Unquiet Things

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I spent my childhood in a picturesque New England village whose architecture, as it happens, bears witness to the argument of this book. On one side of the village green was the town hall, built in 1787, where the community’s business happened: here the selectmen had their offices, from here children graduated to bigger things, and here, every March, the townspeople gathered to complain about taxes, praise the road agent, and pass a budget. Less than a hundred yards away, on the other side of the common, stood the Congregational Church, where God’s business happened: Sunday morning worship, mostly, and the occasional wedding or funeral. Except for Sunday, the church was usually closed. Except for Sunday, the town hall was usually open. As I was growing up, that seemed the right and proper order of things.

But, like many such distinctions, this one has a history.

In the case of my hometown, that history covers the early decades of the nineteenth century. The town’s colonial-era founders, with their roots in England’s Nonconformist and Dissenting communities, had been reluctant to build something that looked like a church. Like the communities nearby, they built a meetinghouse instead—a simple, white rectangular building that could house both God’s business and the world’s business. It is unlikely that those early New England pioneers even made the analytic distinction between what we today call the “religious” and the “secular.”

By the 1820s, however, the increasing size and religious diversity of the village made it desirable to begin drawing some boundaries. It was not clear,
for example, whether the town itself owned the meetinghouse, or whether the various denominations worshipping in the building did, nor how to allocate its various needs and functions—a question that mattered when it came time to collect taxes. So in the late 1830s the largest denomination (Congregationalist) built a church on the other end of the common. Their new church looked like a church: unlike the meetinghouse, it had a steeple and a belfry and two doors in the gable end.1 And once the Congregationalists had moved out, others followed suit; Baptists, Methodists, and Seventh-Day Adventists, no longer tied to a single building, built their own churches. A diversified and clarified religious landscape followed in short order. And the meetinghouse, now emptied of religion, could become a town hall.

Though my subject here is Great Britain, not the United States, the naturalized separations that defined my New England childhood are much like the ones I consider in this book.2 Indeed, those separations were the cause of extensive commentary (and no small amount of self-congratulation) in and around eighteenth-century England. Voltaire, observing the English with admiration in 1733, remarked that “If there were only one religion in England, there would be danger of despotism, if there were only two they would cut each other’s throats; but there are thirty, and they live in peace.”3 Religious pluralism, Voltaire thought, kept violence at bay (which is all he meant by peace). Joseph Addison’s near-contemporary observation that there was “less appearance of religion in England than in any neighboring state, Catholic or Protestant” is only superficially opposed to Voltaire’s.4 It was the appearance of religion that Addison remarked on: the residue of a religious culture reduced now to a mere formality. Meanwhile, as Voltaire suggests, there was plenty of religion in England, but its very diversity meant that it was increasingly privatized; civil society was now organized by trade, not religious conformity. As they went about their daily business in the market, the field, or the coffee shop, the English kept their religion, or lack of it, to themselves.

The metaphorical and literal space between the church and the town hall, the conceptual separation of religion and commerce—these distinctions characterize a modernity on whose modalities social scientists largely agree: rationalization and capitalism, industrialization and alienation, social and cultural differentiation, the autonomous subject, the power of science, the growth of
cities, the advent of the liberal democratic state. The privatization of religion is perhaps the most salient factor of all, for it made possible the nation-state and the development of a market economy. Yet religion’s role has typically been understood as transitional: however various in detail, most accounts of modernity agreed that by the twentieth century religion was a relic of the past, that it held on in some places only because the project of modernity was still incomplete, and that the inverse relationship of religion to modernity in Western Europe offered a template for the rest of the globe. Whether tinged with nostalgia or colored by triumph, this is a progressive narrative. It may contrast duplicity, superstition, and dogmatism with truth, science, and liberalism, or it may mourn alienation, the loss of connection, and the decline of magic; but in either case it left little room for the old enchantments, except perhaps as entertainment.

