VARIETIES OF SECULARISM
IN A SECULAR AGE

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Contents

A Note on Citations  vii

Editors’ Introduction  1

1. Confronting Modernity: Maruyama Masao, Jürgen Habermas, 32
   and Charles Taylor
   ROBERT N. BELLAH

2. A Closer Walk on the Wild Side  54
   JOHN MILBANK

3. The Sacred, the Secular, and the Profane: 83
   Charles Taylor and Karl Marx
   WENDY BROWN

   SIMON DURING

5. Belief, Spirituality, and Time  126
   WILLIAM E. CONNOLLY

   AKEEL BILGRAMI

7. This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor’s Romanticism 166
   COLIN JAGER
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Disquieted History in <em>A Secular Age</em></td>
<td>Jon Butler</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age</td>
<td>Jonathan Sheehan</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular</td>
<td>Nilüfer Göle</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?</em></td>
<td>José Casanova</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Can Secularism Be Other-wise?</td>
<td>Saba Mahmood</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo</td>
<td>Charles Taylor</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### A Note on Citations

References to the major writings of Charles Taylor are given by an abbreviated title:

- **EA** *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992)
- **H** *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)
- **HMS** *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979)
- **SA** *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007)
- **SS** *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989)
Charles Taylor’s Romanticism

This Detail, This History:
Charles Taylor’s Romanticism

COLIN JAGER

Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge.
—William Wordsworth

The poems are finding words for us.
—Charles Taylor

One notable feature of the current debate about secularism is the manner in which something called “Romanticism” circulates within it. As Mark Lilla tells it in The Stillborn God, at the center of our current predicament is Romanticism’s problematic reaction to the Hobbesian/Enlightenment separation of religion and politics. In Lilla’s story, the “children of Hobbes” have been battling it out with the “children of Rousseau,” and Rous-

1 The epigraphs are from William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” (1802), in William Wordsworth: The Major Works, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 606; and SA, 335. I am grateful to Craig Calhoun, Akeel Bilgrami, William Connolly, and John Milbank for comments on the version of this paper presented at the “Varieties of Secularism” gathering at Yale University.


4 “Romanticism” is a notoriously slippery notion; what I mean by it is fairly close to what Taylor means by the “expressivist turn.” However, I wish here to distinguish between two common readings of romanticism. In one, romanticism seeks to undo the enlightenment in the name of a nostalgic desire for the past; in the other, romanticism is understood as a “critique of critique”—that is, as dedi-
lar Age, Taylor puts considerable emphasis on what he calls the "expressivist turn," a movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that encompasses the Romantic period. And he is an authority on Hegel, among other things. So to say that Taylor is influenced by Romanticism seems unobjectionable.

But my claim is that romanticism runs deeper in Taylor, and that it shapes and colors the picture of secularity drawn in A Secular Age. (From here on I will refer to "romanticism" with a small r, in order to distinguish between a big-R "movement" and a small-r attitude or disposition that is more widely distributed.) To get at Taylor’s romanticism, I will propose a reading of A Secular Age inspired by the thought that the book speaks in more than one voice. In effect, this treats the book as if it were a literary text—a move itself licensed by the fact that a recognizably modern notion of literariness, as something simultaneously distinct from Christianity and yet remarkably proximate to it, emerges for the first time during the Romantic era. Taylor takes such "literariness" for granted but doesn’t analyze it in the book, and in my reading, this aspect of romanticism’s genealogy contributes to the ambivalence of Taylor’s engagement with secularism.

Taylor’s romanticism is not the Romanticism indicted by Lilla and Hirsi Ali. At least, not always. For them, a simplistic opposition between Enlightenment and Romanticism does a great deal of heavy lifting. Some of the weaker moments in A Secular Age are the moments when Taylor appears to be telling a similar story, largely derived, in his case, from treatments of literary romanticism prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. Here I want to criticize Taylor for those moments when he tells an "Enlightenment versus Romanticism" story, for that story not only betrays his best insights but also helps to institutionalize a kind of secularism he would do well to question. But I also want to uncover a different, rather more shadowy romanticism in Taylor’s account, one that, far from cementing the "Enlightenment versus Romanticism" opposition, in fact elucidates literary romanticism’s ability to trouble and frustrate the kind of thinking that gives rise to such oppositions in the first place.

My aim, then, is threefold: first, to explain why Taylor’s book takes the form that it does; second, to illuminate an influential, romantic history of the relationship between the secular and the literary; and finally to outline an alternative to that history that is also rooted in romanticism.

**Disenchantment and Reflexivity**

One important strand of Taylor’s argument involves the relationship between disenchantment and what he calls the "buffered self." In the enchanted world of premodernity, human beings thought of themselves as “open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers” (SA, 38). There was a continuity between the mundane world and the spirit world; the two impinged on each other, intersected in numerous ways. And thus, in that world, you couldn’t just rely on yourself, your own thoughts or powers, to keep darkness and evil at bay. You depended on, you needed, to line yourself up with a higher power—not the Christian God, necessarily, but some power capable of securing you. But now, in the disenchaned world, we don’t think in such terms. We draw the boundaries between ourselves and everything else in a very different way. Thus the disenchaned world is “a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans; and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, etc. are situated ‘inside’ them. This space within is constituted by the possibility of introspective self-awareness. . . . The ‘inward’ in this sense is constituted by what I have called ‘radical reflexivity’” (30). Taylor’s reference here is to a moment in Sources of the Self where he distinguishes between reflexivity and "radical reflexivity." While simple reflexivity involves a focus on the self; in the stance of radical reflexivity we adopt a first-person view of the world, becoming “aware of our own awareness.” Our own experience becomes the object of our attention: there is “something that it is like to be an experiencing agent,” as Taylor puts it (SS, 130). In Sources of the Self, Augustine is a principal source of the turn toward radical reflexivity; in A Secular Age, though, Taylor argues that this turn is not generalized until the early modern period, and he links radical reflexivity much more explicitly to the disenchantment that is the chief background condition of secu-
Habermas and Reflexivity

