
After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism

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Secularism has garnered little sustained attention from students of romanticism. In large part, this is because scholars of the period have treated religion as something that influenced romanticism or as something that romanticism secularized or humanized. In treating religion as a self-evident category, such accounts naturalize the opposition of the secular and the religious and thereby obscure secularism as an object of study. However, the idea that the opposition between the secular and the religious is self-evident has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, and romanticism can serve as a site for that scrutiny once it is uncoupled from secularization narratives. Though such language is rather unfashionable now, romanticism has long been interpreted as offering a concept of literary representation capacious enough to negotiate among competing philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual claims. Tied to a secularization narrative, romanticism thus becomes an alternative to religion. Disentangled from the plot of secularization, however, that very same conceptualization of literary representation can appear as an alternative not to religion but to the increasingly stressed secular spaces that have sought to displace religion. Romanticism's potential contribution toward an analysis of secularism resides in the outsized claims that it makes for literary representation (or, more generally, aesthetic representation). This essay asks how such claims may help to analyze and amend secularism's similarly outsized claims to have solved the seemingly irresolvable conflicts of religion.

Answering such questions will require attention to competing tendencies within romanticism itself. On the one hand, romanticism appears to comport

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well with the sequestering of religious discourse that characterizes secularism. Because romanticism's self-consciousness is often construed as positing for literature an autotelic or autonomous domain, religion under the influence of romanticism seems to become a private and unique phenomenon. On the other hand, construing romanticism along the lines of literary autonomy highlights the diversity of experiences imagined through aesthetic representation, thereby producing alternatives to the *sui generis* interpretation of religion that figures so prominently in secular accounts. Thus the wealth of potential conversations that romanticism envisions through its elevation of the literary offers a model for how to think beyond what one critic has called "the conceits of secularism"¹—conceits increasingly recognized as theoretically and politically disabling.

Romanticism and Secularism

I begin by considering two recent books. The first is William Connolly's *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; the second is Paul Hamilton's *Metaromanticism*.² On the face of it, these books have little to do with each other. Connolly's is a work of political theory dedicated to thinking beyond secularism, while Hamilton's is an exercise in theoretical and literary analysis devoted to aligning romanticism with a Habermasian theory of communicative action. Yet these books complement each other in crucial ways on just the issue under discussion here: the relationship between secularism and literary language. If we isolate the ways in which these two books can be mutually informing, we can then work back from that conversation to its origins—Kierkegaard, in the case of Connolly, and early German romanticism, in the case of Hamilton.

Why I Am Not a Secularist devotes most of its energy to finding a language for thinking beyond secularism. Connolly seeks to replace the mutual dogmatisms of secularism and religion with a public life in which, he writes, "no constituency's claim to *embody* the authoritative sources of reason is sanctified." The goal is to "rewrite secularism to pursue an ethos of engagement in public life among a plurality of *metaphysical* perspectives. . . . Such an ethos *between* interdependent partisans provides an existential basis for democratic politics if and when many partisans affirm without deep resentment the contestable character of the faith they honor most."³ Much depends on what Connolly means by "contest-

1. William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19.

2. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; Paul Hamilton, *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

3. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 7, 39.

able character” here; it might sound like a secular notion of tolerance. Connolly, however, proposes something more in tune with the poststructuralist era: that the same conditions of modernity that intensify faith also drive the faithful toward an implicit acknowledgment that they live in a pluralist world. Such pluralism, importantly, is achieved not through liberal practices of forbearance and tolerance but rather through the recognition of difference within oneself. This is one of the ironies of inwardness and thus where Kierkegaard becomes useful for Connolly’s analysis.

Influenced here by Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Kierkegaard in *Difference and Repetition*,⁴ Connolly describes the paradoxical relation of the Kierkegaardian apostle to himself in terms of a contrast between faith and faithlessness: “Kierkegaardian faith . . . repeatedly bumps into gaps or feelings of estrangement between repetitions, when traces of faithlessness intervene inadvertently and unintentionally. . . . Deleuze, the a-theist, pounces upon this trace of faithlessness between repetitions. I would do so too, not to purge faith from the faithful or disenfranchise expressions of faith from public life, but to open a window within theistic *representations* for an appreciation of recurrent moments of difference in faith from itself.”⁵ This internal difference, writes Connolly, has the potential to connect various religious and nonreligious adherents, for, “if the true believer is a simulacrum of himself, in what relation does the nonbeliever stand to herself?” Do not nontheists “harbor truant moments of forgetful faith that belie the steadfastness we present to Christians and other monotheists whenever they press hard upon us?” And thus the connection: “Is it possible, then, for believers and nonbelievers from a variety of faiths to double over in laughter together on occasion across the space of difference? On principle? Doing so partly *because* each harbors in itself an ineliminable element of difference from itself?”⁶

This is a challenging formulation, for it demands from all partisans an honesty typically in short supply. One implication of Connolly’s deconstructive reading of identity, though, is that this process of mutual recognition is in fact always happening; the political task, accordingly, is finding a language with which to bring that process to full consciousness. Putting the matter like this reveals the centrality of representation within Connolly’s account: he wishes to “open a window within theistic [and atheistic] representations,” suggesting that he thinks that secularism

4. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), especially 95.

5. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 44. For a similar argument, implicitly indebted to Kierkegaard, see John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), especially 17–36.

6. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 45.

can be renegotiated by complicating the way we represent ourselves *to ourselves*. The question thus becomes: how does Connolly theorize this reflexivity? Will more flexible self-representations lead necessarily to the drama of mutual recognition between partisans that he imagines? If that is to happen, Connolly needs a theory elastic enough to accommodate differences of the most intimate kind and robust enough to keep those differences within range of each other.