Paradoxically, however, the transformations that contained and privatized religion also made it more visible and more unruly. As Jose Casanova remarked some years ago, “What was new and unexpected in the 1980s” was the increasingly public role adopted by religious traditions whose demise had been widely predicted. “[R]eligious traditions throughout the world,” he continued, “are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.” Casanova’s target was the notion that all nations and cultures would eventually modernize, and secularize, according to a European model. As he and others began pointing out, many of the world’s most rapidly modernizing societies—that is, those across the “global south”—were, at least for now, among its most religious. Reviewing the current data in 2008, Philip Gorski and Ates Altinordu concluded that far from retreating into private life, “traditional, transcendent religion has become a key cleavage in domestic and international politics”—an observation that ought to surprise no one who regularly scans the news.

What we typically mean by “modernity”—liberal, capitalist, secular, democratic—is not, it turns out, a universal aspiration, not even in the West, its supposed home. Moreover, as scholars working on “alternative” or “multiple” modernities have helped us to see, convergence theories of modernization give scant analytic attention to the force of local culture and its ability to take up and transform such aspects of modernity as the market society. And even more, convergence theories make it too easy to forget that aspects of what we call “modernity” have existed in other times (premodern, “traditional”) and places. Given the multivalent and finally provincial character of
European-style modernity, it seems likely that religion could be “reposi-
tioned” and differentiated within a secular world and yet find or create for
itself new forms of social significance. And given the very real constraints
imposed by modernization, that significance may appear in noisy or, as I
term it here, unquiet, forms.

Thus the present book, whose title comes from Samuel Taylor Cole-
ridge’s magnificent poem “Frost at Midnight” (1798). Coleridge writes there
of one who, awake while everyone else sleeps, watches the film in his grate
flutter and flap, the “sole unquiet thing” in his otherwise silent house. This
restless film—not even a proper flame but a residue or ghost, pushed around
by invisible air currents—inspires a mental journey through the speaker’s
own earlier life, and leads thereby to a series of hopes for his infant son,
slumbering nearby in his cradle. The poem ends where it began, with the
opening silence transformed into the “secret ministry” of the frost, hanging
up its “silent icicles.” However basically humanist the poem’s ultimate sym-
pathies, one cannot but be struck by the flickering disturbances it registers,
from the flapping ghost of flame to a silence that is so silent that it “disturbs”
and “vexes” meditation; even the secret, icy ministry of the frost is faintly
sinister. Like so many romantic-era literary productions, Coleridge’s poem
permits us to enjoy its quiet finish, but invites us also to be caught by the
“unquiet” that conditions it. In doing so, the poem allows me to pose the
two questions that direct this study: By what means has the noise been ban-
ished? And are there frequencies at which those of us living in a secular age
can nonetheless perceive its disquiet?

The short answers to these questions are “Reform” and “Yes: romantic
literature.” The longer answers unfold over the course of this book.

Unquiet Things is a study of secularism during the romantic era. It treats
some of the major writers of the British romantic period: Jane Austen, Sam-
By subtitling the book Secularism in the Romantic Age, however, I indicate
that the relationship between secularism and romanticism is not confined to
a particular set of chronological dates. The last quarter of the twentieth cen-
tury was marked by a remarkable and (to some) surprising resurgence in the
public role of religion worldwide, a wave that has only increased during the
early decades of the twenty-first century. What this means has been a matter
of ongoing controversy. But it is clear that we have learned how to think
about such phenomena from the writers and thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when secularism had achieved the kind of cultural and intellectual importance that began to allow for some critical reflection. In part this is the story of romanticism’s complex relationship to nationalism, whose conditions were set by the Westphalian model of the nation state as a container for religion. In part this is the story of romanticism’s penchant both for history and for its losers—the anachronistic, the out-of-step, the people or cultural formations who in some fashion or other will be forced to adjust to the new reality. And in part this is the story of the invention of literature as we know it today: the great romantic-era thinkers, from Herder to Schleiermacher to Coleridge, inaugurated, systematized, and institutionalized a decisive shift toward appreciating the Bible’s figurative, symbolic, and metaphorical resources, developing along the way a method for reading what was increasingly coming to be called “literature.” In all these important senses we are still living in the “romantic age.”

The association of romanticism with religion goes back almost a century, to T. E. Hulme’s famous pronouncement that romanticism was “spilt religion” and Irving Babbitt’s denunciation of it as a “sham spirituality.” In the 1960s Earl Wasserman and M. H. Abrams redrew that picture by arguing that romanticism was an example of secularization. Wasserman found in romanticism a “new poetic syntax” suitable to a postmetaphysical age, while Abrams saw it as a “secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking.” Abrams meant not that religion was disappearing during the early nineteenth century but that it was being transformed: not “the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises,” he explained.