Contrast Taylor’s meditations on reflexivity and religious subjectivity to those of Jürgen Habermas. In an essay entitled “Religion in the Public Sphere,” Habermas too has recourse to the concept of reflexivity in order to explain what it means to be religious today. He claims that there has been a “change in religious consciousness” since the advent of modernity, driven by pluralism, modern science, and the spread of “profane morality,” and with this Taylor would surely agree. Yet there is a normative difference between their accounts that will help us see why Taylor’s book takes the form that it does.

To begin with, Habermas describes the tensions between religion and modernity as epistemological challenges for religion. Religious citizens, he writes, must “develop an epistemic attitude toward other religions and world views,” “develop an epistemic stance toward the independence of secular from sacred knowledge,” and “develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons enjoy in the political arena.” This suggests that Habermas understands religious adherence as a matter of being convinced that certain beliefs are worth holding even within the context of the various challenges to such beliefs posed by modernity. Once religion has been “epistemologized” in this manner, the naturalness of religious reflexivity can be invoked without argument: “Every [religious] citizen must know and accept

6 Ibid., 14.
7 This presupposition puts Habermas at odds with some of the more powerful analyses of secularism offered in recent years, which despite their variety find common ground in a shared commitment to a historical understanding of secularism and its relationship to religion. See, as representative examples, Peter Harrison, “Religion” and the Religious in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); William Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

The casualness of that last sentence (“all that is required is the epistemic ability to consider one’s own faith reflexively”) springs from the manner in which Habermas moves silently from a historical observation to a normative claim. It may in fact be the case that we are all reflexive about our beliefs, whether we like it or not, but it does not necessarily follow that this is the inevitable state of affairs. Or, rather, it only follows if we think that the task at hand is the strictly analytical one of sorting out the relevant confusions, difficulties, and tensions entailed by the relationship between “religion” and the “public sphere,” and that thought is in turn based on a tendency to treat historically contingent definitions of religion (as centered on belief and epistemology) as the truth of “religion” per se. Once we set that supposition aside, other sorts of questions suddenly emerge. How, for example, did the relevant question come to be that of the relationship between religion and the public sphere? Why do we find ourselves thinking in these terms and not some others? Do we all think in these terms? Are there alternatives? Do they matter?

Such questions, which tend toward the historical and genealogical, are barred from Habermas’s analytic methodology. This is certainly not to dismiss his formulation. Indeed, it is worth remembering how much he thinks he is giving up when he turns his attention to the cognitive burdens faced by religious persons within the context of modernity. It is, however, to observe that Habermas—together with most analysts and commentators, academic and otherwise—takes as his starting point the very things that Taylor is trying to historicize in his book. Why, then, does Taylor think it is so important to historicize them?

A Story to Tell

“The change I want to define and trace,” writes Taylor, “is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God to

8 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 9–10.
9 A point made by Craig Callahan during a discussion of this essay at the “Varieties of Secularism” colloquium sponsored by the SSRC, May 12, 2005, New York, N.Y.
one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" (SA, 3). How does one tell a story so big and complex, so multifaceted, in such constant motion? Here is one answer:

It is a crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical; that is, our understanding of ourselves and where we stand is partly defined by our sense of having come to where we are, of having overcome a previous condition. . . . In other words, our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there. . . . Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, so long as we can’t do justice to where we come from. This is why the narrative is not an optional extra, and why I believe I have a story to tell here. (29)

This passage comes quite early in Taylor’s book, while he is still assembling the pieces of the “story” that he will tell over its almost 900 pages. The passage is perhaps most easily read as a defense of the sheer length of the book. Stories, at least good stories, are full of details that demand time and space in a narrative. They are worth it, though, because they make narratives more like real life: good stories are thick and messy rather than thin and sterile. They take surprising twists and turns, double back on themselves, try things out from another angle.

What is the other option? According to Taylor, it is bare conceptual analysis: “But why tell a story? Why not just extract the analytic contrast, state what things were like then, and how they are now, and let the linking narrative go? Who needs all this detail, this history?” (SA, 28). Taylor’s answer is that “this detail, this history” is not an optional extra, not just a set of examples or illustrations. Rather, details are where we live, because details are where history lives, and we are historical creatures. The way we know this is that we tell stories to ourselves about who we are and how we got here.10 To focus strictly on content and ignore how that content is embedded would miss the heart of the matter.

10 Of course, Taylor is not only telling historical stories. As he notes shortly, “the whole discussion has to tack back and forth between the analytical and the historical” (29). Yet on the methodological level the book’s emphasis clearly falls on the latter.

