tale set in the aftermath of an unnamed catastrophe, in which father and son embark on a trek for survival in a devastated and largely desolated earth. The text is instructive for us here both because it has

¹⁰² Claire Colebrook, “Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Change Is Not Really Human,” *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 188.

¹⁰³ Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 151.

¹⁰⁴ Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, 151.

¹⁰⁵ Greg Garrad, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 85.

¹⁰⁶ Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, 151.

¹⁰⁷ Vermeulen himself subscribes to this commonplace reading, alongside many others. See Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, 150; as well as Lydia R. Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative,” *Studies in the Novel* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 218–236; Tim Edwards, “The End of the Road: Pastoralism, and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 55–61; Ashley Kunsu, “‘Maps of the World in Its Becoming’: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 57–74; Petter Skult, “The Role of Place in the Post-Apocalypse: Contrasting *The Road* and *World War Z*,” *Studia Neophilologia* 87 (2015): 104–115; Inger-Anne Søfting, “Between Dystopia and Utopia: The Post-Apocalyptic Discourse of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *English Studies* 94, no. 6 (2013): 704–713.

become so canonical to the field of “Climate Fiction,” and because, in its blending of the “generic” with the “literary”—its simultaneous reception as “Sci Fi,” “post-apocalyptic,” and “literary fiction”¹⁰⁸—it is exemplary of the Anthropocene’s restructuring of form and genre. Though few have understood the work as specifically postsecular¹⁰⁹ as I will propose, its biblical and theological valences can hardly be missed by critics. Indeed, Petra Mundik argues in her *Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy* that McCarthy’s novels “are enriched by a system of metaphysics that draws on the teachings of various esoteric traditions, namely, Gnosticism, Christian mysticism, and Buddhism,”¹¹⁰ viewing *The Road* as a culmination “of moral and natural evil, violence, suffering, darkness and despair, but with just enough hope and goodness to imbue the pages with a hint of soteriological potential.”¹¹¹ Amy Hungerford, meanwhile, reads *The Road* as another instance of her thesis that post-1960 American literature retains the formal elements of “belief” in the absence of specific doctrinal content: “In privileging style over other sources of connection to scripture McCarthy’s approach to the bible joins that of Alter and Kermode, who argue for the importance of scriptural aesthetics (of enchantment, power and radiance) over doctrinal or historical content.”¹¹² Such scriptural aesthetics, however divorced from doctrinal content for Hungerford, still function as a form of religious authority:

The turn to religious authority as a renewable resource for literature can be seen as an attempt to restore to literature the traditional cultural authority that deconstruction and multiculturalist critique called into question in the latter half of the twentieth century—though this turn is of little help to teachers struggling to keep the Bible secular by representing it as literature in their public-school classrooms. For the novelists, it provides authority that can be mobilized at the level of feeling: we feel the significance of Morrison or McCarthy’s best novels through the allusive webs and logics that draw the Bible into their orbit.¹¹³

As Hungerford’s reading reveals, McCarthy is hardly an author whose works have been unrecognized for their theological allusions and style (unlike certain others that we will encounter

¹⁰⁸ For more on the ways in which McCarthy’s work—and McCarthy as a figure—has confronted and rescrambled American designations of genre, see James Dorson, “Cormac McCarthy and the Genre Turn in Contemporary Literary Fiction,” *European Journal of American studies* 12, no. 3 (2017): online.

¹⁰⁹ The only other account of *The Road* as “postsecular” can be found in Spencer Morrison, “Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson, and the Responsibility to Protect,” *American Literary History* 31, no. 3 (July 2019): 458–481. Morrison’s use of “postsecular” differs from mine in ways that will be further clarified over the course of the chapter, however. Most primarily, his concept is inspired by the work of Amy Hungerford and John McClure: “a category denoting a religious culture in which subjects feel the pull of spiritual forces yet nevertheless do not subscribe to institutionalized faiths” (458). It is also bound to the notion of a public pluralism, and in this way, clearly indebted to Habermas’s concept. See Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), and John McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

¹¹⁰ Petra Mundik, *Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy* (Santa Fe: The University of New Mexico Press, 2016).

¹¹¹ Mundik, *Bloody and Barbarous God*, 287.

¹¹² Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 87.

¹¹³ Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 136.

later in this study). But what the previous approach demonstrates is the obverse side of the secular-religious binary: where some texts are assumed, too hastily, to be secular, others are cast in too quickly with the category of the “religious,” here even ascribed a “religious authority.” Rather than read *The Road* as “turning to religious authority” or even providing or constructing its own, I argue that we must understand it beyond the categories of the “religious” or “secular” that secularism constructs, as equally skeptical of either such concept.¹¹⁴

Such a postsecular reading, as I will draw out, can attune us to the temporality of *The Road*’s allegories, complicating straightforward conceptions of the text as deterministically apocalyptic (in either the “religious” or “secular” sense). Indeed, my sense of *The Road*’s temporality operates against that of many scholars, who read its ending as, variously, a recourse to reproductive futurity¹¹⁵ or “nostalgic consolation.”¹¹⁶ That the son escapes death—the fate of his father—and that the novel ends not in the tone of its earlier scenes of violence or desolate emptiness, but with a meditation on the scales of a fish, a creature, now extinct, from the before times, is cast by Sarah Dillon, for example, as an inability to stay with the “ongoingness” of Anthropocenic destruction, in the terms of Donna Haraway.¹¹⁷ The figural repetitions and reiterations, which, I will argue, are constitutive of allegory, are in Dillon’s reading antithetical to the *now* of Anthropocene time, even as such time is itself radically disjointed, comprehensible only through a mode that shuttles between the geological and the human scales, the past (of projected origin) and an imminently approaching future that, for humans, will not be one. To stay with the “ongoingness” is to stay *disjointed*, stretched across scales, hovering in and around the void between past and present, part and whole that is perhaps no better figured than through the allegorical form.¹¹⁸

I thus explore *The Road* for its multiple allegories: most obviously, that of climate change—father and son are figured as remnants of an uninhabitable land—but also the biblical allegory of Abraham and Isaac, particularly as the episode of the Akedah is interpreted by Søren Kierkegaard. What interests me is the temporality that emerges when such allegories are read

¹¹⁴ Dana Phillips has claimed that the scholarly assessment of McCarthy’s oeuvre more generally tends to fall into two camps: those who understand him in the tradition of Southern writing (along the lines of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor) “tend to want to find in each of his novels something redemptive or regenerative, something affirming mysteries ... of a Christian or Gnostic variety.” The other camp reads McCarthy as a Western author, finding in his career “a move toward wider relevance and broader worldview” aligned with figures in a broader Western tradition such as Dostoevsky, Conrad, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Along these lines, such critics tend to focus on McCarthy’s “nihilism” more than his arcs of redemption. My reading of *The Road* as postsecular—and of McCarthy’s movement beyond and skepticism toward both the “religious” and “secularity”—might seem to sit somewhere between these camps. See Dana Phillips, “History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” *American Literature* 68, no. 2 (1996): 434–35.

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Pieter Vermeulen, who claims that the post-apocalyptic genre, of which *The Road* is a part, “is often marked by a conspicuous *denial* of extinction, as these texts’ reluctance to imagine an alternative to current forms of life ends to turn them into exercises in continuity rather than into confrontations with rupture.” Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, 150.

¹¹⁶ See Sarah Dillon, “The Horror of the Anthropocene,” *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 6, no. 1 (February 2018): 11.

¹¹⁷ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 49, cited in Sarah Dillon, “The Horror of the Anthropocene,” 19.

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey makes a similar argument in support of allegory as the most appropriate mode and figure for thinking climate change. See Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

together, one decoupled from either “religious” or “secular” apocalyptic imagination. Instead, drawing on Walter Benjamin, I argue that this use of allegory mobilizes a space of repetition and reiteration that enables the novel to retain an open future against the non-futurity its catastrophic landscape seems to impose throughout, even as allegory itself arises from an intimation of the world’s physical impermanence. Read through this lens, the post-apocalyptic novel reveals not only the precarity of the human, as McCarthy’s characters face starvation, illness, and cannibals, but the precarity of universal humanism—of Kierkegaard’s ethical universal—in this new lawless land. Here, allegory generates a narrative temporality beyond eschatology, offering instead, through its fragments and figures, a time of indeterminacy: one structured not by humanistic ethics but by postsecular faith beyond the human. Such a time might not stay with the “ongoingness” of time if it is imagined as merely historical or linear. But it *does* stay with the “ongoingness” of an Anthropocene time that is itself constellated both by and beyond the human, a time always ruptured, rupturing.

I. ALLEGORY AS FORM

Allegory has the longest history of any form that I will consider in this study, and has been taken up, by turns, as a genre, a mode, a technique, or a rhetorical device. Here, I consider it as form—though hardly an ideal or transcendent one, as will become clear—with which one can compose and interpret. As many scholars of allegory point out, the term has Greek origins: “*allos* (other) and *agoreuin* (to speak in public),” producing the sense of “other-speaking.”¹¹⁹ This “other-speaking” encodes the *double sense* one tends to associate with the allegorical, as well as its spiritual, non-human (other) resonances. As Rita Copeland and Peter Struck write, “Allegorical interpretation (allegoresis) is understood as explaining a work, or a figure in myth, or any created entity, as if there were another sense to which it referred, that is, presuming the work or figure to be encoded with meaning intended by the author or a higher spiritual authority.”¹²⁰ In its ancient Greek conception, allegorical interpretation was the search for “a mystical or philosophical truth,” one both concealed and immediate.¹²¹ In Roman times, the noun *allegoria*, with its emphasis on “speaking,” allowed for a rhetorical reception of the concept, which came to acquire “a rather narrow sense as an ornamental device involving a double meaning (saying one thing and meaning another),” as in Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*.¹²² Already in this brief genealogy from antiquity, the competing valences of “allegory” come to the fore: as Copeland and Struck put it, “how can a verbal trope, which is rather restricted in its value, share a term (and a category) with a profound form of hidden spiritual meaning? How can ‘allegory’ be a fact or event in Scripture that is imbued with sacred mystery beyond itself, as well as an ornamental device of language?”¹²³ Indeed, how could allegory operate across the realms of both the sacred and the profane?

¹¹⁹ Rita Copeland and Peter Struck, “Introduction,” *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, edited by Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), online, 1.

¹²⁰ Copeland and Struck, “Introduction,” 1.

¹²¹ Copeland and Struck, “Introduction,” 2.

¹²² Copeland and Struck, “Introduction,” 3.

¹²³ Copeland and Struck, “Introduction,” 3.

We might argue that from the very beginning, allegory disrupted the boundaries of these concepts, was indeed, *avant la lettre*, postsecular. Jane K. Brown defines allegory as “a mode of representation which renders the supernatural visible.”¹²⁴ While most definitions are less provocative (and some much more capacious—Morton Bloomfield argues that “allegory is that which is established by interpretation,”¹²⁵ for example), there is something to be gleaned in Brown’s claim about allegory’s attempt to conjure what is *invisible*, a movement across concrete, immanent referents to a realm of abstraction, a “second sense” or “other speaking” beyond the text at hand. Bloomfield, in keeping with other work in the field, distinguishes “prophetic or horizontal” allegory and “simple or vertical” allegory. The former “works on history to project a meaning into the future” and is “only fully understandable in retrospection,” while the second “finds an immediate meaning in events, real or literary” and “may—but not necessarily—be understood immediately.”¹²⁶ In the New Testament, one finds prophetic, horizontal allegories—for example, events from the Old Testament are often assigned eschatological meaning. And yet, as Bloomfield points out, vertical allegory is also amply present in Old Testament exegesis.¹²⁷ Even conceptions of horizontal and vertical allegory—one eschatological, the other functioning through simultaneity of substitution—cannot be differentiated by designations of “sacred” and “profane,” as both proliferate in so-called religious and secular commentaries.

It was Walter Benjamin, of course, who did the most to reassess allegory in the twentieth century, rehabilitating it as a form comprised of fragmentation and restitution—an antinomy whose dual movement I will discuss later in further detail. It is no wonder, perhaps, in light of this vision of allegory, with its disjunctive capacity, that it becomes a dominant form in our era of planetary climate crisis. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey has argued,

This uptick is attributable to the fact that allegory appears in moments of historical crisis, as Walter Benjamin has demonstrated.... Decline is represented in Benjaminian allegory and Anthropocene as ruins. In the Anthropocene context this is quite literal, as our reading of geological epochs is dependent on the legibility of fossils and radiocarbon decay. As such, both produce allegorical speculations on *the future as ruins*. The recognition of this seemingly new disjunctive relationship between the human and the planetary environment represents a crisis of ecological modernity in which allegory appears as one of its primary narrative records.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Jane K. Brown, *The Persistence of Allegory: Drama and Neoclassicism from Shakespeare to Wagner* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 5.

¹²⁵ Morton W. Bloomfield, “Allegory as Interpretation,” *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1972): 301.

¹²⁶ Bloomfield, “Allegory as Interpretation,” 307–8.

¹²⁷ As Bloomfield notes, this is especially true of the Alexandrian School, and of Origen in particular. Bloomfield, “Allegory as Interpretation,” 308. For a reading of how “incarnational theology was crucial in the development in Origen’s hermeneutical/allegorical theory and thus arguably for text interpretation in the West altogether,” see Daniel Boyarin, “Origen as theorist of allegory: Alexandrian contexts,” *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), online, 5.

¹²⁸ DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 6.

If, as in Benjamin, allegory turns on the potential for mistranslation—the void between expression and communication¹²⁹—in the Anthropocene, disjunction comes to structure the relationship between human and planet, past and future. Indeed, in Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, his 1925 habilitation thesis on the allegorical Baroque German mourning play, the *Trauerspiel* is contrasted with the redemptive medieval mystery play as well as with the “metaphysical” mode of classic tragedy. Here, the allegories of the *Trauerspiel* create a “state of emergency without redemption,” which Howard Caygill claims results in an “evacuation of eschatology.”¹³⁰ We are no longer in the genre of tragic catastrophe of Christian redemption, but, through the disjuncture of the allegorical, trapped “in the dramatic predicament of the ‘hopelessness of the earthly condition.’”¹³¹ Catastrophe, in the *Trauerspiel*, is made typical, and the genre, in Benjamin’s rendition of it, comes to be defined by “the mourning for a perpetual and irresolvable state of emergency.”¹³² With this in mind, I turn to allegory—as a form that figures disjunction and fragmentation, that from its very inception, has defied the boundaries that secular criticism retroactively applies to contain it,¹³³ and that allows contemporary authors to evoke the misalignment between past and future that constitutes our Anthropocene present. It is with allegory that *The Road* evokes two seemingly contradictory senses of “other-speaking”: that of climate change and that of Kierkegaard’s rendition of the Akedah, or Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac. Through the dialectical interplay of both allegories, the competing voices and evocations of past and future, *The Road*, as in Benjamin’s conception of the *Trauerspiel*, moves beyond the eschatological, and in the face of iterative catastrophe, as I will argue, draws out a non-teleological, postsecular faith.

II. “SHORN OF ITS GROUND”: ALLEGORIES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

The Road is often referred to by scholars as “post-apocalyptic” because it is set in the wake of an unspecified, societal, and earth-devastating shift: whether environmental or otherwise is never explicitly elucidated. The reader must infer from clues the extent of the catastrophe, its consequences on the human and non-human realm. Such a dystopia is often figured through the language of emptiness, barrenness—and indeed, godlessness: “With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn’t sure. He hadn’t kept a calendar for years. They were moving south.”¹³⁴ The “he”—who will remain nameless, as will both protagonists throughout—is the father of the tale, a role whose allegorical purchase I will explore in greater detail later. For now, we might note how what I will read as an allegory for an Anthropocenic world is figured as unbound from calendrical time, but, in a twist on the

¹²⁹ Here I draw on Howard Caygill’s reading of Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. See Howard Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory,” *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), online, 2.

¹³⁰ Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory,” 4.

¹³¹ Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory,” 4.

¹³² Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory,” 4.

¹³³ See, for example, Copeland and Struck’s claim that “secular and sacred conceptions of allegory could be seen to co-exist in the same text.” Copeland and Struck, “Introduction,” 1.

¹³⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 4.

Benjaminian figure of “empty homogeneity,” *empty* even in its liberation from calendar. Indeed, all has become unmoored, ungrounded: “He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone.”¹³⁵ McCarthy is known for the “biblical cadences” of his prose, its short, staccato emphasis on surface reminiscent of the uncanny Old Testament style that Erich Auerbach so famously traces. Such a style, as Petra Mundik argues, “hint[s] at the possibility that this ‘barren, silent, godless’ world has been abandoned by its creator, rather than never having had a creator in the first place.”¹³⁶ Here the late world has become “ashes,” ruin; “everything uncoupled from its shoring.” Claire Colebrook’s claim that the Anthropocene voids all concepts of horizon, milieu, ethos, and polity finds resonance in this image of uncoupling: the winds themselves carry the dust of the late world “to and fro in the void.” This imagery of the old world’s expiration, some might even argue, of secularization, becomes further pronounced in a later passage: “It’s snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom.”¹³⁷ As the “host” refers to the “bread consecrated in the Eucharist, regarded as the body of Christ sacrificially offered,”¹³⁸ Mundik has read this scene as emblematic of the “demise of traditional Christianity” as well as the “ephemerality of religious symbols” in McCarthy.¹³⁹

That the text moves beyond Christianity in its doctrinal and institutional forms seems certainly to be true. But to ascribe secularization to the text as a whole—or even to its allegorizing of climate change—would be to read too hastily. Instead, multiple and various temporalities are evoked through such allegories. Take, for example, the following passage—one of but a few flashbacks that offers more details about the time before that of the narrative:

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all.¹⁴⁰

A dystopian description of roads crawling with refugees—an image that could come from any number of contemporary headlines—gives way to a meditation on “the frailty of everything” as “old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night.” Extinction happens in live time for

¹³⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 11.

¹³⁶ Mundik, *Bloody and Barbarous God*, 299.

¹³⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 16.

¹³⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, “host.”

¹³⁹ Mundik, *Bloody and Barbarous God*, 307.

¹⁴⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 28.

our protagonists, an experience they reflect on throughout, as “the last instance of a thing takes the class with it,” and animals, objects, and concepts from the late world simply cease to exist. The myth of eternity—“ever”—is here smashed to literal ruin (“ruined aviators”), allegorized quite literally into fragment (“refugees shrouded up” and “creedless shells”). The fiction of a future, and more aptly, of an *ever*, a teleological eternity, cannot be sustained even in the eyes of the novel’s young witness. Allegory, and the allegory of the Anthropocene more specifically, fragments futurity.

But in McCarthy’s rendering, such allegoresis has another temporal movement also, one that entails memory:

Everything was alight. As if the lost sun were returning at last. The snow orange and quivering. A forest fire was making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them, flaring and shimmering against the overcast like the northern lights. Cold as it was he stood there a long time. The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.¹⁴¹

Here, forest fires, a recurring image throughout the text (in a later passage, the father and son will encounter corpses that have seemingly succumbed to them), are notable in that they are not, unlike those passages we examined earlier, cast as barren, empty, or ashy, but as “shimmering,” “alight”—“the lost sun . . . returning at last.” The colorful beauty of the scene, however devastating its implications, motivates a different temporality: the text lands not on the fragments of the future but turns to the past, “the color of it mov[ing] something in him long forgotten.” The passage ends with a string of imperatives as the narrative slips into the father’s focalization: “Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.” Images of Anthropocene horror evoke a list-like call to remember that which came before the devastation, indeed, to pray, recite, or invoke it, as in the original definition of litany.¹⁴² Even the barren world demands a response beyond the secular, an attempt to constellate the present through the past.

We might trace these movements—from the fragmentation of the future to the call to reconstitute the past—to the Benjaminian double-movement of allegory more generally, or to its “antinomy.”¹⁴³ As Caygill describes it, “the nihilistic devaluation of the meanings of the world of things and actions [is] accompanied by their reevaluation in allegorical contexts. Meaning is first destroyed and then restored at a higher, allegorical level.”¹⁴⁴ The first movement of allegory is that of fragmentation, achieved through a kind of “spatialization of time”¹⁴⁵: “objects and actions [are]

¹⁴¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 31.

¹⁴² Merriam-Webster, for example, defines litany as “a prayer consisting of a series of invocations and supplications by the leader with alternate responses by the congregation.” See Merriam-Webster Online, “litany,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/litany>.

¹⁴³ Benjamin refers to “the antinomies of the allegorical, the dialectical treatment of which cannot be avoided if the image of the trauerspiel is in fact to be evoked.” See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, translated by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 184.

¹⁴⁴ Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory,” 5.

¹⁴⁵ Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory,” 5. Benjamin describes this spatialization of time as an effect of secularization: “For where it is a matter of making time present in space—and what else is the secularization of time but its transformation into the strictly present?—then the most radical procedure is to make events simultaneous. The

either piled up or stratified according to structures that are indifferent to their natural meaning. It is as if they are words that have been translated into languages that are indifferent to their original meaning.”¹⁴⁶ McCarthy effects this fragmentation of objects and language in several ways: first, in list-like passages of *things*, which in the new world have lost their use, their purchase, in some cases, literally expired, as well as through his use of arcane, sometimes anachronistic language, itself exhausted, odd, out of place for the reader.¹⁴⁷ The result is not a proliferation of meaning but the sense of its devaluation, a loss wrought by the new world order. Such loss comes to the fore explicitly in passages like these:

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.¹⁴⁸

The fragmentation and ruination of referents is made literal as the father witnesses his conceptual world shrink around him, “the sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality.” Ecological and earthly devastation is here figured as linguistic and conceptual exhaustion, as the reordering not just of the planet but of one's truths. And yet such a meditation is delivered in McCarthy's own prose, in which minimal list-like phrases (shorn, as ever in McCarthy, of grammatical conventions) remain interspersed with words and phrases from that “sacred idiom”—the odd “parsible” (not to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary) and “wink out” working to “preserve heat” in a shrinking world.

These are glimmers of Benjamin's second movement, towards restitution—one which never, in *The Road*, reaches anything like full-fledged messianism, but moves us a step beyond pure fragmentation, gathering the novel's ruined signs and allegorizing them into something more. This becomes more visible in a passage late in the novel, as the allegorizing impulse turns in on itself:

The road crossed a dried slough where pipes of ice stood out of the frozen mud like formations in a cave. The remains of an old fire by the side of the road. Beyond that a long

duality of meaning and reality was reflected in the layout of the stage.” Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 209. While *The Road* certainly also has similarities to what Erich Auerbach describes as a kind of blurring of time and space in Genesis 22 (in which the details of time and place are shrouded in obscurity and thus relegated to “background”), that narratological style is distinct from the particular process of fragmentation I am describing here. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁶ Caygill, “Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory,” 5.

¹⁴⁷ Entities also appear in *The Road* that we learn have become completely extinct, existing only within the pages of books, fragments of a ruined past. Crows are one such: “They sat on their folded blankets and watched the road in both directions. No wind. Nothing. After a while the boy said: There's not any crows. Are there? / No. / Just in books. / Yes, just in books. / I didnt think so.” McCarthy, *The Road*, 158.

¹⁴⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 88–9.

concrete causeway. A dead swamp. Dead trees standing out of the gray water trailing gray and relic hagmoss. The silky spills of ash against the curbing. He stood leaning on the gritty concrete rail. Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence.¹⁴⁹

Our Anthropocene allegories are all here as we have come to expect them: pipes inching out of frozen mud like “formations in a cave,” ruins from another era; “the remains of an old fire”; “a dead swamp” and “dead trees” and “relic hagmoss,” the passage’s persistent alliteration and diacope (“A dead swamp. Dead trees standing out of the gray water trailing gray...”) only adding to the sense of repetition and stagnation. Time is stratified by such allegories, in a loop of repetitions that wrest meaning from its objects beyond their fragmentation. And then the second movement arrives, as the father wonders whether “Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made.... The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be.” From amidst the ruined world, *The Road* begins to allegorize its own allegories of fragmentation, offering a “counterspectacle” through which to read history, the world’s past, its constitution, within the frame of its destruction. In the “sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular,”¹⁵⁰ of iterative catastrophe, might we reconstitute the moment of earth’s sacred creation, *The Road* seems to ask—and with it the earth’s sacred idiom? And what would it mean to enact such a reconstitution *not* through the host of christendom (crucially left uncapitalized) but without recourse to a sovereign, a redeemer, whether religious or secular? How, in other words, to stay with the trouble¹⁵¹ while recognizing the sacrality of all that is lost, and all, too, that is left? *The Road* offers some tentative answers to these questions through its mobilization of another allegory: that of Kierkegaard’s reading of the Akedah.

III. BEYOND THE UNIVERSAL: KIERKEGAARDIAN ALLEGORIES

Alan Noble was the first to elucidate the Kierkegaardian allegory in McCarthy’s text, sourcing, in the typescript copy of the first draft of *The Road*, housed among the Cormac McCarthy Papers in the Witliff Collections at Texas State University in San Marcos, a marginal note in which McCarthy wrote “[Kierkegaard: Abraham and Isaac]”—a clear reference to Kierkegaard’s *Fear*

¹⁴⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 274.

¹⁵⁰ “Hydroptic” is another of McCarthy’s obsolete word choices, one which Petra Mundik has investigated. It is, according to Mundik, “an erroneous form of ‘hydropic,’ referring to ‘dropsy,’ which is ‘a morbid condition characterized by the accumulation of watery fluid in the serous cavities or the connective tissues of the body’ (*OED*). Figuratively, ‘hydropic’ can also refer to any ‘insatiable thirst or craving’ (*OED*).” As Mundik argues, “the fact that McCarthy chose the erroneous form ‘hydroptic’ rather than ‘dropic’ is significant in itself, given that the word also appears in its erroneous form in Robert Browning’s ‘A Grammarian’s Funeral,’ where it refers to a ‘soul-droptic with a sacred thirst’ (line 95). Thus McCarthy’s use of the word suggests that the drying up of the divine salitter has left the world thirsting for the sacred.” See Mundik, *Bloody and Barbarous God*, 303.

¹⁵¹ Here I am of course invoking Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, in which she describes “staying with the trouble” as—rather than developing a relationship to futurity—requiring “learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.” See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.

and *Trembling*, the philosopher's meditation on Abraham's binding of Isaac through the pseudonymous authorship of Johannes de Silentio.¹⁵² Noble thus reads in the novel an inversion of the Genesis 22 test of Abraham's faith: where Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac, "the father in *The Road* must make the absurd and unethical decision to preserve the life of his son,"¹⁵³ to perpetuate life in an uninhabitable wasteland with dwindling food, shelter, and infrastructure. In this story it is the choice to maintain life, not sacrifice it, that requires an irrational faith, one that operates against the normative universal and ethical order.¹⁵⁴

Indeed, Noble focuses on the father's absurd faith, which functions as the narrative's locomotive—quite literally what keeps the two characters on the road and, in hopes of a coast, heading south when starving, sleepless, seemingly out of luck. This faith is manifested like a refrain, repeated to the boy when he turns to his father for the reassurance they both need, as in the following passage: "There was a sharp crack from somewhere on the mountain. Then another. It's just a tree falling, he said. It's okay. The boy was looking at the dead roadside trees. It's okay, the man said. All the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later. But not on us. / How do you know? / I just know."¹⁵⁵ As the trees around them topple—as dead as the swamps, the crows, and the various other forms of ecological life that the novel surveils—there is no rational reason why one should *not* fall on our protagonists. And yet the father persists in his faith, not merely for the sake of his son, but for a faith in faith itself—one grounded in the very "incommensurability," to draw on Kierkegaard, between life and its sanction. Throughout *The Road*, we witness as he mobilizes it to move from location to location, to secure resources, to push the pair onward on their journey. In another instance, the characters have run out of food and the son is sure they will die of starvation: "Why do you think we're going to die? / We don't have anything to eat. / We'll find something. / Okay."¹⁵⁶ This is more than mere hope but indeed faith, one seemingly grounded not just in Kierkegaardian incommensurability, but in the being of the child himself. This is clear from the novel's opening pages, which read: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He

¹⁵² Alan Noble, "The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *South Atlantic Review* 76, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 94. While Noble is the first to draw out a sustained reading of the Kierkegaardian allegory, he was not the very first to read the novel alongside Kierkegaard. Both Thomas H. Schaub and Phillip A. Snyder draw on Kierkegaard in passing in their analyses. See Thomas H. Schaub, "Secular Scripture and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Renascence* 61, no. 3 (2009): 153–67, and Philip A. Snyder, "Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (2008): 68–86.

¹⁵³ Noble, "The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," 104.

¹⁵⁴ As Noble points out, it is the man's wife who functions as the voice of the ethical. Appearing in flashbacks, we learn that she committed suicide, unwilling to face the certain fate of rape, starvation, or cannibalization that awaits her. "'I'd take him with me if it weren't for you,'" she claims of their son. To commit sacrifice is no longer on the side of faith but on the side of the universal, what one must do to avoid a crueler fate in a cruel world. See McCarthy, *The Road*, 56, cited in Noble, "The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," 98.

¹⁵⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 35. The novel is full of other such moments of the father providing this seemingly irrational reassurance to the son. Some of this mirrors the famous exchange between Abraham and Isaac on their journey up Mount Moriah in Genesis 22. When Isaac notices the lack of sheep for the offering, he voices concern: "And he said, 'Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offering?' And Abraham said, 'God will see to the sheep for the offering my son.' And the two of them went together." Here Abraham provides the faithful reassurance, in de Silentio's rendition, that God *will* provide the sheep for the offering—even while knowing full well that God has asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac himself. Genesis 22: 7–8, *The Bible*, Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 101.

said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.”¹⁵⁷ The boy—variously figured as a “tabernacle,”¹⁵⁸ some kind of “a god,”¹⁵⁹ and his head a “[g]olden chalice, good to house a god”¹⁶⁰—is cast not merely as the father’s “warrant,” his reason for living, but as a messianic figure, embodied innocence in a world that has lost its way. This warrant, Noble argues, could thus be read as a “God-given duty”¹⁶¹—not, as in Genesis, to sacrifice the son, but to preserve him and the divinity that he represents, even as such preservation is at odds with the ethical obligation to spare the child the further suffering that will undoubtedly come to him in a world that seems inhospitable to human subsistence.

But faith, in de Silentio and in McCarthy, is not characterized by certainty: it is instead the stuff of distress, anxiety, and paradox.¹⁶² For the man (or as de Silentio will refer to Abraham, the “knight”) of faith can never be certain of his own legitimacy. Crucial to de Silentio’s reading of Abraham is that his faithful actions—his readiness to kill Isaac—can never be distinguished from those of a murderer. The faithful will thus always be haunted by the possibility of their illegitimacy; precisely because of the irrationality and the absurdity of the sphere of faith—*because* it supersedes the ethical choice (here, to save one’s son)—it can look interchangeable with the sphere of the individual (or aesthetic) to the outside observer. Kierkegaard, through de Silentio, was interested in precisely this paradox: “For if the ethical—that is, social morality—is the highest and there is in a person no residual incommensurability in some way ... then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had...”¹⁶³ Kierkegaard’s interest is in this “residue” *beyond* the ethics of social morality, beyond the normative social order: might the subject be motivated by more than both the self-interest of the aesthetic sphere and the institutional and social norms of the ethical? This is the paradox of faith: when “the single individual is higher than the universal”¹⁶⁴ in what de Silentio calls a teleological suspension of the ethical—a difficult, lonely position whose psychological consequences de Silentio devotes many pages to considering.

And indeed, the faith of *The Road* is nothing if not anxious, tortured even. We witness the man speak to and even threaten God in sequences more reminiscent of Job than of Abraham: “He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered, Oh God.”¹⁶⁵ The father, evidently ill throughout the novel and coughing with the sickness to which he will eventually succumb, searches for any proof of God from amid the ashes of the former world. Later, this torment will be echoed at various moments, as when the man regrets finding a bunker full of supplies that saves them from starvation (“Even now some part of him wished they’d never found this refuge. Some

¹⁵⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 5.

¹⁵⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 273.

¹⁵⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 172.

¹⁶⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 75.

¹⁶¹ Noble, “The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” 96.

¹⁶² See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 239.

¹⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 234.

¹⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 234.

¹⁶⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 11–12.

part of him always wished it to be over”¹⁶⁶). I thus follow Noble in reading this as an anxious Kierkegaardian faith, and in reading the *ethics* of the novel with the Kierkegaardian allegory in view.