The deconstructive and historicist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s tended to leave the association between religious decline and modernity intact while positioning romanticism as obscuring rather than facilitating that connection. Then in the 1990s a new wave of historicizing studies by Iain McCalman, Robert J. Ryan, and Martin Priestman restored to romanticism a richer and more diversified religious landscape. Though various in their attitudes toward secularization, these books brought religion back into the conversation—but at the cost of treating it largely as a set of cognitive beliefs or mental dispositions. Only with a second wave of scholarship in the 2000s did literary criticism begin to absorb the lessons of scholars from other disciplines—history, anthropology, and religious studies—who were turning
their attention to the historical and discursive constructions of both religion and secularism.\textsuperscript{15} Those scholars reminded us that religion was not some “thing” in the world but rather a mobile discourse that answered particular needs at particular historical moments; that for Europe the crucial moment was an early modern crisis of authority within Christianity, and that around this time a newer, more cognitive definition of religion made it possible to invent “religions,” in the plural, in order to name those activities and postures that characterized Europe’s Others.\textsuperscript{16} And they reminded us, too, that secularization could not be understood as a simple subtraction story, as though the modern secular self was always there, waiting to be liberated from false beliefs; that secularism was not a neutral governance structure but had its own interests, authorizing certain kinds of subjects and marginalizing others; that secularism was complexly intertwined with a particular religion (Christianity); that as part of that relationship it produced, at a certain historical moment, the apparently natural distinction between the religious and the secular; and that as a product of these contingent historical events secularism did not travel especially well.\textsuperscript{17}

Contemporary scholarship directed at the confluence of what used to be called “religion and literature” therefore finds itself in a state of productive disequilibrium, since neither term seems to exist in the stable way that makes investigation easy. We continue to require genealogies that place both terms within the broader interpretive framework of what Charles Taylor calls the “secular age.”\textsuperscript{18} To be sure, the history and politics of secularism extend beyond romanticism, and beyond literary studies. Yet the following pages seek to demonstrate that literary culture of the long romantic period gave to the secular a particular and influential spin. It is romanticism that invented “difference,” including religious and cultural difference, as we know it today; it is romanticism whose historical sensibility began to shape the way that we moderns look back at what used to be called the “age of faith”; it is romanticism that is largely responsible for transforming Christian hermeneutics into secular appreciation for the poetic resources of a tradition; it is romanticism that first took account, conceptually, ethically, and politically, of the changes wrought by Enlightenment culture. And because of all of these developments, it is romanticism that is best positioned to speak to our present moment, for the issues and problems it first identified and posed in recognizably modern form remain our issues and problems, even though much has changed since Percy Shelley declared that the language of the poets “marks the before unapprehended relations of things.”\textsuperscript{19} In the romantic period, poetry (in the
expansive definition Shelley gave to it, namely as the human faculty of *poiesis*) constitutes itself as *the* privileged, nondoctrinal place from which to speak about unexpected and surprising relations. It is with that capacity in mind that one can speak, not of “romanticism in a secular age,” as though the latter term can capture and explain the former, but of “secularism in the romantic age.”

But this is to begin in medias res. In order to begin at the beginning, I have found it necessary to start with the changes imposed on the English nation by King Henry VIII. Chapter 1, “The Power of the Prince,” shows that those changes involve, first of all, a literal secularization: between 1538 and 1540 Henry’s government suppressed over 400 monasteries and abbeys, claiming their wealth and land for the Crown, refounding some as secular cathedrals, giving others away as gifts, and letting some decay into picturesque ruins. This deliberate “worlding” of the formerly sacred, while dramatic enough in its own right, was part of something bigger: a large-scale movement of Reform across early modern Europe. That movement includes both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, but encompasses also slower and subtler processes involving the adjustment of manners, bodily comportment, mental states, and notions of citizenship—all of which bolstered a rapidly centralizing state, including both absolutist and constitutional monarchies and issuing, eventually, in the kind of “bio-power” that Michel Foucault names as the characteristic of modern democracies. Reform involved the making over of an entire society to higher standards, principally by ensuring that people had similar beliefs, were subject to plainer and more instrumental truths, and kept under better surveillance. Crucially, this meant the elimination of folk practices, superstitions, celebrations, and feasts. Reform did not target religion specifically; it was not first of all a doctrinal or theological innovation but a worldly one, indeed something much closer to what Foucault calls “governmentality” than to our textbook assumptions about religious reformers setting the landscape ablaze in service to fanatical convictions.