Many years ago the literary critic Cleanth Brooks called this “the heresy of paraphrase.”11 The heresy here is against literary language itself, which cannot be summarized but must be experienced. This has been an article of faith for literary critics of all stripes and persuasions, and it is an article of faith for Taylor as well. Put differently, this is the difference between saying, with Habermas, that “all that is required” is that the faithful consider their faith reflexively, and trying, with Taylor, to capture what it feels like to adopt that reflexive posture. Where Habermas aligns reflexivity with a perspective “from the outside,” Taylor describes radical reflexivity as the moment when my own experience becomes my object—in this case, my experience of the reflexivity that characterizes modern life. Radical reflexivity in the context of the secular age is a fraught business, then, because it seems to demand not simply that one adopt a third-person perspective on one’s own commitments (which might be hard enough) but that one actually work the movement between first- and third-person perspectives into one’s understanding of what the first person entails. My experience may be of the world as it is for me, but part and parcel of that experience is my acknowledgment that the world as it is for me is not the world as it is for other people.

If this is right, then Taylor’s question—namely, “What does secularity feel like from the inside?”—is the sort of question that can be asked only after a certain kind of secular age, associated with Enlightenment reflexivity vis-à-vis belief, has run its course. The characteristic questions of that age have to be understood as important but limited, and one has to begin casting around for more historically generous ways to describe the distinct feel of the age. So Taylor’s method is “literary” not simply because it is committed to both the first and the third person, but because of how it seeks to convey the passage of time. When Taylor says he has a story to tell, he means that his account must be undergone, not simply paraphrased or glossed.

Here we are already partway to understanding the ambivalence of A Secular Age. Consider again the contrast with Habermas. Both men put reflexivity at the center of their account, but Habermas is comfortable with the third person; he never allows reflexivity to become radical reflexivity. A good deal of the tonal ambivalence in A Secular Age springs from Taylor’s methodologi-

cal commitment to radical reflexivity and consequently to phenomeno-

cal, first-person description. But what do those methods, influentially laid out

in Sources of the Self and put to use so evocatively in A Secular Age, commit him
to? While the Taylor of Sources of the Self may defend the legitimacy of the
modern age, the Taylor of A Secular Age keeps his distance. He is positioned
as if it were after reflexivity, which is to say after enlightenment, which is to say
within romanticism.

The Expressivist Turn

The background condition for the idea of “story” as embedded content is
what Taylor calls “the expressivist turn,” a broad intellectual movement that
begins with such eighteenth-century figures as Rousseau and Herder, passes
through the various romanticisms, and culminates with Hegel. It is not much
of an exaggeration to say that most of Taylor’s career has been an attempt to
measure the impact of this “turn.” In books large and small, he has returned
again and again to the tension between universalism and historicism, be-

between mimetic and expressivist models of selfhood, between “tolerance” and
“recognition”—in short, between the Enlightenment and what came after it.
Putting it so schematically, of course, doesn’t do justice to the nuances of
Taylor’s narration. Yet it remains the case that the thinkers and problems of
the expressivist turn do a particular and unique kind of intellectual work in
his texts. Herder, in particular, offers a sophisticated and influential version
of the dominant themes of the historical “story” that Taylor wants to tell in A
Secular Age: an intimate, first-person theory of historical method, and a

notion of literary language as something unique and unparaphrasable.13

Herder’s crucial innovation was the link between language and the hu-

man as such. If I express my anger, it could mean just that the anger was in-
side me and that I “express” it by yelling; that would be an “Enlighten-
ment” or mimetic theory, in which the thing is thought to exist before its expression.

But in the stronger sense of expression that Taylor draws from Herder, my
yelling is a part of my anger—in some way it actually brings that anger into
being. As Taylor puts it in Sources of the Self, “[a] human life is seen as mani-

festing a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation; it is not
just a matter of copying an external model or carrying out an already deter-
minate formulation” (375). As Herder suggests in the Treatise on the Origin
of Language (1772), this means that the “content” of an utterance cannot be un-
derstood apart from its context, form, and situation.

Famously, Herder extends this notion from individuals to groups, and to

teions.13 In each case, there is no external or “objective” model against which
either individual or group can be evaluated; rather, each is to be evaluated ac-

According to its own terms: “Moreover, their relationships are so national, so

much according to the peculiar manner of thinking and seeing of that people,
of that inventor, in that land, in that time, in those circumstances, that they
are infinitely difficult for a Northerner and Westerner to get right, and

must suffer infinitely in long, cold, paraphrases.”14 To what kind of historical
method might the northerner and westerner appeal in order to avoid such
cold paraphrases? This is the problem that Taylor confronts most explicitly
in his discussion of the “nova effect”: the proliferating spiritual options that
characterize the secular age and the lack of an objective hierarchy against
which to adjudicate them. Comprehending that nova will take a new kind of
historical methodology, which Herder formulates as Einfühlung, or “feeling
one’s way in”: “The whole nature of the soul, which rules through everything,
which models all other inclinations and forces of the soul in accordance with itself
and in addition colors even the most indifferent actions—in order to share in
feeling this . . . go into the age, into the clime, the whole history, feel yourself into everything.”15 As an alternative to the magisterial survey of Enlighten-
ment historiography, the historian must “go into” the particular age in
question—but if such empathy isn’t just to cancel difference and thus return
us to enlightenment universalism, the gulf between now and then, between
us and them, has to be worked formally into the interpretive process itself, so

that the act of interpretive understanding is always also marked by the fact of

13 His thought is thus the origin of modern notions of both culture and nation, as well as of
contemporary multiculturalism. In view of some of the criticisms Herder has received on this score,
it is important to distinguish his picture of cultural difference from the racist implications of Enlight-

enment-era theories that postulated a geographic determinism. Indeed, Herder saved some of his
bitterest irony for this view (which he associated with Voltaire, among others).