Unfortunately, this is the least satisfactory aspect of *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. Connolly hits from time to time upon phrases that have a vaguely aesthetic feel: “It might be wise, then, to cultivate little spaces of enchantment, both individually and collectively.” Other moments suggest a debt to Foucauldian care of the self, such as when he describes “working on yourself in relation to the cultural differences through which you have acquired definition.”⁷ But there is something haphazard about these formulations and consequently about the nonsecular space of representation that Connolly envisions.

Representation, both personal and political, is central to Paul Hamilton’s reading of Friedrich Schlegel in *Metaromanticism*. The largest claim of the book, and one in which Schlegel figures centrally, is that romanticism’s philosophical habits of self-consciousness are relevant today because they suggest what a genuinely multicultural politics might look like. Following Walter Benjamin’s reading of Schlegel, Hamilton fastens on a romantic theorization of literature (and artistic practice more generally) as something that is not opposed to critical reflection but in fact solicitous of it; criticism is simply another way for literature to be what it already is.⁸ The literary is in this sense nonidentical with itself; one of its salient characteristics is to be constantly “fashioning critical alternatives to and historical departures from its original generic performance—that is what is creative about it, its inherent plurality.”⁹ Literature makes possible a reflective activity that offers practice at negotiating among differing conceptions of the good. This is the famous Schlegelian irony, a capacity to acknowledge as contingent and time-bound the truth to which we are nevertheless committed. Such irony is to be distinguished from liberal tolerance, Hamilton emphasizes, because it must be actively and continuously sustained: “An ironist like Schlegel is more interested in the *exercise of imagination* by which we can represent . . . different goods as

7. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 17, 146.

8. Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1:116–200.

9. Hamilton, *Metaromanticism*, 11.

goods belonging to the same human being. Or, another way of putting it, he is interested in the different kinds of human being we could have been, the mixture that one potentially is.”¹⁰ Hamilton’s reading of Schlegel, then, offers a robust concept of representation as an exercise, modeled by literature, through which we imagine human beings as recipients of a variety of goods.

Hamilton and Connolly have much in common. In Hamilton’s Schlegelian reading of identity and in Connolly’s Kierkegaardian reading of identity, internal difference becomes a register of potentiality and hence the basis upon which to construct meaningful dialogue among cultures and ways of life. Specifically, Connolly’s reading of Kierkegaard asks us to imagine a theist inside every atheist and an atheist inside every theist; Hamilton’s reading of Schlegel, meanwhile, asks us to imagine “the different kinds of human being we could have been,” a request that might be extended to Connolly’s theists and atheists.¹¹ Understanding the human subject as a site of possibility thus helps us to reflect upon the challenge of negotiating among multiple religious and areligious identities. Furthermore, Connolly and Hamilton both imagine a refashioned public sphere that demands much of its subjects. Hamilton envisions “a new progressiveness, multifarious rather than linear,” that demands of other partisans “comparable efforts to imagine a workable commonality.”¹² Connolly envisions a new *modus vivendi* “grounded in an ethos of engagement between multiple constituencies honoring a variety of moral sources and metaphysical orientations” and likewise demands that others “affirm without deep resentment the contestable character of the faith they honor most.”¹³ These parallel recommendations come about because both writers refuse to celebrate diversity for its own sake. In spite of the abstract language, moreover, both imagine a public sphere that exists not in theory but in actual practice, in individual efforts aimed at fostering and sustaining it. An analogy emerges, then, between a public sphere imagined as partial or open to revision and the subjects who make up that sphere, likewise imagined as open, incomplete, or—to revert to a Schlegelian idiom—in the process of becoming. The postsecular or multicultural public sphere will need to be assembled again and again by subjects who are themselves undergoing perpetual revision.

In order to pursue the apparent affinity between Hamilton and Connolly, however, each needs to be supplemented with the other. Hamilton, though he has a

10. Hamilton, *Metaromanticism*, 262–63; emphasis added.

11. Hamilton, *Metaromanticism*, 263.

12. Hamilton, *Metaromanticism*, 21.

13. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 39.

clear sense of how the aesthetic can provide a model for political discourse, does not highlight the complicated identities that stand behind aesthetic representation. When he aligns the range of possible futures modeled by literature with what he calls the “aspirational character of all language toward full communication,” the Habermasian influence shifts Hamilton’s theorization of multiculturalism in a decidedly secular direction.¹⁴ It is not clear that religious identities will be let into this multicultural republic. Here Connolly offers a timely critique when he notes that Habermas grounds his theory of communicative action in the possibility of a value-neutral language, something Connolly identifies as a secular conceit achieved only by ruling out-of-bounds the visceral elements (including religious elements) within discourse.

For his part, Connolly thinks of representation as a space of mutual self-recognition, but it is not clear that this ensures the demand of nonresentment that enables postsecular politics. Does Connolly have a robust enough sense of the complicated work that imaginative representation can do and of the various ways in which it can go awry or generate discourses that disable the postsecular polity he imagines? Here Hamilton’s account may temper Connolly’s utopianism, which comes across most forcefully in his claim that if we can learn to see the partiality of all metaphysical visions, we can leave the conceits of secularism behind. Hamilton, by contrast, suggests that any recourse to language, even an ideal speech situation, is a “stand-in” for actual political practice. At best, argues Hamilton, the diversity of content modeled by poetry is a “‘dry run’ for a multicultural republic.”¹⁵ Language encounters its own limit before the republic it imagines can be instantiated; a gap remains, one that romantic irony acknowledges but cannot overcome.