This is a simple but crucial fact, one often forgotten or ignored amid the so-called “turn to religion” in the literary humanities: that *secularism is not first and foremost about religion* but concerns instead power—its consolidation and streamlining, its dispersal and diffusion. Within this framework, religion is often a useful counter in a complex series of worldly maneuvers.
Part I of this book, then, tracks the figure of King Henry VIII: in the first chapter he is the historical actor who changed the landscape of England and tried to remake the sensory capacities of his subjects; in the second and third chapters he is a figure for the melancholy and ambivalence that by the eighteenth century surrounds the very changes with which he is linked. One connecting thread is Shakespeare’s play *Henry VIII*, immensely popular throughout the eighteenth century, a literary production that brilliantly highlights the great difficulty in saying just exactly what Henry’s reforms *did* mean for the nation. I take up this question in Chapter 2, “The Melancholy of the Secular,” which turns to Horace Walpole’s 1764 gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*—a book clearly modeled on Shakespeare’s play (just as Horace’s father, Robert Walpole, was frequently compared to Cardinal Wolsey, Henry’s lord chancellor). I interpret the note of melancholy on which the book concludes as a rejection of the manliness officially celebrated at the close of *Henry VIII*. Rather than helping to consolidate the link between family and nation, Walpole’s hero Theodore opts out of heterosexual reproduction altogether, suggesting that Henrician Reform, far from setting the nation on a smooth path toward Protestantism and prosperity, yields instead an iterated series of succession crises. In its resistance to the marriage plot and to the notion of an unproblematic destiny, Theodore’s melancholy is an example of the “unquiet things” created by the very process of Reform itself.

In Chapter 3, “Wishing for Nothing: *Emma* and the Dissolution,” I follow the long arc of reforming pressure into the early years of the nineteenth century. In Jane Austen’s 1815 novel it is of course Donwell Abbey itself, home of Mr. Knightley and the ideological center of the narrative, that reactivates the history of Reform. To grasp this is to grasp also the politics of the novel’s generic argument against romance, for though Mr. Knightley is in many ways the ideal landowner in his attention to detail, he adamantly refuses any hint of the festive—not only Mrs. Elton’s silly plans for donkeys and picnics, but also Frank’s love of dancing, Emma’s high spirits, Harriet’s overactive libido, and whatever lingering residue of free movement is left to the rural populace. “Quiet” is Mr. Knightley’s watchword, and he is so effective in carrying out his reforms that there seems, by the end of the novel, very little to do and hardly any place to go. To learn to be content with nowhere to go and “nothing” to do, Austen’s narrator continually reminds us, is to learn how to read a realist novel.

Foucault has taught us to look for power in its effects, and scholars have applied that idea to the secular, which is “best approached indirectly,” as
Talal Asad remarks. I, too, argue that secularism is not primarily about religion but about the reform (or regulation, if you like) of what I call here “unquiet things.” But I also make a particular kind of claim for literary representation: that a play like Henry VIII complicates the telos of a reforming narrative posited as inevitable; that in so doing it enables us to tune in the voices of a secular age; that otherwise those voices would be hard to hear because of their tendency to slip quietly into the background. This background or ambience is what Taylor calls the “immanent frame” of the modern secular with its celebration of ordinary life, or what Coleridge in “Frost at Midnight” calls “all the numberless goings-on of life, / Inaudible as dreams!” (lines 12–13). Coleridge’s poem works hard to count those goings-on and to make them audible, chiefly by registering their effects on him as he sits before the fire. The unquiet film at which the speaker gazes can also serve, then, as an example of my method here: the film moves not because of any observable contact but because of the invisible movements of air and heat in the surrounding environment. Call that surrounding environment the secular, and call the film literature. In this book the air currents that move the film are varied: governmental power, travel narratives, literary realism, close reading, metaphor, atheism. Yet within the static, the ambient noise, the alternative frequency, or what the poem names the “puny flaps and freaks” created by the moving air, we can hear the particular kind of unquiet that is my theme.