Throughout the novel, the father invokes a dyadic ethical system to explain the horrors of the world to his son: they are the “good guys,”¹⁶⁷ those “carrying the fire”¹⁶⁸—a metaphor imbued with the sanctity of the father’s “warrant,” his pact to preserve the child, “the word of God.” Their goodness is contrasted with the presumed amorality of “the bad guys,”¹⁶⁹ the various cannibals and thieves whom the pair seek to avoid. But each encounter with another human along the roadway chips further away at this normative conception, the lines between good and bad more difficult to parse:

...a person appears on the roadway. He was as burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black. One of his eyes was burnt shut and his hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull. As they passed he looked down. As if he’d done something wrong. His shoes were bound up with wire and coated with roadtar and he sat there in silence, bent over in his rags. The boy kept looking back. Papa? he whispered. What is wrong with the man?

He’s been struck by lightning.

Cant we help him? Papa?

No. We cant help him.

The boy kept pulling at his coat. Papa? he said.

Stop it.

Cant we help him Papa?

No. We cant help him. There’s nothing to be done for him.

They went on. The boy was crying. He kept looking back. When they got to the bottom of the hill the man stopped and looked at him and looked back up at the road. The burned man had fallen over and at that distance you couldnt even tell what it was. I’m sorry, he said. But we have nothing to give him. We have no way to help him. I’m sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it. You know that, dont you? The boy stood looking down. He nodded his head. Then they went on and he didnt look back again.¹⁷⁰

Incidents such as these will be repeated, with variations, throughout the novel. The father insists that they have no means of helping the pitiful figure, himself an allegory, a ruin, as in our earlier

¹⁶⁶ Noble, “The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” 100.

¹⁶⁷ For instances of this phrase, see, for example, McCarthy, *The Road*, 77, 119, 184, 246, 278.

¹⁶⁸ The phrase appears many times throughout the novel, but in a characteristic refrain, the son asks, “We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa? / Yes. We are. / And nothing bad is going to happen to us. / That’s right. / Because we’re carrying the fire. / Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire.” McCarthy, *The Road*, 83. To carry the fire—a divine spark—in and against a strange and hostile world would also seem, of course, to have a Gnostic dimension. For commentary on this element, see Mundik, *A Bloody and Barbarous God*, 311–326.

¹⁶⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 77, for example.

¹⁷⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 50.

reading, of the destruction wrought by ecological catastrophe (whether he was in fact struck by lightning or burnt in one of the forest fires referenced through the novel, we cannot know). But while the pair has no resources to offer the man, we know that they could offer company, a conversation over a fire—a form of human generosity we do see later in the novel. A standard reading would thus take the child to be emblematic of ethics and goodness, Christlike even, in his desire to help the stranger. But a Kierkegaardian reading reminds us of the paradox: while the father might look self-interested, the sphere of self-interest often intersects uncomfortably with that of faith. Indeed, the father does not prioritize the norms of the ethical or universal; one could say he *suspends* them, his interest, rather, in the sphere of faith, in his divinely imbued mission to preserve the life of his child. As Derrida writes in his own meditation on *Fear and Trembling*, “I can respond only to the one (or to the One), that is, to the other, by sacrificing that one to the other. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And.... I can never justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other.”¹⁷¹ The father’s unfailing responsibility to his son (both “the one” and, in some senses, “the One”) requires that he fail in his responsibility to the ethical generality. Such a sacrifice of faith, like Abraham’s readiness to kill Isaac, is not articulable, never justifiable—it is, fundamentally, irrational, absurd.

By the novel’s end, however, the father’s suspension of the ethical becomes so amplified that he seems to risk losing his humanity. The traveling pair is robbed—they return to find their tarp, blankets, water, and store of food stolen. When the father catches the thief with their cart, “an outcast from one of the communes ... the fingers of his right hand had been cut away,”¹⁷² he threatens him by gunpoint, forcing him to strip off all his clothes:

Standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving. Covering himself with his hand. He was already shivering.

Put the clothes in.

He bent and scooped up the rags in his arms and piled them on top of his shoes. He stood there holding himself. Dont do this, man.

You didnt mind doing it to us.

I’m begging you.

Papa, the boy said.

Come on. Listen to the kid.

You tried to kill us.

I’m starving, man. You’d have done the same.

You took everything.

Come on, man. I’ll die.

I’m going to leave you the way you left us.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 257.

¹⁷² McCarthy, *The Road*, 255.

¹⁷³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 257.

Although the boy will eventually convince his father to leave the stranger's clothes behind for him to return and retrieve (if he dares), we are certainly beyond the ethical by the time we reach this incident, the father's display of cruelty no longer motivated by self-preservation but by a sense of revenge, of self-righteousness. The thief is cast as no less pitiable than the figure from our previous passage: "raw and naked, filthy, starving." The binary between "good guy" and "bad guy" is quickly revealed to be farcical when the world is literally on fire: not only our nouns, to riff on McCarthy, but our truths, our normative ethical concepts, are shorn of their ground when everyone is starving. Thieves are humanized; protagonists are demonized, the interchangeability of such figures reinforced by McCarthy's lack of names and quotation marks: the reader must work to attribute dialogue, as dangling pronouns rove across the text. As if to reinforce this instability of the ethical, the father and son have the following dialogue shortly after this incident: "Do you want me to tell you a story? / No. / Why not? / The boy looking at him and looked away. / Why not? / those stories are not true. / They dont have to be true. They're stories. / Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people."¹⁷⁴ The son no longer believes in the narrative, the mythos, of the ethical. That too, along with crow's, "a black billcap with the logo of some vanished enterprise,"¹⁷⁵ even books,¹⁷⁶ has become a relic of the old world. Noble's reading of McCarthy's Kierkegaardian faith is idealistic: the novel suggests, he claims, "that regardless of how horrific our situation ... we can act in faith and resist the siren call of nihilistic suicide or cannibalism; we can choose to have hope in a good God, in goodness itself, although such a hope is irrational."¹⁷⁷ But what Noble fails to account for is the fragmentation of the ethical—a fragmentation that occurs not only in the father, as he leaps toward faith, but in the world.

In Kierkegaard, or de Silentio's rendition, if the ethical human is always tempted by the lower realm of the aesthetic, the human in the even higher realm of faith will be tempted by the ethical—that "which would hold him back from doing God's will."¹⁷⁸ The father, in the previous scene, surely seems beyond "temptation," but throughout he wrestles with whether or not to sacrifice his child, with his willingness to kill his son if necessary. This, we might say, is the dying call of a fractured ethical sphere, haunting the man like the voice of his wife, both ghosts of the late world. When he and his son find themselves on the run from cannibals,

He took the boy's hand and pushed the revolver into it. Take it, he whispered. Take it. The boy was terrified. He put his arm around him and held him. His body was so thin. Don't be afraid, he said. If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you understand?

I think so.

¹⁷⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 267–68.

¹⁷⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 63.

¹⁷⁶ In a notable passage, the father recalls standing in "the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water.... He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come." McCarthy, *The Road*, 187.

¹⁷⁷ Noble, "The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," 108.

¹⁷⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 236.

No. Do you understand?

Yes.

Say yes I do Papa.

Yes I do Papa.

He looked down at him. All he saw was terror. He took the gun from him. No you dont, he said.

I dont know what to do, Papa. I dont know what to do. Where will you be?

It's okay.

I dont know what to do.

Shh. I'm right here. I wont leave you.

You promise.

Yes. I promise. I was going to run. To try and lead them away. But I cant leave you.¹⁷⁹

This is, in some sense, the boy's "near sacrifice"—but unlike in *Fear and Trembling*, it is a near sacrifice on behalf of the ethical, an ethical that appears, increasingly, to be losing its ground. The father begins by attempting (with an emphasis, here, on *tempt*) to enact responsibility to the others (Derrida's "ethical or political generality") but is won over by the call of an absurd and irrational faith, where, unlike in Genesis 22, both his love of his son and his divine "warrant" coincide. As they lay hiding, seemingly having escaped capture for the time being, we witness a moment of Abrahamic anxiety focalized through the man's narrative point of view: "Can you do it? When the time comes? Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being with you of which you know nothing? Can there be? hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly."¹⁸⁰ The father is still tormented by the temptation of the ethical, and tormented, too, by the question of God's existence. Should he "Curse God and die" (instructions that directly echo those of the wife of Job after he is left ill, impoverished, stripped of all earthly possessions)?¹⁸¹ Or, the man thinks to himself, "[i]s there such a being with you of which you know nothing?"—is his son that "One," that Derridean "Other," in whom he must have an absurd, an implacable kind of faith? He resolves, by the end of the scene, to leap toward this latter stance: "I wont leave you, he whispered. I wont ever leave you. Do you understand? He lay in the leaves holding the trembling child. Clutching the revolver. All through the long dusk and into the dark. Cold and starless. Blessed. He began to believe they had a chance."¹⁸² The barren emptiness ("cold and starless") of the ruined landscape is reconstituted, re-allegorized, from fragmentation to its blessed potential: out of the void, the fractured site of ethics, McCarthy plants

¹⁷⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 112–13.

¹⁸⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 114.

¹⁸¹ See Job 2:9, *Job: A New Translation*, translated by Edward L. Greenstein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 2019). The figure of the wife in *The Road*, in this sense, echoes the voice of the wife in Job. While the man is positioned as a more faithful figure than his wife, both he and Job display an impatient, at times, angry faith (especially when one reads the Job of the dialogues alongside the more resigned Job of the narrative frame). For a reading of Job that reconciles the tension of his seemingly two distinct types of faith, see Christine Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

¹⁸² McCarthy, *The Road*, 114.

the seeds for a Kierkegaardian faith. Such a faith is, crucially, not teleological: it is not any straightforward belief in an afterlife or in eschatology, nor is it a belief in reproductive futurity, one that would be difficult to sustain in the environment of the novel. It is, instead, an indeterminate postsecular faith in *ongoingness* itself, a faith in staying with and in the world in spite of its overwhelming antagonisms.

This faith manifests itself most clearly in the father's final living moments when he must make the ultimate sacrifice, leaving his son behind in the world. "You need to go on, he said. I cant go with you. You need to keep going. You dont know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again."¹⁸³ The boy insists that he cannot—he wants to die with his father. To stay on this earth, alone, is to face a much worse fate. But the father is resolute in his sacrifice. "I want to be with you. / You cant. / Please. / You cant. You have to carry the fire. / I don't know how to. / Yes you do. / Is it real? The fire? / Yes it is. / Where is it? I don't know where it is. / yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it."¹⁸⁴ The son here embodies the temptation of the ethical, a child begging *not* to be "sacrificed" to this cruel world. But the father invokes not just his own feelings ("I cant hold my dead son in my arms,"¹⁸⁵ he says later) but the divine allegorical warrant, "the fire" that his son carries, which he believes it is his duty to preserve. The text and the characters within *The Road* thus figure and refigure a world through allegoresis: in their final moment together, it is "the fire," their burning world refigured as an image of divinity, of possibility, that moves the text from nihilism to another way—however minimal—of living on in the world.

IV. REPETITION AND REITERATION: BEYOND ESCHATOLOGY

I am interested in considering what happens when we think these two allegories, that of climate change, or, more broadly, of the "Anthropocene" and that of Kierkegaard's Abraham and Isaac, together—in how our reading might produce a temporality decoupled from either the "religious" or "secular" apocalyptic imagination.¹⁸⁶ Instead, the use of allegory, the reiteration and repetition of familiar figures and scenes across the text, enables the novel to cultivate an indeterminate, disjunctive continuity against the fatalistic non-futurity its landscape seems to impose throughout. Such indeterminate continuity is so tentative, so non-reproductive, as to function as what I am calling, thinking with Donna Haraway, as a kind of *ongoingness*: it is a temporality that, as I will explore further in this section, cannot see far beyond itself, but in its form of Kierkegaardian repetition, keeps moving forward, however out-of-joint with the moment of the present.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 278.

¹⁸⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 278–79.

¹⁸⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 278.

¹⁸⁶ Indeed, Benjamin writes that "The undialectical mode of thought of the neo-Kantian school is incapable of grasping the synthesis that emerges, in allegorical writing, from the struggle between theological and artistic intentions—a synthesis in the sense not so much of a lasting peace as a *treuga dei* [truce of God] between the warring parties." Within allegory, according to Benjamin, we find a dialectical movement between the "theological" and the "artistic"; the form is consistently collapsing the secular-religious divide. See Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 188.

¹⁸⁷ My formulation of "ongoingness" is inspired by but not identical to Haraway's as she develops it throughout her *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. In her conception, staying with the ongoing trouble of what

We witness this temporality at various junctures throughout the novel, emerging through both the allegories of the Anthropocene and that of *Fear and Trembling*: “No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you.”¹⁸⁸ From amidst the ruin of the world (the first movement of allegory, the wreckage of the Anthropocene) comes *lack* of calendar, of hour, of later. If “[t]he day is providential to itself,” then through the wreckage of eternity, of eschatology, comes a reconstitution of divinity in the fragments of the present: “All things of grace and beauty,” the narrative tells us, “...have a common provenance in pain.” The boy, that source of grace and beauty, is, in our second allegorical reading, the source of Benjaminian reconstitution that offers the tenuous possibility of something beyond fragmentation. But both Anthropocene time and “providential time” function as a kind of indeterminate duration: “Impossible to tell what time of day he was looking at. He looked at the house and looked out over the dripping countryside and then let the door back down and descended the steps and set about making breakfast.”¹⁸⁹ Any “future” in this narrative world has been ruined, lost to complete indeterminacy or obsolescence.

And yet, for a moment, while nearing the end of his life, the father still manages to glimpse something more than duration—a flicker of an extending ongoingness before him: “He coughed all the time and the boy watched him spitting blood. Slumping along. Filthy, ragged, hopeless. He’d stop and lean on the cart and the boy would go on and then stop and look back and he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle.”¹⁹⁰ It is this image of futurity—a tentative, indeterminate, and allegorical one—that is most central to *The Road*. Father and son look at each other from across the distance of imagined time, of anticipated loss, the void between them representative of the very void that allegory attempts but can never mediate between past and future, the order of the human and the planetary. The son stands “glowing in that waste”—in the ruined world—“like a tabernacle,” like, quite literally, “a receptacle for the consecrated elements of the Eucharist.”¹⁹¹ In this second movement of allegoresis, it seems possible that the fragments of the lost world might be reconstituted in this figure: but such a future remains “unimaginable,” absurd, a glowing possibility in the ashes. This, we might say, is a postsecular kind of faith, one that subverts both religious and secular notions of eternity and apocalyptic foreclosures of futurity.

Instead, the temporality of ongoingness is evoked through repetition,¹⁹² distance, and misalignment—all structural features of allegory. As Paul de Man writes in his canonical essay, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,”

she terms the *Chthulucene* would entail “living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.” See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.

¹⁸⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 54.

¹⁸⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 155.

¹⁹⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 273.

¹⁹¹ Merriam-Webster Online, “tabernacle,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tabernacle>.

¹⁹² It is worth emphasizing just how central repetition is to *The Road*: it operates not only through the formal repetition of the signs and symbols of its allegories (those that I have thus far identified under the banners of climate change and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*), but through the repetition of phrases (“carrying the fire,” for example); the repetition of genres of exchange between father and son; and the repetition (with important differences) in its narration of the pair’s encounter and negotiation with strangers.

In the world of symbol it would be possible for the image to coincide with the substance, since the substance and its representation do not differ in their being but only in their extension: they are part and whole of the same set of categories. Their relationship is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind ... whereas, in the world of allegory, time is the originary constitutive category ... it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.¹⁹³

De Man's essay, which was important in offering a history of the relationship between symbol and allegory in Romanticism and beyond, and in illuminating the presence of the allegorical even in authors who averred their distaste for it, here distinguishes between symbol and allegory: where symbol functions synecdochally, through signs that stand, simultaneously, for a larger totality, allegory works through references to those signs that precede it (in our examples, *signs* we have come to associate with climate change—charred objects, burning forests—and those that informed readers will knowingly grasp as Kierkegaardian). Meaning in allegory is thus constituted by the *repetition* of signs already endowed with meaning, but whose meaning will be refigured, reshaped in the instance of their mobilization. Repetition “(in the Kierkegaardian sense)” thus entails a movement backwards and forwards, a making new of what has been.¹⁹⁴ And yet this “new” can never be entirely truly new, nor is this entirely a process of “renewal.” As Arne Melberg writes of Kierkegaardian repetition, “The temporal dialectics of ‘repetition’ suspends temporal sequence: the *now* that is always an *after* comes actually *before*—it is the *now* of ‘the instant,’ the sudden intervention in sequential time...”¹⁹⁵ It is this disjunctive feature of repetition that interests de Man as it comes to define allegory: in contrast to the symbol, the now of the allegory is always out of joint with itself, a now founded on anteriority. If the “now” of de Man (and Kierkegaard's) allegorical repetition is thus never pure, never new, I would suggest that the same can be said of de Man's (so-called “pure”) anteriority. As I will go on to argue, *The Road* provides a challenge to such a reading of anteriority.

De Man claims in the same essay that “allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.”¹⁹⁶ While we could take up the secularization narrative implicit in de Man's essay, or allegory's “distance in relation to its own origin” (elsewhere in the text it is clear that this is a transcendent one),¹⁹⁷ what interests me here is thinking with the formal

¹⁹³ Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” *Blindness & Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Second Edition, Revised (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1983), 207.

¹⁹⁴ And here de Man is of course thinking with Kierkegaard's *Repetition*. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

¹⁹⁵ Arne Melberg, “Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term),” *Diacritics* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 74.

¹⁹⁶ De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 207.

¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Talal Asad has contrasted de Man's essay with Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, arguing that both offer differing conceptions of “the secular.” Describing de Man, he writes:

structure that the images of void, distance, and repetition provide, especially as they allow us to read allegory as a form that enables a different kind of ongoingness (a disjunctive now) amid the state of exception that is the Anthropocene.

Let us, then, think with this figure about the novel's ending, to which I have not yet turned. Many critics express puzzlement and dismay about both *The Road*'s narrative ending and its final paragraph, which stands disjointed from the human narrative, a coda of sorts. In the narrative ending, the son, having witnessed the death of his father just three days prior, is taken in by a traveling family, replete with a father, mother, son, and daughter. He cannot know that they are "good"—to join them, just as his father's choice to let him live, requires a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. In Sarah Dillon's reading, the novel, which otherwise operates in the genre of horror, turns, in its final pages, to "nostalgic consolations of fantasy. Here, somehow, a non-cannibalistic man, wife, boy, girl and dog have survived and come to the rescue of the boy. The nuclear family ... of times long gone. These final pages undo the novel's horror story by offering a continuance after the arresting aftermath of the man's death."¹⁹⁸ But in spite of its seemingly sudden swerve toward reproductive futurity, the novel offers something more complicated than this: a glimpse of ongoingness—"continuance," as Dillon says—in a land it has made clear is not inhabitable, where death is all but certain, even if not within the frame of the narrative itself. What we have, and what perhaps most critics react to, is the odd distance of an image being stretched across the void, the anteriority of the nuclear family of the late world repeated—and *reconstituted*—in an environment that we know cannot sustain it. This is not a passage that signals any kind of teleological future but one rather of iteration, of repetition. Where death would be too easy, the sacrifice on behalf of the ethical, it is the order of ongoingness that demands that humanity continue to grapple with the ongoing ruin that surrounds us and for which we are responsible. The turn to a family does not diminish the radical indeterminacy and ongoingness of such work.

But *The Road* doesn't end with the restitution of the family, but in a time before family, and before the human. In its final paragraph, the text reads:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a

By virtue of the conventional succession of the signifier by the signified, allegory essentially played out an inescapable temporal destiny in which self and nonself could never coincide. *Early* romantic imagery therefore constituted the site of a reluctant coming to terms with the secular—a world in which there are no hidden depths, no natural continuities between the subjects emotions and the objects of these emotions, no fulfillment of time....In his study of German baroque drama known as *Trauerspiel*, Walter Benjamin describes a different trajectory, one that directs the reader to a secular world that is not merely discovered...but precariously assembled and lived in contradictory fashion. Although de Man also displays a sense of precariousness of secular life in his writings, he retains a commitment to the secular as 'the real' that Benjamin doesn't here.

See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 63. While I agree with Asad's fundamental distinction, which helps point to the secularity that situates de Man's essay, I read both conceptions of allegory as they—perhaps in spite of themselves—confound the normative oppositions of "the secular" and "the religious" (a feature Asad goes on to explore in Benjamin).

¹⁹⁸ Dillon, "The Horror of the Anthropocene," 18.

thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.¹⁹⁹

As Dillon and others have pointed out, the genre of this final passage takes a notable turn, drawing on the tropes of a fairytale or parable in its “Once there were...” opening, reminiscent of the atemporality of a “Once upon a time.”²⁰⁰ Again we have an image of the “world in its becoming,” one the narrative ponders earlier—the question of whether one can finally see the world “as it was made” in the “counterspectacle” of its destruction. Here the non-human brook trout figure metonymically for a time “older than man,” one, like fish themselves, “muscular and torsional” and humming with vitality. The continuity of the son’s narrative is thus thrust against a different sort of repetition, which presupposes, like all Kierkegaardian repetition, an absence of that which is anterior.²⁰¹ Such absence, “[o]f a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again,” emphasizes the impossibility of a return to origin: there is only ongoingness. But this anteriority is not “pure,” as de Man’s theory claims, but itself never entirely new, constituted by signs, “vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming.” The term vermiculate itself points us to this impure anteriority: as “worm-eaten,”²⁰² it suggests nature’s beginnings are blemished, but so too, already an *after*, a “now” which is a “before”; as convoluted and involuted, “marked with ... wavy impressed lines,”²⁰³ it suggests that the origin is constituted by intricate signs, a map of all that which has previously impressed upon it. In other words, the “origin” is not fixed, but another allegorical moment disjunctive to itself.

This final passage represents the full capacities of allegory as McCarthy mobilizes it to catapult us beyond the linearity of apocalyptic time and into the disjunctive repetitions (of catastrophe after catastrophe) and unbridgeable gaps constitutive of life in the Anthropocene. De Man links allegory to its “demystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide.”²⁰⁴ Perhaps it is with allegory that the world wrought by the Anthropocene—itsself disjunctive, inorganic, and disjoint—can best be engaged in contemporary prose, the better for readers to stay in the disjunctive void of those horrors.

¹⁹⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 286–87.

²⁰⁰ Dillon, “The Horror of the Anthropocene,” 19.

²⁰¹ As Melberg writes, “the *now* that is privileged by ‘repetition’ is also an *after*, meaning that the presence of the now presupposes an absence.” See Melberg, “Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term),” 80.

²⁰² Merriam-Webster Online, “vermiculate,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vermiculate>.

²⁰³ Merriam-Webster Online, “vermiculate,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vermiculate>. I thank James Porter for his insightful thoughts on “vermiculate” as it operates here.

²⁰⁴ De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 222.

CHAPTER TWO:

“Just a Little Different”:

Postsecular Metafiction in J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04*

...there has been a lamentable lack of critical appreciation for the kind of novel that expresses its seriousness through playfulness, that is acutely aware of itself as a mere structure of words even as it tries to discover a way of going beyond words to the experiences words seek to indicate.

— Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* (1975)

While much ink has been spilled over the term “autofiction” in recent years—first coined to denote “a fiction of facts strictly real”²⁰⁵—this chapter turns to sites of the postsecular in an arguably older form. Diverging from the strict reality of autofiction, metafiction “describes the capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction and thus refers to all self-reflexive utterances which thematize the fictionality (in the sense of imaginary reference and/or constructedness) of narrative.”²⁰⁶ Or, to draw on another definition from the canonical work of Patricia Waugh,

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.²⁰⁷

We might thus use the term to encompass any such text that “breaks its fourth wall,” so to speak, invoking its author, the process of its construction, or any other such signifier of fictionality.

²⁰⁵ A version of this designation was appended to the cover of French novelist and critic Serge Doubrovsky’s text *Fils* (1977), where the term was deleted from within the manuscript. “Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement réels; si l’on veut *autofiction* [Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction if you like],” the cover read. See Claudia Gronemann, “Autofiction,” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

²⁰⁶ Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nunning, “Metanarration and Metafiction,” in Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), *the living handbook of narratology* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2012, revised 2014), <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/metanarration-and-metafiction>.

²⁰⁷ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 2.

Though the term was first coined by William H. Gass and further analyzed by Robert Scholes in 1970,²⁰⁸ work on “self-conscious narration” predates this use, and indeed, many critics cite *Don Quixote* as the first metafictional novel. The form is not, therefore, limited to the contemporary by any means, nor to the so-called postmodern.

However, metafiction became associated with postmodernism in the critical landscape as it became increasingly pervasive in the second half of the twentieth century, appearing in the work of American authors such as John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, William H. Gass himself, Philip K. Dick, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and others.²⁰⁹ As Amy Elias has pointed out, metafiction’s ubiquity in mid-twentieth-century American fiction seems linked to the rise of the US culture industry: “After World War II, the United States became the world’s major producer and exporter of mass culture; more than any other nation it became the empire of the unreal, the country with the economic resources to develop cultural products such as novels and films and export them throughout the world.”²¹⁰ Metafiction, as others have argued, takes off just as poststructuralism makes its way to the American academy and as “the success of the US culture industry, was enough, perhaps, to fundamentally unhinge American authors’ faith in mimesis and what a ‘reality’ unmediated by images, language, and ideology could be.”²¹¹ As this chapter will go on to explore, in the post-war-era and beyond, metafiction—and particularly a postsecular metafiction—responds to an American neoliberalism that reconstructs the subject as *homo oeconomicus*. How, indeed, to separate the individual from the market actor, the author from the performer-cum-anticipatory-critic, in a world which demands that we are always both?

This chapter turns to two metafictional texts that arguably exceed and predate postmodernism, reading the contemporary poet, novelist, and essayist Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014) alongside acclaimed novelist and short-story writer J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* (1961). Though Lerner and Salinger make for an unlikely pairing, in spite of their temporal distance, the authors share certain characteristics: both write prose that features a milieu of artists and intellectuals, and Lerner, in his most recent novel (*The Topeka School*, 2019), has delved into the thematic of family dynamics that characterizes Salinger’s oeuvre. What interests me in this chapter, however, is the metafictional gesture shared by *10:04* and *Franny and Zooey*. *10:04* deploys prose and poetics to playfully trace the spectral mode of finance capital and its totalizing grasp, only to subvert it, eschewing, I argue, *messianism* for the *messianic*. Lerner taunts the reader by offering a narrator (“Ben”) who *almost* coincides in biographical detail with Ben Lerner the author but is (in a theme that will be later discussed) just a little different. In its opening scene,

²⁰⁸ See William H. Gass, “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction,” *Fiction and Figures of Life* (New York: Random House, 1970); and Robert Scholes, “Metafiction,” *The Iowa Review* 1 (Fall 1970): 100–15.

²⁰⁹ While my interest is not in defining postmodernism or outlining its periodicity here, I will note that many argue that the form of metafiction seems to have outlived postmodernism, with various attempts to define and demarcate the new metafictional sensibility that constitutes the era of “post-postmodernism” emerging in recent decades. In their anthology, *Supplanting the Postmodern*, David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavrakis have documented some of these, citing Billy Childish and Charles Thomson’s “remodernism,” Gilles Lipoevetsky’s “hypermodernism,” Robert Samuels’s “automodernism,” Nicolas Bourriaud’s “altermodernism,” Alan Kirby’s “digimodernism,” and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s “metamodernism.” See David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavrakis, eds, *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the 21st Century* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

²¹⁰ Amy Elias, “Postmodern Metafiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, edited by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17.

²¹¹ Elias, “Postmodern Metafiction,” 17.

Ben is commissioned to write the novel we are reading, and yet the novel he delivers, we are told is “just a little different,” subverting the book’s telos as it was foretold by finance capital. *10:04* thus deploys a messianic temporality to play with and subvert the promissory mode of late capitalism, to wrest back a future that feels constantly foreclosed.

I include Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, itself originally published as two installments in *The New Yorker*, as it reveals that the metafictional impulse predates the contemporary—and indeed, so too does the postsecular sensibility as we see it operate in this form. If the narrative tension of *10:04* occurs through its spectrality, a messianic suspension between what Lerner has termed the virtual and the actual²¹², that of *Franny and Zooey* can be found in its narrator’s overt denial of the story’s mystical content, the same narrator who draws our attention to his story’s construction. *Franny and Zooey*, a tale of Franny’s spiritual awakening or mental breakdown, depending on what perspective we inhabit, hinges on its multiple layers of fictionality and on the simultaneous reliance on and denial of its mystical content. What we find in both texts is that metafiction troubles the site of the stable subject—author, narrator, protagonist—of secularism and religion. That impulse is not unique to the contemporary, as my recourse to *Franny and Zooey* shows—post-war fiction here reveals the limits of secularist notions of the subjects and of secularist critique more broadly. As Mark Currie writes, “If metafiction characteristically internalizes the relationship between authors and readers, fiction and criticism or art and life, we find its antecedents throughout literary history.” This chapter will examine precisely what Currie terms this “internalize[d] ... relationship”²¹³ between authors and readers, fiction and criticism or art and life—or, thinking with Lerner, what I would call the suspended relationship between them, one metafiction holds in tension.

Of course, 1961 was not 2014, and 1955, the year that “Franny”—part one of *Franny and Zooey*—was first published in *The New Yorker*, even less so. Salinger was writing during the Eisenhower years, years of unprecedented post-war economic prosperity as the president continued the New Deal programs enacted by Roosevelt and expanded Social Security. And yet behind the scenes, the stage was already set for the turn from a Keynesian-inspired welfare state to the neoliberal Reagan years that were to come, as large corporations “chafed against the constraints” of the New Deal, implementing new routes for international investments throughout the fifties and sixties.²¹⁴ An emphasis on free enterprise—along with liberty and autonomy from paternalism more generally—would emerge as triumphant in the late sixties with rising inflation.

²¹² Here I draw on terms that Lerner develops in his *The Hatred of Poetry*, which he borrows from critic Allen Grossman. Lerner draws on Allen Grossman’s reading of the story of Caedmon to argue that “poetry arises from the desire to get beyond the finite and the historical—the human world of violence and difference—and to reach the transcendent or divine.”²¹² Like Caedmon, who sings a beautiful, otherworldly poem when visited by God in a dream, but is unable to replicate such talent upon waking, “as soon as you move from that impulse to the actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms.” The poem can thus never reach the transcendent, can never break beyond the straitjacket of the actual. But Lerner sees, in the failure of poetry, the possibility for us to experience the distance of ideality—indeed, to experience the distance between the earthbound and the virtual is to glimpse a glimmer of another order: poetry, in its “radical failure,” enables us to feel, hear, inhabit that gap between orders, which, I would argue, is also the gap of Lerner’s messianic mode. See Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

²¹³ Mark Currie, *Metafiction* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

²¹⁴ Daniel Robert McClure, *Winter in America: A Cultural History of Neoliberalism, from the Sixties to the Reagan Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 1–2.

And yet even in these post-war years of “liberalism” proper, the seeds of the ideology to come are apparent: within *Franny and Zooey*, it is clear that the individual was already configured as a “market actor,” that, as Wendy Brown has aptly put it, “neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities.”²¹⁵ The first section of the chapter will argue that the postsecular metafictional form of *Franny and Zooey* works precisely to resist this process of individuation already at work. Metafiction dissolves clear boundaries between subjects—narrator, reader, protagonist—thus working against this commodification.

Needless to say, the financial situation changes dramatically by the time of Lerner’s writing. We are now post-1971, a watershed moment in economic history: Nixon’s administration has unilaterally abolished the gold standard, thus ending the Bretton Woods system of international exchange in place since World War II. The economy was thrown into a state of crisis, commonly referred to as the “Nixon shock,” and most agree that “Nixon’s abolition of the gold standard marked the beginning of an era of unbridled economic speculation (high-risk financial action) that is at the origin of our economic situation today.”²¹⁶ *10:04* thematizes that it is itself a product of this historical shift—the product, in other words, of finance capital. Its metafictional gesture might be understood as both documenting the world of which it is borne and reflecting on that world’s very tenuous construction, grounded, as it were, on the fiction of capital. As Anna Kornbluh has put it, referring to realism more generally, realism “makes a world while highlighting the artifice of its making ... [and it is through] the creation of excessive, aberrant, counter-factual realities ... that realist literature is also able to think the conditions of finance capital.”²¹⁷ If neoliberalism attempts to foreclose the future in advance, limiting possibilities and potential risks to only those that are profitable, Lerner’s text is a postsecular attempt to suffuse the present with heterogeneous time—with alternatives to the narrow future delineated by the market. I trace this movement, from a present premised on a single future telos to a present suffused with heterogeneous temporalities, as the shift from messianism to the messianic.