Thus Connolly needs the strong reading of representation that Hamilton finds in Schlegel if he is to argue persuasively for *how* practices of self-representation can move us beyond secular conceits. Likewise, Hamilton needs Connolly’s strong critique of secular models of dialogue if he is to make his imagined multicultural republic as open as he wishes to. The next two sections bring Connolly’s critique of secularism together with Hamilton’s theory of romantic representation by investigating the sources of their thought—early German romanticism, first, and then Kierkegaard. It may be that secular conceits will never be wholly left

14. Hamilton, *Metaromanticism*, 13. Also see Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

15. Hamilton, *Metaromanticism*, 257. This is not to say, of course, that speech is not itself a political practice. It simply notes that *another* of language’s capacities is to model or imagine a future.

behind. Perhaps, though, secularism's conceits can be humbled and its aspirations preserved by imagining it as a practice modeled on literary representation.

Romanticism and the Question of Religion

In a crucial passage in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" Immanuel Kant distinguishes between the role of a clergyman in his sermon, which is to conform to the tenets of his church, and the role of a clergyman as a public intellectual, which is to communicate that which is erroneous in the church's doctrine. But, Kant then continues, could not a "society of clergymen" commit itself eternally to unchanging doctrine? "I answer," he writes, "that this is altogether impossible. . . . An age cannot bind itself and ordain to put the succeeding one into such a condition that it cannot extend its . . . knowledge, purify itself of errors, and progress in general enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature."¹⁶ Kant assumes that it would be a crime against human nature to halt enlightenment but not a crime against human nature to curtail the church. According to Talal Asad, Kantian distinctions like this one exemplify "the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time."¹⁷ Let us call this "new historical object" that Asad identifies an "essentialized religion." That term itself names a paradox. No longer orchestrated by the public domain of Christendom, religion becomes that which drives people apart, that which is inessential to life together. In the very same gesture, however, religion is also understood as an aspiration or sensibility that all humans share, as something that has a core or essence irreducible to other domains of knowledge.

Behind Kant's essay, then, stand several centuries of discussion and reconfiguration of the category of "religion" itself, while ahead of it stretches a definition of religion as a private consciousness or feeling. Peter Harrison has traced the emergence of a modern understanding of religion in the aftermath of the various crises of authority within Western Christianity during the early modern period. First, after the Protestant Reformation, it became increasingly important for believers to grasp explicitly what it was they were professing to believe. "What was now revealed through revelation," writes Harrison, "was an objective 'religion.' . . . This was quite new, for the traditional view had been that in the process of revela-

16. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Continuum, 1993), 266.

17. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 207.

tion God reveals himself. Now God reveals saving knowledge.”¹⁸ It became the individual’s responsibility to assent to this knowledge, for salvation hinged upon such assent. Second, Harrison shows that reducing religion to a set of beliefs made it possible to handle the fact of religious pluralism by comparing different “religions.” Religion was therefore placed on the same footing as the natural sciences, and “religion” itself became an outsider’s term, demarcating a schema in which particular religions could be examined and compared.

Another phase of the essentialization process brings this story up to the late eighteenth century. Following the reconfiguration of abstract “religion” and empirical “religions,” the increased emphasis on the cultivation of an interior space described in terms of belief renders religion a universal human phenomenon because all people were considered to have religious beliefs.¹⁹ Asad calls this a “fully essentialized idea of religion which could be counterposed to its phenomenal forms.”²⁰ Particular religious traditions are manifestations of a shared impulse, and so those particularities can, in principle, be stripped away to arrive at the “essence” of religion. There may be a variety of religions, but only one religious essence that is valid across time, space, and culture. Thus in the nineteenth century essentialized religion entered the domains of disciplinary knowledge, particularly anthropology and religious studies.²¹

On Religion (1799), the first important work of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, demonstrates the power of this essentialized understanding of religion. Schleiermacher offers a systematic and extremely influential formulation of religion as an interior feeling or intuition, based in experience and irreducible to other categories of analysis or description. “When reading any number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of the nature of religion,” writes Graham Ward, “the reverberations of [Schleiermacher’s definition] are still discernible.”²² Ward indicates that Schleiermacher’s influence results from the way that he modifies the Kantian concept of intuition; he places it at the center of his description of

18. Peter Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 25.

19. See Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269.

20. Asad, *Genealogies*, 42.

21. See Asad, *Genealogies*, 27–54, for a discussion of this transformed concept of “religion” in the history of anthropology; for an analogous discussion of religious studies, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

22. Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 84.

religion by making it into an apprehension of the unity of mind and world. This technique, in turn, connects Schleiermacher to the milieu of post-Kantian philosophy at the very end of the eighteenth century and thus to early German romanticism. This romantic context of *On Religion* is crucial. The subtitle of the book is “Speeches to its Cultured Despisers,” and those “cultured despisers” are Schleiermacher’s best friends, principally Friedrich Schlegel and his brother Augustus, who, together with G. P. F. von Hardenburg (who wrote under the pen name Novalis) were at the center of the group usually referred to as the Jena romantics. Without much exaggeration, then, we can say that Schleiermacher’s speeches are speeches addressed to romanticism.

