

Insider Exile

Secular Critique and the Future of the Humanities

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IN THE MID-1850S, AFTER NOVELS LIKE *MOBY-DICK* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852) had chased away most of his readers, Herman Melville turned out a series of short stories for magazines. These included “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the tale of a resistant clerk narrated by his baffled boss, who ends the story by throwing up his hands: “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” Another story from this period ends on a similar note of helpless wonderment: “Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! And oh! Tartarus of Maids!” This closing exclamation, like that of “Bartleby,” is delivered by a comfortable man for whom the world’s mysteries are a little too much.

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” details its narrator’s travels from a lawyers’ dinner club in London, a haven for bachelor connoisseurs, to a paper mill in rural Massachusetts, where immiserated unmarried women produce the blank sheets that will record men’s doings. What makes the story apt for a reflection on the humanities is its portrayal of the failure of secular critique. As Edward Said defined it, secular criticism is intellectual traveling: a generative condition of exile, of standing outside what feels like home.¹ As a form of skepticism or irony, secular critique discovers the often sordid manmade facts behind a phenomenon billed as supernatural. In Melville’s story, the narrator at first succeeds as a secular critic. He rightly uses his status as a guest to query the material conditions of the bachelors’ heavenly equanimity. But when confronted with the maids’ misery, the narrator projects cosmic forces at play. He makes himself comfortably helpless, a spectator on the outside of what he

¹ Said, “Introduction: Secular Criticism,” in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), esp. 6-8.

repeatedly calls an “inscrutable” system.² I read the story as a cautionary tale for secular critics in the humanities, a warning of what goes wrong when a productively self-aware distance collapses into a self-protective insistence on one’s outsider stance.

For Said, writing in 1983, secular criticism was necessarily “oppositional” but also aspirational: such “criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and opposed to every form of tyranny.” Since then, both secularism and critique have been productively subjected to scholars’ ironic distancing. (I treat “criticism” and “critique” as largely synonymous in practice, but the latter term generally signals a more skeptical stance.) In 2004, Bruno Latour asked “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” and found his answer in the intellectual arrogance of critics who diagnosed everyone but themselves as dupes. In *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski turned this line of argument toward the discipline of literary criticism, seeing its interpretive methods as skewed by an aggressive will-to-power.

Whether or not “secularism” and “critique” are explicitly named as twin targets in such arguments, they are a matched pair, because critique is the intellectual tool that empowers secularism by claiming to sort the rational actors from the credulous who need to be enlightened. The case that secularism is a not a liberating disenchantment from primitive religion, but rather a massive and ongoing effort to generate the categories of rational versus credulous, began in such groundbreaking works as Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* (2003) and Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). A 2007 symposium at Berkeley brought the terms together by posing the question, “Is Critique Secular?”, with Asad and Saba Mahmood detailing the ways that secularism has served as a cover story for Western imperialism. For many scholars across the humanities, secularism is now understood as Protestant biopolitics, disciplining the unruly adherents of other faiths into heteronormative capitalist consumers.

The exposure of secularism as a political-economic program disguised as universal objectivity has produced valuable analysis in multiple disciplines. But the scholars critiquing secularism are, to my mind, practicing secular critique. Far from proving secular critique to be a compromised tool, they are doing exemplary work with it. Such scholars, like Said’s secular critic, practice a form of insider exile by using intellectual skepticism to question the institutional power granted to intellectual skepticism. Seeing how one’s own privileged tools of thought have developed that privilege can generate the analytical leverage to show how faith in secularism has abetted imperialism abroad and justified a knowing elite.

The problem that Melville’s story helps us see is how unstable this outsider vision is, how readily secularism’s power to demystify provokes the urge to re-mystify. “Paradise and Tartarus” dramatizes both

2 Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” in Peter Coviello, ed., *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 219–241.

the strengths and limits of secular critique in a way that is especially salient for my own field of American literary studies but applicable to the study of the humanities more broadly. This story of heaven and hell demonstrates not only how secular critique goes wrong but also the potential for its proper functioning. Such critique would hold secularism accountable for its promise to dismantle, not to prop up, transcendental justifications for oppressive regimes. One of those regimes would include the university itself, an institution historically clothed with the power of secularism and still our most dependable site of knowledge production. Practicing a renewed secular critique would require scholars working inside the system of higher education to step outside of it without mystifying it, either for good or ill.