I will go on to argue that *Franny and Zooey* draws on a postsecular metafictional form to question the already imminent commodification of subjectivity that had begun in the mid-fifties—but, unlike in the twenty-first century, when Lerner was writing *10:04*, neoliberalism was not yet hegemonic. In Lerner’s world, a certain irrational “non-knowledge” becomes foundational to the reigning order; neoliberalism itself becomes a practice of divination²¹⁸ that, between the financialization that fuels it and the climate change it has contributed to, creates a spectral world in its wake. In *Franny and Zooey*, the individual is still a viable, if dissolving, category—in *10:04*, it is one wholly subsumed by the neoliberal order. In these late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century examples, the postsecular form exists in a dialectical relationship between neoliberal subjection and antagonism: it lends itself to the commodification of the individual and yet it is that commodification of subjectivity that both *Franny and Zooey* and *10:04* seek to trouble.

²¹⁵ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 31.

²¹⁶ Arne de Boever, *Finance Fictions: Realism and Psychosis in a Time of Economic Crisis* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 9.

²¹⁷ Anna Kornbluh cited in Arne de Boever, *Finance Fictions*, 16–17.

²¹⁸ See Joshua Ramey, *Politics of Divination: Neoliberal Endgame and the Religion of Contingency* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

I. ACTING “FOR GOD”

J. D. Salinger first published what is now known as the novella *Franny and Zooey* as two distinct, successive short stories in *The New Yorker*: “Franny” was published in January 1955; the second installment, “Zooey,” was not released until May 1957. The two pieces were not published together in book form until 1961. I offer *Franny and Zooey*’s publication history because its genre is of interest: indeed, does it better fit the category of short story, novella, or something else entirely, perhaps a play, or “prose home movie,”²¹⁹ as the narrator himself suggests? One could make the case for any number of these classifications. I will propose that we attend to *Franny and Zooey*’s metafictional form—that is, the narrative allusions to the textuality and fictionality of the work. At the basic level of plot, *Franny and Zooey* narrates the spiritual and psychic breakdown of Franny Glass. In “Franny,” we are introduced to Franny as she appears in a college setting over the course of but a few hours, on a date with one Lane. The narrative focalizes Franny’s increasing frustration with her own submission to the norms and clichés of university life, and by the end of the date, she has fainted. In “Zooey,” we encounter Franny as recontextualized within her family life, and within the world of Salinger’s famous Glass family, the subject of all of his published work after *Nine Stories* (1953). With the addition of “Zooey,” a full summary of the plot would read something like the following: Franny, the youngest in this family of nine precocious children, abruptly leaves her college life to be tended to by her family in her Upper West Side family home. Fed up with the shallow egotism she’s encountered in the academic world around her, Franny turns to the Jesus Prayer, and inspired by *The Way of the Pilgrim*, attempts to recite it repeatedly. The “Zooey” story is entirely devoted to Franny’s time post-collapse in the Glass family’s New York apartment with her mother and brother, Zooey—himself an actor—as the characters circle each other, trying to get through to Franny.

At issue, then, is Salinger’s play with the theological and just how seriously we, as readers, are to take it. On the one hand, as David Seed has pointed out,

The Way of the Pilgrim is an anonymous nineteenth-century narrative of spiritual searching by a Russian who travels around the country trying to attach clear meaning to the injunction in I. Thessalonians v, 17 “pray without ceasing.” Formally *The Way of the Pilgrims* contrasts strikingly with *Franny* in many respects. It is a travel-narrative where Franny herself is relatively immobile; it is punctuated by moments of insight and the seeker is guided by a religious sage, whereas Franny’s insights are ambivalent, incoherent and solitary; it is also a text about *using* texts since the pilgrim carries a manual of prayer with him (*The Philokalia*), and a text for use itself, although Franny retreats behind agnosticism in the face of Lane’s attacks.²²⁰

But while Seed is right to point to both Franny—and *Franny and Zooey*’s—theological ambivalence, I would argue that both *Franny and Zooey* and *The Way of the Pilgrim* are in fact interested in “using” texts. Franny, we learn from the backstory of “Zooey,” was first introduced

²¹⁹ J.D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1961), 41.

²²⁰ David Seed, “Keeping it in the Family: The Novellas of J.D. Salinger,” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: J.D. Salinger*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 75.

to *The Way of the Pilgrim* from her eldest brother, the spiritual Seymour, whose suicide (the subject of Salinger's 1948 "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"²²¹) haunts the narrative. She retrieved the book from Seymour and her second-to-eldest brother, Buddy's, old room: a shrine of sorts, where we find "quotations from a variety of the world's literatures"²²² pinned to a board. This, it will later become clear, is the result of an ecumenical spiritual interest that the brothers attempted to impart to the younger Glass siblings, Zooey and Franny. The question that Salinger poses is: to what end? While "Franny" ends with Franny's unceremonious collapse, alone, we learn, "[h]er lips began to move, forming soundless words, and they continued to move."²²³ Throughout "Zooey" the protagonist is listless, in despair—whether spiritual or otherwise we cannot know. But after a final, key exchange with Zooey, one that, as I will argue, "uses text" and performance, she is finally at peace, falling into "a deep dreamless sleep" and "smiling at the ceiling."²²⁴

Key, then, to understanding the status of the theological is the story's narration, which critics have called "digressive," "self-conscious," and "excessive."²²⁵ Indeed, Salinger's metafictional turn may have puzzled early critics in part as it emerged precisely at the vanguard of metafiction's American boom. "Zooey" opens with a long introduction, referred to, self-consciously, as the "author's formal introduction": "The facts at hand presumably speak for themselves, but a trifle more vulgarly, I suspect, than facts even usually do. As a counterbalance, then, we begin with that everfresh and exciting odium: the author's formal introduction."²²⁶ Here is where the narrator goes on to make several pronouncements about his text—that it is more "prose home movie" than short story, and that it is resolutely *not mystical*. The secularism that dominates if not post-war American culture then at least the narrator's milieu impinges upon the story's frame: "[Zooey] feels that the plot hinges on mysticism, or religious mystification—in any case, he makes it very clear, a too vividly apparent transcendent element of sorts, which he says he's worried can only expedite, move up, the day and hour of my professional undoing."²²⁷ The narrator—who admits, very obliquely, to being none other than Franny and Zooey's elder brother Buddy Glass, though he remains anonymized throughout²²⁸—assures the reader that the story is

²²¹ See J.D. Salinger, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," *Nine Stories* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991).

²²² Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 148.

²²³ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 37.

²²⁴ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 170.

²²⁵ As Steven Belletto writes, "Salinger was cheered by critics throughout the fifties on the strength of *The Catcher in the Rye* and a handful of well-made stories published in *The New Yorker*. By the end of the decade, however—after he published *Zooey* (1957) and *Seymour—An Introduction* (1959), both of which are highly digressive—professional critics and amateur readers alike found themselves puzzled and generally unreceptive to Salinger's project. This was due in part to this apparently excessive, self-conscious, self-critical, and self-commenting style." See Steven Belletto, "Digression, Ethical Work, and Salinger's Postmodern Turn," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 22 no. 1 (February 2011): 10.

²²⁶ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 41.

²²⁷ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 42.

²²⁸ In a classic metafictional move, the narrator refers to a letter featured in the story authored by the character of Buddy: "The style of the letter, I'm told, bears a considerably more than passing resemblance to the style, or written mannerisms, of this narrator, and the general reader will no doubt jump to the heady conclusion that the writer of the letter and I are one and the same person. Jump, he will, and I'm afraid, jump he should. We will, however, leave this Buddy Glass in the third person from here on in. At least, I see no good reason to take him out of it." (Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 43.) Buddy Glass is also the narratorial figure in other late stories of Salinger's, such as *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* (1955), *Seymour—An Introduction* (1959), and "Hapworth 16, 1924" (1965). See J.D. Salinger *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour—An Introduction* (New York: Little, Brown and Company,

indeed not a religious one, but a “compound, or multiple, love story...”²²⁹ We might read this claim as a nod to the cultural moment, one that both the character of Buddy, a writer and college professor, as well as Salinger had to exist within: “People are already shaking their heads over me, and any immediate further professional use on my part of the word ‘God,’ except as a familiar, healthy American expletive, will be taken—or, rather, confirmed—as the very worst kind of name-dropping and a sure sign that I’m going straight to the dogs.”²³⁰ But we can also read it as exemplary of the kind of double readings that metafiction produces: Franny can be simultaneously read as having a nervous breakdown or as having a genuine spiritual awakening, and truly, at the text’s end, coming to terms with something revelatory. *Franny and Zooey* could be a “mystical” text or it could be a “love story.” Zooey-via-Buddy and Buddy himself present both options. Literary theorist Amy Hungerford claims that Salinger in fact “ensures that this is a religious story” in spite of the novel’s “simultaneous denial and assertion of religious meaning.”²³¹ Here she and I diverge, however, in that I would not characterize *Franny and Zooey* as a “religious story,” but rather as a postsecular one—one that enacts, through its metafictional form, affects that deconstruct the binary secularism has erected between the secular and religious.

Indeed, *Franny and Zooey* draws on what I will term a postsecular metafictional form to question the already imminent commodification of subjectivity that had begun in the mid-fifties. Unlike in the twenty-first century, of course, neoliberalism was not yet hegemonic—the category of the individual still remains within Salinger’s oeuvre and within *Franny and Zooey*, though one of the problems that the text raises is that category’s imminent demise. Monica Gehlwhat has argued that the novella is situated at the crossroads between modernism and postmodernism. In her terms, the death of the subject has not yet occurred. I am less interested in entering debates about the labels of “modernism” and “postmodernism”; as I read it, the subject has not yet been mediated by neoliberalism, but characters throughout the text are wary of this imminent capture. In a scene typical of “Franny,” Franny rails against the commodification of the self already at work among the college cohort:

‘It isn’t just Wally. It could be a girl, for goodness’ sake. I mean if he were a girl ... he’d have been painting scenery in some stock company all summer. Or bicycled through Wales. Or taken an apartment in New York and worked for a magazine or an advertising company. It’s everybody, I mean. Everything everybody does is so—I don’t know—not *wrong*, or even mean, or even stupid necessarily. But just so tiny and meaningless and—sad-making. And the worst part is, if you go bohemian or something crazy like that, you’re conforming just as much as everybody else, only in a different way.’²³²

Traveling, painting, summer interning, even opposing the reigning system and becoming bohemian: Franny seems to have tapped into the knowledge that all of these activities are but a

1991); and J.D. Salinger, “Hapworth 16, 1924,” *The New Yorker*, June 11, 1965, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1965/06/19/hapworth-16-1924>.

²²⁹ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 42.

²³⁰ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 43.

²³¹ See Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 9–10.

²³² Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 22–3.

means of cultivating one's brand. Even the "bohemians"—those ostensibly opposed to productivity—are trapped within a logic of self-fashioning, or *homo oeconomicus*, that has come to feel totalizing in Franny's collegiate milieu. Commodification takes center stage in a very different context in "Zooney," as the narrator painstakingly lists every item in the Glass's bathroom cabinet:

Before her, in overly luxuriant rows, was a host, so to speak, of golden pharmaceuticals, plus a few technically less indigenous whatnots. The shelves bore iodine, Mercurochrome, vitamin capsules, dental floss, aspirin, Anacin, Bufferin, Argyrol, Musterole, Ex-Lax, Milk of Magnesia, Sal Hepatica, Aspergum, two Gillette razors, one Schick Injector razor, two tubes of shaving cream, a bent and somewhat torn snapshot of a fat black-and-white cat asleep on a porch railing, three combs, two hairbrushes, a bottle of Wildroot hair ointment, a bottle of Fitch Dandruff Remover, a small, unlabelled box of glycerine suppositories, Vicks Nose Drops, Vicks VapoRub, six bars of castile soap, the stubs of three tickets to a 1946 musical comedy ('Call Me Mister'), a tube of depilatory cream, a box of Kleenex, two seashells, an assortment of used-looking emery boards, two jars of cleansing cream, three pairs of scissors, a nail file, an unclouded blue marble ... a cream for contracting enlarged pores, a pair of tweezers, the strapless chassis of a girl's or woman's gold wristwatch, a box of bicarbonate soda, a girl's boarding-school class ring with a chipped onyx stone, a bottle of Stopette—and, inconceivably or no, quite a good deal more.²³³

We are, clearly, already in a land of name brands, of endless *things*, as the text emphasizes: a list of this length confronts the reader with the overwhelming materialism and commodification in which Franny is surrounded. No wonder she seeks "namelessness" as an antidote: as she puts it, "I'm sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody."²³⁴ The goal is to be unbranded, unclassifiable, to exist beyond the realm of neoliberal subjection that was already at work in the fifties, reducing the human to its diagnoses, datapoints, and qualifications.

Yet however drawn to the idea of *egolessness*, of becoming nothing, neither Franny nor any of the other characters who populate Salinger's text succeeds in shedding the modernist hallmarks of individuality. The Irish Mrs. Glass with her "hoary midnight-blue Japanese kimono," which "served as the repository for the paraphernalia of a very heavy cigarette smoker and an amateur handyman,"²³⁵ is hardly interchangeable for any other mother, while Zooney and Franny—clearly siblings—are drawn distinctly in the influence that the elder Seymour and Buddy Glass left on them. ("Phooey, I say, on all white-shoe college boys who edit their campus literary magazines," Zooney pronounces about Franny's boyfriend, Lane. "Give me an honest con man any day."²³⁶) These are not the flattened characters of a postmodernist novel. But such identities are not immutable; indeed, selves, within *Franny and Zooney*, are constantly being performed,

²³³ Salinger, *Franny and Zooney*, 65–6.

²³⁴ Salinger, *Franny and Zooney*, 26. Interestingly, it is noted that the Russian peasant protagonist of *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the text that launches Franny's spiritual quest, also "never gives his name" (28). Zooney, as I will go on to explore, in the book's final scene, must remain masked, nameless also.

²³⁵ Salinger, *Franny and Zooney*, 64.

²³⁶ Salinger, *Franny and Zooney*, 84.

scripted, rehearsed, and restaged. This begins in the text's opening scene, where we witness Lane awaiting Franny at the train station: "Franny was among the first of the girls to get off the train, from a car at the far, northern end of the platform. Lane spotted her immediately, and despite whatever it was he was trying to do with his face, his arm that shot up into the air was the whole truth."²³⁷ Lane epitomizes the self-aware college boy: the opening scenes witness his straining for studied cool while his body betrays him, revealing, the narrator tells us, some kind of "truth." It's exactly this sort of performance of which Franny is critical: Lane's acting, much like that of their college compatriots, is in the name of optimizing his worth, whether in the field of dating or academia.

It is, in some ways, no wonder that Franny turns, or rather *returns*, to the wisdom of her brothers, the narrative's ghostly presences, when fed up with these performances. In opposition to quests for optimization, whether for worth, knowledge, or status, we learn (in Buddy's narrative voice, from a letter to Zooey) that Seymour

had already begun to believe ... that education by any name would smell as well, and maybe much sweeter, if it didn't begin with a quest for knowledge at all but with a quest, as Zen would put it, for no-knowledge. Dr. Suzuki says somewhere that to be in a state of pure consciousness—*satori*—is to be with God before he said, Let there be light. Seymour and I thought it might be a good thing to hold back this light from you and Franny ... and all the many lower, more fashionable lighting effects—the arts, sciences, classics, languages—till you were both able at least to conceive of a state of being where the mind knows the source of all light.²³⁸

Here, Buddy invokes a concept from Buddhism—*satori*—that seems to counter the dominant "fashionable lighting effects" of the age. Rather than seeking light, performance, Buddy invokes a search for that which precedes it: a pre-epistemological pure state of Godly consciousness. If Lane betrays his "truth" through performance, Seymour and Buddy, here, seek a truth that precedes it entirely.

But the text seems to move beyond this bifurcated theory of *performance versus truth*²³⁹: we might claim, following Gehlawat, that what draws Franny to the Jesus Prayer is the "euphoric sense of possibility associated with poststructuralist views on self-making and anti-essentialism."²⁴⁰ As Franny herself puts it:

²³⁷ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 7.

²³⁸ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 56–7.

²³⁹ It is worth noting that early in the text, even Buddy, as narrator, seems to endorse this binary, only for the text to proceed to critically destabilize it. As he writes in a letter to Zooey, which Zooey rereads leisurely in the bathtub, "I can't help thinking you'd make a damn site better-adjusted actor if Seymour and I hadn't thrown you in the Upanishads and the Diamond Sutra and Eckhart and all our other old loves with the rest of your recommended home reading when you were small." Here to *act* (as Zooey does, for a living) is established in distinction to the truth of the theological. See Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 52.

²⁴⁰ Monica Gehlawat, "Desperately Seeking Singularity in *Franny and Zooey*," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 22, no. 1 (2011): 74.

‘But the thing is, the marvelous thing is, when you first start doing it, you don’t even have to have *faith* in what you’re doing ... In other words, nobody asks you to believe a single thing when you first start out. You don’t even have to think about what you’re saying, the starets said. All you have to have in the beginning is quantity. Then, later on, it becomes quality by itself. On its own power or something. He says that any name of God—any name at all—has this peculiar, self-active power of its own, and it starts working after you’ve sort of started it up.’²⁴¹

The *content* of her “faith” or “belief” is not so crucial to Franny—nor does it ever seem to be for Salinger²⁴² (and indeed critics have remarked on the ecumenical hodge-podge of traditions represented in the text, often characterizing this as “religious pluralism”). What is, however, crucial to Franny, is the form of the Jesus Prayer: as anthropologist Saba Mahmood has put it, describing piety in a very different context, “instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one’s desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them.”²⁴³ Performance, in this context, is no longer merely the tool of the subject who seeks to “rebrand” herself but becomes a postsecular mode designed to resist neoliberal subjection. Neither doctrinally religious, nor, in its form, secular, Franny’s turn to the Jesus Prayer enacts a performance that troubles the binary between the two. She draws on the temporality of piety—the notion that practices and action can shape souls, bodies, and desires—in order to combat the commodification of those souls, bodies, and desires she so abhors. In other words, Franny is interested—much like the short story in which she finds herself—in “using text,” to draw on my earlier formulation, to enact a critical force, an agency, “a self-active power.”

Because of the metafictional nature of *Franny and Zooey*, a reader may interpret Franny’s postsecular practice more openly or more skeptically: the narrator’s denial (that this is but a “love story”), as mentioned earlier, offers the possibility for a secularized reading. Such a reading would have to overlook the novella’s ending, however, which both validates performance as a mode and seems to firmly land in a space beyond the secular. In the final scene, it is Zooey who calls his sister from brothers Buddy and Seymour’s old phone line, pretending to be Buddy. In other words, it is only through performance—though this performance is eventually found out—that Zooey believes he can finally get through to the bereft Franny. Buddy as narrator gives us Zooey the character playing Buddy the character: three layers of performance set the scene. Once Zooey realizes that his gig is up, he offers this monologue:

‘You can say the Jesus Prayer from now till doomsday, but if you don’t realize that the only thing that counts in the religious life is *detachment*, I don’t see how you’ll ever even move an *inch*. Detachment, buddy, and only detachment. Desirelessness. ‘Cessation from

²⁴¹ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 32.

²⁴² This is the view, anyway, of Zooey. At one point, Mrs. Glass considers getting yet another brother, Walker, a Catholic priest, on the phone with Franny, to which Zooey replies, “You’re way off ... This thing with Franny is strictly non-sectarian.” See Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 82.

²⁴³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 157.

all hankerings.’ It’s this business of *desiring*, if you want to know the goddam truth, that makes an actor in the first place.... The only thing you can do now, the only *religious* thing you can do, is *act*. Act for God, if you want to—be *God’s* actress, if you want to.’

The “religious life” itself comes under criticism; the detachment that Franny seeks, Zooey tells her, will get her nowhere. But performance, or acting—which is, incidentally, exactly what has drawn her to the Jesus Prayer—is itself “religious” according to Zooey. One can act, at every moment, for God. To perform is not to evade or conceal one’s “true self”; it can precisely involve the elicitation of truth.

Several factors are at work here. The first, formally, is that the standard boundaries between narrator, protagonist, reader, and author seem to dissolve, or are at least deconstructed, in this metafictional emphasis on performance. If the narrator introduces himself as Buddy—indeed claims the constructed nature of the whole vignette—skepticism is introduced not just around the status, truth, and efficacy of Franny’s Jesus Prayer (which, after all, has led Franny not to spiritual salvation but seemingly to a state of childhood regression) but around the status of the text itself. In the final scene, however, if we are to believe our narrator, we have a protagonist performing the narrator as recounted by the narrator: where is the line, then, between “Zooey” and “Buddy,” between what Buddy attributes to Zooey and what is essential to Zooey himself? These individuals dissolve into the performance, into “Glass,” as it were, and we as readers co-construct the performance: the audience must buy into the meaning in order for the action to go forward. Franny must believe in Zooey’s telephone performance as Buddy—at least initially—just as we begin reading by believing in the construction and conceit of the narrative. Yet even as such conceits are revealed to both Franny and reader, the performance can maintain its status as “fiction,” as *act*, as Zooey puts it, and remain meaningful.

And yet this story, composed of its many layers, ends, finally, with several of them peeled back, not with text but its highlighted absence. Franny responds to Zooey’s phone call, at first, in silence: “For a fullish half minute or so, there were no other words, no further speech. Then: ‘I can’t talk any more, buddy.’”²⁴⁴ This is noteworthy, especially in “Zooey,” which is comprised largely of dialogical set pieces, long volleying rallies between the precocious Glasses or their mother. The narration continues:

The sound of a phone being replaced in its catch followed. Franny took in her breath slightly but continued to hold the phone to her ear. A dial tone, of course, followed the formal break in the connection. She appeared to find it extraordinarily beautiful to listen to, rather as if it were the best possible substitute for the primordial silence itself. But she seemed to know, too, when to stop listening to it, as if all of what little or much wisdom there is in the world were suddenly hers. When she had replaced the phone, she seemed to know just what to do next, too. She cleared away the smoking things, then drew back the cotton bedspread from the bed she had been sitting on, took off her slippers, and got into the bed. For some minutes, before she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, she just lay quiet, smiling at the ceiling.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 170.

²⁴⁵ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 170.

Franny, however briefly, seems to have attained something like the *satori* Seymour and Buddy taught her to seek: a pre-epistemological “state of pure consciousness,” “the best possible substitute for the primordial silence itself.” It is crucial, here, that Franny is not acting, not talking: that speech, even knowledge, here comes to a halt. But then action—performance, if you will—continues, our protagonist, for the first time in the short story, “know[ing] just what to do next.” Performance, again, is not at odds with truth, but can be entangled with it, emerging from and indeed producing an agentive force.

Where, then, does this final scene leave us with regard to *Franny and Zooey*’s treatment of the term “religious”? Is it, indeed, a “religious” novella, one that espouses the “religious life”? Amy Hungerford has read it as such, arguing that

[t]he novel provides a case through which we can see how a literary text negotiates the relationship between words and God at this particular moment. It exemplifies how a writer might locate religious experience in meaning-less language, and how doing so might alleviate the tension between specific doctrine and religious pluralism without giving in to secularism.²⁴⁶

I disagree with this formulation; *Franny and Zooey* deals in neither “religious experience” nor “meaning-less language.” Instead, it draws on religious traditions to explore something distinct from religion—or, indeed, secularism—feeling out an alternative mode of being and performing the self that might throw into question our definitions of the two categories. As for the language in question, the Jesus Prayer, which Franny is silently uttering throughout the text, is precisely not meaningless: it acts and effects meaning on souls and bodies. Franny’s changed behavior throughout “Zooey” is evidence of the effect of these words—even if not the desired or aspirational one. To think otherwise is to remain lodged within a secular perspective, to fail to grasp how text can mediate affect beyond the category of the “religious.”

In *Franny and Zooey*, then, a metafictional form works to postsecular effect: in staging a performance in which character, narrator, and author are consciously performed, acted, reconfigured (as we move through the layers of fictionality from Zooey, to Buddy, to Salinger in this final scene), the short story, like metafiction at its best, implicitly destabilizes the subject beyond the bounds of fiction as well, commenting on the performances and constructions required by neoliberalism and indeed by secularism. However, the postsecular potential that I have identified within *Franny and Zooey*’s metafictional form is not simply one of resistance to subjection (whether liberal or neoliberal), and I want to be careful that my reading is not mistaken for naïve idealism. We need look only at *New York Times* profiles of Salinger to see to what extent he himself was commodified, his own reclusiveness fetishized.²⁴⁷ As I will go on to argue after examining Lerner’s *10:04* in the next section, metafiction, as it operates postsecularly in these case studies, moves dialectically between neoliberal antagonism and subjection: though both texts seek

²⁴⁶ Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 9.

²⁴⁷ See “J.D. Salinger Speaks about his Silence,” Lacey Fosburgh, *The New York Times*, 1974, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/13/specials/salinger-speaks.html>.

to trouble the commodification of the individual, this form is not wholly resistant to neoliberalism's capture, especially in the twenty-first-century era of financialization.

II. "A PROPRIOCEPTIVE FLICKER"

In a passage from *The Hatred of Poetry*, Ben Lerner remarks upon the "slash," or as it is technically called, "the virgule," that he encounters in prepublication excerpts of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* lurking between, before, and at the end of lines. "The virgule," he writes, "is the irreducible mark of poetic virtuality—the line break abstracted from the time and space of an actual poem."²⁴⁸ The slash, in this reading, is figured as a trace of poetic possibility, a possibility that strains beyond the spatial and temporal constraints of the line. But Lerner's signification of "virgule" goes further:

'Virgule': from Latin *virgula*—a little rod, from *virga*: branch, rod. We hear in it the *Virgula Divina*—the divining rod that locates water or other precious substances underground, a rod that mediates or pretends to mediate between the terrestrial and the divine ... And we hear the meteorological phenomenon known as 'virga,' my favorite kind of weather: streaks of water or ice particles trailing from a cloud that evaporate before they reach the ground. It's a rainfall that never quite closes the gap between heaven and earth, between the dream and fire; it's a mark for verse that is not yet, or no longer, or not merely actual; they are phenomena whose failure to become or remain fully real allows them to figure something beyond the phenomenal.²⁴⁹

In a gesture that is emblematic of his work more generally, Lerner here figures the virgule not as *divina*—for that would be too simple—but as that which at once attempts to mediate between the divine and terrestrial while pointing to the *pretense* of complete mediation, as that which shuttles, whether as rod, water, or ice materials, between them, but which, crucially, "evaporate[s] before [it] reach[es] the ground." The virgule thus signifies a verse that has moved "beyond the phenomenal," as he puts it, and yet is not, of course, fully noumenal, or in Lerner's vocabulary, virtual, either. Lerner's poetic project is instead interested in a "flickering" between such categories that can never quite bridge them: virtual and actual, collective and individual, but most crucially for my interests here, terrestrial and divine. Much like the messianic sensibility that runs throughout *10:04*, the virgule enacts a space of suspension ("never quite closes the gap between heaven and earth"), a resistance to teleological closure ("not yet, or no longer, or not merely actual"), an escape hatch in the phenomenal, secular order.

I offer this vignette on the virgule as a way to introduce the animating ambition of Lerner's *10:04*,²⁵⁰ which offers another case study of metafiction that complicates the notion of a secular

²⁴⁸ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, 78.

²⁴⁹ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, 80-1.

²⁵⁰ The book's title is a campy reference to the film *Back to the Future*—10:04 marks the time on the clock when time travel becomes possible. The seemingly standard clock-time of the title is immediately transformed into a signifier for the non-linear, the fantastical, the spectral.

modernity. In its movement between realism and what we might term virtuality, prose and the poetic, and, most crucially, spectral pasts and futures, it seems to function in the space of the messianic, a term that it engages throughout. The text is often referred to as “autofiction”²⁵¹ or “metafiction”: its narrator, named Ben, is, much like the author, an acclaimed poet-turned author from Topeka, Kansas, now living in Brooklyn. In the opening scene, the narrator is commissioned to write the very novel we readers are told we find in our hands, and the text moves between “reality” and an ever-so-slightly fictionalized version of that reality: fiction within a fiction, as it were. Finance capital—replete with its totalizing will to the commodification of all aesthetic objects, and its peculiar, speculative temporality—is immediately thematized. “A few months before, the agent had e-mailed me that she believed I could get a ‘strong six-figure’ advance based on a story of mine that had appeared in *The New Yorker*; all I had to do was promise to turn it into a novel,” the narrator explains.²⁵² We are immediately within the structure of the promise, that spectral principle of eschatology and Marxism alike. Lerner’s novel, which includes within it the entirety of an actual *New Yorker* story previously published by the author (attributed to its narrator), playfully traces the promissory modes of late capitalism only to subvert the promise he narrativizes—he will ultimately deliver a different novel than the one he promises. If the narrator begins the book overwhelmed by what he describes as “my future collapsing in upon me”²⁵³—fears of climate change, literary and physical reproduction, and illness ricocheting throughout—what occurs throughout the novel, as Peter Vermeulen has also suggested, is an attempt to “redeem the present from a future that only diminishes it,”²⁵⁴ as well as, I would add, an attempt to construct multiple alternative futures within that present, to create a space of multiple possibilities in the face of a determining narrative. Such a project necessarily entails the deconstruction of what we might call messianism—both fiction and financialization’s reliance on a classic promise-based futurity—in favor of the messianic. This messianic entails the creation of a gap between the actual and the virtual, one that *10:04* inhabits through the visible traces of its unrealized, erased, and merely possible plots: like the virgule, the plots that the protagonist abandons—but that remain visible to the reader—are “not yet, or no longer, or not merely actual”; they “figure something beyond the phenomenal.”²⁵⁵

This form of the messianic occurs through a double movement of critique and receptivity. Lerner’s neurotic, socially uncouth narrator registers a cynicism toward his hyper-commodified surroundings, his own bourgeois habits, and impending climate-related destruction, but within Whitmanian passages, the neoliberal cosmopolitan landscape is transformed into something resembling hope and sublimity.

²⁵¹ As noted earlier, the term “autofiction” was first coined by French novelist and critic Serge Doubrovsky when he used it as a generic descriptor for his 1977 novel, *Fils*. As Alison Gibbons writes in her work on the genre, the term came to designate not only Doubrovsky’s writing, but a broader literary trend emerging in the seventies in France. Gibbons narrowly defines autofiction as “fiction (to a greater or lesser degree) and the central character shares the same name as the author.” See Alison Gibbons, “Autonarration, ‘I’, and Odd Address in Ben Lerner’s Autofictional Novel *10:04*.” In Gibbons, A., and Macrae, A. (eds.), *Pronouns in Literature: Positions and Perspectives in Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 76.

²⁵² Lerner, *10:04*, 2.

²⁵³ Lerner, *10:04*, 7.

²⁵⁴ Pieter Vermeulen, “How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future.” *Political Theory* 45, no. 5 (October 2017): 661.

²⁵⁵ Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, 80-1.

Only an urban experience of the sublime was available to me because only then was the greatness beyond calculation the intuition of the community. Bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water, vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity—whenever I looked at lower Manhattan from Whitman’s side of the river I resolved to become one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body.²⁵⁶

Notice the temporality of the narrator’s statement: the present, bad forms that bind us become those through which he must make art, a “collective figure of possibility ... *in advance* of the communal body.” The narrator explicitly positions himself messianically in advance of an event—“the communal body”—that can be neither predicted nor heralded. And yet Lerner seeks to seize, within his present, that possibility of the imperceptible future, to recognize, within the late capitalist drudgery and increasing erosion of the urban landscape, glimmers of what Benjamin would call “chips of Messianic time.”²⁵⁷ Note, however, the language in which such glimmers are figured: “momentarily,” “possibility,” “flicker.” There is instability, precarity, a hypothetical element to this entire operation. A postsecular poetics can strive to wrest open the gap between the secular and the religious, the infinite and the finite, allowing us to—however fleetingly—inhabit flickering figures of possibility within the present, but such a movement must remain suspended, momentary, if it is to resist the gravitational pull of what Lerner terms the actual.