On Religion immediately distinguishes between religion’s inner essence and its outer appearance. With this distinction in place, Schleiermacher can make romanticism and religion into allies, for both are critical of cautious bourgeois life and open to new dimensions of perception and creativity. The bourgeois ethos is one of naive empiricism; by contrast, religion and art both hold that self-awareness is prior to knowledge of the world, and this reflexivity makes them creative. Indeed, religion requires reflexive creativity even to grasp its proper object: “For me,” Schleiermacher writes in a Kantian vein, “divinity can be nothing other than a particular type of religious intuition.”²³ Religion is an experiential, precognitive encounter with the truth of the universe, hence inevitably distorted by rational discourse. At once very narrow and very deep, religion “renounces herewith all claims to whatever belongs to . . . others and gives back everything that has been forced upon it. It does not wish to determine and explain the universe. . . . [rather, it] wishes devoutly to overhear the universe’s own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe’s immediate influences in childlike passivity.”²⁴ Still less does religion desire temporal power; it cannot be subject to coercion but must emerge unaided: “It springs forth necessarily and by itself from the interior of every better soul, it has its own province in the mind in which it reigns sovereign, and it is worthy of moving the noblest and the most excellent by means of its innermost power.”²⁵

On this basis, Schleiermacher tries to convince his romantic friends that they share religion’s taste for the infinite. This “spiritual” argument, however, cannot defend against the view that religion is simply a step along the way to the

23. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 51.

24. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 22.

25. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 17.

fully realized self-consciousness of philosophy. This is a position associated particularly with philosophical idealism, though it attracted romantic thinkers like Schlegel and Novalis as well. In *The Literary Absolute*, their book on the early German romantics, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy note that the realization of a systematic philosophy presupposes the downfall of ecclesiastical power, for one purpose of such philosophy is to deliver the subject to itself.²⁶ Freeing the subject from ecclesiastical authority is in turn presupposed, as we have already seen, by the transformation of religion into a universal essence. Thus, when Schleiermacher writes that religion is an intuition that springs forth, as if spontaneously, from inside the soul, he defends religion in the very terms that, from the perspective of systematic philosophy, render religion an alternative (or lesser) philosophy. Talal Asad ventriloquizes this attitude: “The human condition is full of ignorance, pain, and injustice, and religious symbols are a means of coming positively to terms with that condition.” “One consequence,” Asad continues, “is that this view would in principle render any philosophy that performs such a function into religion.”²⁷ Philosophy becomes an adequate substitute for religion once religion itself has been essentialized. By this logic, Schleiermacher’s defense of religion shares the very presuppositions that marginalize it in the eyes of its cultured despisers.

By making religion universal, *On Religion* risks making it simply the penultimate step before the arrival of a fully adequate philosophy. Yet Schleiermacher’s own proximity to the Jena romantics suggests an alternative to this progressive scheme. During the period that Schleiermacher was writing *On Religion*, Schlegel was announcing his break from the systematic philosophy that dominated German philosophical culture in the 1790s. Against the idea that philosophy must be deduced from a first or unconditioned principle—consciousness, the self-positing “I,” or the like—Schlegel argued that philosophy was a provisional activity that begins with the given and the conditioned.²⁸ And in this attempt to break with idealism, Schlegel famously contrasted the genre of systematic philosophy with a literary genre—the fragment. For Schlegel, fragments were not synecdoches for a lost or missing whole but were themselves the experience of truth as partial and provisional rather than unconditional. The ironic attitude needed to handle this

26. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 36.

27. Asad, *Genealogies*, 45–46.

28. Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), especially 33, 40, 65.

understanding of truth is best modeled by what Schlegel calls “romantic poesy.” “Other genres are fixed and are capable of being classified in their entirety,” he writes in the well-known *Athenaum Fragment* 116. “The romantic genre is, however, still in the process of becoming; indeed, this is its essence: to be eternally in the process of becoming and never completed.”²⁹ Accordingly, the opposition between fragment and system is itself ambivalent: “For the spirit,” writes Schlegel in *Athenaum Fragment* 53, “it is equally fatal to have a system or not to have one at all. It will therefore be necessary to join the two.”³⁰ Irony, again modeled upon a “romantic poesy” whose epistemological correlative is the fragment, is the proper way to retain this ambivalence between fragment and system. In this way, the fragment reflexively testifies to the necessary incompleteness of systematic exposition. In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s interpretation, the early romantics did not seek the culmination of philosophical idealism nor conceive of “romantic poesy” as philosophy’s literary manifestation; rather, they reformulated the very ideal of exposition represented by a “philosophical system.” In this reformulation, the fragment emerges as the genre best suited to a “subject that can no longer conceive itself in the form of a *Discourse on Method*.”³¹ In place of the philosophical subject, who begins with the problem of self-consciousness, Schlegel offers a literary subject, whose point of departure is the rich world of perception and experience.

Because the idealist vision of philosophy matches nicely with an essentialized religion, the romantic attack on idealism by way of the fragment offers an alternative to essentialized religion in spite of Schlegel’s evident attraction to understanding religion in essentialized terms. We can glimpse this alternative by returning to Schleiermacher. The break with systematic thought that Schlegel assays through the fragment mirrors a break in Schleiermacher’s own effort to posit an elective affinity between romanticism and religion. Recall that in trying to validate religion to his romantic friends, Schleiermacher appeals to a universal

29. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaum Fragment* 116, in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 321. These fragments appeared in the first edition of the journal *Athenaum*, founded by A. W. and Friedrich Schlegel in 1798. Most of the unsigned fragments are attributed to Friedrich Schlegel; others are by A. W. Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher.

30. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaum Fragment* 53, in Schulte-Sasse, *Theory as Practice*, 320.

31. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 40. For a discussion of early German Romanticism that argues against a “literary” interpretation of the movement, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

aspiration to intuit the universe that he claims his friends share. The problem with intuition, of course, is the lack of shared evaluative criteria. “Others may stand right behind you, right alongside you,” he writes, “and everything can appear differently to them.”³² Schleiermacher then turns to an extended metaphor in an attempt to resolve this problem:

Elevate yourselves at once—after all, it is still an elevation for most of you—to that infinite dimension of sensible intuition, to the wondrous and celebrated starry sky. The astronomical theories, which orient a thousand suns with their world systems around a common point and seek for each common point again a higher world system that could be its center, and so on into infinity. . . . You know that there is no semblance of a system in that, that still other stars are discovered between these pictures, that even within their limits everything is undetermined and endless, and that the pictures themselves remain something purely arbitrary and highly changeable. When you have persuaded another person to join you in drawing the image of the Big Dipper onto the blue background of the worlds, does he not nevertheless remain free to conceive the adjacent worlds in contours that are completely different from yours? This infinite chaos, where of course every point represents a world, is as such actually the most suitable and highest symbol of religion. In religion, as in this chaos, only the particular is true and necessary.³³

Manifestly, the metaphor claims that a focus on one particular constellation alters one’s perception of the surrounding stars—and that this is a good thing, for it indicates the primacy of particularity and of the personalization of religious vision. But we see that this claim can be made only within a social and comparative context. There is another person drawing the stars also, and central to Schleiermacher’s argument is that the drawings can be compared to each other and to the original. This social aspect raises an important question: are the two people seeing things differently or drawing them differently? In other words, does the particularity of religious intuition reside at the level of perception or of representation? Schleiermacher goes on to assert that differences among the drawings are “accidental,” and that the real source of religious particularity lies within perception itself. Yet the point is a sticky one, for the accidents of representation are inevitably part of the metaphorical situation imagined here. Because we don’t have direct access to another person’s intuitions, even intuitive religion

32. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 26.

33. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 26–27.

will have to pass through the realm of representation, and so Schleiermacher can only assert, not demonstrate, that differences in representation are accidental but differences in perception are not. Implicitly, his astronomical metaphor acknowledges that actually having a conversation with the “cultured despisers” of religion will be a more complicated affair than simply telling them to dispense with the false representations of religion and get down to its essence. Representations—as the very presence of *On Religion* attests—are all we have.

If the metaphor holds, and religious difference is a matter of perception, then Schleiermacher’s depiction of an abstract, essentialized religion remains intact. In consequence, the imagined conversation between religion and romanticism must proceed as a dialogue among intuitions, with no way to sort out potential disagreements other than the assertion that religion has an inner essence to which intuitions have immediate access. This makes intuition the content of religion and its justification. As a result of the heavy lifting that intuition must do, Schleiermacher’s interlocutors can reject his argument that religion is a species of intuition on the grounds that its functions can be more adequately taken up by a systematic philosophy.³⁴

By contrast, we could interpret Schleiermacher’s metaphor to call into question the very distinction between the realm of essence and the realm of appearance. Paul de Man has argued that figurative language “reenter[s] the system” at just the point at which its metaphorical power is repressed. “All philosophy is condemned,” concludes de Man, “to the extent that it is dependent on figuration, to be literary.”³⁵ If de Man is correct, then Schleiermacher’s attempt to distinguish essence from appearance by means of figurative language becomes an allegory for the insecurity of this very distinction. Accordingly, if appearance or representation is the precondition of the religious essence that is accessed by intuitive perception, rather than simply its figurative distortion, then the social world presupposed by *On Religion* shifts dramatically. Rather than fighting it out at the level of intuition, various religious intuitions could converse within the shared space of representation. In consequence, the subjects that the space presupposes would take on the qualities that Schlegel imagines for his literary subjects, ironically balanced between fragment and system, their incompleteness soliciting critical conversation across the space of difference. Social space would be created by

34. The effect of this response would be to restore a more familiar Kantian position, rejecting Schleiermacher’s attempt to make the Kantian language of intuition serviceable for religion.

35. Paul de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 49, 50.

what Schleiermacher calls accidents, and what Schlegel calls “a dialogue” that becomes a “chain or a garland of fragments,” and therefore open to continual revision and transformation.³⁶

I have suggested that Schlegel’s ironic contrast between systematic philosophy and the literary fragment parallels Schleiermacher’s hesitation between intuitive perception and figurative representation. That parallel, inspired by Connolly’s reading of the mutual recognition and self-recognition of theist and atheist, elicits the following questions: Might a “literary” subject, one no longer able to imagine itself along the lines of a systematic philosophy, be able to conceive of religion as something other than an alternate philosophical or conceptual system? Might that subject, in other words, recognize something in common with the subject presupposed by a nonessentialized conception of religion? Answering yes to such questions demands complementary acts of self-recognition, for in each case, the subject must recognize itself as inevitably bound up in strategies of representation. On this reading, a subject conceptualized via the genre of the fragment would be open to metaphysical difference because it recognizes itself as unfinished and must therefore acknowledge the possibility of its own radical transformation. The subject of *On Religion*, meanwhile, by surrendering the self-sufficiency of religious intuition, gains not only a dialogue (Schlegel’s garland of fragments) but a conception of religion whose functions cannot simply be superseded by a systematic philosophy.

Paradox-Religion

So far, I have read Schleiermacher together with Schlegel in order to suggest that Hamilton’s interpretation of Schlegel can be modified to bring it close to Connolly’s Kierkegaardian ideal of a conversation among metaphysical orientations. It now remains to do the converse, namely to modify Connolly’s reading of Kierkegaard to bring it close to Hamilton’s Schlegelian ideal of a conversation modeled upon romantic poetry.