14 Treatise on the Origin of Language (1772), in Herder: Philosophical Writings, 114.

15 This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity (1774), in Herder: Philosophical
Writings, 292.
cultural and historical difference. We need, in other words, a radically reflexive method that allows us to recognize our ancestors as ancestors and simultaneously helps us feel their absolute historical distance and difference.

And so, where Habermas refers in passing to what "sociologists have described [as] 'modernization of religious consciousness,'"16 Taylor’s evocation of the changes in background conditions that have brought about modern reflexivity lends itself to something much more intimate: an attempt to find a way around the "cold paraphrase" and describe what it feels like, in the first person, to live in a secular age. "I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival theories, that is, ways that people account for existence, or morality," Taylor writes. "Rather, what I want to do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it's like to live as a believer or an unbeliever" (SA, 4-5; my emphasis).

Einführung has its own problems, though—most obviously because if our knowledge and self-understanding are historical, then this must apply to the historical storyteller as well: the storyteller himself must be situated, and understand himself as situated. And this leads to a tension that A Secular Age never resolves but rather comes increasingly to exemplify. For at one and the same time, the book can be viewed as too secular and as too religious. Too secular, because it is of course radical reflexivity that is the crucial part of the story of secularity that Taylor himself is telling. The experience of the secular age, on his account, just is the experience of shifting back and forth between the first and the third person. Simply by virtue of living in the secular age, we find ourselves feeling our way deeply into peoples and places that are not our own; this is "the new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and the spiritual must proceed" (SA, 20). From this angle, the experience of reading A Secular Age becomes a working-through at the methodological level of the secular reflexivity whose historical genesis the book narrates.

At the very same time, however, the book’s methodological emphasis on the phenomenological feel of radical reflexivity can be read as a subtle tilting of the playing field in favor of Christianity. For when it comes to his description of the phenomenology of the secular, Taylor’s emphasis falls most upon those who wish to identify themselves as members of a religious tradition. In other words, the phenomenology in which Taylor is most interested is the phenomenology of a Christian in a secular age—the person who must live with the knowledge that his or her faith is an option. This comes directly from Taylor’s interest in the first-person perspective and the way he narrates its historical genesis as part of the expressivist turn. For if the only way to do history is to tell a story, and the only way to tell a story is to feel one’s way in, then from a certain perspective the only story that can be told is one’s own story—but if one tells it right, it will also be the story of one’s difference from every historical and cultural other, and so it is their story too.17 From this angle, the book seems to argue that Christianity is the best way to grasp the secular. To be sure, this is partly a historical thesis, for the official argument of the book is that Christianity "caused" the secular (in a very complicated and paradoxical way). But it is more than just a historical thesis: unofficially, as it were, Taylor seems to argue for the existential validity of Christianity as the best response to the secular age.

This tension between the book’s secularity and its Christianity remains unresolved. Indeed, the latter sections of A Secular Age are best read as a series of experiments in how one might best express, rather than resolve, this tension. And in this search, literature begins to do a considerable amount of work.

Literature

In Sources of the Self, Taylor describes and defends an “affirmation of ordinary life” as fundamental to modern selfhood. In A Secular Age he extends this theme, noting that the affirmation of ordinary life “put the center of gravity of goodness in ordinary living, production and the family. It belongs to this spiritual outlook that our first concern ought to be to increase life, relieve suffering, foster prosperity” (370). He traces the sources of this affirmation back to a variety of impulses, from the late medieval nominalist revolution to the Reformation to the humanist critique of religion that carried Western cul-

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16 Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 13.

17 For versions of the argument that one cannot legitimately route multicultural evenhandedness through a Christian phenomenology, see Jonathan Sheehan, "Framing the Middle," and Stathis Gourgouris, "A Case of Heteronomous Thinking," both at The Immanent Frame: www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/category/secular_age/.
tecture across the threshold into a truly immanent frame. On Taylor’s telling, such affirmation of ordinary life provokes a counter-Enlightenment response that seeks to return to traditional hierarchies, but it also inspires what Taylor calls an “immanent counter-Enlightenment” that reveres against a secular religion of life but remains on a worldly plane. The immanent counter-Enlightenment has two sources: first, a “continuing spiritual concern with the transcendent, which could never accept that flourishing human life was all there is, and brulled at the reduction” (371–372); and second, an aristocratic ethos, which “protested against the leveling effects of the culture of equality and benevolence” (372). Thus by the nineteenth century we have two different strands of the immanent counter-Enlightenment, one of which is Romantic, the other Nietzschean. Such reactions and counter-reactions are what Taylor means when he talks about a “nova effect.”