Secular critique done properly does not mistake exile for innocence.

In the “Paradise” half of Melville’s story, we see the power of secular critique to hold secularism accountable. At first, the narrator is charmed by the bachelor lawyers’ table talk. The conversation is that of liberal arts faculty chatting before a meeting: they discuss life as a “student at Oxford,” “Flemish architecture,” “Oriental manuscripts,” “a funny case in law,” work on “translating a comic poem of Pulci’s.” But the narrator takes a turn. The bachelors’ bonhomie begins to strike him as morally blinkered. He sees that they use their status as “men of liberal sense,” their “ripe scholarship,” and their “capacious philosophical and convivial understandings” to justify their own leisure. The narrator shrewdly observes that because their capacious understanding depends on their freedom from responsibility to “wives or children”, they cannot understand the suffering of those who are free. Voicing the bachelors’ incredulity, he writes: “how could they suffer themselves to be imposed upon by such monkish fables? Pain! Trouble! As well talk of Catholic miracles. No such thing.” The narrator’s irony here underscores the power of his judgment: the bachelors’ secular humanist virtues, their capacity to be exiles, have enabled their glib denial of evil as a primitive superstition.

Yet when the narrator travels back to Massachusetts, his power of secular critique fails him. Confronting the noise and heat of the paper mill, witnessing the factory workers’ pain and trouble, he treats it as something on the order of a fable or a miracle. He first orientalizes the women workers as “mutely and cringingly” serving the machinery “as the slave serves the Sultan,” then casts them as Christianized martyrs, the “agony” of their faces printed on the paper like that of Jesus’ “on the handkerchief of Saint Veronica.” Watching

pulp become foolscap in nine minutes exactly, he is “filled” with a “curious emotion... not wholly unlike that which one might experience at the fulfillment of some mysterious prophecy,” an emotion he dispels by telling himself it’s only a machine. That is a secular explanation: it’s not a demon, only gears and cogs. But his secular critique stops short of seeing the profit-seeking that built the machinery. Instead, he reads the technology as destiny. He is, after all, at the mill to purchase supplies for his business. He fails to notice (even as Melville lets us see) that his secular faith in rational progress has led him to mystify the barbarity of progress as divine will. His concluding line, “Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! And oh! Tartarus of Maids!” is a lamentation for what he prefers to read as two realms separated by cosmic decree. Melville wants us to see the division between consumers and producers as manmade. The narrator’s exclamation makes an implicit claim to be outside of both paradise and hell. But as Aaron Winter points out, the story suggests that we all, reader and author included, belong to this system.³ In the moment of reading, at least, we are consuming not producing.

Melville shows this narrator as someone whose secular critique is just strong enough to needle the professional class but too weak to do more than lament the plight of labor. His unwitting theodicy, his apologia for capitalism, reveals the potential for secular critique to be practiced in bad faith. But because Melville’s narrator does see the interlocking global system of consumer and producer, the story has been taken as inspiration for American literary studies’ turn toward transnational critique. On this reading, because it shows us how to “trace the interconnected flow of capital and ideas in the global economy,” the story points toward a “literary and cultural criticism that aims to be as global as its objects of analysis.”

That optimistic vision of global critique does not account for the fragility of secular critique, the way it lures us to outsider innocence by making it easy to shift from productive internal exile to self-defensive spectatorship. Robyn Wiegman finds that tendency in the Americanist turn toward transnationalism. The urge to think outside America, as Wiegman sees it, manifests the discipline’s “refused identification” with its object of study—not literature as much as American culture writ large—even as it enables the discipline to claim a planetary mission.⁴ Americanist scholars may wishfully locate themselves outside the university by identifying with a “grassroots global resistance.” This is certainly preferable to Melville’s narrator’s flight from the laboring class. Such a stance can be a valuable form of solidarity. Wiegman specifies that refused identification (what I am calling exile or outsider-ness) is not “a mistake or a failure” but the source of “a critical subjectivity that is one of the most important, seductive, and gratifying ends of [American studies] disciplinary disposition.” But Wiegman also observes that by claiming this “deeply

3 Winter, “Seeds of Discontent: The Expanding Satiric Range of Melville’s Transatlantic Diptychs,” *Leviathan* 8.2 (2006).