Kierkegaard’s running critique of the Hegelianism that dominated Danish intellectual circles in the 1830s turns upon a personal and all-encompassing decision for Christianity, a decision he depicted as an attempt to break the hold of philosophical self-consciousness. For Kierkegaard, the subject’s relationship to its own existence depends not on positing a self capacious enough to absorb whatever is beyond it, but rather on a self involved in a paradoxical relationship with

36. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaum Fragment 77*, in Schulte-Sasse, *Theory as Practice*, 320.

something altogether outside of it. Such a subject would be immune to dialectical synthesis, for it would be able to grasp itself only through the act of faith that identified that which existed absolutely beyond it. Kierkegaard's most famous figure for such a subject is the "knight of faith," memorably described in his *Fear and Trembling* (1843), in which a paradoxical faith in God returns the subject to a world conceived of as an existential ground beyond the positing of its own consciousness. Kierkegaard's example is Abraham: if, like Hegel, one sees religion culminating in a universal ethic, then Abraham can be nothing other than a potential murderer. If, however, Abraham is the father of faith, then it follows that the content of religion is not exhausted by the ethical. These two interpretations of Abraham—as murderer, as hero—reveal the stubborn persistence of the gap between philosophy and faith that Hegel and the idealists had tried to overcome.

In wishing to drive a wedge between faith and philosophy, Kierkegaard is reacting to a tendency he sees within Danish Hegelianism to divinize the social order as the culmination of Spirit. Some of this reaction is particular to the situation in Copenhagen, where a Christianized Hegelianism seemed the sure path to academic preferment,³⁷ and some is due to the Danish situation more generally. The year 1835 marks the beginning of what Danish historians call the "constitutional era," when Denmark began its sudden transformation from an absolute monarchy into a democracy. By 1849 Denmark had perhaps the most widespread suffrage of any European country. "The years between 1830 and 1848," remarks one historian, "were the most eventful and decisive in laying the foundations of present-day life in Denmark."³⁸ The period of Denmark's transformation aligns with Kierkegaard's own: he was twenty-two in 1835 and beginning to contemplate a writing career; his mysterious crisis of 1846–48 matches the moment when the transition to democracy was achieved. Kierkegaard's own description of 1848 records the violence of these changes: "In the course of a couple of months," he writes, "the past [was] ripped away from the present with such a passion that it seemed like a generation had gone by."³⁹ The social formation that Kierkegaard came to call Christendom—the medieval synthesis of religion, society, and politics, overlaid by bourgeois complacency—was suddenly gone, and this radically new world called for a new diagnosis.

37. See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 90–99.

38. John Henry Stopford Birch, *Denmark in History*, 5th ed. (London: John Murray, 1938), 327.

39. Quoted in Bruce H. Kirmmse, "'Out with It!': The Modern Breakthrough, Kierkegaard, and Denmark," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20.

Kierkegaard thought that romanticism was not up to the task of such diagnosis. He makes this clear in a later text titled *Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*:

A genius and an apostle are qualitatively different, they are definitions which each belong in their own sphere; the sphere of immanence, and the sphere of transcendence: (1) Genius may, therefore, have something new to bring forth, but what it brings forth disappears again as it becomes assimilated by the human race; . . . the Apostle has . . . something new to bring, the newness of which, precisely because it is essentially paradoxical, . . . always remains. . . . (2) Genius is what it is of itself, i.e. through that which it is in itself; an Apostle is what he is by his divine authority. (3) Genius has only an immanent teleology; the Apostle is placed as absolute paradoxical teleology.⁴⁰

Overtly, Kierkegaard's target in this small book is the popular idea (found, as we have seen, in Schlegel and Schleiermacher, and also in Herder, Eichhorn, and, in a slightly different way, in Hegel himself) that prophets were inspired artists.⁴¹ This idea collapses, on romanticism's terms, the distinction between romanticism and religion. For Kierkegaard, by contrast, the difference between romanticism and religion is the difference between immanence and transcendence, between self-reflection and the decisive act. The decision in favor of Christianity is entirely subjective, for old structures of temporal authority are gone. But the decision must also be made with reference to divine authority, or compulsion, which is the means by which the transcendent enters into existence: the decision thus grasps an objective element. Conceived like this, authority is not a constraint but a goal, and it comes into being at the moment of action, when the subject finds an authority in which to ground its own existence. To illustrate, Kierkegaard imagines a son who declares: "I obey my father, not because he is my father but because he is a genius, or because his orders are always profoundly intelligent." Kierkegaard comments that "the son accentuates something entirely wrong, he emphasizes the intellectual aspect, the profundity in a command, whereas a command is, of course, indifferent to that qualification. The son wishes to obey by virtue of the father's intellectual profundity; and to *obey* by virtue thereof is just what is not

40. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 105–6.

41. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 43–44. Asad makes a Kierkegaardian point when he notes that "what appears to have gone largely unnoticed [in the collapse of artist and prophet] was that while prophets were *called*, artists were not" (43).

possible, for his critical attitude as to whether the command is profound undermines the obedience.”⁴² Rather, declares Kierkegaard, one obeys one’s father simply because he is one’s father—because of the authority of his position, not the content of his commands.