Precisely in this regard, as I will discuss in the next section, Lerner’s temporal logic is juxtaposed to that of neoliberalism, which attempts to foreclose the future in advance. Lerner’s present, we might say, is suffused with the constant possibility of an imperceptible future; indeed, we may very well be unwittingly inhabiting the “world to come.” *10:04* is inscribed with an epigraph that reads “The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here.... Everything will be as it is now, just a little different”—a line Lerner attributes to Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community*, within which it is attributed to Walter Benjamin, himself a phantasmatic figure within Lerner’s novel. One begins to see how this messianic sensibility must be understood as necessarily postsecular: unlike Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* as imagined by Benjamin,²⁵⁸ Lerner’s mode is both “backward-looking and anticipatory,” as Graham Huggan has described postsecularism, “on the knife-edge between skepticism and idealism.”²⁵⁹

As a book unusually concerned with its own potential power (and possible failure) as an aesthetic object in a totalizing world of capital and advanced book deals, *10:04* turns to an examination of art that has slipped through the cracks of totalizing “market” time. This is encapsulated in “The Institute for Totaled Art,” a project concocted by the narrator’s on-again-off-

²⁵⁶ Lerner, *10:04*, 108–9.

²⁵⁷ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

²⁵⁸ Lerner reproduces Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* with an inscription from Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (“The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned.”) See Lerner, *10:04*, 25.

²⁵⁹ Huggan, “Is the ‘Post’ in ‘Postsecular’ the ‘Post’ in ‘Postcolonial’?,” 765–6.

again girlfriend, Alena.²⁶⁰ When Alena discovers that artworks have been deemed worthless according to market value because of damage either visible or invisible, she plots a scheme to secure and display these “totaled” pieces that have been left abandoned in a warehouse, many of them once worth thousands. As the narrator considers such a project—this “recontextualization” that he deems a reversal of a Duchampian readymade, thus extracting an object from its “artwork” logic and returning it to its role as mere object—he feels something almost like the possibility of the utopic:

I felt a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied as I held a work from which the exchange value had been extracted, an object that was otherwise unchanged. It was as if I could register in my hands a subtle but momentous transfer of weight: the twenty-one grams of the market’s soul had fled; it was no longer a commodity fetish; it was art before or after capital. Not the shattered or slashed works ... but those objects in the archive that both were and weren’t different moved me: they had been redeemed, both in the sense that the fetish had been converted back into cash, the claim paid out, but also in the messianic sense of saved from something, saved for something.²⁶¹

The text imbues the seeming banality of an undamaged Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph now deemed worthless (it is part of a triptych missing a panel, we learn) with a messianic glow, its interest, as always, in what has managed to escape the capitalist neoliberal order. “Art before or after capital” looks identical but becomes moving, “saved,” wrested from a totalizing, fetishizing logic to which the narrator and his own art practice feel beholden. The narrator’s examination of the two senses of “redeem” are key here: those pieces that are visibly undamaged have presumably been redeemed for their market value and have thus fulfilled their eschatological telos. But so too have they been “redeemed” *from* such a logic—the logic of the actual—figured instead with a messianic glow in their having been “saved from something, saved for something.” While critics such as Arne de Boever have suggested that Lerner is here attempting to think art not just beyond capital but *beyond the sacred*,²⁶² beyond the political theology of fetish, I would argue that the sacred, paradoxically, remains in the movement of art’s universalization, the banalization of the fetishized object. It is this movement, after all, this *gap*, that the book’s “Institute for Totaled Art” allows us to inhabit, that Lerner would *like* us to inhabit: the distance between fetish and earth, iconicity and scrapheap, “Ben” the narrator and the living breathing author.

On the page directly following this description of the messianic potential of the Institute for Totaled Art, Lerner has included two identical images: both are of a man (not Lerner himself, as a reader can deduce from examining the book’s author photo) on what appears to be the Manhattan Bridge. Indeed, if one checks the art attributions at the novel’s end, it becomes clear that these are Cartier-Bresson photographs, perhaps the very triptych with the missing panel. The first is captioned “our world,” the second, “the world to come.” The story of the Hassidim is overtly echoed, and an imaginary collective plural readership is interpellated through the first-person plural pronoun: reader, text, narrator, and author are imagined to inhabit “our world.” And yet “the

²⁶⁰ The project is a fictional transposition of the Salvage Art Institute, founded by Elka Krajewska in New York state in 2010. See “Salvage Art Institute,” accessed April 26, 2024, <http://salvageartinstitute.org/>.

²⁶¹ Lerner, *10:04*, 133-34.

²⁶² Arne de Boever, “Iconic Intelligence (Or: In Praise of the Sublamental),” *boundary 2* 49, no. 2 (2022): 140–42.

world to come” might not depend on a redeeming future: glimmers of it may exist already, *10:04* seems to tell us, in the Cartier-Bressons that look identical, undamaged, but are “a little different.”

III. “FROM IRONY TO SINCERITY IN THE SINKING CITY”: THE POSTSECULAR AND NEOLIBERALISM

At this point some might ask, but what makes this supposed “postsecular” sensibility within Salinger or Lerner distinct from, say, that of Walter Benjamin himself? Or that of a Heidegger, a Taubes, or even an Augustine, in his attempt to reconcile human temporality with God’s eternity? My answer is that each of these thinkers could be read as postsecular once we learn to read beyond our secular-religious binary—though for Augustine secularism was not yet a political imposition as it was for the others. Similarly, neoliberalism was not yet the hegemonic backdrop for any of these writers as it was beginning to be for Salinger and is so forcefully for Lerner.

Neoliberalism is a famously difficult term to pin down; its origin stories and definitions vary across scholarship, in part due to its temporal and geographic instability across its instantiations. Scholars such as David Harvey view neoliberalism as an economic project grounded in the free-market principles of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman; it can be read as both a reaction to Keynesianism and democratic socialism.²⁶³ For theorists like Wendy Brown, however, neoliberalism is unique—and pernicious—in that it moves *beyond* the economic sphere, “configur[ing] all aspects of existence in economic terms.”²⁶⁴ Brown argues, drawing on Foucault, that neoliberalism comprises a “governing rationality” that extends the market to non-economic spheres: everything from leisure, to education, to online dating is configured as investment, asset, opportunities cost. All domains become markets—and by the 1990s, not least the domain of identity writing. As Michum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith aptly put it, “the market does not require specific economic pursuits, political commitments, or ideological beliefs; it only requires our presence, our being in and of it.”²⁶⁵

If a postsecular sensibility is visible throughout history—and indeed, I would claim that it is—it has become pronounced within our neoliberal moment. I would suggest that there are two (not entirely distinct) reasons for this: the first constitutes a reaction to the neoliberal emphasis on autonomy, rationality, freedom, etc. The second, which I will go on to explain, is that neoliberalism could itself already be called postsecular. As Lisa Duggan writes, in a particularly provocative formulation, “neoliberalism is a kind of secular faith,” which manipulates understandings of race, gender, sexuality, and religion “in the interest . . . of capital accumulation.”²⁶⁶ Neoliberalism, we might claim, becomes a part of the US secular apparatus, an economic instantiation of the tenets of freedom, autonomy, and individuality that gradually come to pervade all spheres of life. The 1990s are when neoliberal ideology first extended into noneconomic domains of life, affecting literary theory and form. In this period, neoliberalism becomes immanent to literary form even as

²⁶³ See Michum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald-Smith, eds., *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

²⁶⁴ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17.

²⁶⁵ See Huehls and Greenwald-Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, 9.

²⁶⁶ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), xiii, cited in Huehls and Greenwald-Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, 2.

certain texts are antagonistic towards it.²⁶⁷ And indeed, as I argue, what emerges in the contemporary is precisely a postsecular emphasis in resistance to the political rationality of neoliberalism—here we find a staging of what we might term the “pre-rational” against instrumentalizing rationality.²⁶⁸

Let’s examine Duggan’s formulation, “secular faith,” further: a seeming paradox, it works precisely to question the boundaries this dissertation seeks to trouble. Indeed, neoliberalism cannot be placed squarely within the categories of a secular-religious divide. Adam Kotsko has recently argued that it is itself a form of political theology (a discipline, he notes, which rejects the secular-religious binary): “...neoliberalism is more than simply a formula for economic policy. It aspires to be a complete way of life and a holistic worldview, in a way that previous models of capitalism did not. It is this combination of policy agenda and moral ethos that leads me to designate neoliberalism as a form of political theology.”²⁶⁹ According to this view, neoliberal discourse distinguishes itself from previous economic policies—and can be classified as political theology—precisely because it aspires to reshape the world.²⁷⁰ Whether “secular faith” or “political theology,” neoliberalism itself presents a challenge to the traditional discursive spheres of religious studies and secularism alike.

Joshua Ramey takes this one step further in his analysis of neoliberalism, which, in his view, is not only a political theology, but a contemporary form of divination. Ramey argues that the neoliberal era ushers in a transition from a knowledge-based economy to a *nonknowledge*-based economy: where formerly the economy was driven by prediction and control, it now operates through the exploitation of uncertainty.²⁷¹ Here he draws the term “non-knowledge” from Bataille; neoliberalism exploits “the intuitive, empathetic consciousness required for creative improvisation, manifested in laughter and tears, and signified in otherwise unaccountable sorrow, joy, longing, hope, despair, and inspiration.”²⁷² Rather than plan for uncertainty, Ramey argues, the economic strategy now is to produce and exploit it, profiting off an entwinement of the known and unknowable. This specific blend of market expertise, he claims, “has come to occupy an ancient and perennial place in human culture, the site where human cultures have, from time immemorial, practiced many forms of *divination*: procedures by which human beings attempt to access knowledge of the unknown.”²⁷³ Divinatory practice is itself a form of political theology, one that offers a retroactive, justificatory narrative for arbitrary changes in market conditions, equating them with a “divinely ordained order. This ideology justifies austerity, the maintenance of debts, and even ecological devastation, reading them as cosmic inevitabilities it is irrational to

²⁶⁷ Huehls and Greenwald-Smith refer to this as the “sociocultural phase” of neoliberalism. See Huehls and Greenwald-Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, 8.

²⁶⁸ For more on this notion of instrumentalizing rationality and the “pre-rational,” see Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

²⁶⁹ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 19.

²⁷⁰ Kotsko adds to this definition of political theology: “I regard political theology as the study of systems of legitimacy, the ways that political, social, economic and religious orders maintain their explanatory power and justify the loyalty of their adherents.” See Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons*, 24.

²⁷¹ Ramey, *Politics of Divination*, 4. Here Ramey draws on Randy Martin’s *Knowledge, Ltd.*

²⁷² Ramey, *Politics of Divination*, 4.

²⁷³ Ramey, *Politics of Divination*, 5.

question.”²⁷⁴ Ramey is interested not only in neoliberalism’s political theological aspirations, but in its justifications.

Following Kotsko and Ramey, I suggest that neoliberalism can be read as postsecular: indeed, in its values and method, it rests uneasily on the secular-religious binary. The postsecular forms of *Franny and Zooey* and *10:04* are also interested in “nonknowledge”—but they play with it to other ends, seeking to destabilize and question neoliberalism’s command of divination, its subordination of all chance to profit. In so doing, these textual forms both offer routes of possible resistance and further fuel the non-knowledge economic machine with data to be exploited.

What differentiates *10:04* and *Franny and Zooey* is that the former is operating within a late capitalist world order in which, as Christopher Nealon has pointed out, life itself has already become spectral. Describing a group he terms the post-Language poets, Nealon asks, “How do they perform a relationship to the experience of a materiality that is both desubstantialized and supersaturating, subject to both lightning-swift consolidations and dispersals and to humiliating, vegetally slow decay?”²⁷⁵ We can loosely categorize Lerner within this group historically; he certainly fits Nealon’s depiction of those poets who “have become invested in a historical story about what Theodor Adorno called ‘damaged life,’”²⁷⁶ though Nealon’s great claim is that “many of the post-Language poets have struck a kind of camp posture toward the ‘damage’ of late capitalism in a way that borrows from but reinterprets both the messianism of Adorno and Benjamin...”²⁷⁷ This heterogeneous group of post-Language poets, is, arguably, made up of Lerner’s contemporaries—and yet by 2014, ten years after the publication of Nealon’s “Camp Messianism,” we see the messianic Lerner deploys veering from the broader group culture Nealon delineates. Lerner does indeed draw on a campy archive (alongside Klee’s *Angelus Novus* he includes images from the 1985 film *Back to the Future*; and a Powerpoint on dinosaurs is also featured within the novel), but unlike many of the other “post-Language” poets, Lerner is intent on revitalizing the tradition of the lyric, a quest that ultimately tips his “messianic” less in the direction of camp than in that of sincerity.²⁷⁸ It is this form of the messianic that he deploys to counter neoliberalism’s divinatory practices. If neoliberalism attempts to foreclose the future in

²⁷⁴ Ramey, *Politics of Divination*, 6.

²⁷⁵ Christopher Nealon, “Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism,” *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (September 2004): 581.

²⁷⁶ Nealon, “Camp Messianism,” 579.

²⁷⁷ Nealon, “Camp Messianism,” 579.

²⁷⁸ In the opening scene with his agent, eating octopus at a restaurant on the High Line in New York, which the narrator narrates cynically, if utterly self-consciously, he is asked how he plans to expand his *New Yorker* short story into the book he has been commissioned to write. “‘I’ll project myself into several futures simultaneously,’ I should have said, ‘a minor tremor in my hand; I’ll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid.’” The line is delivered theatrically, perhaps proving Nealon’s point (camp), and yet I read it as tracking, too, a sincere authorial self-awareness, a knowledge of how the aspirational Whitmanian project of *10:04* defies market sensibilities. One might read the conjunction of ironic theatricality and sincerity in Lerner alongside what Adam Kelly has called “The New Sincerity.” For Kelly, such a term defines a literary countermovement to postmodernism among writers who recognized that sincerity, as “expressed through language, can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation.” That sincerity is fundamentally unknowable means that it depends “not on purity but on ... faith.” See Adam Kelly, “The New Sincerity,” *Postmodern/Postwar—and After: Rethinking American Literature*, edited by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 201. For a discussion of *10:04* and “The New Sincerity,” see Alexandra Effe, “Ben Lerner’s *10:04* and the ‘Utopian Glimmer of [Auto]fiction,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 67, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 738–757.

advance, Lerner's novel, by contrast, attempts to inhabit the vibrating possibilities—plots that could be, were not, are not yet—circulating in a single present.

Lerner explicitly thematizes late capitalist modes of the virtual and spectral, not only in the form of valuation, but also in the form of ghosts: the narrator wrestles with the specters of poets Jack Spicer, Walt Whitman, and, most literally, Robert Creeley, whose phantom the narrator believes he glimpses driving along an empty road in Marfa, Texas. It is after this phantasmatic encounter that the narrator comes to a realization, deciding to abandon the novel he had pitched to his agent, and thus, we might say, financialization and its premise of the promise:

I'd been hard on Whitman during my residency, hard on his impossible dream,²⁷⁹ but standing there with Creeley ... looking at the ghost of ghost lights, we made, if not a pact, a kind of peace. Say that it was standing there that I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them; I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures.²⁸⁰

Note the phrase “replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now”: Lerner lingers in this space where the spectral—the proposed, immaterial book whose valuation funded the material—becomes the actual, physical object in the hands of the reader, thereby abandoning, in our reading, the future-based premise of messianism for the immediacy of the present-tense. However, it is a “present alive with multiple futures,” in other words, a present animated by *the messianic*, a “time of now,” in Benjamin's terms, “shot through with chips of messianic time.”²⁸¹

This stands in crucial contrast to the temporality of neoliberal divination as Ramey outlines it, which is not, remember, about *anticipating* the future, but rather about the attempt to “*foreclose the future in advance*”:

This is achieved in part by constraining the meaning of chance (restricting it to potentially profitable risk) and in part by producing or allowing catastrophic situations, states of emergency that only the already largest firms and interests can manage or claim to manage. By calling neoliberalism a politics of divination we capture the sense in which *retroactive* stories about market success or failure, market efficiency or inefficiency, are isomorphic

²⁷⁹ Whitman's “impossible dream,” to which the narrator here refers, is one of “democratic personhood”: it is, perhaps, what Jacques Rancière would call substitutability, the *as if* inherent to democracy. Such substitutability requires a process of emptying out of subjectivity—one that Lerner would not endorse. “If he were to reveal the specific genesis and texture of his personality, if he presented a picture of irreducible individuality, he would lose his ability to be ‘Walt Whitman, a cosmos’—his ‘I’ would belong to an empirical person rather than constituting a pronoun in which the readers of the future could participate.” But even as Lerner's narrator is critical of this aspect of Whitman, he cannot readily dismiss him. *10:04* narrates Lerner's working through the lyric tradition that precedes him, his attempt to reformulate it in order to ground a collective second-person address of possible futures while retaining a textured, specific portrait of the neoliberal materiality of his everyday present. See Lerner, *10:04*, 168.

²⁸⁰ Lerner, *10:04*, 194.

²⁸¹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

with traditional uses of divination to understand the meaning of how events have unfolded into a given present, and why.²⁸²

While the ordinary view of neoliberal economics might be that it thrives on “blind openness” and total risk, Ramey’s analysis illuminates this crucial nuance: neoliberalism thrives on *manageable* risk. Risk and chance are constrained to the potentially profitable; particular states of emergency are produced or allowed. Far from open, the future becomes limited to that which can be contained. In contrast to the reigning desire to constrain meaning and futures, Lerner’s novel departs from the model of a future readership that receives a completed narrative whole.

Instead, he seeks to bring readers into the time of writing, to create an asynchronic, vibrant present. The reader is interpellated throughout, invoked directly in the second person: “reader, we walked on,” he tells us in the final section, and elsewhere, “you might have seen me...”. The space of narrative here is not one of teleological subordination to the future reader, in which meaning is postponed. Indeed, *10:04* resists the standard narratological mode aligned with the order of messianism, in which meaning is imagined to be produced retroactively.²⁸³ Instead, Lerner attempts to occupy that space where narrator and reader become both subject and object, all part of the “organism” of the city, with material agency distributed across human and nonhuman alike. As Lerner’s narrator consumes octopus in the novel’s opening scene, he quite literally digests non-human agency and affects: “I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say that I intuited an alien intelligence, felt subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me: the ability to perceive polarized light; a conflation of taste and touch as salt was rubbed into the suction cups; a terror localized in my extremities, bypassing the brain completely.”²⁸⁴ The materials of the world become enmeshed, their agency embodied. Literature becomes the place where glitches in systems, in what Tsitsovits and Vermeulen call the “dominant discourses—can be registered,”²⁸⁵ and can allow for novel postsecular notions of subjectivity that make political activity feel more urgent, more vital. This is non-knowledge not yet captured by the neoliberal order.

In the book’s final two paragraphs, after a storm (clearly resembling Hurricane Sandy) has swept New York City, the narration moves from its continuous present into the future tense before returning to the present, ending with a line repurposed from Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”²⁸⁶:

²⁸² Ramey, *Politics of Divination*, 58.

²⁸³ Here I build on Pieter Vermeulen, who has argued, drawing on the work of Mark Currie, that “narrative fiction organizes human life as if it required the sanction of a significant closure in order to be recognized as meaningful.” See Vermeulen, “How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)?,” 670. See also Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

²⁸⁴ Lerner, *10:04*, 1.

²⁸⁵ Ioannis Tsitsovits and Pieter Vermeulen, “The Anthropocene Scriptorium: Writing and Agency in Ben Lerner’s *10:04* and Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island*,” *Anglistik & Englischunterricht* 86 (2017): 210.

²⁸⁶ However, as Daniel Katz has pointed out, this is no simple repurposing, as should the reader seek out the “Library of America edition” of Whitman emphasized earlier in the novel, the direct line from Whitman cited on page 168—“I project myself – also I return – I am with you, and I know how it is”—is nowhere to be found. Whitman edited it out of the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Katz explains, the one used by the Library of America. As he writes, “Whitman, with his habit of revising old poems and adding new ones in each new edition of *Leaves of Grass*, projected new futures from pasts which never existed, returning from one future to erase the past in which he promised a projection.

Sitting at a small table looking through our reflection in the window onto Flatbush Avenue, I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I'd seen it from the Manhattan Bridge, but, at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence intended to stop jumpers, I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural. I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is.²⁸⁷

The narrator projects himself from his textured, specific, non-substitutable person (the actual, walking), into a future “second-person plural” who takes in the city's ruins in an image clearly meant to evoke the angel of history. But Lerner's messianic mode, unlike Benjamin's, is not so concerned with the liberation of untold stories of history. It is rather the liberation of the present from the impending order of the future that interests *10:04* throughout. Here, the present (“sitting”) opens onto a speculative future (“I will begin,”) that relies on an imagined past (“as if I'd seen”), all orders of time converging briefly in the present of reading and writing, a Benjaminian *Jetztzeit*—replete with a virgule—that upends any narrative of homogeneous, empty time, slipping us somewhere beyond the terrestrial.²⁸⁸ The genre of this postsecular messianic thus operates from within those cracks where “what normally felt like the only possible world [becomes] one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs”²⁸⁹; out of the order of seeming realism, the temporality—and indeed collectivity—of an otherwise becomes fleetingly glimpsable. *10:04* may finally begin to imagine a future, but it is not the narrowly constricted future of neoliberalism, nor the future constrained by the antinomies of secularism. Texts like *10:04* at once expose their belonging to the time and project of neoliberalism even as they resist it: *10:04*'s very premise hinges upon the value of the virtual, a speculative bubble around the as-yet-unwritten; it is thus funded by a future on which neoliberalism has staked its claim. It is the movement of that “at once,” however, the simultaneity of belonging and resistance, that can be grasped only against the secularist assumptions of literary criticism.

IV. METAFICTION BEYOND THE MODERN

10:04 and *Franny and Zooey* therefore serve as examples of works whose forms' discursive and material effects cannot be adequately described by the usual vocabulary of the secular order—indeed, I would say that to call these texts “religious” or “secular” would be to obfuscate their

10:04 ends with a line which was retrospectively made to fade out from the future it imagines ... only to find itself inserted into an edition of Whitman in which it doesn't exist.” See Daniel Katz, “‘I did not walk here all the way from prose’: Ben Lerner's Virtual Poetics,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 2 (2017): 329.

²⁸⁷ Lerner, *10:04*, 240.

²⁸⁸ As I will explore in detail in the subsequent chapter, it is thanks, primarily, to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* that Benjamin's “homogeneous, empty time” has become associated with the time of capital and the time of secular modernity. The empty time of eighteenth-century industrial development is imagined to be devoid of the sovereignty that imbues “pre-modern” temporalities. In Anderson's conception, the kind of “premodern” simultaneity present in something like Benjamin's messianic time, “a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present,” is succeeded by a secular simultaneity measured by clock and calendar. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006).

²⁸⁹ Lerner, *10:04*, 14.

myriad operations, which cannot be subsumed by such a binary but work instead to trouble it. It is through a postsecular formalism that we can read against the secularist assumptions of much existing literary criticism, engaging in a mode of reading that is more attuned to the complex temporalities at work throughout modernity. Lerner's *10:04* hardly embodies a landscape of empty or homogeneous temporality: he illustrates a world where book deals are made for books not-yet-existing; where biological reproduction can be interrupted, "frozen"; where "past" literary archives can be falsified for an unknowable future; and where storms and impending climate change threaten the future and distort the present. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, meanwhile, may be written chronologically, but it is both structured by a repeated prayer and haunted by ghosts, by figures and episodes past, one of whom announces he is himself constructing the narrative. As in *10:04*, the reader is invited into a series of performances, of fictions, and both asked and not asked to take them seriously: when the performance is over, we are left with nothing but the divine "dial tone," "the primordial silence itself."²⁹⁰ Both texts thus force the reader to acknowledge the fictional, constructed status of the text while interpellating him or her as co-constructor, a co-performer as it were. We are hailed into the performance, into the scene, and called, with "Buddy" and "Ben," to produce meaning. Such "meaning," as I have argued against Amy Hungerford, need not be conscripted into the categories of religious (or, for that matter, secular), but is endowed with a force that may indeed rupture such categories.

We must return to the question, then, of what we mean when we invoke the "modern," as so many continue to differentiate even the present-day from some (often imagined) "pre-modern" that preceded it. What unifies many of these characterizations is the association, sometimes tacit, elsewhere explicit, between modernity and the secular, or secularization, one which will be further disentangled in the following chapter. That which is assigned to the modern is assigned also to the realm of a homogenizing force of secularity. The work of Salinger and Lerner, then, might be said to function as a mirror held up to the "contemporary West": one that allows us to dispel long-ingrained myths of a complete and totalizing secularization, fissures and cracks of which are becoming ever more visible in the crises of neoliberalism and the Anthropocene. What we find in those fissures are impulses, forms of life, and modes of being that demand conceptualization beyond a "return of the religious" or "secularity," instead disclosing the spectral, iterative, horizonless nature of life in the twenty-first century, one that requires that we meet it on its own terms.

²⁹⁰ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 170.

CHAPTER THREE

Seriality Beyond Secularization:

Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and Fred Moten's *All That Beauty*

Seriality constantly confronts us with
interruptions—sites of resistance—to continuity.

—Ryan Engley, “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media
Theory” (2021)

People can only imagine themselves in empty
homogeneous time; they do not live in it.

—Partha Chatterjee, “The Nation in Heterogeneous
Time” (2001)

In 2009, poet, critic, and essayist Maggie Nelson published *Bluets*. Comprised of 240 loosely linked propositions modeled after Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*²⁹¹, the text's numbered fragments offer a meditation on blue, loneliness, sex, pain, death, and—notably—divinity. Indeed, in its opening pages, Nelson's *Bluets* reads:

That each blue object could be a kind of burning bush, a secret code meant for a single agent, an X on a map too diffuse ever to be unfolded in entirety but that contains the knowable universe. How could all the shreds of blue garbage stuck in brambles, or the bright blue tarps flapping over every shanty and fish stand in the world, be, in essence, the fingerprints of God? *I will try to explain this.*²⁹²

Nelson has been classified as a practitioner of queer theory, autotheory, the lyric essay²⁹³—her work is heralded for its formal and generic innovation—but none have attended to the implications

²⁹¹ Nelson cites the *Philosophical Investigations* as one of “The Principal Suppliers” in the backmatter of *Bluets*, though it seems clear that Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color*, with its interest in the use of language about color, was an influence as well. See Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2009), 98; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Color*, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007).

²⁹² Nelson, *Bluets*, 2.

²⁹³ For just a survey of some of the recent scholarship that falls into these categories, see Tyler Bradway, “Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form,” *PMLA* 136, no. 5 (2021): 711–727; Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain, *Queer Troublemakers: The Poetics of Flippancy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Max Cavitch, “Everybody's Autotheory,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2022): 81–116; Kate Collins, “The Morbidity of Maternity:

for the secular-religious binary within the above-cited lines and in the text's very form. In fact, though *Bluets* continues to offer a sense of the sacred amid the quotidian, blending the discourses of mysticism and sexuality, its references to angels, providence, and burning bushes have not been engaged by critics. Nelson remains firmly ensconced within the American "high art" imaginary, and that realm is imagined—perhaps no more so than by literary critics—to be secular.

In order to interrogate this secular imaginary, I examine Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and Fred Moten's *All That Beauty*, two formally hybrid texts in which the theoretical and poetic intertwine. The forms of these works, I argue, can be characterized by an iterative, serial quality. Each poem of Moten's or "proposition" of Nelson's moves and builds episodically, though a sense of teleology is eschewed in favor of that which accrues, reiterates, persists, and "cuts." By focusing, in particular, on the "cuts" of the serial—on that which lies between each "series"—I offer a reading of the form that reveals it to be more than linear, continuous, forward-facing. Both Nelson and Moten's serials showcase, in different ways, that which the standard account of modernity and its serials as "homogeneous [and] empty" excludes or forecloses.

In order to grasp the rich site of associations bound up with the form of the "serial"—indeed, in order to grasp the force of "seriality" in the theoretical imagination—we must embark on a brief genealogy. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin originated the formulation, so often referenced throughout this study, "homogeneous, empty time [homogene und leere Zeit]." In the essay, composed at the end of his life in early 1940, Benjamin writes,

Die Vorstellung eines Fortschritts des Menschengeschlechts in der Geschichte ist von der Vorstellung ihres eine homogene und leere Zeit durchlaufenden Fortgangs nicht abzulösen. Die Kritik an der Vorstellung dieses Fortgangs muß die Grundlage der Kritik an der Vorstellung des Fortschritts überhaupt bilden.²⁹⁴

The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.²⁹⁵

As we can see in the lines cited, Benjamin here inaugurated the association of progress—of a view toward futurity—with empty homogeneity, but *not* so as to posit homogeneous, empty time as a lived reality. It is rather an erroneous perception imposed by historicism in contrast to the arresting,

Radical Receptivity in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*," *Criticism* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 311–334; Michelle Dicinoski, "Wild Associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson, and the Lyric Essay," *TEXT* 21, special issue 39 (2017): 1–12; Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021); Yasmina Jaksic, "Becoming (Trans)ient: Queer Motherhood and Becoming-Queer in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*," *ESC* 45, no. 1-2 (March/June 2019): 141–160; Joe Moran, "Walking With a Purpose: The Essay in Contemporary Nonfiction," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 8 (Jan 2017): 1277–1299; Monica B. Pearl, "Theory and the Everyday," *Angelaki* 23, no. 1 (Feb 2018): 199–203; and Georgia Walton, "Emerson and the Lyric Essay in Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*," *English: Journal of the English Association* (2023): np, among others.

²⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I.2. Herausgegeben von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 701.

²⁹⁵ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 261.

irruptive force of historical materialism, which sees, rather than “a chain of events,” a broken vessel in need of repair.²⁹⁶

Benedict Anderson would go on to quite brilliantly misappropriate this formulation,²⁹⁷ arguing in *Imagined Communities* (1983) that the nation, and by extension, nationalism, are constructed through homogeneous, empty time: it is through the rise of the printing press, and newspaper distribution that allowed for a simultaneous reading practice, that communities imagined themselves to inhabit the same space and time.²⁹⁸ In this conception, the time of capital becomes synonymous with the time of secular modernity: the ostensibly empty time of eighteenth-century industrial development is imagined to be devoid of the sovereignty that imbues “pre-modern” temporalities. In Anderson’s view, the kind of “premodern” simultaneity present in something like Benjamin’s messianic time, “a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present,” is succeeded by a secular simultaneity: “What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of ‘homogeneous, empty time,’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.”²⁹⁹ Note, here, how Anderson doesn’t so much “borrow from Benjamin” as mischaracterize him, ascribing to the experiential time of modernity and secularism what Benjamin cast as the misguided construct of the historian. Such thinking has become pervasive among historians and theorists: as Espen Hammer writes,

... there is something peculiar about the time of modernity (or what I will equate with Western modernity in order to distinguish it from other and possibly different processes of modernization occurring elsewhere). The time of modernity, which I will argue imposes specific constraints on what we can take human existence in time to entail, is torn loose from its erstwhile association with natural cycles and processes to become a disenchanted succession of essentially homogeneous now-points.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ Ronald Beiner has commented helpfully on the distinction that Benjamin draws out here. See Ronald Beiner, “Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History,” *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (August 1984): 424–34.

²⁹⁷ For another reading that argues for Anderson’s misappropriation of Benjamin, see Adam Barrows, “Living the rhythms of the global: Time, globalization discourse, and rhythm-analysis,” in *Time, Globalization and Human Experience: Interdisciplinary Explorations*, edited by Paul Huebener et. al (New York: Routledge, 2017). “Disentangling that theoretical misreading,” Barrows argues, “is a crucial preliminary step in any attempt to offer a counter-history of time and globalization.” (176)

²⁹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006). Anderson thus directly links serialization—the rise of serialized newspapers—to processes of modernization and secularization. He goes on to make this point even more directly in his next monograph, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, in which he distinguishes between “bound” and “unbound” serialities: where unbound serialities are those enabled by the instruments of print, such as the novel and the newspaper, what Anderson terms “bound” serialities are the products of modern governmentality, the numerable classes of populations, for example, produced by the census. It is this latter form of seriality that Anderson illustrates as constricting. See Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London, New York: Verso, 1998).

²⁹⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24.

³⁰⁰ Espen Hammer, *Philosophy and Temporality from Kant to Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

Modernity, as ever, is represented as “disenchanted,” “homogeneous,” and here, successive—we might even say serial.

Though much scholarship has associated the form of the serial with modernity³⁰¹—especially as it relates to the rise of “the serial” (novel) most literally—I understand the term “serial” to encompass a relation between part and whole that, while linear, contains other temporalities within it, from recursion, to repetition, to an asynchronous *Nachträglichkeit*. The serial, too, predates any normative notion of the onset of the modern, and indeed, of periodization itself. One might imagine, for example, an Aristotelian treatise, which can be characterized as made up of a network or series of concepts that Aristotle treats at greater and lesser length.³⁰² Such concepts are not necessarily arranged linearly; both author and reader return periodically to those that have come before. I thus turn to the form of the serial precisely because of its lasting associations with Anderson’s foundational story of nationalism: it was, after all, according to this widely held narrative, only through the rise of circulating newspapers and other forms of mass media that reading publics could experience themselves as located together in time and space. And yet the form of the serial catapults us beyond linearity, and beyond the “modernity” to which it has been cleaved.