The dominant mood of this first section is melancholy. Like Thomas Pfau, I think that attention to moods, to climates of feeling, allows criticism to address “the deep-structural situatedness of individuals within history as something never actually intelligible to them in fully coherent, timely, and definitive form.” Like secularism, then, the historical content of a mood must be traced in its effects. Melancholy is a particularly complex mood since it seems to have no origin and no solution. Yet in his study of baroque tragic drama, Walter Benjamin identifies three elements that lead to its characteristic melancholy. First, baroque tragedy is simultaneously worldly and uncertain: “The religious man of the baroque era clings so tightly to the world because of the feeling that he is being driven along to a cataract with it.” The era may have invented absolutism as compensation for this lack of discernable order, yet baroque tragedy returns again and again to the indecisive tyrant and the “sheer arbitrariness of the constantly shifting emotional storm” that characterizes his inactions (66). Second, while classical tragedy does not require an audience, baroque tragedy does. It is ceremonial and
ostentatious, and marked by a certain extravagance: “The spectator of tragedy is summoned, and is justified, by the tragedy itself; the Trauerspiel, in contrast, has to be understood from the point of view of the onlooker” (119). And third, baroque tragedy is characterized by acedia (boredom, “world-sadness”), a restlessness that does not permit one to settle on any one thing, even though the world is full of things to which one might commit oneself. Together these aspects create the Trauerspiel’s dominant melancholic mood.

Such melancholy, with its component parts of indecisiveness, ostentation, and boredom, may seem like the polar opposite to a Foucaultian narrative of ever more effective and minutely adjusted Reforming power that I have been emphasizing. And yet we can see how the one might produce the other: the narrative of Henrician Reform highlights an increase in state power, but Henry himself, especially as figured by Shakespeare and Walpole, looks more like a mystified baroque prince than a decisive leader; meanwhile the ostentatious showiness, bordering on camp, that characterizes the worlds of Shakespeare and Walpole has less to do with governmentality than with a compensation for the loss of passageways between heaven and earth. Finally, Theodore’s melancholy and Emma’s acedia become the dominant moods of Walpole’s and Austen’s novels. In books that end by re-writing the eschatology of the marriage-plot into bleakly reiterative reminders that nothing more is needed, melancholy is the primary objection to the various eschatological and teleological plots to which these characters find themselves bound. Benjamin captures the dialectical and class-based nature of this mood when he writes that “by making the secular-political sphere a testing ground for a life that was only indirectly religious” the baroque might “instill into the people a strict sense of obedience to duty, but in its great men it produced melancholy” (138). Melancholy is not the same thing as nostalgia; as the imaginative postulation of a fullness already foreclosed upon, its discontent is temporally and emotionally complex. Secularism-as-governmentality is all too real in this first section of the book, then, but so too is discontent with that formation—and this is the other half of the story I wish to tell.

In a very literal sense Henry VIII imposed secularization on England. He removed property, power, and authority from the church and put them in worldly hands. And his reforms also prepared the ground for secularism, a set of opinions, beliefs, and institutional protocols involving the proper relation of church and state. But it is to the secular itself that I wish first to draw attention: to a pretheoretical way of life that bequeathed to modernity a particular phenomenology. Something of that phenomenology is captured in
this book’s cover image, Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *Monk by the Sea* (1810), which shows a lone figure, his back to the viewer, contemplating a rough ocean and an ominous sky. The monk, set low in the frame, is diminished by the vast landscape and seascape, which are in turn immense without being sublime; they are simply omnipresent, as though foreground and background have slipped away into a kind of middle distance, while the energy of the painting is itself distributed horizontally rather than vertically. The familiar romantic association between art and religion remains intact here, but the monk/artist figure looks out at the world neither in mastery nor in worship, but rather with something more akin to *anomie* or melancholy.