4 Wiegman, “The Ends of New Americanism,” *New Literary History* 42.3 (2011), 386.

comforting” outsider status, we risk equating “critical noncomplicity with historical noncomplicity” and forgetting that American studies “has been institutionalized” to function as a site of resistance. By telling a story of our discipline as endlessly resistant, we tell a story that keeps our field institutionally secure.

That goal is worthy: scholars of American literature and culture need institutional security if we are going to teach our students to be secular critics themselves. But for any humanities scholar, outsider-ness taken too far, as a badge of innocence, will mystify its objects. (Said notes that exile is not the same as escape.) Mystification can cast laborers as victims, as Melville’s narrator does in the paper mill, or as heroes, like the “prophetic organization” that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney find in the academic workforce they call the undercommons.⁵ Such heroizing can serve a necessary corrective purpose and make plain the unequal conditions under which people labor in the university. But the heroic outsider position is a tempting one to claim for scholars who refuse identification with the university. Heroizing labor may also get some facts wrong: as Megan Wadle points out in her reading of “Paradise and Tartarus,” at least some of the women who were employed in antebellum New England factories registered their preference for waged labor over unpaid domestic work.⁶ Likewise, some of our overworked graduate students might prefer to see themselves not as underground prophets but as developing professionals who should be compensated accordingly. Finally, the outsider’s innocence needs a villain. That can mean hyperbolizing a factory or the university into an inscrutable evil force, making it harder to see the human motives, including our own vested interests, that keep it running.

“Paradise and Tartarus” finally answers the questions “Has critique run out of steam?” and “Is critique secular?” with a “no” and “yes.” Melville’s secular critique reminds us that the mysteries of the world, both good and ill, both fiction and factory, are manmade, not transcendent. As Jenny Franchot argues, Melville devoted himself to a globe-trotting effort to get outside of America and to demystify the Protestant God by making that God travel. His work shows how efforts to demystify trigger contrary efforts to re-mystify. Deconstructing one’s own god simultaneously “incite[s] a religious impulse to assign transcendent meaning—a contradictory gesture resolved by

5 Moten and Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text* 79 22.2 (2004), 102.

6 Wadle, “Rightly Enough Called Girls: Melville’s Violated Virgins and Male Marketplace Fears,” *American Literature* 90.1 (2018).

supplanting theological and anthropological mystery with that of literary mystery.” As scholars and critics, we perpetually whet our own appetites for literary mystery by restlessly undermining it. The trick is not to deny that appetite for mystery in our zeal to practice the salutary demystification of secular critique. I don’t mean to call here for postcritique or for critical humility. What I have in mind, for professors of literature, is a willingness to toggle between recognizing the inexhaustible provocations of a text like Melville’s, and candidly acknowledging how such texts have kept the professoriate, though fewer and fewer of us, earning a living.

Secular critique done properly does not mistake exile for innocence. It does practice the outsider-ness that reexamines familiar truths from unfamiliar angles. Humanities scholars can teach that skill to others. We can bring the outside inside, “educating and including in [our] research ranks those historically excluded by virtue of caste, class, religion, region, race, ethnicity, gender, and body,” as Wendy Brown writes.⁷ At the broadest level, if we are to maintain the public university as a public good, we cannot seek innocence—universities “cannot be held to a standard of purity,” as Brown says, since they “will always be engaged in some compromises with their sources of survival”—but we can maintain the “modest distance” of a “*relative* autonomy from markets,” one that enables “*uncontracted*” “inquiry.” That distance will inform our efforts to halt what Brown rightly sees as the drift toward aligning higher education with the needs of business. For UT-Dallas, where I work, that drift, ironically, heads in the direction of its origin, its founding in 1961 by Texas Instruments as a workforce training institute. But if any university is going to promote “the learning appropriate to free people, those capable of self-government,” it must be able to distinguish between what is good for citizens versus what is good for rankings and to direct its energy toward the former.

To make that distinction, we need secular critique to catch ourselves mythmaking (which includes making myths about secularism itself), so that we can see more clearly where we stand in the system. Secular critique neither denies mystery nor proclaims one’s immunity to it. What it can do is help us distinguish self-justifying myths from the mythical-seeming hopes that should be made real—above all, the possibility of humanities scholarship to make a freer world. A

7 Brown, “The Vocation of the Public University,” in Debaditya Bhattacharya, ed., *The Idea of the University: Histories and Contexts* (London: Routledge India, 2018), 56.