Partha Chatterjee has registered a critical voice of dissent to this narrative from amid its wide acceptance, referring to this view of modernity as “one-sided”:

People can only imagine themselves in empty homogeneous time; they do not live in it. Empty homogeneous time is the utopian time of capital. It linearly connects past, present and future, creating the possibility for all of those historicist imaginings of identity, nationhood, progress, and so on that Anderson, along with others, have made familiar to us. But empty homogeneous time is not located anywhere in real space—it is utopian. The real space of modern life consists of heterotopia ... Time here is heterogeneous, unevenly dense.³⁰³

My project moves in the same direction as Chatterjee, examining not just “the modern” but instances of seriality itself for its heterogeneity and “density.” However, whereas Chatterjee turns

³⁰¹ See, for example, Clare Pettitt, *Serial Forms: The Unfinished Project of Modernity, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), and more specifically on literary serialization in the nineteenth century, see Catherine Delafield, *Serialization and the Novel in Mid-Victorian Magazines* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1991); Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and his Publishers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Mark W. Turner, *Trollope and the Magazines: Gendered Issues in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

³⁰² On the “seriality” of Aristotle, see James Leshner’s “Parmenidean *Elenchos*,” which argues that Parmenides inaugurates a method of “serial review” that is adapted and altered by various figures, chief among them Aristotle. This is further elaborated in Charles M. Young’s “Comments on Leshner, Ausland, and Tarrant” in the same volume. See Gary Alan Scott, ed., *Does Socrates Have a Method?: Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002), 19–35, 78ff.

³⁰³ Partha Chatterjee, “The Nation in Heterogeneous Time,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38, no. 4 (2001): 402.

to an “example from the post-colonial world”³⁰⁴ to examine “the continuing tension between the utopian dimension of the homogeneous time of capital and the real space constituted by the heterogeneous time of governmentality,”³⁰⁵ my interest is to turn to those instances of heterogeneity at the heart of two contemporary Anglo-American serials, reading them *not* as sources of alterity to present—as somehow non-contemporaneous or “premodern”—but as forms that deconstruct and trouble our definitions of the secular modern, and of the serial itself.

And indeed, contemporary scholarship continues to forward the Andersonian link between modernity and seriality. In *Serial Forms: The Unfinished Project of Modernity, 1815-1848*, Clare Pettitt makes this logic explicit: “The form of the serial moves onwards though calendar time: by its dynamic forward trajectory, it seems to unspool into the empty future,” she writes. “Indeed, I argue that it is actually constructing that very model of a future—in a way that echoes Walter Benjamin’s famous description of the ‘empty, homogeneous time’ of modernity.”³⁰⁶ And yet even as she associates the serial with empty, homogeneous time, arguing for seriality as “the defining form of modernity,” something in excess of such homogeneity seems to slip into Pettitt’s own description:

the serial can plot multiple and conflicting temporalities. ... In its movement across space and time, seriality maintains some kind of structural relation between its moving parts, although this relationality can be quite complicated. ... It is complicated partly because serialization is at the same time about both the *relation* of parts and their *separation*. ... Our tendency is to think of a series as one thing after another, but the serial is not necessarily tidy or linear.³⁰⁷

The aim of this chapter, then, is to explore *this* realm of the serial: its multiplicity, its temporality beyond the linear, and so too, beyond what is standardly understood to be the modern. In their radical configurations of seriality, Maggie Nelson and Fred Moten deploy the form to dissolve the subject of the secular-religious binary. The force of both authors’ serial forms resides in the cut—the gap between each “series”—which functions to radically interrupt and defer narratives and frameworks of closure, whether secular, religious, or otherwise.

The chapter proceeds in four parts: in the first, I argue that the serial aphoristic structure of *Bluets* stages the dissolution of the will and the subject; in the second, I claim that Moten’s seriality functions less as dissolution than as rupture, trouble, and undoing-towards-flesh. In *All That Beauty*, I uncover a seriality that shuttles dialectically between the linear and what Nelson calls “static eternity,” forging a postsecular temporality. In part three, I turn to psychoanalysis to examine that which defies linearity within the serial form, reading Moten and Nelson for an asynchronous *Nachträglichkeit*, but more primarily, for their serial cuts. Finally, I turn briefly to contemporary writing on the serial and ask how we might revise our understanding of both the form and modernity in light of what lies in the cut. Here, I am not interested in a postsecular seriality as that which can “disrupt” or “resist” homogeneous, empty time but rather in a

³⁰⁴ Chatterjee, “The Nation in Heterogeneous Time,” 402.

³⁰⁵ Chatterjee, “The Nation in Heterogeneous Time,” 403.

³⁰⁶ Pettitt, *Serial Forms*, 20.

³⁰⁷ Pettitt, *Serial Forms*, 6–7.

postsecular seriality that makes visible the conceptual incoherence of homogeneous, empty time as it becomes metonymic for modernity.

I. FINGERPRINTS OF GOD

Empty homogeneity would hardly be an apt description for the sort of time we find in Nelson's *Bluets*—the text functions *serially and recursively*, its propositions operating like fragments and working episodically and cumulatively, circling around a medley of themes.³⁰⁸ The philosophical investigation that nominally structures *Bluets* is phenomenological: the speaker (a writer who would seem to resemble the author herself³⁰⁹) sets out to investigate the color blue, assembling not only a collection of blue objects to examine, but blue references from across literature, art, theology, and more.³¹⁰ “For no one really knows what color is, where it is, even whether it is. (*Can it die? Does it have a heart?*),” she writes.³¹¹ But the question of definition, and of language, haunts the narrative: how does one account for something that is perhaps in itself undefinable, ineffable?

Early on in the text, it becomes clear that the investigation into “blue” might in fact be something larger, an attempt to name that which *resists* explanation: with “each blue object a kind of burning bush,” Nelson’s project might be said to be no less than to describe God’s imprints on the quotidian (“shreds of blue garbage”; “bright blue tarps flapping over every shanty”).³¹² Such apprehensions of divinity continue to appear throughout:

In the baby-shit yellow showers at my gym, where snow sometimes fluttered in through the cracked gated windows, I noticed that the yellow paint was peeling in spots, and a decent, industrial blue was trying to creep in. At the bottom of the swimming pool, I watched the white winter light spangle the cloudy blue and I knew together they made God.³¹³

³⁰⁸ In an interview, Nelson has commented on the role of the fragment in *Bluets*’ conception. See Maggie Nelson and Evan Lavender-Smith, “The Fragment as Unit of Prose Composition,” interview by Ben Segal, *continent* 1, no. 3 (2011): 158–70.

³⁰⁹ Nelson has referred in interviews to the subject matter of the book as that of her own life (calling the book “experimental speculative nonfiction”), so unlike the double bind of such presumptions in the realm of autofiction, in the lyrically indebted *Bluets*, the direct relation between speaker and author seems less fraught. Of course, as I note later, the speaker’s implied death at the same time complicates any overly hasty identification between author and literary persona. See Maggie Nelson, “An Interview with Maggie Nelson,” interview by Ross Simonini, *The Believer*, no. 137, October 1, 2021, <https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-maggie-nelson/>.

³¹⁰ In this sense, the text’s other clear inspiration, in addition to the Wittgenstein mentioned earlier, is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*. Goethe, like Nelson’s speaker, collected specimen in his investigation of color, and also refrained from establishing an actual theory of color. As in *Bluets*, the goal was to portray his subject matter through a breadth of objects. Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*, like *Philosophical Investigations*, is acknowledged by Nelson as a “The Principal Supplier.” See Nelson, *Bluets*, 98; and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, translated by Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1970).

³¹¹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 15.

³¹² Nelson, *Bluets*, 2, 7.

³¹³ Nelson, *Bluets*, 9.

Blue figures allegorically: beneath the surface of the profane, yellow paint of the narrator's gym there lurks something sacred—a blue that, when the light shines on it, reveals God. I suspect that what most interests Nelson is this process of revelation: the blue's *attempt* to “creep in,” the light and the tiles' Godly combination. I want to argue that Nelson's inquiry into color operates more broadly as spiritual exercise,³¹⁴ enacting a process through which the events and categories of the quotidian dissolve into affects, a kind of pure “saturation.”³¹⁵ Exercise is indeed the apt term here, as the speaker's endeavor into blue is cast in the vein of speculation, supposition: “1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious.*”³¹⁶ We are thrust into the realm not only of the supposition but the conditional, an “as if”³¹⁷ (“Suppose *I were*”) that operates beyond the certainty of confession either religious or secular. It is through this exercise that the speaker embarks on processual dissolution, the effects of blue becoming “more serious.”

In this vein, Nelson complicates any easy equivalence between *Bluets*' Godly invocations and the presence of some “religiosity” in the text:

123. Whenever I speak of faith, I am not speaking of faith in God. Likewise, when I speak of doubt, I am not talking about doubting God's existence, or the truth of any gospel. Such terms have never meant very much to me. To contemplate them reminds me of playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey: you get spun around until you wander off, disoriented and

³¹⁴ The notion of exploring color as a spiritual exercise has a history that of course predates Nelson. Here I see resonances with Wassily Kandinsky's 1914 *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: “The spirit, like the body, can be strengthened and developed by frequent exercise. Just as the body, if neglected, grows weaker and finally impotent, so the spirit perishes if untended. ... The starting point is the study of colour and its effects on men.” Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, translated by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), 36.

³¹⁵ Nelson plays with this concept of “saturation” in several instances: she considers how one can “have the blues” and simultaneously stay alive, invoking Billie Holiday's “Lady Sings the Blues.” “Nonetheless, as Billie Holiday knew,” she writes, “it remains the case that to see blue in deeper and deeper saturation is eventually to move toward darkness.” Elsewhere, it becomes clear that Nelson is interested in such saturation—of affect and color—as process for her own text: “In *Crack Wars*, Avital Ronell refers to Duras's works as ‘alcoholizations’—as *saturated*, so to speak, with the substance. Could one imagine a book similarly saturated, but with color? How could one tell the difference?” Nelson, *Bluets*, 52, 57.

³¹⁶ Nelson, *Bluets*, 1.

³¹⁷ This conditional operation is not unlike Anne Carson's, as explored further in Chapter Four, but Carson's is, critically, often contrafactual, emerging against a negation. The form of the supposition, however, appears too in Carson's oeuvre—see, for example, in *Decreation*, her “Ode to Sleep,” which begins “Think of your life without it.” Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 41. The form of the supposition of course has a long history, particularly in the philosophical tradition. Here we might look to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the text on which *Bluets* openly draws (sometimes even directly borrowing its language in addition to its form, with lines such as “what of it?” [Nelson, *Bluets*, 1; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 94e]) or to Descartes's *Meditations*. See, for example, Wittgenstein's, “But suppose I didn't have any natural expression for the sensation, but only had the sensation,” or his “Let us imagine a language ...” or Descartes's “Let us suppose that we are dreaming, and that these particular things (that we have our eyes open, are moving our head, stretching out our hands) are not true ...” See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1953), 3, 91e; and René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 14.

blindfolded, walking gingerly with a hand stretched out in front of you, until you either run into a wall (laughter), or a friend gently pushes you back toward the game.³¹⁸

Faith is not the operative term in *Bluets*' framework, nor religion, it would seem: these are within the confines of the "game," a game in which, as the speaker continues, "hitting the wall or wandering off in the wrong direction or tearing off the blinding is as much a part ... as is pinning the tail on the donkey."³¹⁹ Attempting to withdraw from religion or to outright resist it are still moves that leave the subject within its framework—secularism is bound up with our definitions of "religion" proper.

It is important to mention, in the scheme of Nelson's text, that "blue" also signifies the pain of an absent lover, one whose betrayal affects the speaker throughout the arc of the text. This man, of whom we are told little, is referred to as the "prince of blue." The arc of mourning the prince of blue is *Bluets*' major narrative structure, and yet the recursivity and seriality of the text's fragmented form allows us to hear an alternative temporal note. Where a standard reading might see the future of the love plot as already foreclosed, the relationship already having ended, *Bluets* seeks to narrate a vision of time far more complex than reconciliation to a singular future. Nelson's relationship to temporality might best be encompassed in her propositions on a fragment of Heraclitus: "You cannot step into the same river twice," or, in its alternative variations, which she offers, "'On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow'; 'We step and do not step into the same river; we are and we are not' ...'"³²⁰ What is staying the same, the speaker asks, between each of these variations?

201. I believe in the possibility—the inevitability, even—of a fresh self stepping into ever-fresh waters, as in the variant: 'No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.' But I also sense something in Heraclitus's fragment that allows for the possibility of a mouse shocking its snout on a hunk of electrified cheese over and over again in a kind of static eternity.³²¹

Nelson is allowing for both episodic seriality—the clean slate of a new proposition, the new self it might enable, the transformed self who might emerge at the end of *Bluets*—and for a "kind of static eternity" that defies linearity, the very static eternity typically identified against the figures of the modern and the secular. Her own text enacts this "mouse shocking its snout" as the same motifs recur; pain lingers; the memory of the "prince of blue" is not quick to fade.

Where *Bluets* stands in clear distinction to the genre of memoir or love story, however, is in the speaker's attempt to find oblivion in these sites of "static eternity": to submit to something beyond the self, beyond the ego of confession. "Perhaps this is why I have turned my gaze so insistently to blue;" she writes, "it does not purport to be me, or anything else for that matter."³²²

³¹⁸ Nelson, *Bluets*, 48.

³¹⁹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 49.

³²⁰ Nelson, *Bluets*, 80.

³²¹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 80.

³²² Nelson, *Bluets*, 67. She writes also of a sexual fantasy of submission, and of oblivion in exoticism. "I have also imagined my life ending, or simply evaporating, by being subsumed into a tribe of blue people. I dreamed of these

Against all neoliberal impulses, Nelson's speaker resists the commodification of self *and* of blue; the text's multiplying chain of propositions serves a paradoxically kenotic function, emptying both concepts of any stable signifier. "Perhaps this is why I am avoiding writing about too many specific blue things—I don't want to displace my memories of them, nor embalm them, nor exalt them. In fact, I think I would like it best if my writing could empty me further of them, so that I might become a better vessel for new blue things."³²³ Traditionally, kenosis refers to the self-emptying of Christ's will in becoming receptive to the divine will. The motif of *self-emptying*, and of *relinquishment* recurs throughout Nelson's text: "133. I have been trying to place myself in a land of great sunshine, and abandon my will therewith," she proclaims. We might be tempted to read Nelson as merely *secularizing* a theological trope. But I would argue that the kenotic impulse is not merely thematized, but indeed motivated by the text's aphoristic, serialized fragments, demanding *not* that we identify *Bluets* as therefore theological, but that we consider the theological trope it mobilizes and ask what material and affective consequences it produces.³²⁴

We are given a clue in Nelson's formal play with pronouns. The "I" is ambiguous, unspecified, but so, too, is the "you" kept open: at times seemingly used to refer to "the prince of blue," the "you" also functions to invoke the text's future imagined readers. What this structure reveals is that self-emptying exceeds divisions between self and other, and even subject and object.³²⁵ Throughout the text, the speaker raises the question of whether color is ontological or phenomenological: "'We mainly suppose the experiential quality to be an intrinsic quality of the physical object'—this is the so-called systematic illusion of color. Perhaps it is also that of love. But I am not willing to go there—not just yet. I believed in you."³²⁶ The "you" of this passage could be read most obviously as the lost love object, but so too could "you" be blue itself, which the speaker is unwilling to attribute to mere illusion or perception. Rigid ontological distinctions between the *you*, *blue*, and even the *I* are revealed to be overwhelmed by the kenotic movement at the heart of the text: the "self" is consistently undone, in the process of dissolving, in the name of a groundless "belief." The book's serial aphoristic structure enacts a form that resists the standard linear account of the individual subject—the *Bildungsroman*, the confessional, the memoir³²⁷—operating instead in a mode not unlike the medieval exercise such as that of Ignatius of Loyola, in which the reader traverses through the stages of memory, intellect to ruminate on those memories, and finally the heightening of affect, with the final goal of the will's (and the subject's) dissolution.

blue people as a child, long before I knew that such people actually existed. Now I know that they do, in the eastern and central Sahara desert, and that they are called *Tuareg*, which means 'abandoned by God.'" See Nelson, *Bluets*, 54.

³²³ Nelson, *Bluets*, 77.

³²⁴ As Alex Dubilet writes, "The problematic of self-emptying must not be interpreted as restricted exclusively to a theological or a philosophical domain, nor should it be seen as localizable exclusively within a premodern or a modern textual site. Rather, it must be seen as traversing discursive and temporal divides and thereby necessitating thinking Christian theological contexts and twentieth-century theoretical debates in tandem." See Alex Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 10.

³²⁵ For a consideration of how the process of self-emptying discloses an immanence, or "groundlessness," that undoes divisions between subject and object, see Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject*.

³²⁶ Nelson, *Bluets*, 20–1.

³²⁷ This is not say, of course, that all such genres are themselves "homogeneous [and] empty," even if some operate linearly. A reading like that of Fredric Jameson reveals the modern realist novel, for example, to be a space of dialectical interplay between forward-moving history, narrative, plot, and an immanent, eternal presence. See Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso Books, 2013).

II. ARPEGGIATION

American poet, cultural theorist, and scholar Fred Moten works at the intersection of Black Study, critical theory, and performance studies. He has become a fixture in American critical theory and in recent debates in African American criticism more specifically, known for his series of theoretical texts published with Duke University Press under the title “Consent not to be a single being,” as well as his trio of texts co-authored with Stefano Harney such as the 2013 *The Undercommons*. If we understand the landscape of American Black Studies as dominated primarily by two camps—so-called black optimism and Afro-pessimism—Moten seems, theoretically and poetically, to open a third way.³²⁸ As scholar Calvin Warren has noted, both these fields “orbit around the gap of black ontology, each attempting to understand black existence in an anti-black world.”³²⁹ While Afro-Pessimists—most famously Frank Wilderson or Jared Sexton—claim the source of black suffering is the *non-ontology* of blackness in an anti-black world, those we might loosely label as black optimists, such as Paul Gilroy and Anthony Appiah, seek to resolve the ontological problem by embracing universal humanism. Though Moten is often characterized as part of this latter group, I follow Warren in his claim that Moten departs from the grammar of ontology altogether, interested less in theorizing black *being* (people or things) than in black *spirit*, or what he calls, throughout *All That Beauty*, “blackness,” figured as that which escapes form or possession. This is an escape that, in his essay entitled “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” Moten crucially describes as “serial.”³³⁰

Indeed, Moten is interested in not just seriality, which is named explicitly throughout *All That Beauty*—but in serialism, or in the musical tradition most readily associated with Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique. Though serialism has taken on multiple forms, it’s perhaps best understood as a structural principle (in Schoenberg’s case, the twelve notes of the chromatic

³²⁸ I make this claim, following Calvin Warren, in ways that might seem to diverge from Moten’s own use of the term “black optimism,” though as will become clear, it is precisely his interest in what he terms the “paraontological” that distinguishes him from those most often associated with “black optimism.” In “The Case of Blackness,” he seeks to bracket “the movement from (erstwhile) subject to object in order to investigate more adequately the change from object to thing.... What if the thing whose meaning or value has never been found finds things, founds things? What if the thing will have founded something against the very possibility of foundation and against all anti- or post-foundational impossibilities? What if the thing sustains itself in that absence or eclipse of meaning that withholds from the thing the horrific honorific of ‘object’?” It is this founding of meaning, of things, in meaning and objecthood’s absence, that “[p]erhaps ... would be a cause for black optimism or, at least, some black operations.” Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 181, 182.

³²⁹ Calvin L. Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 65, no. 2 (2017): 220.

³³⁰ See Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (October 2012): 749–750:

On the one hand, blackness and ontology are unavailable for one another; on the other hand, blackness must free itself from ontological expectation, must refuse subjection to ontology’s sanction against the very idea of black subjectivity. This imperative is not something up ahead, to which blackness aspires; it is the labor, which must not be mistaken for Sisyphean, that blackness serially commits. The paraontological distinction between blackness and blacks allows us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks ... but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the question of (the meaning of) being.

scale) that provide a unifying basis for a composition's recurring series of ordered elements. Moten begins a poem, "photoops," with an epigraph from Charles Rosen, a Schoenberg scholar:

There is nothing inherently unpleasant about a dissonance: insofar as any chord can be said to be beautiful outside of the context of a specific work of music, some of the most mellifluous are dissonances. They are even to most ears more attractive than consonances, although in one respect less satisfying: they cannot be used to end a piece or even a phrase (except, of course, if one wants to make an unusual effect of something incomplete, broken off in the middle).

It is precisely this effect of ending ... that defines a consonance. A dissonance is any musical sound that must be resolved ... a consonance is a musical sound that needs no resolution, that can act as the final note, that rounds off a cadence. Which sounds are to be consonances is determined at a given historical moment by the prevailing musical style, and consonances have varied radically according to the musical system developed in each culture ... It is not, therefore, the human ear or nervous system that decides what is a dissonance ...³³¹

Several themes here become immediately apparent, which I want us to hold in mind as they echo—or resonate, a term which will recur later—throughout Moten's poetry. The first is that dissonance is defined here by irresolution; in contrast to the consonance that resolves, dissonance signifies incompleteness, broken phrases amidst a sequence. Second, dissonance occurs *not* in nature but in a "given historical moment" and is determined "by the prevailing musical style": in other words, what, or, more crucially, *who* is read as dissonant shifts and changes in particular cultural and historical milieus. Finally, Rosen emphasizes potential beauty in dissonance—however unsatisfying its effect of irresolution.

Moten's collection draws on and elaborates these Schoenbergian themes, formally enacting its own kind of seriality as repeated words and phrases are reconfigured in new variations. He describes what he terms arpeggiation in his poem "the general balm": we might imagine that a chord is spread throughout each of these texts; the notes are not sounded simultaneously. Arpeggiation is not just a formal mode for Moten, but a quality of blackness:

Is there a relation between alienation and arpeggiation? Distanciation and differentiation, as in *différance*? Chords fall apart. Together, we fall apart to here in there. What if here there are no persons, only chords in various (anti-)states of throwing down? What if blackness is just the theory and practice of throwing down? Our music troubles the water. Our dancing troubles the music. Our music and dancing trouble the body into inexistence. We worry lost body till they flesh again. We worry worry worry.³³²

³³¹ Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), cited in Moten, *All That Beauty*, 86.

³³² Moten, *All That Beauty*, 62.

What is the relation, Moten asks, between alienation from the world and its structures and arpeggiation, which breaks those structures apart, sounding out their parts in succession? And might those relations be depersonalized, he asks, structured not by “persons” but only by chords? Seriality works to draw out even the “chord” of the poem, stretching it into various configurations: “Our music troubles the water. Our dancing troubles the music. Our music and dancing trouble the body into inexistence.” Music and dancing recur in different positions of the repeated phrase in its new variations; in the last instance blackness has not merely resisted and reconfigured the world (the water, the music) but “troubled” the self “into inexistence.” Worrying has returned us to flesh, undoing the confines of the body and the world that disciplines it. As elsewhere in Moten’s oeuvre, we might understand flesh here as a “necessarily degraded” but fecund essence both within and *before* the body, one Moten sees as particularly generative in its disintegration of the body as a site of objecthood, of symbolic value.³³³ It is the poem’s serial iterations that move us through this dialectic of bodily refusal and flesh’s return, all as the residue of arpeggiated chords continues to echo (“throwing down,” “throwing down,” “troubles,” “troubles,” “body,” “body,” “worry worry worry”). Blackness is here figured as a praxis of arpeggiating: of breaking apart governing structures into their composite parts, of grasping at air where you can instead of playing the full chord, of “music [that] troubles the water.”³³⁴

Moten names the motion of seriality directly elsewhere in *All That Beauty* in a poem titled “sun and shade.” Dedicated to the photographer Roy DeCarava, the poem would seem to be specifically inspired by the 1942 photograph of Harlem that shares its title. “Blackness,” Moten writes, “is the ceaselessly miraculous demonstration that there is no black and white, just sun and shade. This insight is serial, over and over, all over the place, as an irreducible element of art consciousness’s remedial education, registering the condition that is without remedy.”³³⁵ Blackness—understood *not* as black people or things but as what Calvin Warren would call a “transcendental horizon”³³⁶—itself demonstrates, serially—miraculously—that the categories of black and white cannot hold. Blackness breaks down purity. Far from the simple absence of color, blackness here comes to signify the “disorder[ing] [of] positive value,”³³⁷ a sociality that emerges in color’s unnamed surpluses (sun and shade). The poem “photopos” offers insight into Moten’s temporal vision of blackness: “We who are out of sync can’t help but be committed to sequence. This promise of constant rupture,” Moten writes. If the writing of blueness functions through seriality as dissolution, the writing of blackness stages seriality as rupture, trouble, as undoing-towards-flesh. “Does seriality have to align itself with the vulgarity of the timeline,” Moten writes,

³³³ See Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 174. Here, as elsewhere, Moten’s conception of flesh is indebted to Hortense Spillers’s canonical essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” In it, Spillers theorizes the movement from flesh to body that occurs as West African communities reached the shores of the Americas in the slave trade: “I would make a distinction ... between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the body there is ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, the reflexes of iconography.” By returning to the narrative of *flesh*, in all its woundedness, “its seared, divided, ripped-apartedness,” we move beyond the imposition of the body as a being-for-others. See Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 67.

³³⁴ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 62.

³³⁵ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 25.

³³⁶ Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” 221.

³³⁷ Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 188.

“which is held in the sterile fetishization of the singular?”³³⁸ The “we” who are “out of sync,” whose blackness is an “excluded essence,” a “tragedy you render miraculous,”³³⁹ seek the serial, a sequence. The miracle relies on chronology, even if that chronology is *episodic, spontaneous*. Moten thus seeks to distinguish this temporal mode from the vulgar “timeline”: within the serial “[t]he time of the bass line is spread out, folded, then spread out again, like a realistic sheet.”³⁴⁰ This sheet, or rather, its image, can never quite be enacted in the world: “What’s an image—or a sheet or a show or a page or a pavilion full of images—got to do with the incalculable? What’s seriality got to do with all? ... Image can’t quite take place in the world. It might take place through the world, but then it wouldn’t quite take place.”³⁴¹ Seriality works towards that unworldly image, transporting us to a space—not unlike Lerner’s virtuality, as explored in the previous chapter—below and beyond the world. Here Moten theorizes an incalculable, uncapturable dimension across artistic media that each merely mediate, or as Lerner writes of the *virga*, “pretend to mediate.” That bass line cannot ever be fully translated within the confines of this world, violently structured as the world is by binaries both secular and racial.

It is precisely in its incalculability that Moten locates the serial beyond the secular. Yet though references to divinity and to theological institutions recur throughout the collection, we might say that Moten’s practice lies “in the break” of the theological. “The topographical distress of the church is what I’m / trying to put in words,”³⁴² Moten writes in a poem titled “judson church, impromptu.”³⁴³ What is left in the residues of church, in the ruins of a colonial Christian tradition? “Is it the same thing / to reside and to be left over? Is it the same thing to leave and / and to be left? Have we left for the lesbian future? Did we leave / for that when we left for church? When we left the church / did we leave all that behind?”³⁴⁴ Moten’s serial recurrence of “left”—which here functions as the arpeggiating chord—plays with what it is to have both left a tradition and to feel abandoned by it, as well as to have a tradition abandoned to you, “*what of the church is left to us now*,” ready to be occupied differently. There is also, of course, to feel *left over*, in excess of its structures. This sense of excess becomes most clear in the poem’s final stanza:

Church refuses virtuosity in fallenness. We fall through virtue,
in virtue of our nastiness, forgiven in giving all we have away
in being given to this sin of turning, promiscuous in spinning out
in all this rubfallen wailing and laughing, all this rubstringed

³³⁸ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 87.

³³⁹ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 25.

³⁴⁰ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 87.

³⁴¹ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 87–90.

³⁴² Moten, *All That Beauty*, 73.

³⁴³ Moten’s poem’s title is a reference to Judson Memorial Church in Washington Square in New York City, which was founded by Baptist Edward Judson in 1890. In the mid-twentieth century, the church, under minister Howard Moody, became known for its advocacy on issues of civil rights and free expression, as well as its development of social outreach and arts programming, much of which continues in the present. See “Judson Memorial Church,” accessed April 29, 2024, <https://www.judson.org/history>. Moten has referred to the church’s history elsewhere as a “history of devoted heresy, of transgressive congregation.” See Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 176.

³⁴⁴ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 73.

laughing we be doing all the time, always resisting arrest at rest
 at work all the time, in and out of time time and again ..., taut
 all the time, native again already in tuning pans, in preparing
 hubkaphones for sharing, step echoed, evening entered, slack
 in besidual study of exude. Evangeline, we play our incompleteness.
 We disarrange in little groups of little instruments we arrange
 All cross the little world we disavow, the one that kills us one
 by one. All that's left of church is us in all that beauty, which is
 untranslatable if you know the language, if you ain't been falled,
 if you ain't been callen, if you ain't been sun and shade by nude.³⁴⁵

As Moten's first line points out, to have fallen is to be refused virtue. But what if blackness already inhabits a state of fallenness, of exclusion—what if this vision of falling is to “fall through virtue”? “Evangeline” would seem to refer to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie*, the 1847 epic poem that followed the Acadian eponymous protagonist as she searched for her lost love during the Expulsion of the Acadians. Evangeline is thus metonymic for expulsion more greatly, and here repurposed for black expulsion in particular. Moten's playful use of diacope conveys a sense of residue and return as terms recur and reiterate: “We fall through *virtue*, / in *virtue* of our nastiness, forgiven in *giving* all we have away / in being *given* to this sin of turning ...” (my emphasis). The “we” are thus the ultimate residue, expelled and yet miraculous, excessive and thus beautiful, in a “besidual” study of exude, a neologism that combines *residue* and *beside*—to be *beside* oneself, *beside* the body. That “we” operates “in and out of time time and again,” functioning not through homogeneous, empty time but nor entirely *out* of time, in the realm of pure eternity. This is, instead, a postsecular relation to time, one that cuts in and out, over and over, serially, we might say. It is this attention to excess, to “all that beauty,” that moves Moten beyond the confines of the church and its attendant political theology, and into the realm, instead, of what J. Kameron Carter would call a “poetics of the sacred.”³⁴⁶

Here, the sacred entails “blackness as rupture or (de)generative breach”³⁴⁷: all that beauty is untranslatable for those who, in Moten's terms, “ain't been falled ... ain't been callen.” Put another way, Moten's poesis enacts a new sacred praxis for those who find virtue precisely in their “fallenness,” in their exclusion from and troubling of norms both secular and theological, and in—recalling our earlier reading of the poem “sun and shade”—the “miraculous demonstration that there is no black and white.”³⁴⁸ This new sacred poesis—what Carter refers to as “black malpractice”—refuses the static binaries of political theology and its governing secular, white imaginary. Instead, this form of the serial might be read “as a kind of ... ek-static threshold before which other, differential and unrepresentable presences, genres or forms of life, unplotable gatherings in representation's colonializing ruins, alternative ways of being in the earth, come into

³⁴⁵ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 73.

³⁴⁶ See J. Kameron Carter, “Black Malpractice (A Poetics of the Sacred),” *Social Text* 37, no. 2 (2019): 67–107.

³⁴⁷ Carter, “Black Malpractice,” 88.

³⁴⁸ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 25.

view.”³⁴⁹ Arpeggiation thus retains some linearity: it is, after all, a melodic sequence. But it crucially relies on excess, on the lingering afterlives of each earlier note in that sequence—we are therefore confronted with something of Nelson’s self-electrocuting mouse. As Moten writes elsewhere, “black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation.”³⁵⁰ Operating between linearity and Nelson’s “static eternity,” the serial becomes a site through which the unplottable and the incalculable—that which we cannot map within the terms of the secular or religious—begin to emerge from their residue, themselves fragmented, arpeggiated, ruined. Blueness and blackness thus share a certain “incalculability,” an inability to be grafted onto the dominant historical narrative of a homogeneous and empty modernity: blueness indexes dissolution, revelation, the medium itself, while blackness (which, Moten writes elsewhere, “emerges out of blue’s dark side”³⁵¹) troubles, tarries, disrupts. We might thus conclude that blackness is modernity’s constitutive exclusion (and blueness its aseccular excess)—and that “the modern,” if there has ever been such a thing, was never homogeneous or empty to begin with. In what follows, I want to think with Nelson and Moten to see how their texts might allow us to rethink and revise the dominant conceptions of the serial as emblematic of and even originating a homogeneous and empty modernity, focusing less on the serial’s continuity than on its inherent *cuts*.