As Taylor tracks the multiplying possibilities of the nova in the second half of his book, it becomes clear that the Nietzschean strand (which he links to such latter-day figures as Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida) will not be asked to do much work; it seems to interest him mostly as a symptom of the nova. By contrast, it is clear that Taylor is taken with the Romantic strand—which, he writes, is “linked with a primacy of the aesthetic. Even where it rejects the category . . . it remains centrally concerned with art, and especially modern, post-Romantic art. Its big battalions within the modern academy are found in literature departments” (372). Whether or not this is empirically accurate,18 it highlights the increasing weight that literature will bear in Taylor’s account. This includes not just literary examples themselves (though from Wordsworth to Mrs. Humphry Ward to Hopkins, there are plenty of those), but also ways of putting things that can be traced back to literary forms of expression (Taylor’s archetypal example of fullness, for example, taken from Bede Griffiths, is unimaginable without Wordsworth’s “spots of time”) and finally theories of literature, from Schiller’s “play” to Shelley’s “subder lan-

guage.” In sum, “the literary,” in all its forms, emerges in the latter half of A Secular Age as a privileged window—perhaps the privileged window—into the inner workings of the varieties of secularism.

Most importantly for my argument here, the sense of difference that characterizes this nineteenth-century nova becomes lodged in the literary. Recall Herder’s worry that comparing disparate ways of life commits us to “cold paraphrase.” What drops out of a paraphrase, of course, is the poetry. Here the nation and its self-realization in the form of its characteristic linguistic expression comes under the wider banner of an emergent ideal of literature that simultaneously expresses the unique characteristics of a people and offers a “way in” to those characteristics for those who are outside. We can feel what it is like to be a member of a particular culture or nation if we can get past paraphrase to poetry.

In The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry (1782), Herder makes this case most dramatically. Explicitly indebted to the Englishman Robert Lowth’s claim that the Old Testament should be read as sublimely inspired poetry, Herder’s text also criticizes Lowth for not taking his ideas far enough.19 Like an enlightened northern European, Lowth paid too much attention to the letter; a proper understanding of the spirit of Hebrew poetry, Herder declared, would allow people to understand “the Hebrews” as if they were Hebrews themselves. Through poetry they could “feel their way in” to the lives of these quintessential Volk.20 In this text literature read just the right away emerges as the primary conduit of the empathetic historical understanding that was Herder’s lifelong aim, and the idea of reading the Bible as a literary work powerfully transforms both what counts as “literature” and what counts as “religion.”

Famously, Herder called attention to Hebrew’s lack of written vowels. In his account, the space between consonants, heard but not seen, becomes a window into the childhood of the human race. In the Treatise he refers to this as “writing the inessential and omitting the essential”; the essential song and poetry of the language is contained in the “breath” and “spirit” of the unseen

18 It would take an entire book to analyze why Taylor perceives literature departments as the primary carriers of such values as phenomenology, Erlebnis, historicism, and storytelling. Perhaps it will suffice to say for the moment that his appeal is made possible by the historical transformations that he is analyzing. That is, literature comes to be understood as a distinctive area of human endeavor during the period that Taylor calls the expressivist turn. Useful—though somewhat hostile—accounts of this transformation are to be found in Clifford Siskin, The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1790–1830 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), and John Guillory, Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).


vowels. Closer to nature, Hebrew is also closer to divinity: carried by breath and spirit, the vowels become a channel to the mysterious, ineffable manifestation of God. Blessedly caught in a time before abstraction, before scholarly systematization, Hebrew connects the modern reader to effects that cannot be precisely pointed to but only felt and experienced. In trying to describe this effect, Herder turns continually to the language of "breath," "spirit," and "soul." This is the spirit of Hebrew poetry, indeed "the very breath of the soul," in which the true spirit of a people allows itself to be heard. Poetry is spirit, and spirit is the "way in" to history.

At such moments poetry, scripture, and historical understanding become one. By 1800 Wordsworth is declaring in the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads that "poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge." (Wordsworth was a close reader of Lowth; he got his Herder indirectly, from Coleridge, via Michaelis and Eichhorn.) If Herder turns scripture into the literature of a specific folk, Wordsworth will make the language of the folk ("the language really used by men," he calls it in the "Preface") into the secret, hidden scripture of humanity itself.

If this gesture has an appeal for Wordsworth and Herder, it also has an appeal for Charles Taylor. And the appeal is once again third-person and first-person: the new spiritualization of literature is an example of the expressivist turn, but it is also a "way in" to that turn. In Sources of the Self, Taylor refers to several places where the lines between scripture and literature fade: Coleridge's famous definition of imagination from Chapter 13 of the Biographia Literaria, Schlegel's and Coleridge's definitions of the symbol, Schiller's notion of play. Summing up these ideas and developments, Taylor follows Shelley and calls them "subtler languages," languages that had to be developed poetically over the course of the expressivist turn in order to capture the new sensibility of an age in which the old, objective verities were losing their hold. Taylor gets the idea of the "subtler language" from the literary critic Earl Wasserman; he quotes the following passage from Wasserman’s 1968 book of

\[ \text{that title: "Until the end of the eighteenth century . . . men accepted . . . the Christian interpretation of history, the sacramentalism of nature, the Great Chain of Being, the analogy of the various planes of creation. . . . By the nineteenth century these world-pictures had passed from consciousness. . . . Now . . . an additional formulative act was required of the poet. . . . Within itself the modern poem must both formulate its cosmic syntax and shape the autonomous poetic reality that the cosmic syntax permits."} \]

And here is Taylor's gloss: "The Romantic poet has to articulate an original vision of the cosmos . . . . [Wordsworth and Hölderlin] make us aware of something through nature of which there are as yet no adequate words. The poems themselves are finding the words for us" (SA, 381).