The genius and the apostle, then, are images of two very different kinds of subjects. The gifts of a genius are born with him, and his realization of those gifts is something internal to what he is. Apostles, in contrast, are not born but called, and the apostolic calling is always external to the personal identity of the apostle himself. This leads to a split within the subject: “An Apostle can never come to himself in such a way that he becomes conscious of his apostolic calling as a factor in the development of his life,” says Kierkegaard.⁴³ Pursuing a call, therefore, is not a matter of expressing something that is true of the apostle by nature but is instead a matter of following an external command. While it is the task of the genius to realize or fulfill himself and thus to achieve a level of integration, the apostle is in some sense always standing beside himself, always aware of the lack of fit between who he is and the divine call under which he is placed. In *Fear and Trembling* and elsewhere, Kierkegaard calls Christianity a “paradox-religion” because it demands a paradoxical relation of the believer to himself.

Kierkegaard does not think that genius is naive. But he does think it is marked by a false belief in the sufficiency of individual consciousness. By making a virtue of its own critical reflexivity, genius simultaneously undermines authority and excuses itself from making a final decision about anything. Endless questioning of authority through habits of self-consciousness, an attitude that appears radical to the genius who adopts it, actually comports with the spirit of an age characterized by complacency, intellectual self-satisfaction, and affectation.

This hostile reading of romantic subjectivity tends to obscure the fact that Kierkegaard is engaged in a project remarkably similar to that carried out by the early German romantics a half century earlier. Where early German romanticism turned to the fragment in order to break the hold of reflective self-consciousness, Kierkegaard turns to the absolute decision of the apostle in order to accomplish something similar. The targets are different—idealism in the case of the romantics, Hegel in Kierkegaard’s case—but each has a similar picture of what true philosophizing entails. Against that picture, Kierkegaard and the romantics offer a subject so unsettled or incomplete that the very notion of self-consciousness becomes too radically unstable to build a philosophy upon. Kierkegaard’s apostle

42. Kierkegaard, *Genius and Apostle*, 121–22.

43. Kierkegaard, *Genius and Apostle*, 107.

and Schlegel's fragmentary subject are different, of course, for Kierkegaard has no patience with the endless self-revisions that Schlegel celebrates. But the analogous targets and analogous techniques argue for a real affinity. (That affinity may even be understood as invited by Schlegel himself when he described conversation as a garland of fragments; the theory of the fragment leaves open the possibility that even the fragment itself may lose its edge, become complacent, and need to be replaced with something else.)

What are the implications of the possibility that Kierkegaard has more in common with romanticism than he lets on? Kierkegaard's paradox-religion would seem to comport well with secular doctrine, for it suggests that religious adherents are always living in two worlds. Note, however, that it arrives at its secularism by opposing the conception of religion as a universal essence advanced by Schleiermacher. From Kierkegaard's perspective, Schleiermacher's defense of religion too easily lends itself to the collapse of genius and apostle characteristic of romantic and postromantic interpretations of religion. Kierkegaard thus interprets romanticism much as Schleiermacher had done, but where Schleiermacher had offered an elective affinity between religious intuition and romantic consciousness, Kierkegaard proposes an absolute split between a self-sufficient romantic consciousness and true religion, for the latter involves a paradoxical relationship to an authority beyond itself. By these lights, a nonessentialized religion is a religion understood as a calling. In distinguishing between the genius and the apostle, therefore, Kierkegaard does overtly what Schleiermacher had done only implicitly and by way of his astronomical metaphor. In the case of that metaphor, a conception of religious difference that resides at the level of representation, rather than perception, found its ideal dialogue partner in a subjectivity conceived along the lines of Schlegel's fragment. Almost a half-century later, Kierkegaard takes aim much more directly at an essentialized religion and does so once again via a subject understood as decisively torn. Here lies one possible affinity between Kierkegaard and early German romanticism: that the fragmentary romantic subject anticipates, or more precisely becomes a condition of possibility for, Kierkegaard's interpretation of religion as a paradoxical calling. As part of his critique of romanticism, therefore, Kierkegaard offers an against-the-grain reading that was in fact implicit within romanticism itself.

The second implication of the possibility that Kierkegaard has more in common with early German romanticism than he admits involves the very distinction between genius and apostle itself. Can it hold up? Within his own family Kierkegaard played the part of the genius son rather than the apostolic one. Beyond biographical details, too, the point can be generalized. *Of the Difference between*

a Genius and an Apostle is not written by an apostle; rather, it observes the apostle from the outside, commenting upon his characteristics rather than entering into them. Given the intensely personal and paradoxical nature of faith as Kierkegaard understands it, how can one who is not an apostle enter sympathetically into the apostle's world? Kierkegaard does not address this question directly, but the answer is implied by the various strategies—irony, humor, verbal play, and so on—that he employs here and in his other texts. As many have noted, there is something literary about all of Kierkegaard's philosophical writing: the anonymous authorship, the various pseudonyms who become characters in their own right, the general sense that one is always in the middle of a production and that the sincerity of the author is a carefully constructed textual effect—all these contribute to the thought that Kierkegaard offers himself as both a genius *and* an apostle.⁴⁴ Not only, then, does the apostle stand beside himself, but “Kierkegaard” stands beside the apostle.