III. THE CUT OF THE SERIAL

Media theorist Ryan Engley is one of few academics who has championed a theorization of the serial that focuses on its inherent gaps and interruptions, thus complicating the more dominant (and now decades-old) notions of the serial as a smooth and linear form. “The serial, as we can see most evidently in its narrative form, is cut—the hole in the whole,” Engley writes. “There is a material cut to the narrative, as it is clearly segmented and delivered in pieces over time.”³⁵² In his “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory,” Engley offers a psychoanalytic reading of seriality, claiming that if Freud understood the structure of trauma as specifically serial, the opposite—that seriality is inherently traumatic—can also be said to be true. I am less interested in following Engley in this pursuit of the traumatic nature of the serial than I am in considering the temporal dynamics that his psychoanalytic investigation uncovers.

Engley undertakes a reading of Freud’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology*,³⁵³ arguing that within it, trauma functions serially. Engley takes the example of Freud’s anecdote and analysis of a patient named Emma. At the time of analysis, Emma is afraid to enter shops alone. She initially attributes this to an incident that occurred at age twelve: “[Emma] went into a shop to buy

³⁴⁹ Carter, “Black Malpractice,” 74.

³⁵⁰ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 26.

³⁵¹ Moten, *All That Beauty*, 217, 233.

³⁵² Ryan Engley, “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory: From Freud’s Couch to Yours,” *Continental Thought & Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 3, no. 2 (2021): 319.

³⁵³ This manuscript of Freud’s dates from the fall of 1895 and bore no title. Its title in the German edition, “Entwurf einer Psychologie,” was chosen by the editors. See Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume I (1886-1899)*, edited by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 283–397.

something, saw the two shop-assistants ... laughing together, and ran out in some kind of *affect of fright*.”³⁵⁴ But Freud is unconvinced that this singular scene is the cause of Emma’s symptom. Through analysis, he and his patient are able to unearth an even earlier scene: indeed, Emma recalls that when she was eight, she was sexually assaulted by a shopkeeper who laughed as he touched her. It is this laughter that links what Freud calls Scene 1 (the laughing shop assistants at age twelve) to Scene 2 (the laughing shopkeeper at age eight). What Engley points out is that these links of trauma “can only be understood *as a series*, and the series can only be apprehended retroactively.”³⁵⁵ Indeed,

Trauma, for Freud relies on this precise understanding of retroactivity: a seemingly innocuous incident calling forth the trauma of a previous event. This is the way for a prior event to even register as a trauma in the first place. What Freud begins to understand here is that trauma does not occur continuous with the subject’s linear experience of time. ... Seriality as a form shares exactly this same structure; it appears continuous and linear but our understanding of it relies, crucially, on *Nachträglichkeit*, or retroactivity.³⁵⁶

Seriality, as in Freud’s conception of trauma, relies on retrospection, and relies too, as I have claimed throughout this chapter, on recursion. The import of a series becomes visible only in a kind of *Nachträglichkeit*, in a deferred understanding or recognition of the whole. Such an understanding of the serial “enables us to see that meaning emerges not linearly from cause to effect but retroactively from effects that posit their own causality.”³⁵⁷

This logic of *Nachträglichkeit* is one challenge to the hegemonic linear model of seriality. The second is that of the serial’s inherent cuts, to which I have already gestured. It is only against such cuts—the incoherent, jagged pieces of Scene 1 and Scene 2, which contain between them gaping holes, blanks in time—that a retroactive narrative can be overlaid. Seriality will always, Engley insists, no matter how seemingly continuous our contemporary bingeable streaming series may seem, be reliant on such cuts, on the black outs between the episodes, on the blank spaces between the aphorisms, on the “to be continued ...” between installments of Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*. For Engley, the cut is the true heart of the serial, propelling our psychic investment in its content and its continuity: “Episodic meaning in seriality is, of course, possible, but it is the lingering questions and the lack of *totality* of meaning that stokes interest in serials. ... It is this tension between the demand of episodic totality and the necessity of retroactive serial meaning that propels seriality.”³⁵⁸ We might follow Engley in considering how the serials we have examined in this chapter—Nelson’s *Bluets* and Moten’s *All That Beauty*—each work to resist and defer a *totality* of reading, lingering instead in the gaps, in the cuts that delay narrative resolution.³⁵⁹ This deferral of totality, I want to argue, is part of their postsecular form: in

³⁵⁴ Freud, quoted in Engley, “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory,” 321.

³⁵⁵ Engley, “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory,” 321.

³⁵⁶ Engley, “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory,” 322.

³⁵⁷ Engley, “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory,” 332.

³⁵⁸ Engley, “Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory,” 325.

³⁵⁹ Commenting on Nelson’s *The Argonauts*’ “lack of trajectory,” Monica B. Pearl cites Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*, the text from which *The Argonauts* draws its inspiration: “no transcendence, no deliverance, no novel,”

complicating (though not entirely eschewing) a closed linear model, both texts resist forms of totality both secular and eschatological.

This is particularly visible in the case of Moten, on whose own work we can draw for a theory of “the cut.” In his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Moten conceptualizes black performance as a kind of “lyricism of the surplus” born in “an erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation.”³⁶⁰ It is such moments of rupture, of “breaking space-time,” that his text tries to capture, and indeed, performs in its own poetic ensemble of the voices it constellates. Passages like this one give us a sense of how Moten’s cut aligns with Engle’s:

Here lies universality: in this break, this cut, this rupture. Song cutting speech. Scream cutting song. Frenzy cutting scream with silence, movement, gesture. The West is an insane asylum, a conscious and premeditated receptacle of black magic. Every disappearance is a recording. That’s what resurrection is. Insurrection. Scat black magic, but to scat or scatter is not to admit formlessness. The aftersound is more than a bridge. It ruptures interpretation even as the trauma it records disappears.³⁶¹

Moten focuses in on the sonic and phonic cuts that interest him throughout his monograph—Aunt Hester’s scream as it cuts against Frederick Douglass’s narrative, the cut of Marvin Gaye’s rhythm in “Since I Had You” as it cuts against “the uniformity of the line.”³⁶² Such breaks, cuts, ruptures, Moten argues, are consciously contained and sanitized; every recording is a disappearance, just as “every disappearance is a recording,” in that recordings reduce the magic of performance by “embodying an illusory determinacy and representativeness.”³⁶³ To resurrect the performance of the cut is thus to enact “insurrection” on that which would contain it, to improvise on the Enlightenment categories (and “*through* [the Enlightenment’s] other”³⁶⁴). Here it is the “aftersound”—as in our reading of *All That Beauty*, the notes of the arpeggio that linger, resonating into the rests and “cuts”—that complicates the kind of retroactive interpretation we saw in Freud. The resonance of the cut, its very non-linearity, would seem, in Moten’s reading, to preclude *Nachträglichkeit*, to rupture any retroactive attribution of totality.

What, however, exactly is this space of the cut in Moten? How to theorize or grasp what he names “universality”—the constant possibility for rupture through sound, silence, movement, gesture? The site of such rupture would seem to map onto what Moten terms “the incalculable” in *All That Beauty*:

if we imagine a space between repetitions then we imagine something impossible to locate. The moment between moments presents massive ontological problems, like the attempt to

Barthes writes. Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990, originally published in 1977), 7; cited in Pearl, “Theory and the Everyday,” 200.

³⁶⁰ Moten, *In the Break*, 26, 39.

³⁶¹ Moten, *In the Break*, 39.

³⁶² Moten, *In the Break*, 227.

³⁶³ Moten, *In the Break*, 265.

³⁶⁴ Moten, *In the Break*, 146.

establish the reality of pure mathematical objects (for instance, a set, an ensemble). Perhaps political upheaval is in the nonlocatability of discontinuity. ... What one begins to consider, as a function of the nonlocalizable nature or status of discontinuity, is a special universalization of discontinuity, where discontinuity could be figured as ubiquitous minority, omnipresent queerness.³⁶⁵

Though Moten is not specifically theorizing the space between the serial in this instance, his “space between repetitions” or “moment between moments” offers a generative model for thinking the cut between the scenes, the space between the episodes, the inherent gap within a series. All such spaces present the “massive ontological problems” that Moten lays out, but it is precisely in the “nonlocatability” or “incalculability” of discontinuity, of that which ruptures and interrupts, where Moten finds its political potential. Such spaces cannot be neatly mapped or theorized, and yet they are ubiquitous—as we saw in our earlier passage, universal—“omnipresent queerness,” lurking in the gaps of what is called the West, and indeed, of what is called modernity.

In *In the Break* Moten is interested in the sexual politics of this cut, which is of course the most standard way to read a cut psychoanalytically. But there is a dimension to the cut of the serial, especially as he formulates it, that is not just queer but postsecular. Take, for example, this passage, in which Moten speaks to singularity as it operates as a cut (“an end, a break, a radical interruption”) against totality:

Part of what one might say, then, about singularity is that it is tragic and that it always points to a kind of despair or inevitability or to an endless dialectical struggle with despair as inevitability; to remain within its grasp requires a powerful faith in resurrection, ghosts, spirits, specters, a powerful faith in the possibility of some mystical and therefore totalizing force rising from the abyss that blocks any notion of continuity, fate, destiny, any notion, more specifically, of progress or perfectibility. You must have faith, in short, in some animus that allows the continual projection of discontinuity, the persistence of a certain structure of life in which final judgment—in which justice—is always deferred, to come, up ahead.³⁶⁶

That the space of the cut—the space of interruption, refusal, possibility—relies on “a powerful faith” is no coincidence.³⁶⁷ This is not a faith in “continuity, fate, [or] destiny,” but in precisely some “some mystical and therefore totalizing force” that would block such a notion. Moten’s framework is thus postsecular as I have defined it: it disrupts notions of closure, progress, and determination secular and religious alike, even as it draws on figures beyond the secular

³⁶⁵ Moten, *In the Break*, 69.

³⁶⁶ Moten, *In the Break*, 99.

³⁶⁷ It is worth noting that in *Black and Blur*, Moten thinks what we might call “the cut,” or a kind of disruption, through both blue and through Nelson’s *Bluets*. After citing Nelson’s proposition 54, Moten writes, “To see a work of art in twilight, that ongoing disruption and deferral of the total.... Prolepsis is conceptual motility, a thought provoked by senseless sense, enacted in senseless ritual’s inveterate sensuality, disorder’s tendency to blue, this blackness, which is not prophecy but description. How blue can you get? Prochronic blue.” Blue—and blackness—are figured together as that which cuts, anticipates, disorders through “senseless ritual.” See Moten, *Black and Blur*, 235.

(“resurrection, ghosts, spirits, specters”) in order to do so. Indeed, a *totalizing* force is required to confront the closures of *totality*.³⁶⁸ His interest in the incalculable is thus specifically postsecular—it is not merely a mathematically incalculable, but a mystical one, a space whose very deferral of the standard structures of the secular-religious binary requires a new kind of faith. On this reading, Moten’s serial is no mere handmaiden of modernity unspooling, ever forward, into an empty future. As Moten writes, “whatever manifests itself as modernity was embedded in the vernacular all along,”³⁶⁹ seemingly implying that the modern itself is comprised of that which was already present in various local traditions; the vernacular, we might say, manifests itself in what is termed modernity through its cuts and fissures. But I would take this claim even further: where Moten asserts some line of continuity between modernity and that which precedes it, I would argue that the very form of his seriality—in all its postsecular, irruptive, incalculability—reveals the instability of “the modern” as we have come to understand it via Anderson and his reading of Benjamin.

Nelson’s *Bluets* also avails itself of this generative power of the serial and its cuts. “I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me, apart from meaning,”³⁷⁰ she writes. The cut enables her to leave meaning open, to defer the closure of narrative, to continuously interrupt her series—and all that might seem to resemble plot—with citation, anecdote, or blank space. For color, like Moten’s cut, is incalculable, and Nelson is respectful of this incalculability, ever cognizant of it: “There are no instruments for measuring color; there are no ‘color thermometers.’ How could there be, as ‘color knowledge’ always remains contingent upon an individual perceiver?”³⁷¹ And yet the blue of the sky, as Nelson’s speaker acknowledges, “depends on the darkness of empty space behind it. As one optics journal puts it, ‘The color of any planetary atmosphere viewed against the black of space and illuminated by a sunlike star will also be blue.’ In which case blue is something of an ecstatic accident produced by void and fire.”³⁷² This layperson’s scientific explanation might serve as a metaphor for Nelson’s project: the blueness in which her text appears saturated is visible only against the “black of space,” the blank cuts against which her blue propositions are juxtaposed—and illuminated too by the light (the “fire”) of her prose and of her love for blue.³⁷³

Nelson’s speaker goes on to discuss the concept of “Divine Darkness” as first conceptualized within Christianity by Dionysius the Areopagite. Within such darkness, she reports, there lies the possibility for *agnosia*, or unknowing: “160. Equally complicated: the idea of *agnosia*, or *unknowing*, which is what one ideally finds, or undergoes, or achieves, within this Divine Darkness. Again: this *agnosia* is not a form of ignorance, but rather a kind of *undoing*. (As

³⁶⁸ And here we might think of Benjamin, his idealized historian’s conception of the present “shot through with the chips of Messianic time”—a totalizing force to counter the totality of historicism. See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

³⁶⁹ Moten, *In the Break*, 72.

³⁷⁰ Nelson, *Bluets*, 16.

³⁷¹ Nelson, *Bluets*, 39.

³⁷² Nelson, *Bluets*, 36.

³⁷³ Light appears throughout *Bluets*, but most crucially in its ending, where it is aligned with love: “239. But now you are talking as if love were a consolation. Simone Weil warned otherwise. ‘Love is not a consolation,’ she wrote. ‘It is light.’” In the very final proposition, Nelson writes, “When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light.” Light, in this final twist, takes on a divine, almost heavenly association: we learn that the speaker, previously presumed to be Nelson, is writing from above, as it were. See Nelson, *Bluets*, 95.

if one knew, then forgot? But what did one know?)”³⁷⁴ To continue with our metaphor, I would argue we can read for the possibility of *agnosia* at work in Nelson’s (dark) cuts: an unknowing or undoing of any narrative of closure or totality. Take, for instance, the narratives of psychology³⁷⁵ that haunt *Bluets*, always to be interrupted, fractured:

43. Before a faculty meeting, talking again with the expert on guppy menopause. *What do biologists make of the question, Does color exist?* I ask. Duh, he says. A male guppy looking for a mate doesn’t worry about whether color exists, he says. A male guppy only cares about being orange, in order to attract one. *But can it really be said that the guppy cares about being orange?* I ask. No, he admits. The male guppy simply *is* orange. *Why orange?* I ask. He shrugs. In the face of some questions, he says, biologists can only vacate the field.

44. This particular conversation with the expert on guppy menopause takes place on the day when, later that afternoon, a therapist will say to me, *If he hadn’t lied to you, he would have been a different person than he is*. She is trying to get me to see that although I thought I loved this man very completely for exactly who he was, I was in fact blind to the man he actually was, or is.

45. This pains me enormously. She presses me to say why; I can’t answer. Instead I say something about how clinical psychology forces everything we call love into the pathological or the delusional or the biologically explicable, that if what I was feeling wasn’t love then I am forced to admit that I don’t know what love is, or, more simply, that I loved a bad man. How all of these formulations drain the blue right out of love and leave an ugly, pigmentless fish flapping on a cutting board on a kitchen counter.³⁷⁶

Between these three propositions, we can see how the cuts—from episode to episode, and from biology to psychology—serve to disrupt and defer narrative closure. Nelson’s entire project might be seen as resistant to the formulation of clinical psychology—“*If he hadn’t lied to you, he would have been a different person than he is*”—a proclamation that rings as deterministic and ontological. It is, of course, intended by the therapist to end the narrative, to provide closure to a patient. But it is instead the unexpected cut of biology, which at first seems to offer very little, that by proposition 45, returns to splice the therapist’s narrative: “How all of these formulations drain the blue right out of love and leave an ugly, pigmentless fish flapping on a cutting board on a kitchen counter.” This, we might say, is a demand for “static eternity”: Nelson’s speaker wants her love to be recognized as love; the orange fish to be recognized as orange. This is not a mechanistic serial in which we cannot step into the same river twice, but one in which one *can and cannot*. It is precisely because the serial of *Bluets* is more than linear—precisely because of the afterlife of

³⁷⁴ Nelson, *Bluets*, 63.

³⁷⁵ Elsewhere, Nelson cites a self-help book: “Like many self-help books, *The Deepest Blue* is full of horrifyingly simplistic language and some admittedly good advice. Somehow the women in the book all learn to say: *That’s my depression talking. It’s not ‘me.’*” ... As if we could scrape the color off the iris and still see.” Nelson, *Bluets*, 34.

³⁷⁶ Nelson, *Bluets*, 17–8.

the guppy, because of the cut of biology against psychology, because of the divine darkness of space against which we might unknow or unlearn the reductive language of the therapist—that the narrative is far more than that of a mourning (or, indeed, melancholic) lover.

Yet as in Freud (and Engley and Moten), seriality opens the temporal structure of what it is to mourn, of what it is to love. The inherent anachronism of what we might rightly call Nelson's speaker's trauma is revealed through the form of the serial, through the residue of blues that linger in the cuts of her propositions:

190. What's past is past. One could leave it as it is, too.

191. On the other hand, it must be admitted that there are aftereffects, impressions that linger long after the external cause has been removed, or has removed itself. 'If anyone looks at the sun, he may retain the image in his eyes for several days,' Goethe wrote. 'Boyle relates an image of ten years.' And who is to say this afterimage is not equally real? Indigo makes its stain not in the dyeing vat, but after the garment has been removed. It is the oxygen of the air that blues it.³⁷⁷

As in Engley's conception, *Nachträglichkeit* is here revealed through the serial—*Bluets* is necessarily retroactive, recursive, about the effect and lingering affects of blue and the prince of blue.

But this narrative of the absent lover is spliced, not only with forays into philosophy, science, and the theology of antiquity, but with another narrative: that of the love for a friend who has had a near-death accident, rendering her quadriparalytic. The speaker's friend's pain, like blue, and the speaker's love for blue, are fundamentally incommunicable, incalculable, and *Bluets* bears witness to this pain knowing that it can never conjure or capture it, that what cannot be said must be relegated to the cuts. Here again, such cuts work to *undo* the standard formulas that would otherwise determine this narrative:

217. 'We're only given as much as the heart can endure,' 'What does not kill you makes you strong,' 'Our sorrows provide us with the lessons we most need to learn': these are the kinds of phrases that enrage my injured friend. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to come up with a spiritual lesson that demands becoming a quadriparalytic. The tepid 'there must be a reason for it' notion sometimes floated by religious or quasi-religious acquaintances or bystanders, is, to her, another form of violence. She has no time for it. She is too busy asking, in this changed form, what makes a livable life, and how she can live it.

218. As her witness, I can testify to no reason, no lesson. But I can say this: in watching her, sitting with her, helping her, weeping with her, touching her, and talking with her, I have seen the bright pith of her soul. I cannot tell you what it looks like, exactly, but I can say that I have seen it.

³⁷⁷ Nelson, *Bluets*, 76.

219. Likewise, I can say that seeing it has made me a believer, though I cannot say what, or in what, exactly, I have come to believe.³⁷⁸

From within the “violent” tropes of what the speaker terms the religious, something incalculable, incommunicable looms: that postsecular belief, “the bright pith” of the soul of another. From its cuts of divine darkness, *Bluets* has created a space to trouble determinations both secular and religious: a space it fills with light.

IV. THE SERIAL BEYOND “THE MODERN”

This long excursus into the cut of the serial has served several purposes: it has allowed us to see the temporal dimensions at work in seriality beyond linearity, and such new, a-linear, liberatory, and postsecular dimensions might allow us to understand the form of the serial beyond the framework of modernity into which it is so often inscribed. Part of my investment in wresting the serial from the frame of the modern is that the form, especially in recent years, has often been written about with anxiety, cast as an inherent, looming threat. Already in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), what he names “seriality” is an ideological structure of capitalism, the default mode of inert and alienated existence in the modern world.³⁷⁹ The notion of a purely ideological series—a series, somehow, sans gaps—is taken up by other writers such as Jonathan Crary, who draws on Sartre’s work in his *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, James Wittebols in *The Soap Opera Paradigm*, and in the recent work of media theorist Shane Denson.³⁸⁰ For all these authors, seriality is something oppressive and threatening. Were we to follow the advice of this set, we would studiously avoid all serialized novels, Netflix series, Twitter threads, and avant-garde serial music. In such treatments, seriality is seen as metonymic for capitalism, and both, as the products of modernity.

While Clare Pettitt, whose serial study of the serial I pointed to earlier, offers a more nuanced, historically rich account, a Sartrean anxiety toward the form is still evident. I cite again the passage with which we began this chapter, this time in full, so as to reexamine it after having explored seriality:

³⁷⁸ Nelson, *Bluets*, 88–9.

³⁷⁹ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*, translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York: Verso, 2004).

³⁸⁰ Engley identifies both Crary and Wittebols as part of a Sartrean paradigm, but I have added Denson to this list. See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2014); James Wittebols, *The Soap Opera Paradigm: Television Programming and Corporate Priorities* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); and Shane Denson, “The New Seriality,” *qui parle*, 32 no. 2 (2023): 301–339. Denson notably reads seriality much more dialectically in earlier articles. See, for example, Shane Denson, “Framing, Unframing, Reframing: Retconning the Transnational Work of Comics,” 271–284, in S. Denson, C. Meyer, and D. Stein (eds.) *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), and Shane Denson, “Frame, Sequence, Medium: Comics in Plurimedia and Transnational Perspective,” 561–580, in *Transnational American Studies*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2012).

Seriality is an exceptionally, perhaps dangerously, flexible form. It can be emancipatory, but it can also be regulatory and repressive. It can model a connective universalism, but it can also be enlisted to work to biopolitical and racist ends. And the serial can plot multiple and conflicting temporalities. ... In its movement across space and time, seriality maintains some kind of structural relation between its moving parts, although this relationality can be quite complicated.... It is complicated partly because serialization is at the same time about both the *relation* of parts and their *separation*. The serial offers a means of distributing information or data across time and also across space, and this distributive function is crucial to the ways in which seriality becomes imbricated in political systems and processes in the nineteenth century. ... Our tendency is to think of a series as one thing after another, but the serial is not necessarily tidy or linear.³⁸¹

Pettitt, unlike the authors mentioned above, acknowledges that the serial can be emancipatory, and acknowledges too the multiple temporalities and discontinuity inherent in the form (“parts and their *separation*”). Her note that the serial is “not necessarily tidy or linear” would seem to come closest to the theorization I have approached in this chapter. And yet “danger” still lurks in this rhetoric; the very flexibility of the serial—this relation between parts—is precisely what Pettitt warns of, part of what, in her logic, will imbricate the serial “in political systems and processes of the nineteenth century.”

Ultimately, the concession here to that which is more than tidy or linear will be overshadowed by the influence of Anderson (though Pettitt takes pains to complicate his account in various ways). Nowhere is this more evident than in the following two claims: “The form of the serial moves onwards through calendar time: by its dynamic forward trajectory, it seems to unspool into the empty future. Indeed, I argue that it is actually constructing that very model of a future—in a way that echoes Walter Benjamin’s famous description of the ‘empty, homogeneous time’ of modernity”³⁸²; and “The serial rushes forward, always incomplete, abandoning the past in its wake, in a state of constant self-interruption, beginning again with every new iteration or fresh item or number.” What I hope has become clear, through our exploration of Moten, Nelson, and the cuts that structure their serials, is that the serial 1) does not “abandon the past in its wake,” but is constantly returning to it, cut by it, haunted by the lingering notes of previous arpeggios, and 2) that the future of the serial is thus never empty, never homogeneous, never fresh: it is instead one determined by the dialectic between singularity and retroactive totality (Nelson’s “fresh self” and “static eternity”), one where the cuts of discontinuity carve out a space through which to defer the onward progression Pettitt describes.

For Pettitt, it is this model of progressive, calendrical time that makes “seriality ... the defining form of modernity.”³⁸³ But we know better than this. Indeed, if seriality, the supposed product of modernity, has revealed itself to be more than progressive—recursive, cutting, anachronistic, cut with a “static eternity”—then where does this leave modernity? I quote Pettitt at the height of her panicked rhetoric: “For Deleuze, the modern world is ‘a world of captures instead of closures.’ Seriality is a technology of capture: in all senses. It is anti-closure, moving

³⁸¹ Pettitt, *Serial Forms*, 6–7.

³⁸² Pettitt, *Serial Forms*, 20–1.

³⁸³ Pettitt, *Serial Forms*, 2.

forward in a series of chapters, frames, views, or scenes; it captures episodes, moments, identities, and moves on. It creates a holding pattern until such a time as a major reshuffling might occur: seriality is, in sum, the perfect form for liberalism's 'not yet.'"³⁸⁴ Seriality is indeed anti-closure, as our readings of Moten and Nelson have revealed: it is the closure of both narratives of secularism and religion that their postsecular forms, in these instances, cut against, trouble, defer. But these operations could hardly be described as "capture." If the form of the serial has amply served liberalism's "not yet," so too has that form served the "to come" of a postsecular messianic: this is a "to come" that relies not on the multiplication of possibility but on productive interruption, on gaps in the self-propagating myth of modernity. What is shored up in the cut's "divine darkness" is all that is imagined to be a-modern: Moten's ghosts, spirits, and specters, a totalizing force rising from the abyss, Nelson's incommunicable belief after glimpsing the bright pith of a soul. If this, the serial, is the quintessential form of the modern, then the modern entails all this too: not just each episode, emptied of the in-between, but the in-between itself, the cuts that reveal the very fiction of homogeneity and emptiness.

³⁸⁴ Pettitt, *Serial Forms*, 293.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The void which is fullness”:

The Elliptical in Anne Carson and Ariana Reines

To be 100% serious about nothing, about absence, about the void which is fullness, is the destiny and task of the poet.

— Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* (1999)

The poem is always a record of failure.

— Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016)

In a 2004 interview with *The Paris Review*, the poet, classicist, and essayist Anne Carson was asked—given her work’s Godly invocations—if she thought of herself as having a relationship with God. “No,” she replied. “But that’s not bad. I think in the last few years, since I’ve been working on *Decreation* and reading a lot of mystics, especially Simone Weil, I’ve come to understand that the best one can hope for as a human is to have a relationship with that emptiness where God would be if God were available, but God isn’t.”³⁸⁵ At first glance, one might take Carson’s remark as that of an atheist, a claim of God’s unavailability akin to proclamations of his “death.” But Carson complicates this: “He’s not available,” as she goes on to explain, “because he’s not a being of a kind that would fit into our availability.”³⁸⁶ In this framework, the conditional “as if” becomes a structuring premise: Carson seeks to have a relationship with “that emptiness where God would be if he were available.” In spite of her reasoning that he isn’t, the *if* here triumphs over reason: Carson’s work is devoted to thinking through emptiness. As she puts it:

There is the space where a thought would be, but which you can't get hold of. I love that space. It's the reason I like to deal with fragments. Because no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn't be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, so spooky.³⁸⁷

It is “this space” to which Carson refers that I will explore in this chapter. Those texts that deal with such spaces—whether through their formal omissions, their use of silence, or their overt engagement with “the void”—I term “elliptical.”³⁸⁸ This term draws on the rhetorical notion of

³⁸⁵ Carson, “Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry.”

³⁸⁶ Carson, “Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry.”

³⁸⁷ Carson, “Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry.”

³⁸⁸ Christine Wiesensthal has also referred to Carson’s “deliberately elliptical poetics.” Christine Wiesensthal, “Nox, Unboxed: Anne Carson’s Uncommon Long Verse ‘Epitaph’ (or Economies of the Unlost),” *University of Toronto*

ellipsis as omission, but it draws too on the mathematical concept of an ellipse: a bounded space with two foci (we might imagine God and humanity) whose proximity or distance is variable. One might also think along the lines of an “elliptical trajectory”³⁸⁹ in the romantic tradition: a celestial body orbiting a sun that is perpetually out of reach (“which you can’t get hold of”). My suspicion is that key to Carson’s interest in ellipsis is language’s structural inability to fully translate the ineffable. This chapter thus takes up Carson’s 2005 volume *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (with brief excursions into her 1995 *Glass, Irony and God* and 1999 *Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)*) alongside poet Ariana Reines’s 2019 *A Sand Book*, attending to the elliptical within the work of both authors. Reines’s work mobilizes content from across various traditions, drawing them together in a mosaic of quotidian, New York life. Sometimes referred to as “occult”—the author is also a practicing astrologist—Reines, like Carson, can be better understood as concerned with the structural failures of language, and as striving to capture the invisible precisely as words—and the world itself—fail.

Though several critics have insisted on Carson as a “secular” figure³⁹⁰—and many more, I’m sure, would see Reines as a “religious” one—the silences integral to Reines’s and Carson’s forms, I argue, propel both authors beyond such a framework. In the case of Carson, the elliptical allows for a speculative *as if* that operates beyond a certainty either theological or secular. Reines does not operate in this realm of Carsonian contrafactual but rather deploys what I call a “mosaic” mode to both illuminate and ultimately counter the elliptical form: through the “mosaic,” a bricolage of traditions, terms, and references serve first to reflect divine absence in a world stifled by images and language, and second to fuse such absence into textual presence in the book’s culminating kenotic section. Tracing this heretical “mosaic” operation, I argue that *A Sand Book* poses divine emptiness as that which can limit and, however briefly, resist the colonized world of images—and, in the book’s final gesture, that which demands the creation of a new world entirely. I read both authors’ forms of the elliptical in light of the Kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum*, variously understood as Godly contraction or concealment. Ellipsis and speechlessness in Reines come paradoxically to figure *not* God’s processual contractions, but rather, in this Weil-inflected cosmology, the expansion of divine absence. It is when divine absence recedes, or contracts, that the creaturely world would seem to renew itself. Carson’s oeuvre, by contrast, enacts the well-known schism in *tsimtsum* interpretation: from God’s unavailability to mere transformation, from

Quarterly 89, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 188–218. For a brief exploration of “absence” and “the void” as it emerges in Carson’s *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)*, see Karla Kelsey, “To Gesture at Absence: A Reading-With,” in *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, edited by Joshua Wilkinson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 88–93.

³⁸⁹ It is Johannes Kepler’s laws of planetary motion, of course, on which the romantic tradition draws. Kepler first proved that Mars traveled on an elliptical orbit in his *Astronomia Nova* (1609) and would later extend this to all planets in *Epitome Astronomiae Copernicanae* (1622). Such a discovery is critically post-Copernican, relying on a notion of the earth decentered by the sun. The elliptical, as form, would seem to signal the distance between earth and the heavens, and the indirect, oblique pathways required to move between them. See Johannes Kepler, *Astronomia Nova* (New Revised Edition), translated by William H. Donahue (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 2015) and Johannes Kepler, *Epitome of Copernican Astronomy & Harmonies of the World*, translated by Charles Glenn Wallis (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995).

³⁹⁰ For the most critical of such readings, see Concetta V. Principe’s “Anne Carson’s ‘Book of Isaiah’ and the secular unconscious,” which argues that “Carson’s secularization of the biblical Isaiah fails ... because her poem is a secular project, and secular ideology is a project that is managed by its failures.” See Concetta V. Principe, “Anne Carson’s ‘Book of Isaiah’ and the secular unconscious,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (Jan 2020): 36.

“death of God” to immanent pantheism. My claim is that the works of both authors, as they operate across traditions supposedly modern and pre-, demand a “postsecular” mode of reading, one that complicates the binary secularism constructs between the secular and the religious. These works function instead through an ontology of failure: constrained by their own form in language, they are both compromised and buoyed by the finitude of their terms.

As in the previous chapters of this dissertation, the “post” of postsecular does not designate a temporal “post,” a claim that the era of secularism has come to an end. The “post” signals instead a deconstructive sensibility and mode of reading that troubles the distinctions secularism has historically established between various categories, from the secular, to the religious, to the supernatural. If thus far we have examined allegory, metafiction, and the serial—all of which I have termed, in the context of our present, “forms under pressure,”—the so-called elliptical might be the most pressurized form of all, the space in which form and language themselves seem to dissolve. While Carson turns to the elliptical, to silence, and to that which language cannot capture, Reines moves from decreation to creation, eventually transforming the elliptical into a kind of prophetic speech. In offering a poetics of the contrafactual—one that moves beyond the premise of an absent God, and of failed language, to seek a divinity in the blank spaces at language’s edge—Carson, I argue, can be read as subverting what has often been seen as the inaugural moment of secular modernity. Reines’s mosaic mode also troubles the distinctions of the secular and religious, modern and pre-, constellating a variety of traditions across time and space in a revolutionary call for a world beyond this one. And yet Reines, unlike Carson, seems unable to escape the force of neoliberal remediation: this, as I will argue, might be the price of moving beyond the elliptical, of daring to trade silence for speech in a present whose language has been completely colonized, commodified.