In A Secular Age, Taylor quotes this very same passage from Wasserman, and he quotes his own gloss from Sources of the Self almost verbatim. But in the later book, the subtler languages emerge in the context of a discussion of "how the development of modern poetics . . . has enabled people to explore . . . meanings with their ontological commitments as it were in suspense" (SA, 351). These languages, Taylor continues, have "opened a space in which people can wander," created a "neutral zone" or "free space" (352) aligned with Schiller's notion of play (358), and in so doing they "offer a place to go for modern unbelief" (356).

What has happened here? Whereas the subtler languages became in Sources of the Self a crucial site of the modernity that the book largely defends, in A Secular Age Taylor seems to recognize in those languages a sensibility about which he is more ambivalent. In the form of aesthetic "neutrality," or "freedom," romanticism's subtler languages, unhooked from ontological commitments, begin to look a lot like secularism, and the fact that "the poems are finding words for us," as Taylor now phrases it, takes on a darker tone.

**Genealogies**

Taylor's differently inflected discussion of romantic literature in A Secular Age implies a methodological shift from "genetic" to "genealogical" history. The

21 Herder, Treatise on the Origin of Language, 70.
former method comes once again from Herder—the Fragments (1767) this
time—who had influentially recommended two principles of interpretation
to the historian. First, an action or creation must be seen as the product of a
specific time and place; second, we must understand such things from within
their own moment and according to their own internal rules. For any reader
of Herder, or any student of the expressivist turn in general, these will seem
familiar points, and they can certainly be folded back into the kind of phe-
nomenological empathy that Taylor recommends. The method of Sources of
the Self is genetic insofar as it seeks a historically sensitive explanation of mo-
dernity; though it eschews universals, it implicitly functions as a defense of
modernity’s “affirmation of ordinary life.” But genetic history can also be
radicalized, so that the historian’s empathy is directed not only at understand-
ing how the world was in its own terms, but also at how those terms render
other possibilities irrelevant and thereby continue to set the frame for our
thinking in the present day. Indeed, the method was radicalized in just this
way, by Nietzsche and again by Foucault, thinkers today associated with “ge-
nenalogical history.” For them, history is not in the service of present life but
in fact serves to put present life—its ways and habits of thought—at risk.

Now it is totally characteristic of Herder to be ambivalent about the im-
lications of his genetic method, for history of the kind he recommends is
pulled in two directions: toward a humanism whose apotheosis seems inevit-
able to be some version of Western (post-) Christian humanism, and toward
a genealogical critique whose aim is to separate itself from exactly that kind
of destiny. I hope it is clear by now that this is precisely the tension that I have
been tracking in A Secular Age. On the one hand, the dominant strand in this
book is the humanist one; on the other, when Taylor revisits his own earlier
analysis of the subtler languages, he implicitly suggests something less ge-
netic than genealogical.

The possibility of such a critique is muffled, however, by the way Taylor
construes the intellectual terrain. As we’ve seen, to the modern affirmation
of ordinary life—work, family, production, charity—he opposes the varied
forces of the immanent counter-Enlightenment: a romantic “concern with the
transcendent, which could never accept that flourishing human life was
all there is,” and a Nietzschean aristocratic contempt for ordinary human
flourishing. On my reading, this distinction is the methodological crux of the
book. Taylor has never had much use for Nietzschean antihumanism, yet it is
precisely that tradition’s interest in genealogy that would sharpen his analy-
sis; without it, his sometime impulse to criticize the secular age is deprived of
a methodological foundation. By the same token, the romantic humanist
strand that Taylor clearly loves, and to which he turns both for examples and
for intellectual sustenance, is perhaps less friendly to the book’s argument
than it may appear, for deprived of any genealogical edge, the romantic cri-
tique of enlightened secularity becomes simply a nostalgic desire for some-
ting more, some “spirit” of poetry that will open our mundane earthly lives
toward the transcendent.

What, then, would a genealogical reading of Taylor’s romantic human-
ism look like? It might begin simply by following the logic of Herder’s insis-
tence that cultures and nations are to be evaluated according to their own
time and place and by their own lights, and his importation of the spirit of
poetry as a magical connector between the interpreter and the nation he
would interpret. On the far side of this development, we might note, is a ren-
dering of the spirit of German Protestantism as a universal religion, the true
inheritor and developer of a heritage stretching back to the Hebrews—an
idea already implicit in Herder and developed fully by those who followed in
his wake, from Eichhorn to the Schlegels to, preeminently, Schleiermacher.

Yet because Protestant Christianity is thereby transformed into a universal
religion, it is also not really religion any longer. It is simply, as Herder writes, a
“subtle spirit, ‘a deism of human friendship,’ . . . [a] philosophy of heaven that,
precisely because of its loftiness and its unearthly purity, could embrace the
whole earth.” The metaphors Herder goes on to use are telling: Christianity
is the yeast that mixes with the dough of a particular nation or culture; it is
the “subtle vapor” mixed with earthly materials. Or as Wordsworth would
put it in a related context, Christian fellow-feeling is the “secret spirit of hu-
manity.”