What does such fracturing of identity mean for a discussion of secularism? To recapitulate: Kierkegaard's discussion of the apostle seems to take secularism for granted in that it pictures the apostle as living simultaneously in two worlds; this secularism is achieved, however, by arguing against the familiar or dominant genealogy of secularism (as examined, for instance, in Talal Asad's work), for it takes issue with an essentialized religion and with the philosophical emphasis on self-consciousness with which essentialized religion is so intimately entwined; finally, Kierkegaard's critique of philosophical self-consciousness from the perspective of religion completes a line of argument latent within early German romanticism. Taken together, these various strands suggest an alternate history that ends not in the conceits of secularism criticized by Connolly but rather with an image of multiple constituencies that might be called postsecular. The Kierkegaardian apostle is torn between his sense of self and the calling under which he is placed; standing next to that figure, in turn, is Kierkegaard himself, or perhaps more appropriately one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. This third figure can sympathetically portray the apostle precisely because his medium is the liter-

44. See, for example, this passage near the end of Kierkegaard's *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (written 1848, published 1859): “I have nothing more to say, but in conclusion I will allow someone else to speak, my poet, who, when he comes, will usher me to the place among those who have suffered for an idea and will say: ‘The martyrdom this author suffered can be described quite briefly in this way: He suffered being a genius in a market town.’” Of course, this is no more the final word than anything else in Kierkegaard. In *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard Vincent Hong and Edna Hatlestad Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 479.

ary—because he produces, characteristically, fragments.⁴⁵ It is only a small step to see in this third figure the subject envisioned by Schlegel, for whom literary production modeled a subject who was simultaneously a wealth of other potential subjects. In principle, the literary practices sustaining such a subject would be able to represent all varieties of apostles, even those who do not recognize the paradox of being an apostle in the modern age.

Conclusion

A reading of secularism through Kierkegaard and a reading of romanticism through Schlegel both suggest an understanding of subjectivity for which romantic literary practice becomes a model. Construed along Schlegelian lines, literature solicits criticism neither to complete it nor to stand in judgment upon it but rather to extend that which literature already is. With Kierkegaard, meanwhile, comes a reading of religion as a calling, that is, as a personal response to something extrapersonal, a subjective response to something understood as objectively and universally valid. That Kierkegaardian understanding would go a considerable way toward assuaging the concern of religious adherents that public space militates against aspects of their identity; at the same time, the paradoxical origins of that understanding, anticipated by the fragmentary romantic subject and raised almost to the status of contradictions by the conditions of modernity, would go some way toward assuaging the concerns of areligious people that religious identity seeks to remake the democratic public sphere in its own image.

Romantic literary activity (and here I include Kierkegaard within this domain) reminds us that such endeavors place tremendous burdens upon individual subjects. That is of course characteristic of religion during modernity; it may also be a characteristic of secularism, which seems increasingly to be understood as a private decision rather than as a way of organizing public life. Connolly's *Why I Am Not a Secularist* reflects this trend, for while its theoretical argument focuses upon politics and hence upon ways of conceptualizing a public, its prescriptions for a postsecular future rely upon the agency and good intentions of individual actors. This is evident, of course, even in the book's title, which, in referencing Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, does for secularism what modernity did for religion: make it a matter of personal choice, even if the reasons offered for

45. A number of Kierkegaard's most important works are deliberate fragments, including *Either/Or, or a Fragment of Life* (1843), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), which deliberately refuses to "complete" *Philosophical Fragments*. Beyond these official fragments, moreover, all of Kierkegaard's writing is deliberately unsystematic.

that choice are transpersonal. The individualist tone carries over into Connolly's normative claims, which ask the subject to do various things without supplying a robust theory of subjectivity that would ground such activities.⁴⁶

I have suggested that the understanding of subjectivity shared by Kierkegaard and Schlegel, an understanding grounded in a shared critique of philosophical self-consciousness, offers a theoretical basis for Connolly's postsecular prescriptions. While the dominant reading of romanticism as a substitute spirituality comports well with an essentialized model of religion, I have argued for the presence of a counterstrand within romanticism, a strand ambivalently present in Schleiermacher, theorized from the perspective of the literary fragment by Schlegel, and then picked up from yet another direction by Kierkegaard's focus upon paradox-religion. This counterstrand represents an alternative path for modernity, one that does not culminate in a secular marginalization of "the religious," because it understands the religious not as a universal essence but as a formation every bit as contingent and paradoxical as the secular itself. That is what it means to take seriously the idea that religion is a calling; religion becomes not the realization of a universal human quality (thus something for which nationalism, the aesthetic, and a host of other modern formations offer a substitute) but rather a choice that guarantees that the subject will be forever standing beside itself.

I have represented the romantic subject as capable, in principle, of negotiating these complex demands. Where is that subject located? (We don't, after all, live in Jena in the late 1790s, in the heady days of post-Kantianism, idealism, and early romanticism.) Perhaps the very fleetingness of the original romantic subject will help us avoid thinking of it as a stable or achieved thing; the Jena group itself moved on to other things after the intense burst of activity captured in the *Athenaum*. The romantic subject comes into being at the moment of criticism—a term that, I emphasize again, needs to be uncoupled from its enlightenment-era associations with secularity. Criticism is a way to continue the conversation from the shared understanding that, under the conditions of the modernity we all share, even the strongest commitments and the most firmly held identities are fragments, paradoxes, and traces of the ideal.

46. Connolly's switch from an authoritative third-person voice to a hesitant second-person voice indicates the voluntarist nature of his prescriptions: "In place of the Habermasian ideal of a consensus between rational agents . . . you might substitute that of *ethically sensitive, negotiated settlements* . . . in response to the quest for rational purity in moral motivation . . . you might explore an *ethic of cultivation*. . . and in response to the secular demand to leave controversial religious and metaphysical judgments at home . . . you might pursue a generous *ethos of engagement*" (35–36). As I have already suggested, Connolly's own reading of Kierkegaard is an exception to this tendency.