I. “TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH THAT EMPTINESS”

The centerpiece of Carson’s *Decreation* is her essay titled “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God.” It is here that Carson’s titular interest in Weil’s notion of “decreation”—a theory itself interested in emptiness—is most rigorously explicated. Carson’s essay works in four parts, moving through Sappho, the Archaic Greek poet, Porete, a French-speaking mystic burned for heresy in 1310 following a two-month inquisition, and finally Weil, a twentieth-century figure of spiritual self-negation. For Weil, decreation is “to make something created uncreated,”³⁹¹ or, as Carson explains it, a kind of undoing of the creature in us in order to make room for a void where God might enter.³⁹² As Louis Ruprecht has asked suggestively, “What does Sappho’s erotic art have to do with this quasi-Christian self-negation? A great deal, Carson suggests, if we drop our superficial notion of soulful ‘decreation’ as bloodless, and our secular conceptions of mysticism as anti-worldly, and our cynical sense of mystics as

³⁹¹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 1952). As others have pointed out, Weil’s use of the term “décréation” was an unacknowledged use of Charles Péguy’s earlier coinage. See Elizabeth Coles, “The Sacred Object: Anne Carson and Simone Weil,” *Acta Poetica* 34, no. 1 (2013): 134, n9.

³⁹² Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 185.

company-men and -women, whose company just so happens to be a church.”³⁹³ In other words, reading these three figures together across time and space becomes possible only when we lose our secular blinders, which impose a view of mystics as inherently “religious,” and a figure like Sappho, for example, as somehow “mythological” or other to the mechanisms of the religion-secularism binary in pre-dating Christianity. To read *as* Carson and indeed to read Carson requires a postsecular mode of reading: one in which the opposition of the secular and religious is disentangled so as to see the forms, figures, and practices that do not fit neatly within its mold.

This becomes clear in Carson’s description of Porete’s theological treatise, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*—“a kind of handbook for people seeking God,”³⁹⁴ as Carson puts it. According to Porete, the human soul proceeds through seven stages of love, culminating in an ecstasy that “carries [the soul] outside [its] own being, leaving the self behind.”³⁹⁵ It is this ultimate site of emptiness that interests Carson. “Throughout *The Mirror* [Porete] speaks of herself as null, worthless, deficient, deprived and naked. But at the same time she recognizes her poverty as an amazing and inexpressible kind of repletion; and of this absolute emptiness which is also absolute fullness she speaks in erotic language ...”³⁹⁶ The theme of a *replete emptiness*, or a *full absence* continues in the seemingly paradoxical phrase that Porete coins to describe God’s relation at the moment of the soul’s annihilation: in French, “*le Loingpres*,” which Carson translates to “the FarNear.” Porete “does not justify this term,” as Carson puts it, but simply “begins using it”³⁹⁷ to describe God’s annihilation of the soul as akin to a “ravishing”:

For there is an aperture, like a spark, which quickly closes, in which one cannot long remain. ... The overflowing from the ravishing aperture makes the Soul free and noble and unencumbered [and its] peace lasts as long as the opening of the aperture. ... Moreover the peace is so delicious that Truth calls it glorious food. ...

And this aperture of the sweet movement of glory that the excellent FarNear gives is nothing other than a glimpse which God wants the soul to have of her own glory that she will possess without end.³⁹⁸

This passage, with its radical invention of “the FarNear,” brings Carson to the heart of her project: how does one narrate *the annihilation of the soul*? How can the ravished soul live to describe its

³⁹³ Louis A Ruprecht, “Review Essay: Righting the Self, and Writing God: *Anne Carson, Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005),” *Thesis Eleven* 93, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 103.

³⁹⁴ Carson, *Decreation*, 178.

³⁹⁵ Carson, *Decreation*, 178.

³⁹⁶ Carson, *Decreation*, 179, 180.

³⁹⁷ Carson, *Decreation*, 186.

³⁹⁸ Throughout, Carson draws on Porete’s *Le Mirouer des simples âmes anienties et qui seulement demeurent en vouloir et d’sir d’amour*; the author’s only extant book, composed in Old French. Marguerite Porete, *Le Mirouer des simples âmes anienties et qui seulement demeurent en vouloir et d’sir d’amour*, edited by R. Guarnierei (Rome: Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pièta, 4, 1965), 58, 63; cited in Carson, *Decreation*, 176. Carson adapts the following translations: Marguerite Porete, *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated by E. Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993); Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated by E. Colledge, J.C. Marler and J. Grant (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1999).

own ravishing? And how does one invoke a God who arrives only once the soul, or the creature, has been voided?

For the writer of a kletic hymn, God's absence is something tricky, perhaps impossible, to tell. This writer will have to invoke a God who arrives bringing her own absence with her—a God whose Farness is the more Near. It is an impossible motion possible only in writing. Sappho achieves it by various syntactic choices: for example, suppression of the verb in the first stanza of her poem. In my translation I supply an imperative 'Come!' in square brackets as the first word of the poem, and the sense may seem to require this, but the Greek text has no such verb. It begins with the adverb 'Here.' ... The effect of this suspension is uncanny: as if the whole of creation is depicted waiting for an action that is already perpetually *here*. There is no clear boundary between far and near; there is no climactic moment of God's arrival.³⁹⁹

Here Carson moves across boundaries temporal and spatial—the so-called modern and pre-modern, religious and worldly—to interweave her interlocutors across this shared “FarNear,” across God's palpable absence. Narrativization, for Carson, is not a betrayal of this absence, but the mechanism through which to convey it in all its palpability, a farness that comes ever more near. This “impossible motion” is precisely what I have called the elliptical: through various formal and rhetorical strategies, such texts are able to evoke a void of unknown origin. Sappho's poems, which we already receive in fragmented form, embody this in their silences, as Carson points out, in the author's suppressions. “... [come] here to me from Krete / to this holy temple where is / your graceful grove of apple trees and altars / smoking with frankincense,”⁴⁰⁰ begins a fragment on a pottery shard from the third century BC, its opening invocation—“come”—crucially absent. The effect of this repressed verb, as Carson claims, is the blurring between *far* and *near*; the absent God seems not distant but palpable, already “here to me.”⁴⁰¹

Carson, I would argue, is emulating this Sapphic form, the “distance of God in a sort of suspended solution.”⁴⁰² Both throughout the collection of *Decreation* and elsewhere, her use of blank space indicates to the reader that we must look beyond the scope of the poem, the essay, the aria for God, and yet *God's very distance*—the impossibility of language—saturates the text itself. One might imagine here our mathematical ellipse, its two foci suspended together yet forever apart. Silence reveals language's inherent failure to ever render fully the divine even as the reader catches

³⁹⁹ Carson, *Decreation*, 201.

⁴⁰⁰ Sappho, fragment 2, in *Sappho et Alcaeus Fragmenta*, edited by Eva-Maria Voigt (Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep, 1971), cited and translated in Carson, *Decreation*, 178.

⁴⁰¹ Carson, *Decreation*, 179.

⁴⁰² Coles too reads Carson as emulating her objects in “Decreation”—though largely to her detriment. “The ‘paradox of authorship,’” she writes, citing a term from Gillian Rose, “recalls the paradox or ‘problem of telling’ that Carson attends and succumbs to in ‘Decreation’: that writing both affirms and denies the author, and that her writing binds her to forms of resolution and definition that can close down productive forms of tension and meaning in the critical object.” This critique would seem to emerge from the space of secular criticism: it demands, against the intimacy Carson stages with her interlocutors, the fantasy of distance, a fantasy no less a “form of domination,” as Coles puts it, than the hermeneutic prose of Weil. See Coles, “The Sacred Object,” 147.

glimpses of it. In an early poem in *Decreation* titled “Lines,” such silence is between the speaker and her interlocutor, her mother:

...Out
the window snow is falling straight down in
lines. To my mother,
love
of my life, I describe what I had for brunch. The
lines are falling
faster
now. Fate has put little weights on the ends (to
speed us up) I
want to tell her—sign of God’s pity. She *won’t*
keep me
she says, she
won’t run up my bill. Miracles slip past us. The
paperclips
are immortally aligned. God’s pity! How long
will
it feel like burning, said the child trying to be
kind.⁴⁰³

In this instance, the inarticulable gap occurs between mother and daughter: the poem’s tension lies in what the daughter expresses (“I describe what I had for brunch”) and what she can express only to her reader (“Fate has put little weights on the ends (to speed us up) I want to tell her—sign of God’s pity”). The poem’s titular lines—quodidian snowfall and paperclips—are further emphasized and mirrored by the text’s formatting, “lines” and “lines,” for instance, aligned on the page. That these appear to the speaker as signs of God, as miracles slipping past, is itself a reading within the gaps, a reading that defies expression outside the form of the poetic; but within the world of this poem, God’s signs, however ambiguous or distant, are still expressible. Carson, as ever, animates the impossibilities of language, drawing out what *could have been*—the contrafactual miracle—in the space of its foreclosure.

As *Decreation* progresses from poetry to arias, and any autobiographical subject of Carson’s lyric “I” is gradually decentered and eclipsed, the elliptical further highlights what we might call the divine failure of language. Take, for example, this excerpt from Carson’s sixty-five-page opera libretto, *Decreation: An Opera in Three Parts*. Titled “Aria of the Flames [sung by Marguerite],” it manages to feel simultaneously playful, campy, and sincere:

⁴⁰³ Carson, *Decreation*, 13-4.

where else
 can God put
 God's nakedness,
 where else
 can God put
 God's emptiness,
 where else
 can God put
 God's nothingness
 where else
 can God put
 God's endless end,
 but
 in
 me?
 Entire God!
 Entire naked empty endlessly ended unmatched God!
 Where
 else
 can
 God
 put
 God?⁴⁰⁴

Appearing on the heels of the fictive Porete's silence in response to the 33 questions she is posed by her inquisitors, the aria enacts the priority of divine emptiness. Beginning with standard line breaks and formatting, the poem sequentially refuses reason and virtue in its first two lines (for divine "Love liberates you from Reason ... releases you from Obedience ... replaces the law,"⁴⁰⁵ as Carson writes elsewhere in the opera). As Porete moves beyond the confines of such concepts, in lines excerpted above, her verse moves beyond the confines of standard poetic form, the staccato enjambment of each subsequent line mirroring her breakdown ("where else / can God put / God's nakedness?"). If we are to follow Timothy Baker, who argues that "The void Weil desires is revealed in Carson's verse as the space around the text,"⁴⁰⁶ then of course the space surrounding

⁴⁰⁴ Carson, *Decreation*, 225.

⁴⁰⁵ Carson, *Decreation*, 217.

⁴⁰⁶ Timothy Baker, "Praying to an Absent God: The Poetic Revealing of Simone Weil." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 47, no. 2 (October 1, 2006): 138. Baker offers a rich account of how the elliptical functions through the use of blank space: "This is, for Carson, the way in which language, through attention reveals emptiness: each word points to all the words it is not and asks an unanswerable question. The void Weil desires is revealed in Carson's verse as the space

each word here increases, as though Porete's verse were treading into the empty territory of God, until her voice—her soul—has the effect of moving farther and farther so that the surrounding emptiness might come all the more near: "Where / else / can / God / put / God?" Though critics have remarked on the adoption of Simone Weil as "an avowedly secular patron saint of modern metaphysical poetry,"⁴⁰⁷ it seems clear to me that Carson's use of Weil's "decreation" may be both arch and playful—Weil will, after all, star in her own opera following Porete's—but it is not, by any means, secular. If a traditional understanding of the secular is a space and time that is empty of God, then Carson's (de)construction of that emptiness as itself saturated with the possibility of divinity offers a subversion. One could read this as the secular's failure to empty itself of God, but I would argue that what is exposed is the failure of the very category of the secular in its dichotomous construction. In the face of a contemporary literary criticism whose tendency is to treat texts as either "Religious" with a capital R or "secularized," Carson poses a challenge, straddling the boundary between Far and Near. Such a space cannot be mapped within the terms of the secular, or indeed the religious—it is, we might say, unknown to the vocabulary of the secular order, lurking in the crevices of what we call modernity.

I offer one more excerpt of Carson's—this time from her 1999 *Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)*—to reveal how Carson deploys the elliptical and further inhabits and animates it through the contrafactual mode. Here Carson offers us not her own poetics but an analysis of Simonides of Keos, a Greek lyric poet (c. 556–468 B.C.) best known for his prolific writing of epitaphs. Relaying an anecdote about Simonides, Carson tells us that the "tyrant" Hieron once asked Simonides to define the attributes and nature of divinity. Simonides supposedly replied, "Give me a day to think about it."⁴⁰⁸ A day later Hieron asked again, to which Simonides replied, "Give me two days to think about it."⁴⁰⁹ Two days later Hieron asked again, to which Simonides replied, "Give me four days to think about it."⁴¹⁰ This went on exponentially until Hieron became fed up and Simonides finally replied, "The longer I ponder the matter, the more obscure it seems to me."⁴¹¹ Carson sees in this anecdote a kind of *Loingpres* in action:

Simonides has bequeathed to us in this anecdote a sort of concrete poem of man's relations with the Godhead. And what we see enacted in the interchange with Hieron is the properly invisible nature of divinity, receding out of our grasp down the lengthening corridor of time and into the darkness at the back of the painting. No trick of perspective, no illusionist sleight-of-hand, can bring God into focus on this canvas. Simonides is interested in rendering the fact that ἀλήθεια (truth) cannot be seen in this world, no matter how tyrannical the pressure exerted on it by τὸ δοκεῖν (appearances).⁴¹²

around the text; what remains of the reader is to move from the text to the emptiness which surrounds it." Baker, "Praying to an Absent God," 138.

⁴⁰⁷ Baker, "Praying to an Absent God," 137.

⁴⁰⁸ Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 61.

⁴⁰⁹ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 61.

⁴¹⁰ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 61.

⁴¹¹ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 61.

⁴¹² Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 62.

Divinity lies in the space of the void—that which cannot be captured, written, painted, conjured in human time. Simonides is left with merely a glimpse of God, can perhaps feel the proximity of his distance each time he sets about answering Hieron’s question. Carson thus moves across traditions, and across the boundary of the “modern” and “premodern,” to offer up a conception of *full emptiness*, and of a poetics all-the-more productive in its very failure. As she writes of Simonides,

‘If to you the invisible were visible,’ says Simonides to his audience, ‘you would see God.’ But we do not see God and a different kind of visibility has to be created by the watchful poet. The poet’s metaphorical activity puts him in a contrafactual relation to the world of other people and ordinary speech. He does not seek to refute or replace the world but merely to indicate its lacunae, by positioning alongside the world of things that we see an uncanny protasis of things invisible, although no less real. Without poetry these two worlds would remain unconscious of one another.⁴¹³

Simonides must develop a new poetic mode—“a different kind of visibility”—in order to render *the invisible* visible, in order, we might say, to conjure silence in language, to represent the void. In describing the mode of Simonides, Carson here helpfully summarizes her own relationship to the “world of other people,” or, we might say, to the secular world—a relationship that I would call “contrafactual.” “But we do not see God,” Carson writes of Simonides, and his activity must begin from the premise of this negation. This echoes Carson’s gambit that in the face of God’s unavailability, the best we can hope for is to “have a relationship with that emptiness where God would be *if* God were available.” Carson’s activity, like Simonides, is one of seeking out the lacunae—the aporia—in her surroundings, which poetry makes fleetingly glimpsable. The work of the poetic contrafactual is this knitting together of the world of things with the world of things invisible.

II. IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED NOTHING: GOD’S CONTRACTIONS

In what follows, I consider the comments of Carson’s with which I began this chapter, themselves, of course, a kind of poetic contrafactual: “that emptiness where God would be if God were available, but he isn’t.” Such comments signal to multiple traditions of the divine letting-be of finitude, from Weil, Carson’s acknowledged inspiration, to Hegel, to Schelling, to the Kabbalah. I will thus explore in further detail the Kabbalist notion of *tsimtsum*—or what has been popularized as the “contraction of God”—drawing out its schisms of interpretation in order to further contextualize Carson’s postsecular poetics. Here I engage in a tradition of reading the discursive roles of Kabbalistic concepts as they are powerfully resonant in, and indeed, have been appropriated by, literary texts.⁴¹⁴ To think with the resources of Kabbalah allows us to ask

⁴¹³ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 58-9.

⁴¹⁴ For a recent exploration of Kabbalah as it is taken up across a range of literary works, see Kitty Millet, *Kabbalah and Literature* (New York, London, Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2024). As Millet writes, “The stakes of introducing such a project [Kabbalah] into literature change what literature does, and what literature is fundamentally because it liberates text from a human register that demands a mimetic function tied to the phenomenal world. When kabbalistic patterns

questions not only about the elliptical as it functions in Carson and Reines, but about, as I will argue, how the tradition of writing and thinking absence shapes theories of the modern.

Tsimtsum is a rabbinical notion that was radically reinterpreted and popularized by sixteenth-century Safed Kabbalist Isaac Luria (1534–1572) as the “contraction” of God. This notion plays out in the Genesis 1 story of creation, or *Bereshit*: in Luria’s conception, the original, amorphic and undifferentiated God must contract in order to create a void, which only then becomes a space for God’s creation. God, in other words, must transform infinitude (*Ein Sof*) to cosmos. Thus, in Luria’s elaboration, this “contraction” is no mere “concealment” of God, as previous Kabbalistic understandings had proffered, but an ontological shift in God’s status that introduces a distinct separation between God and that which he creates. As Gershom Scholem puts it,

Creation out of nothing, from the void, could be nothing other than creation of the void, that is, of the possibility of thinking of anything that was not God. Without such an act of self-limitation, after all, there would be only God—and obviously nothing else. A being that is not God could only become possible and originate by virtue of such a contraction, such a paradoxical retreat of God into himself. By positing a negative factor in Himself, God *liberates* creation.⁴¹⁵

Scholem, perhaps the contemporary’s most influential Luria historian, here insists on the *negative* dimension of Lurianic *tsimtsum*: it is this dimension that catapults us beyond pantheistic or Neoplatonic readings of the concept, in which God is all-encompassing, and introduces a radical division that, as Scholem puts it, “liberates” creation, the human, from creator. If the human—and the world—are created by God but are not *of* him, Lurianic *tsimtsum* begins to provide a new response to the problem of theodicy, one that further emphasizes human responsibility for care of the world.⁴¹⁶ This is a crucial difference between the framework of *tsimtsum* and its Christian analogue of kenosis, or divine self-emptying, as discussed in Chapter Three. As Simon D. Podmore puts it, “*Tikkun* [repair] does not allow one to rest in the transcendent consolation of the kenotic crucified God, but demands action in the light and darkness of God’s *tsimtsum*.”⁴¹⁷

Let us return, then, to what I have termed the “elliptical” form as it appears across literary works, and once again to the lines from Carson with which I began this chapter. As Carson says

and processes substitute for mimesis’ phenomenal registers, literature exhibits wholly new objects, suggests texts, words, letters, as phenomena without phenomenal footprints in the faculties, and produces ‘new creation.’” (10)

⁴¹⁵ Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, edited by Werner Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 283.

⁴¹⁶ Indeed, if *tsimtsum* is the first “negative factor” introduced in the Kabbalistic model of creation, the second would be *shevirat ha-kelim*, or the breaking of the vessels. In the void that God created, he sent a ray of light to initiate the act of creation. Ten *sefirot*, or vessels, were to catch the ray. However, they were unable to contain its power and seven of the lower vessels shattered, their shards uniting with the divine light. *Tikkun olam* (repair of the world) is the imperative to repair this fragmented world.

⁴¹⁷ Simon D. Podmore, “‘Abyss Calls Unto Abyss’: *Tsimtsum* and *Kenosis* in the Rupture of God-forsakenness,” in *Tsimtsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology*, edited by Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel Weiss (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 316. Interestingly, this emphasis on *repair of the world*—or at least human responsibility for the creation of a *new world*, as it were—seems far more present in Reines than it is in Carson.

in *The Paris Review*, “the best one can hope for as a human is to have a relationship with that emptiness where God would be if God were available, but God isn’t.”⁴¹⁸ Reading these lines now again in light of *tsimtsum*, we might understand Carson’s claim as aligned with the Lurianic notion of Godly contraction: the best we could hope for is to have a relationship with the void that God created, but in the very act of having created it, God contracted himself and is thus *unavailable*. Emptiness, nothingness, and *the void* are not synonymous with God in this framework but preclude his very availability. The moment they—and we—come on the scene, *Ein Sof* has contracted.

And yet Carson, as we have noted, builds her work on the contrafactual within her statement: “if God were available.” Seemingly inspired by Weil, for whom “God can only be present in creation under the form of absence,”⁴¹⁹ Carson’s work seeks out signs of divinity within silence, blankness, the elliptical. Take, for example, an excerpt from the poem “God’s Work,” from her 1995 collection *Glass, Irony and God*:

Moonlight in the kitchen is a sign of God.
The kind of sadness that is a black suction pipe extracting you
From your own navel and which the Buddhists call

“no mindcover” is a sign of God.
The blind alleys that run alongside human conversation
like lashes are a sign of God.

God’s own calmness is a sign of God.
The surprisingly cold smell of potatoes or money.
Solid pieces of silence.⁴²⁰

Rather than maintain the strict separation between God and his creations, Carson, like Simonides, offers a poetics that functions through contrafactuals. In Carson’s rendition, the worldly is saturated with signs of the divine, from the more quotidian (“surprisingly cold smell of potatoes”) to the places where we have come to expect them: alongside human decreation, where the self is “extract[ed]” from its “own navel” in a process dramatized through the use of enjambment. We might imagine that the “blind alleys that run alongside human conversation” are the invisible lacunae envisioned as ever-present just alongside the worldly, what poetics can glimpse—can hope—is possible in the blank spaces at the edges of language.⁴²¹ By the time we reach the third stanza, God’s “own calmness” is mirrored in the mood of the poem; the consonance of “surprisingly cold smell” and “solid pieces of silence” creates the sensation that everything is in

⁴¹⁸ Anne Carson, *Paris Review*.

⁴¹⁹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 162; quoted in Anne Carson, *Decreation*, 201.

⁴²⁰ Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 53.

⁴²¹ Joanna Skisbrud also reads Carson as concerned with edges. “Despite,” she writes, “... an insistence on *lack* as an organizing principle of both eros and poetry, Carson’s writing ... attests to the way that ‘edges’ reveal neither absence nor an objective limit, but instead provide a potential for recognizing—and reconfiguring—relations.” See Johanna Skisbrud, *The Poetic Imperative: A Speculative Aesthetics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 102.

its right place. This is not a world created in the wake of God's contraction. Carson, both here and in her use of the elliptical more generally, would thus seem to align not with the Lurianic conception of *tsimtsum* but with its earlier, more pantheistic interpretations⁴²² of Godly emanation, in which 'Ayin (nothingness) is not the distinct creation of *Ein Sof*, but one of its transformations.

This sense of emanation seems to ramify across "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God," even if, indeed, it is a Godly emanation through absence, a paradoxical "FarNear." Carson appears to confirm such a reading when she writes, near the essay's end, "saintliness is an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history and we resent that. We need history to remain ordinary. We need to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgments sanctify our own survival."⁴²³ The saintliness of the essay's titular figures is the absolute transformed, *erupting* in the human plane. This is not humanity abandoned by its creator, but the absolute made flesh, pouring out in the quotidian. Figures like Porete are deemed "fake women,"⁴²⁴ Carson asserts, because "we resent" this explosion or emanation of the absolute in history, the melding of the saintly and the ordinary.⁴²⁵ The essay—in its exploration and recuperation of so-called "fake women"—could thus be claimed as both feminist and postsecular: the "need" that Carson articulates to denounce saints as "neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake" is not only gendered but bound up with the maintenance of secular hegemony.

And yet this is no straightforward recuperation of Carson's protagonists. In fact, perhaps fittingly, Carson ends her essay on a note of "mistrust," of distance, appropriating the epithet of "fake women":

The truth they tell from this paradoxical position [both near and far] is also fake. As Marguerite Porete says briskly: 'For everything that one can tell of God or write, no less than what one can think, of God who is more than words, is as much lying as it is telling the truth.' So in the end it is important not to be fooled by fake women. If you mistake the dance of jealousy for the love of God, or a heretic's mirror for the true story, you are likely to spend the rest of your days in terrible hunger.⁴²⁶

Even as Carson illustrates the emanation of a FarNear, a world saturated with divine (absence), her essay returns us to the fundamental premise of Godly absence—God's unavailability—with which I began this chapter, insisting on the impossibilities and aporias it creates for any human claim to divine knowledge. Carson has recuperated, danced with Sappho, Porete, and Weil, but complicates any easy equivalence between their saintliness and truth. "Fake women" are precisely those who frustrate the boundaries (and binaries) between saintliness and ordinariness, truth and

⁴²² The earliest such interpretations have been attributed to Spanish Rabbi and Kabbalist Moses de Leon (1240–1305). For more on such pantheistic readings, see Joseph Ben-Schlomo, "Gershom Scholem on Pantheism in the Kabbala," in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 56–72.

⁴²³ Carson, *Decreation*, 180.

⁴²⁴ Carson is here drawing on the language used in the proceedings of Marguerite Porete's trial, in which Porete was deemed a "*pseudo-mulier*."

⁴²⁵ Carson, *Decreation*, 180.

⁴²⁶ Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 119, cited in Carson, *Decreation*, 181.

falsity. To call them “fake women” is not to doubt her protagonists from a secular point of view, but to reinforce that animating Carsonian paradox: a postsecular paradox that operates against easy truths, oscillating between Godly contraction (or unavailability) and the contrafactual realm of his emanation.⁴²⁷

Carson thus in her oeuvre enacts the schism in interpretations of *tsimtsum*, one that has typically been read along the lines of a secular-modern rift with an earlier theology, only for her oeuvre to collapse it: is God *unavailable* to humans, contracted, or does God remain in the absence he created? Does *tsimtsum* signal the “death of God” or his mere transformation? This is the schism in Kabbalah that will sever transcendence from immanence. Scholars have argued that the Lurian-Scholemian line of *tsimtsum* interpretation lies at the heart of modernity: God’s power of *negation* is that which will enable the lines of thought of Schelling, Hegel, and eventually Marx.⁴²⁸ Carson begins by accepting the Lurianiatic premise—God’s unavailability, absence, contraction, fundamental distance from humanity—and yet she goes on to ask, *what if in fact the second premise*—that God were still here, merely transformed—were also true? Carson thus offers something of a “not—as if”: moving from negation to the contrafactual, she offers a poetics that knows it is doomed to fail at any attempt at cosmic union, yet still reveals itself as on the side of immanence, seeking divinity within the gaps and silences of this world. Indeed, I would posit that the very fact that Carson’s poetics enacts such a schism, that we move through these questions in considering her work—*is he there or isn’t he?, absent or transformed?*—is precisely what makes her postsecular. In thinking alongside sources and traditions that breach our disciplinary boundaries of secular and religious, modern and premodern, Carson conjures up a *full emptiness* in which not only near and far but modern and “non-” become indeterminable, suspended. Her poetics is thus anything but mere secularized readings of its references: moving beyond the *not* of negation to the invisible realm of *as if*, it collapses our image of “secular modernity,” puncturing it with so many divine gaps.

III. “NOTHING I SAY BELONGS REMOTELY TO ME”

Ariana Reines takes up Carson’s quest for emptiness though in a form that feels entirely full: her 2019 *A Sand Book* is an epic, eleven-part book largely in verse, which might be said to trace the movement of divine absence processually limiting, and eventually annihilating, the world. *A Sand Book* lays bare the difficulty of emptying oneself in a neoliberal, dystopian landscape in which we are already so *filled up*:

We closed our eyes, all this was all we looked at
Every day all day. It was all we could see.
We were lost in a language of images.

⁴²⁷ Elizabeth Coles has also described Carson’s appropriation of “fake women” as “a name for women whose conversancy with paradox disorients but, in disorientation, gifts us a language for the most intimate of contradictions: that we *are* and *are not* what we think we are.” See Elizabeth Coles, *Anne Carson: The Glass Essayist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 147.

⁴²⁸ See Bielik-Robson and Weiss, *Tsimtsum and Modernity*.

It was growing difficult to speak. Yet talk
 Was everywhere. Some of us still sought
 To dominate one another intellectually
 Others physically; still others psychically or some
 Of all of the above, everything seeming to congeal
 Into bad versions of sports by other means
 And sports by that time was the only metaphor
 Left that could acceptably be applied to anything.
 The images gave us no rest yet failed over
 And over despite the immensity
 Of their realism to describe the world as we really
 Knew it, and worse, as it knew us⁴²⁹

Writing from the Trump era, Reines's speaker offers a suffocating picture; her use of diacope reinforcing the totality of the situation ("*all* this was *all* we look at / Every day *all* day. It was *all* we could see"). Alliteration moves into assonance ("Some of us still sought / To *dominate one* another intellectually"); the lines cascading to a frenzied crescendo. The images are inescapable—and yet they fail "over and over." How to create something beyond the language of images that has colonized us even psychically? How to truly speak in a world where all language is doomed to failure?

Reines's answer, like Carson's, is to deploy poesis to illuminate language's gaps—or in the terms of Simonides, to illuminate the invisible—but Reines's method is resolutely distinct. Her bricolaging of references and traditions, from Kabbalah, to Simone Weil, to finally Gnosticism, is, to borrow the author's own term, "mosaic," a multi-tiled artwork that both revels in its cracks and cuts (the grout between tiles, so to speak) and seeks, ultimately, to fill them.

The kenotic, Weilian influence is perhaps most visibly evident. As Reines writes in a poem titled "Sandra":

I don't know how
 & something very large in me does not
 Want to know how
 To say anything at all
 It just wants sobbing
 It wants the true feeling
 It wants the fall⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹ Ariana Reines, *A Sand Book* (Portland: Tin House Books, 2019), 10-1.

⁴³⁰ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 58.

The speaker here grapples with Carson's impossibility of language, yearning instead for a kind of primeval, "true feeling," the surrender to total instinct invoked by "the fall" of original sin. Such a surrender is thus heretical—*religiously* sinful—and yet figured in apophatic language. Surrender recurs elsewhere in "Sandra":

But I taught myself another kind of surrender too
I did it in the off hours, in whatever time and space
I could steal from my career. All I can say is
Once you have surrendered like that
It becomes hard to care about magazine feminism.⁴³¹

Such surrender is unspeakable, merely alluded to within the lines of the poem through implied negation—it is not the surrender of a career, but time and space stolen from it; nor is it a surrender of "magazine feminism" but one that transcends it. Surrender is, of course, crucial to the framework of Christian kenosis, in which Christ surrenders his self to God the Father. This act of surrender is rendered as *self-emptying*: as Paul writes in Epistle to the Philippians, Christ "emptied himself [*ekenosen heauton*]" by "humbl[ing] himself and bec[oming] obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."⁴³² This kenotic dynamic of surrender *as* self-emptying will become especially crucial by *A Sand Book*'s end.

But Reines, despite a reference to "gravity and grace," is no straightforward Weil devotee, and her own framework of surrender occurs alongside the mess, resistance, and "human beauty" of the contemporary world. Indeed, "Sandra" ends with "I too a product of magazines / And yet, I wanted to say, and yet ... / But now I feel the other world pulling me down / Again ... Goodbye."⁴³³ The rhetoric of emptying appears in jolts across the first 360 pages of Reines's tome, with glimmers of "another kind of surrender," of a world beyond language, and yet that emptying just as quickly retracts: this world assumes its rightful place.⁴³⁴ I read this as a movement of divine contraction (as the world seeps in again, its influence everywhere felt) and expansion that characterizes the volume's whole. Here, as in my reading of Carson, the rabbinical notion of *tsimtsum* seems pertinent. As I have already emphasized above, the term and concept *tsimtsum* existed in the Midrashic and Kabbalistic context before it was popularized by Isaac Luria. According to Joseph Dan, it denotes in Talmud "the constriction of the *shekhinah* in the space between the images of the angels on the holy ark in the temple of Jerusalem."⁴³⁵ The first to introduce this Midrashic context in Kabbalah was Moses Cordovero (1522–1570), who defined *tsimtsum* as an act of God's withdrawal. According to Cordovero, God oscillates between revealing and concealing his nature.⁴³⁶ Oscillation—whether of *concealment and revelation* or the slightly

⁴³¹ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 65.