The point to emphasize here is how secular these various spiritualizations
are. Whatever overt intentions motivated this simultaneous spiritualization
and nationalization of scripture, its effect was to replace the Bible as source

25 For Herder, see Olender, The Languages of Paradise, 39; for Schleiermacher, see Colin Jager,
26 Herder, This Too a Philosophy of History, 304.
of revelation with the Bible as a repository of "culture" and of poetic "resources." When Schiller’s "play" and Coleridge’s symbol find their institutional home in departments of national literatures, a hugely influential variety of secularism is institutionalized under the guise of the literary. From this genealogical perspective—which I am arguing is one that from time to time emerges in A Secular Age itself, a kind of counterspirit to its dominant spirit—simply taking the methodology of the expressivist turn on board is a secular move, even or perhaps especially when this is done in the name of respecting religion.

We are now in a position to understand at a deeper level why A Secular Age seems both too Christian and too secular. It is certainly the case that aspects of the book seem biased in favor of Christianity. Taylor’s expressivist turn may acknowledge the space of unbelief, the criticism goes, but it functions chiefly as an expression of yearning for some enchanted other world—and therefore implies that unbelief, no matter how poetic, is missing out on something. From the genealogical perspective I have just been outlining, however, some of the very same passages that seem to reflect a normative Christianity might also be understood to reflect a normative secularity, insofar as their turn to literature instantiates a particular transformation of scripture and poetry into a spirit whose fulfillment seems always just around the bend. That some readers may find the account too secular and others too Christian, then, is not simply a matter of different readers having different perspectives. It is, rather, a reflection of Christianity’s specific relation to secularism as that relationship is taken up and transformed by the secret spirit of poetry.

Charles Taylor’s Philosphic Song; or, Telling the Story Properly

My argument has been that the romantic method of A Secular Age both narrates the arrival of a modern "formation of the secular" and, read properly, provides the tools for its genealogical critique. This becomes clear, I have sug-

27 For elaborations of this argument, see Talal Asad’s reading of Clifford Geertz in Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 27–54; and Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," Public Culture 18, 2 (2006): 333–347. See also Asad’s reminder that "if the Bible is read as art... that is because a complicated historical development of disciplines and sensibilities has made it possible to do so." Formations of the Secular, 9.

truth of science. And if we could do that, disenchantment would be an empirical matter: we would know whether the story was true or false. In contrast to this scientific form of truth, Taylor remains interested in what I just called performative truth: if we tell that story about demons and science to ourselves, then it becomes a part of our self-understanding, and thus becomes true as a description of how we think about ourselves.

Now, it would be possible to describe the difference between enlightenment and romantic historicism in terms of this contrast between empirical truth and performative truth. Hume and the philosophes didn’t think they were telling stories; they thought they had discovered a basic fact about the way the mind works, and they developed techniques to explain it (the philosophes called it “priestcraft,” Hume called it the “natural history of religion”—these were the fMRI machines of their day). The picture here is of stripping away illusion to reveal truth.

If, by contrast, we consider disenchantment performatively rather than empirically, we would view the very prevalence of disenchantment stories as offering an important window into a culture’s self-understanding. Rather than the cultural universalism presupposed by the fMRI model, such an approach invites us to ask about the kind of work that disenchantment stories do within their “local” cultures. Who tells such stories, and to what ends? Of course, this means we still have to take disenchantment seriously—but it dispenses with the fMRI picture and substitutes a historicist one.

Historicism of this sort always courts conceptual relativism, but Taylor is after something else. “Just because we describe where we are in relating the journey,” he writes, “we can misdescribe it grievously by misidentifying the itinerary. That is what the ‘subtraction’ accounts of modernity have in fact done. To get straight where we are, we have to go back and tell the story properly” (SA, 29). To say this is to imagine, at least for a moment, that the situation can be changed, that we can weaken the power of the subtraction story and thereby alter how we understand ourselves, if we change the story in the right way.

The question is how one goes about changing the story—and it is just here that Taylor falls back on a relatively weak notion of romanticism as an attempt to reintroduce transcendence in the aftermath of the early modern scientific revolution. I call it a “weak notion” because this way of telling the story accepts that the terms of the debate have been set by an early modern consensus that rigorously separated the natural from the supernatural, the immanent from the transcendent, the rational from the irrational, and the scientific from the religious. Yet it is exactly the seemingly naturalness of these distinctions that going back and “telling the story properly” would dislodge. Telling the proper story, here, doesn’t mean telling a more accurate story; it means finding the essential thing that got lost or sidetracked the first time and highlighting that, and thereby telling a different story, with a different ending. This is a more radical rendering of the historicism that characterizes the expressivist turn. And, I’d like to suggest, it’s the meaning lurking in the shadows when Taylor writes that we have to go back and get the story right.

Recent revisionist work by Akeel Bilgrami, Michael Saler, and others suggests how we might tell a different story about enchantment. Saler reminds us that modern disenchantment has always been a relatively elite discourse, with limited appeal beyond certain enclaves—there is no reason to conclude that the modern world is especially disenchanted, notwithstanding all the voices telling us so. Bilgrami, meanwhile, develops a reading of enchantment as a critique of enlightened modernity that sprung up within modernity itself.29 Focusing in particular on the development toward the end of the seventeenth century of a resistance to “scientific rationality,” he highlights the deists, pantheists, and radical immanentists who dissented from Royal Society orthodoxy. Like Taylor, Bilgrami notes the profound irony that it was largely mainstream Christians who, for good pious reasons, removed magic from the world and installed it in a divine source understood as definitively outside the natural world, thereby stripping the world of meaning and delivering us into a disenchanted modern cosmos. Unlike Taylor, however, he finds resistance to this trend arising from within it, rather than retrospectively and in reaction to it. While Taylor interprets deism, for example, as part of the general trend toward disenchantment, Bilgrami understands it as a counternarrative to a developing scientific orthodoxy. The deistic dissenters were every bit as scientific as Newton and Boyle; what they objected to was “the official metaphysical picture that was growing around the new science,” according to which matter was brute and inert.30 The attitudes, the habits of mind, the forms of

rationality celebrated by this official metaphysical doctrine have real cultural
effect, and the disenchantment that trails behind them can be devastating.
On Bilgrami’s reading, the anti-Newtonians glimpsed this future—and that
makes them, despite their theologically heterodox opinions, better allies for
contemporary religious persons than the mainstream Royal Society
Christians who sought to preserve Christianity and wound up making it irrele-
vant.

Bilgrami here models a reading practice that looks simultaneously for-
ard and backward, that recommends we return to an early modern mo-
ment in order to see how its dissenters may have anticipated us. Taylor, by
contrast, tends to describe intellectual movements sequentially, so that the
immanent counter-Enlightenment can appear only after and in response to
the Enlightenment. “For many people, then as now,” he writes, deism “has
seemed to be a gratuitous reduction of human scope. There is a long train of
thinkers, from the Romantic period on, who have reacted against this excision of
the heroic dimension from human life” (SA, 231; my emphasis). Interestingly,
and symptomatically, Taylor’s syntax takes a reaction that seems at first to be
located in the early modern period itself (“then”) and refits it as a reaction of
“the Romantic period.” Bilgrami, by contrast, thinks that the reaction is part
and parcel of the early modern period.

This distinction between Bilgrami’s method and Taylor’s is consequen-
tial for the notion of going back and telling the story properly. For on Tay-
lor’s own testimony, a great deal rides on what story we go back and tell. It
matters whether the counternarrative to our secular age takes shape in the
late eighteenth century rather than the late seventeenth century. This is not,
or not only, because a lot happened during those one hundred years. More
crucially, it is because by missing or downplaying the immanent counter-
Enlightenment at the moment of its inception in the seventeenth century and
only picking it up in its later form, Taylor has in effect preordained that it will
appear only as romantic nostalgia or Nietzschean antihumanism. Yet that
very distinction, which is so crucial for Taylor’s account, is from the perspec-
tive of the seventeenth century an artificial one. In the past decade Jonathan

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31 For a spirited defense of anachronistic romantic history, see Jerome Christensen, Romanticism
at the End of History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

32 Jonathan I. Israel, Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750 (Ox-

33 On Spinoza and Wordsworth, see Marjorie Levinson, “A Motion and a Spirit: Romancing Spi-
According to Boyle, nature is inanimate; looking upon it as if it were endowed with life is the mistake characteristic of polytheists and idolators; the new science is the best defense against such a mistake because it has the courage of its literalism: it sees inanimate matter for what it is. According to Wordsworth, though, attitudes like Boyle's are actually examples of idolatrous thinking. To begin with the assumption that the world is meaningless or dead, and therefore that any meaning to be found there is a projection (to be rigorously policed by referring to it as merely a figure of speech), simultaneously "invents" the very possibility of idolatry and occludes other possible modes of experience by blocking the "vital functions" with which the world is shot through. To be a literalist about the world, to insist on calling things according to what they are, is not to be disenchanted but rather to make an idol of one's own supposedly disenchanted reason.

But what is poetic about this way of thinking? The notion that reason and illusion emerge together, Jarvis writes, is not "merely an opinion held by Wordsworth. It is undergone at the level of technique. It is central to the revolution in Wordsworth's way of writing poetry and thinking about poetry which takes place in the late 1790s." Or, to put this in Taylor's idiom, one cannot simply extract the analytic content from the story; the story has to be told, experienced, undergone, in order for its force to be felt. So philosophic song is not something to be mined for what its content might tell us about the spirit of the age. Rather, philosophic song is a mode of critical thought because it forces its readers to undergo the very thing it is describing.

This, I submit, is the secret spirit of A Secular Age. Officially, Taylor is a defender of humanism and of modernity's affirmation of ordinary life. He is ambivalent, however, about the secularity that is central to those developments. We may have gained much, but we have also lost something, and Taylor looks to romanticism and the expressivist turn in order to find language for what we have lost. Accordingly, he treats the literary texts to which he refers not as philosophic songs but rather as philosophy in verse, whose analytic content can be extracted. But secretly, in the shadows as it were, Taylor is looking for readers willing to undergo modernity with him, looking for readers who will experience the book as a form of poetic thinking, a story that
needs to be retold properly. In those shadows such a reader might catch a
glimpse of a different world, one in which Robert Boyle would be talking
nonsense rather than common sense. A different world, mounted on the
strength of some alternative and anachronistic history in which things had
somehow turned out otherwise. This secret desire is Charles Taylor's roman-
ticism.