⁴³² Philippians 2:7.

⁴³³ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 66.

⁴³⁴ The dynamic here between the two worlds is of course crucial. We might read the "two words" to which Reines here refers, like Carson's "invisible world" and "world of things," as two foci of an ellipse, the distance between them unknowable.

⁴³⁵ Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74.

⁴³⁶ See Bielik-Robson and Weiss, *Tsimtsum and Modernity*, 5.

later *contraction and expansion*—would seem to be the operative term within Reines, as *A Sand Book* moves between a revealed *divined nothingness* and the concealment of such divinity amidst the world of images.

Such oscillation is inherently repetitive. As Scholem stresses in his reading of a Lurianic conception of *tsimtsum*, God’s “contraction” occurs not once but *processually*: “This act, however, is not a one-time event; it must constantly repeat itself; again and again a stream streams into the void, a ‘something’ [negative factor in himself] from God.”⁴³⁷ We can thus read *A Sand Book* as illustrative of this continuous contraction and expansion, as exemplified in the poem “Armorica,” whose speaker gravitates towards an unnamable “truth” and yet must just as soon repress it, the world closing in around her. “She had almost mastered it,” the poem begins, “It was nothing she / Had not / Felt before / False peace of my adulthood / She thought / Behind her smile / False peace of my art / Moving toward the true / The secret peace ...”⁴³⁸ Here the speaker—her adulthood, even her art—has mastered a kind of “false peace,” one the poem opposes to the inner, “the true,” “[t]he secret peace,” which makes its first appearance here, expanding into and thereby opposing the falsity of the world. This, one might say, is a classic critique of self-alienation under bourgeois, purportedly secular capitalism. The opposition between truth and falsity continues as the speaker narrates a trip to the grocery store where she is greeted by a neighbor, the speaker’s mouth forcing itself into the requisite smile—and yet the smile is quick to fade: “Her smile took its time going down / Her face would not release it / Or she felt the familiar space / And looseness, the sense of wide / Incompletion in reality ...”⁴³⁹ Here again, the elliptical—“the familiar space”—has intruded into and expanded into the world. This loosening and widening sensation that Reines’s speaker describes might be understood as a kind of unnamable divine expansion—that which necessarily limits “reality” and the world. Smiling is described as a kind of transubstantiation of “[a] presentiment or memory of things / That happened here before she ever, / Set foot here, and the things done to her / And the things done to other women ...”⁴⁴⁰ In smiling, “She stretched across the gulf / Of the more and more and ever / More she could not say ...”⁴⁴¹ Smiling thus becomes a kind of worldly contraction of an unspeakable, elliptical gap—and, indeed, following “say,” *A Sand Book* is formatted with a full page break, a gaping wide gulf of material ellipsis.

Such dynamics of “contraction” and “expansion” become more visible in later passages of the poem, where they seem to be directly competing:

Nothing she meant to make a big
Deal of, only some tiny budging
Of memory, the sense of duty hidden
Inside her body, that willed her
Transubstantiate it all, and the aggrieved
Look of the woman working out opposite

⁴³⁷ Scholem, “Reflections on Jewish Theology,” *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 283.

⁴³⁸ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 181.

⁴³⁹ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 184.

⁴⁴⁰ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 185.

⁴⁴¹ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 186.

Her this morning, a wholly ancient
 Look of ritual death, of sacred sacrifice
 Of readiness to die right then
 For the truth, and she wondered did her
 Face too release such overwhelming
 Longing and such arresting intimacy
 With agony⁴⁴²

Note that the first line begins with an attempt to minimize this “duty” within the body: “Nothing she meant to make a big / deal of”—but of course it also begins with a key term: “Nothing.” This feeling is *nothing*; it is *no thing*; no thing that can be put into words; no thing expressible within the confines of the poem; it is an inexpressible absence toward which the speaker is simultaneously grasping and resisting. The verse weaves back and forth between the speaker’s attempts to minimize that “nothing,” “to transubstantiate it all”—which keep us within the “symbolic,” in the realm of the quotidian⁴⁴³—and the irrepressible outbursts of “such overwhelming / Longing and such arresting intimacy / With agony” lurking beneath. Thanks to Reines’s use of enjambment, it is the terms associated with the latter—with the unspeakable elliptical—that are left echoing, resonating even as the speaker conceals her agony: “big ... hidden / willed her / aggrieved ... ancient / sacred sacrifice ... overwhelming / arresting intimacy / agony.” Here, I would argue, we find ourselves in a cosmic dimension devoid of the usual triangulation (within classic readings of *tsimtsum*) between God, emptiness, and world. Instead, through a mosaic combination of Kabbalah and a Weil-inflected theology,⁴⁴⁴ divine emptiness—that overwhelming, mystical, sacred “Nothing”—is itself in a *tsimtsum* dynamic with the world, the only factor that can limit and resist it. Indeed, throughout *A Sand Book* it is not the divine, but more properly *divine absence* that expands and contracts, is revealed and concealed across the pages, seemingly fleeing as soon as the world and its “language of images” clamps back down again. This is manifested most literally in “Armorica’s” ending, when the speaker learns of a school shooting while at the grocery store, “Killing now spreading through her body / Up through her left hand / The hand that would not put / Down the phone ...”⁴⁴⁵

Reines thus aligns with neither the Lurianian line nor that of pantheistic immanence: in her positioning of divine absence not as constitutive of the world from which God has contracted, but as the world into which a “far-near” has expanded, she illustrates the *movement* of contraction and expansion in her text’s very form. *A Sand Book*, seemingly paradoxically, represents a realm in which *absence itself contracts and expands*: indeed, absence, nothingness, the elliptical here takes on a felt, material form. Reines, more so than Carson, emphasizes the torture of these contractions,

⁴⁴² Reines, *A Sand Book*, 187.

⁴⁴³ Quotidian transubstantiation is exemplified later in the poem, when Reines writes “... the staving- / Off of some long-domesticated / Appetite she was now / (For the thousandth time) conscious / Of translating into shopping / For vegetables ...” Reines, *A Sand Book*, 190-1.

⁴⁴⁴ Indeed, the kenotic-Weilian impulse is visible in “Armonica” as well. See, most explicitly, lines like “Loss of herself / She still longed for it / Genderless self, / Loveless and avid ...” Reines, *A Sand Book*, 190.

⁴⁴⁵ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 193-4.

the feeling when the world wins out again and that “nothingness” becomes unattainable, the invisible world unreachable. As she writes in “Skull & Bones”:

The world keeps forcing
Its way in. “The world”
Which fucking one.
You know the one.⁴⁴⁶

Indeed, by the end of the aptly named “Armorica,” the world wins out: “In Florida another child / Had murdered seventeen children / She learned / Through the cracked / Device she held in her left / Hand.”⁴⁴⁷ Learning this, too, “was nothing / She had not felt / Before,”⁴⁴⁸ in a repetition of the poem’s refrain, where here the earlier possibilities of “nothing”—with its glimmer of divine absence—are foreclosed. Instead, this “nothing / She had not felt” figures a shame in the impossibility, indeed the failure of the world. It is not until the book’s culminating moment that the speaker can move beyond it, becoming one with divine absence rather than, as “Armorica” puts it, transubstantiating it.

In the volume’s final section, titled “MOSAIC,” this movement of expansion reaches its culmination as we witness the soul self-emptying in kenotic oneness with the divine void. The speaker has transcribed “the verbal portion of an encounter,” but insists that the text that follows is not her own—it belongs, instead, to the sun, whose warmth “enter[ed] me through the part of my head I sometimes call ‘my antenna,’ where my first white hairs grow, where my hair fell out while my mother was on Rikers Island, and where, when a truck drove into me near Léogane, Haiti ... I developed a bump, though by all accounts I should have died.”⁴⁴⁹ Here the pages are suddenly printed in black with white text, as though to signal the crucial shift in form—and the inversion from this world into its parallel:

The sun’s warmth kept filling me, and what had begun as a slightly above-average warmth kept growing. It was starting to fill my body, and just before I totally surrendered to it, I had the inkling this might be something like the ‘bliss’ I had heard about in old books. I had to sit down. There was even a bench to sit on right there, traffic streaming in both directions. ... Whatever bliss was, if this was it, it steadily gave way to rapture. I like the word rapture, but the truth is no word exists for what I felt. It was love, of such ravishing totality that I don’t know what to compare it to, and of such magnitude I could scarcely speak of it for two and a half years. I have never felt anything like it. ... I felt it filling me, and changing me, changing my cells, reorganizing me. And then it began to speak. The sun began speaking, but not strictly to speak. Thoughtforms were being communicated to me whole, in a didactic and commanding voice that was not literally a voice, insofar as it wasn’t audible to my ear. The voice had no sound, but it communicated its totality into me in a

⁴⁴⁶ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 137.

⁴⁴⁷ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 197.

⁴⁴⁸ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 197.

⁴⁴⁹ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 360.

masculine tone—my entire body, my every cell, and ever particle of my experience was being reorganized in order to shape and receive each thoughtform, each one delivered into me whole instant by instant, second by second, minute by minute.⁴⁵⁰

If Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* is a handbook for the ravishing of the soul, Reines offers a narrativization of that ravishing in the twenty-first century: one that came upon her suddenly, spontaneously, her "antenna," or as Porete would say, "aperture," opening up to a divine force. But that force is, crucially, still figured as a kind of absent presence, a presence that can be experienced only as "warmth," as inaudible voice. Indeed, the sun (whose Farness, we might say, invoking Carson, comes all the more Near) becomes symbolic of the overwhelming, annihilating *divine presence as absence*, that which, in Reines's cosmology, limits and resists the tug of the world. As in Porete, the speaker must first surrender herself only to be filled, changed, reorganized on a cellular level. Importantly, this divine encounter is precipitated by a moment of silence—we might say, of ellipsis—in the speaker's life: distraught by an environment of sexual harassment at her workplace, "I had begun to go silent. I could feel it happening to me, as though concrete were filling my cells. The more silent I grew, the more silence I wanted. Silence had become almost voluptuous—it was becoming my place of refuge. It became indistinguishable from rage."⁴⁵¹ Silence thus becomes a site of refuge from the world, which itself contracts as silence—the elliptical—expands. This elliptical ground is the necessary first step before the speaker's kenotic experience with the sun: in the speaker's very *failure* to speak, the words of the divine other reveal themselves, like mosaic tiles coming to fill the "concrete" of the elliptical.

Reines's poetics thereby moves beyond the premise of worldly self-emptying, instead narrating a moment in which the *subject is saturated by a divine absence that has itself annihilated the world*, transposing the subject, however fleetingly, into an a-worldly bliss. *A Sand Book* thus transcribes a process for which "no word exists." As if in response to the question of Carson's *Decreation*—how does one narrate *the annihilation of the soul*?—the text becomes prophetic medium, and rather than devolve into the structural silences that haunt Carson's work, Reines ends with proclamations attributed not to the poet but to the sun. Floating alone amidst the black pages in all caps, the aphoristic lines read, for example:

GOD DIDN'T DIE
HE'S JUST NOT THE ONLY GOD IN THE UNIVERSE⁴⁵²

and

KNOWING THAT THE WORLD HAS ALWAYS SUSTAINED
AND WILL ALWAYS SUSTAIN THE MAXIMUM
OF DESTRUCTION POSSIBLE

⁴⁵⁰ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 360.

⁴⁵¹ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 362.

⁴⁵² Reines, *A Sand Book*, 372.

IS WHY THE OTHER WORLD HAS ALWAYS
AND WILL ALWAYS NEED TO BE CREATED⁴⁵³

and

THE TIME OF THE SPECTACLE WILL PASS⁴⁵⁴

and

ANALOGY IS THE STRUCTURING PRINCIPLE OF THE UNIVERSE⁴⁵⁵

Reines gestures towards the invisible, towards the possibility of “the other world” as the world around us fails. Here we move beyond Simonides and his attempt to bridge this world—the world of things—with the world of the invisible, to something seemingly more radical. Indeed, this evokes the doctrine of Gnosticism: the radical refusal of the enclosure of this world through the appeal to an alien, heterogeneous God, beyond the world in which we are supposedly imprisoned.⁴⁵⁶ The Gnosticism of *A Sand Book* contains a revolutionary call to action: “the other world has always and will always need to be created.” In his *Occidental Eschatology*, Jacob Taubes has treated the close historical connection between apocalypticism and revolution, arguing that Gnostic apocalypticism always contains this revolutionary impulse that we find in Reines. As he writes, “if revolution means opposing the totality of this world with a new totality that comprehensively founds a new in the way that it negates, namely in terms of the basic foundations, then apocalypticism is by nature revolutionary.”⁴⁵⁷ Reines might be read as continuing this line of Gnostic apocalypticism in, for, and crucially *against* the commodified present.

What I have identified as Gnostic apocalypticism contrasts sharply with Carson’s oeuvre: in Reines we are not instructed to seek out God within the cracks of this world but reminded that *another* God exists, and that the “other world” will always need to be created. If this world was left to humans who have effaced it (as Reines writes, “What I saw & sensing this was not a world / in which the truth could be told. Upon / Reflection it has scarcely ever been”⁴⁵⁸), there is no Godly redemption awaiting us within the crevices or “blind alleys” here. Reines thus moves from a heretical formal blending of *tsimtsum* and Weil-inflected kenosis, to a Gnostic-apocalyptic call for an alien God in a new world to be created. Such doctrinal melding is her artform, even, as she might say, her birthright:

⁴⁵³ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 378.

⁴⁵⁴ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 393.

⁴⁵⁵ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 366.

⁴⁵⁶ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 77.

⁴⁵⁷ Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, translated by David Ratmoko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 9.

⁴⁵⁸ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 139.

It's true what they say, that meaning can be made from anything. The real
Question might be must it & if so how. It's true what the Jews say
That the drawing-together of the two most disparate things is the real
Mark of intelligence. It's what the Greeks say
That metaphor is transportation. And Art's

Demand that one turn a single idea into a thing, a place
A series, and do it elegantly, I've put that in my pipe
All over again and smoked it too.⁴⁵⁹

This, it seems to me, is Reines's manifesto for the form and method I have called "mosaic": she combines traditions, references, and figures, welding them into a contemporary landscape of "meaning." In this way, both she and Carson refuse the traditionally "modern" framework of *tsimtsum* even as their work seems to draw on it: far from a God-abandoned world, for Reines, we live in a universe "structured by analogy"⁴⁶⁰ where the new world, with its other God, need only be created. Analogy becomes the mechanism for assembling the mosaic, a transhistorical tool⁴⁶¹ through which to understand—and construct—the (new) world.⁴⁶²

A *Sand Book* has moved us, then, through its mosaic method, across heterogeneous, sometimes seemingly contradictory invocations, from Kabbalah, to Weil, to Gnosticism. How to read such references with, and indeed, against each other? I would argue that Reines's cosmic refusal, distinct from that of Weil or Porete, is decidedly postsecular in that it demands that we think more critically about the categories of the "religious" and "secular" in the first place, operating beyond the boundaries of secularism's grasp. In its call for a new world—and new God—A *Sand Book* is disinvested in both the secular world and the borders it erects between "religion" and "secularity." In an earlier poem this comes to the fore explicitly:

Of course it can be secular to be alive on a Thursday
And as a matter of fact
It cannot
And as a matter of fact this is between you and me universally

⁴⁵⁹ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 235.

⁴⁶⁰ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 366.

⁴⁶¹ It is noteworthy that analogy is a tradition generally associated with "premodernity," based largely on the rich theories of medieval analogy that developed in logic, theology, and metaphysics. Analogies between proportionality, attribution, and finally "likeness" or imitation—in other words, a relation of likeness between God and creatures—sprung up in this period. Of course, the use of analogy of various kinds continued into the Enlightenment and beyond as well, appearing in physics and various other disciplines. For more on medieval analogy, see Jennifer E. Ashworth and Domenic D'Ettore, "Medieval Theories of Analogy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/analogy-medieval/>.

⁴⁶² Analogy reigns throughout Reines's poems. See, for example, "Venice": "Sand was the place between two worlds / Waves rolling in like prayers / Like Kabbalist friends of Leonard / Cohen and I grew so aroused I thought / I might start weeping." Reines, *A Sand Book*, 22.

And nothing I say belongs remotely to me⁴⁶³

Reines is playing here with the language of fact, certainty, reason: “Of course,” she writes; “as a matter of fact,” the poem repeats. Secular reason is turned in on itself, the premise that we can know only the knowable world reversed on its head: for “as a matter of fact . . . it cannot” be secular to be alive on a Thursday, the speaker asserts, applying a certainty to the realm of Carson’s speculative *as if*. One “cannot” inhabit the world as strictly secular because the boundary of the secular itself does not hold. The fact is, as the speaker puts it, “*nothing I say belongs remotely to me*.” We and she are beyond a realm of autonomous secular reason—but nor, I would say, are we in that of the “religious,” historically a category, as this dissertation has repeatedly argued, constructed in the image of Christianity. With its Kabbalistic symbolism and Gnostic-apocalyptic framework, *A Sand Book* strives to resist not only the failing world of late capitalism but the failing grammars of secularism and the category of “religion” it has designated in its wake.

IV. “THE TIME OF THE SPECTACLE WILL PASS”: NEOLIBERAL REMEDIATION

And yet, even as *A Sand Book* offers us a redemptive arc, moving from a dystopian “language of images”⁴⁶⁴ that stifle speech to the clear, divine proclamations of the sun, we might ask whether this is not but another form of neoliberal remediation, whether “*nothing I say belongs remotely to me*” indicates, too, a surrender to market forces. Indeed, the final 35-page section of the volume, formatted with capitalized white text centered on black printed pages, could be sold alone among an “Astrology” or “New Age” section at a Barnes & Noble: such is the genre that the printed aphorisms (one per page) evoke. I cite a few more below in order to offer a sense of their range:

IT'S TRUE THAT THE OLDER
A THING IS THE BETTER IT IS

EXCEPT WITH FOOD & FOODLIKE PRINCIPLES

NOT THE SOCK ON YOUR FOOT

BUT ANY SPECK OF MATTER IN RELATIONS

TO THE DIGNITY OF AGE THAT IS THE WINERY⁴⁶⁵

And another:

⁴⁶³ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 216.

⁴⁶⁴ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 10.

⁴⁶⁵ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 386.

THERE IS NOTHING A PERSON CANNOT LOVE⁴⁶⁶

And finally:

WE DO NEED EVERY KIND OF STORY

BECAUSE THERE IS EVERY KIND OF PERSON

YET STILL, GREAT ART IS CRUCIAL

FOR THE WORLD TO WATCH, WHEN IT WATCHES
DIVINITY IN SPLENDOR

RATHER THAN WHAT WE'RE WATCHING NOW,
WHILE LEARNING TO WATCH⁴⁶⁷

Is this parodic, we might ask? “THERE IS NOTHING A PERSON CANNOT LOVE” seems to mimic the language of self-help or manifestation. “WE DO NEED EVERY KIND OF STORY / BECAUSE THERE IS EVERY KIND OF PERSON” meanwhile sounds like the contemporary language of representation repackaged with a divine twist. The final aphorism is telling: “EVERYTHING HAS A NATURE,” it reads, “FIND OUT YOURS.” Is this the price of trading silence for speech, even when that speech is supposedly that of the sun? All language has been colonized by the currents of PR, by the marketable force of a quick fix. Even as blankness surrounds these pages, the elliptical everywhere present, they seem still to offer an ambivalent commentary on the failure of both the world and the word: this was, after all, “not a world in which the truth could be told.”⁴⁶⁸ These final aphorisms seem most fully to epitomize *form under pressure*: the capitalization of the text strains against the black space of the page, exerting a taut tension between the centered white lines against the black page. “YET STILL, GREAT ART IS CRUCIAL,” the text reads, seemingly heralding the color fields of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, or perhaps the *Black Series I* prints of Frank Stella, whose carefully controlled geometric lines against an inky black background are evoked by the formal gesture of the page. And yet such gestures are no longer, or no longer *merely*, avant-garde—for what was once avant-garde has become orderable, proliferating on home furnishing sites, Etsy, and poster shops. Under neoliberalism, even and especially the gesture of resistance is for sale.

A Sand Book thus belongs to the era of neoliberalism even as it attempts to resist it. But indeed, part of the act of resistance might entail the very act of *depiction*, of rendering visible

⁴⁶⁶ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 395.

⁴⁶⁷ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 378.

⁴⁶⁸ Reines, *A Sand Book*, 139.

neoliberalism's appropriation of language from within. *A Sand Book* is named for Paul Celan's 1965 "NO MORE SAND ART [Keine Sandkunst mehr]" whose opening lines ("NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters"⁴⁶⁹) Reines borrows as an epigraph. The poem is famously a repudiation of Celan's earlier oft-reprinted *Sand from the Urns* (1948). As Carson puts it, Celan is moving from a "stage in which he had sought to 'poeticize' reality (as he says), rather than simply to 'name' it."⁴⁷⁰ As we move from Carson to Reines, something of this same Celanian trajectory, from the poeticization of reality to its *naming* might hold true. Even as Reines's naming takes a Gnostic form, it refuses to see signs of God in "solid silences," instead offering a vision in which failure means we must begin anew. That parody and sincerity, in the ultimate "Mosaic" moment of kenotic reconciliation, remain indistinguishable, serves as further evidence of this world's failure: whether the text bears witness to the divine thoughtforms of the sun or merely offers up another "language of images" to get lost in, in this landscape, we cannot know.

V. THE FAILURE OF "THE MODERN"

If in *Decreation* and *A Sand Book* the category of the secular breaks down, so too does that of the "modern." Both Carson and Reines draw from sources and traditions across the boundary of the "modern" and "pre-modern": Carson, in this text, works with Sappho, Porete, and Weil, while Reines moves across Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and more. These texts, in other words, do not signal that modernity should be read postsecularly—or that modernity has never been secular—rather, the postsecular sensibility both Carson and Reines exhibit collapses the very logic of periodization on which the idea of modernity is premised. Recall how I read Carson's work as enacting the schism within interpretations of *tsimtsum*, one in which the "death of God," some argue, as he contracts from the world, parts ways with any notion of God's mere transformation. Scholars have posited the inaugural moment of modernity—one traced through the German idealists and French poststructuralists⁴⁷¹—as premised on this moment of Godly contraction, or, to borrow Carson's language, "unavailability." But Carson complicates this supposedly defining categorization, as I argued, by moving from *negation* (unavailability) to *contrafactual divine presence*: in her poetics, signs of God's presence still emanate, however obliquely ("Moonlight in the kitchen ... The blind alleys that run alongside human conversation"), across creation. I am less interested in whether such a move can or should be properly classified as Godly *contraction* or *transformation*—as I have already suggested, in Carson's oeuvre, this schism would seem to be straddled and then collapsed. What interests me, rather, is that in offering a contemporary poetics that complicates the tropes of God's unavailability, Carson, through her unique combination of sources (both "modern" and "non-"), evacuates the concept of "modernity"

⁴⁶⁹ Paul Celan, "NO MORE SAND ART," quoted in Reines, *A Sand Book*, epigraph. For the complete poem in English translation, see Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, translated by Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 2002).

⁴⁷⁰ Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 115. It is worth noting, however, particularly given our Kabbalistic reading of Reines, that Kitty Millet has offered a different reading of Celan's "NO MORE SAND ART," arguing that the poet moves beyond the naming of reality to the attempt of a "new aesthetic, 'a song beyond humankind' ... because for Celan, the stakes of his 'turn away' from 'poeticization' are grounded in a kabbalistic register in which the letters themselves must be liberated to address new 'structures of being.'" See Millet, *Kabbalah and Literature*, 153.

⁴⁷¹ See Bielik-Robson and Weiss, *Tsimtsum and Modernity*.

more generally. Indeed, her references, figures, and very understanding of God flies in the face of any easy distinction between the modern and that which precedes it.

Reines, too, proceeds through mosaic analogy to weld together worlds and traditions from across the modern and pre-modern divide, theorizing the world as well as antagonism to the world through a transhistorical Gnostic-revolutionary trajectory. The continuity of such a trajectory—which, in his *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes traces from the apocalypticism of antiquity to Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Marx—into the present, subverts the very idea of a self-enclosed secular modernity. That which has been heralded as quintessentially modern, exemplary of a periodizing break (especially in the case of Hegel⁴⁷² and Marx), is here recast as part of a long revolutionary agenda, united by a Gnostic critique of the world. The elliptical as form thus serves to signal the breakdown of the world *and* the concept of the secular modern, the “incompletion in [their] realit[ies],” to cite Reines. Indeed, her use of silence, blank space, and evocations of the unsayable point to the cracks in the fissures of “the modern,” the “false peace” the speaker inhabits. *A Sand Book*, however, does more than point to these cracks—by its finale, it fills them, narrating a scene of kenotic reconciliation between sun (divine absence) and speaker. And yet this scene, and the aphoristic proclamations that follow it, I have argued, ultimately cannot escape the neoliberal landscape from which the book’s speaker is alienated. Indeed, even in their inarguable postsecular status, the “thoughtforms” conveyed in “Mosaic” read as part and parcel of their era: not, of course, the era of secular modernity, but the era of neoliberalism.

What this might tell us, then, is that while the periodizing terms of “secular modernity” and “secular modern” seem to need revisiting and revising—and seem, indeed, to carry little purchase for our readings of Anglo-American literature in the present—the term neoliberalism, as I have argued in Chapter Two, can be a useful analytic if we keep in mind that it is itself *postsecular*, i.e., a form of divinatory political theology⁴⁷³ that cuts across and destabilizes the secular-religious divide. Part of what my study thus reveals is that the contemporary Anglo-American literature I identify as formally postsecular is in certain ways reflective of its landscape, one that is not aptly named secular modern but neoliberal—and itself ripe for the speculative, divinatory, and nonlinear. In this sense, the elliptical might be one of few forms capable of resisting neoliberal mediation: in a world in which all speech is ripe for capture, it is the blank spaces at the edge of language where the postsecular can do its most political work.

⁴⁷² Taubes sees in Hegel’s system a close relationship to Gnosis: “The system of Gnosis and that of Hegel are grounded ... in the supposition that the idea of divine finds its explanation and completion in the three stages of dialectic. ‘Spirit is the divine history, the process of becoming distinct from self, *dirimirens*, and taking it back into itself’: that is divine history.” Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 161. Such a process of divine diremption and reabsorption could also be said to appear in *A Sand Book*, moving from the “divine history” of the book’s majority, to the kenotic culmination of the speaker’s silence, to the divine reabsorption through the sun.

⁴⁷³ Here I invoke Joshua Ramey, *Politics of Divination*.

In her 2023 *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh claims that “immediacy” has become a dominant category in twenty-first-century cultural production, reigning in the domains of “art as well as economics, politics as much as intimacy.”⁴⁷⁴ This has occurred, so the argument goes, at the expense of good old-fashioned mediation:

In the eminent tradition of aesthetic theory, ‘mediation’ means the *active process of relating*—making sense and making meaning by inlaying into medium; making middles that merge extremes; making available in language and image and rhythm the super-valent abstractions otherwise unavailable to our sensuous perception—like ‘justice’ or ‘value.’ Now, this middling falters.... The medium is missing.⁴⁷⁵

Among the contemporary literary styles that Kornbluh classifies as “immediate” are autofiction, prose poetry, and what she refers to as “archipelagic prose,” or fragmented, associative fiction. As she describes, “sustained narration with distant perspective, multiple characters, eventual plotting, quoted dialogue, and long paragraphs all come under pressure to reduce, instantify, sharpen.”⁴⁷⁶ Kornbluh’s objects, in other words, are also “forms under pressure”—the very self-reflexive features of *Franny and Zooey* and *10:04* would fall precisely under her purview, as would the aphoristic (“archipelagic”) form of *Bluets*,⁴⁷⁷ and *A Sand Book* in its ending.

However, Kornbluh and I would part ways in our assessment of such forms’ “immediacy.” Having embarked on readings of allegory as it operates in a contemporary climate novel, metafiction as we glimpse it in its post-war moment and in the throes of late capitalism, seriality as it variously enables the dissolution of the subject and the undoing of the body towards flesh, and finally the elliptical as it catalyzes both speculation and prophetic speech, it seems clear that the forms under study—however seemingly *formless*—cannot avoid the thickness of mediation, of “making middles” as Kornbluh puts it. This might have to do with what Carson describes in *Decreation* as the problem of “withness.”⁴⁷⁸ Just as, in *tsimtsum*, God must contract himself in order for the world—that which is distinct from God—to come into being, so too, Carson argues through her protagonists, can we never truly be alone “with” God and retain ourselves. It is the

⁴⁷⁴ Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2023), 17.

⁴⁷⁵ Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, 15.

⁴⁷⁶ Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, 128.

⁴⁷⁷ Indeed, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* serves as an example of “autofiction” for Kornbluh and an object of critique. “For Nelson, autotheory is the fun, free wilding in ‘lack of partition,’ what she also calls in *The Argonauts* ‘flow...plethora...kaleidoscopic shifting...excess’—so many virtues of immediacy synonymized by her flexible labor.... The efflorescence of writing without reading and Nelson’s bounding omnivorism bespeaks immediacy as genre dissolve: in its blur, autotheory and autofiction function as two names for the same thing: wilding against genre, against theory, against fiction, against mediation.” Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, 106–107.

⁴⁷⁸ Carson remarks upon the use of quotation marks around “with” in a text of Marguerite Porete’s. She writes, “Withness is the problem. She is trying to use the simplest language and the plainest marks to express a profoundly tricky spiritual fact... in the deepest possible sense I can never be alone with God. I can only be alone ‘with’ God.” Carson, *Decreation*, 169.

impossibility of witness—of the immediacy craved by Porete in the moment of her soul’s ravishing—that demands mediation, a move toward the speculative or the contrafactual in the face of an elliptical void.

Such voids, gaps, and moments of suspension have followed us across these chapters: allegory, I claimed, is structured by a disjunctive void between anteriority and the present; metafiction holds the relationship between reader and writer, fact and fiction, author and narrator suspended; the serial, I argued, is composed not only of individual episodes but of the *gaps* or *cuts* between them; and finally, the elliptical is of course the void *par excellence*—a form based in absence. That such contemporary pressurized forms share this constitutive disjunction seems hardly surprising. And yet, as my study reveals, fragmentation and dissolution (whether of form or of the literary subject) need not in fact lead to what Kornbluh calls immediacy. Rather, it is the gaping void (the suspension, the disjuncture, etc.) that just as quickly thrusts the reader into the process of sense-making: whether through the abstraction wrought by allegoresis; the demand of the reader to co-create meaning in metafiction; or competing rhythms of interruptions, recursions, and linearity that constitute seriality. But mediation, I want to argue, can occur not just at the level of “sense” or understanding, but so too at the bodily, the affective, what Kornbluh calls our “sensuous perception.” As we explored in Chapter Three, the form of Nelson’s *Bluets* functions as a kind of spiritual exercise, one that works *not* via “instant relay of emanative intensity in continuous flow”⁴⁷⁹ but as a gradual, cumulative series. Here, we might also recall our discussion of the Jesus Prayer in Chapter Two—which, as it is taken up in *Franny and Zooey*—cannot be claimed as either “religious” or “secular,” but rather operates as an active text that mediates and transforms its speaker, shaping her affect and disposition. To consider this bodily dimension of mediation is, to harken back to the introduction, part of what is entailed by a postsecular formalism: one that reclaims the sensory without reducing it to instantaneous affect.

And indeed, a postsecular sensibility, as I have uncovered it across these contemporary Anglo-American literary examples, is one that *mediates*: it thrusts us out in the thick of things—not in the “flow” or in “sheer excess,” as Kornbluh would say (expressions that imply having abandoned mediation entirely)—but in the middle, where we must do the critical conceptual work of making sense. Such is the messy, difficult work entailed when literature moves beyond the realm of secularism’s antinomies, when it begins to open new categories, new approaches, new terminology, new thinking. While Kornbluh is right that what she calls “too late capitalism,” and what I would call neoliberalism, trades in the instantaneous, the immediate, and the fluid, such forms must be distinguished from the postsecular sensibility that runs on distance and critical mediation. It is only by attuning themselves to the plethora of temporalities at play in the forms of our present that critics can distinguish the self-help, the enchantment on-demand, from the far more complex and often disjunctive postsecular sensibility. Neither homogeneous and empty, nor fluid and instantaneous, such a sensibility demands mediation precisely where form appears to dissolve.

⁴⁷⁹ Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, 144.

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