We live in the secular before we cogitate about it. To ask what kinds of experiences—in particular what bodily experiences—the secular facilitates is to shift the focus from what the secular is to what it does, and to the powers and possibilities it both permits and prevents. In “Frost at Midnight,” it is the “stern . . . face” (line 37) of the teacher—easily read as a figure of Reform—that first encourages the poem’s speaker to turn to the fluttering film for solace; later, when he is an adult who has supposedly put away such childish fancies, the dream somehow remains, and the flickering, moving film still figures the “unquiet things” of a folk superstition that will not die, even in the midst of an overwhelming silence. Indeed, the speaker describes the stillness of midnight and the steady breathing of his sleeping child as “strange / And extreme” (lines 9–10), as though order holds within itself the potential for disorder. Here, the pitch and frequency of the secular age are transmitted from the very center of a culture.

While Part I of *Unquiet Things* attends to discontent with the pretheoretical background of the secular, Part II turns to discontent with the theory itself. We all know the familiar story: beginning in the seventeenth century and accelerating throughout the eighteenth, political liberalism and the discourses of toleration slowly brought peace to a war-torn Europe by privatizing religion and subsuming it beneath the sovereign power of the modern state. “[A]lmost all those tragical revolutions which have exercised Christendom these many years have turned upon this hinge, that there hath been no design so wicked which hath not worn the vizor of religion,” wrote John Locke in 1660. “All those flames that have made such havoc and desolation in Europe, and have not been quenched but with the blood of so many millions, have been at first kindled with coals from the altar.”

Locke was thinking most
immediately of the English Civil War but also reflecting on the bloodshed of the prior 150 years. Apparently the reorganized religious landscape of the early modern period led not to peace but to havoc and desolation. Locke blames religion for this: people are more likely to be duped into violent acts if someone is blowing on the coals. Thus “religious violence” is the problem that the nation-state and its slowly developing discourses of liberalism and tolerance will be called on to solve. “[N]one ever went about to ruin the state but with pretense to build the temple,” is how Locke pithily phrases it, as though religion were the innovation, and the state the neutral ground on which it imposed. This remains the dominant assumption of liberal political theory. “First, and central, were the problems caused by religion” writes Ross Harrison of the early modern period. And for John Rawls, political liberalism begins “in the Reformation and its aftermath, with the long controversies over religious toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” Although modern commentators may differently imagine the relationship between religion and the state, they tend to agree with Locke that religion is intrinsically divisive. Henceforth peace will be a secular business, presided over by a secular state—peace here meaning simply the absence of war.

In the past decade, however, a revisionist alternative to this liberal story has gained some traction. Inspired by earlier critiques of liberalism as a form of governmentality (Foucault) or violence (Benjamin, Derrida), the revisionists propose that the directional arrow actually runs the other way: it is not the nation-state that brings a halt to religious violence, but religious violence that is the result of the nation-state. Religion, on such an account, is thus contingently rather than necessarily divisive. This narrative has come from two directions. Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, and William Cavanaugh, basing their arguments on a theological tradition oriented toward peace rather than conflict, have argued that the nation-state is at best a manager of violence, the most successful player in a Machiavellian world where force is primary and must be met with counterforce. In a more Foucauldian vein, meanwhile, scholars like Talal Asad and Wendy Brown have analyzed the violence that adheres even in liberal practices of lawmaking. Religion in its modern form, they note, is in fact a creation of the liberal state. Both groups of critics converge on the claim that the nation-state, usually presented as a savior from religious violence, is actually part of the problem. From time to time political interests, particularly in trade and finance, may be more efficiently advanced through peace, but it is the violence of war, or the threat of violence embodied in the law, that preserves identity, territory, and sovereignty.
Is the modern state a bringer of peace, then, or a site of violence (even if that violence is sometimes presented as toleration)? In the middle section of the book I discuss three authors—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walter Scott, and James Hogg—who took up the challenge of measuring the new, secular arrangement of religion and state made possible by the work of Reform and by new arrangements of power. Writing in the early years of the nineteenth century, they each begin their thinking from the turning point of 1688/1689, the so-called Glorious Revolution, when England chased out its Catholic king, welcomed William and Mary to the throne, and ushered in a tolerant, latitudinarian regime that set the nation on a secular course of peace and prosperity. Much of Coleridge’s prose, particularly his defense of the established church as an instrument of toleration, seems to continue this project into the nineteenth century. But in Chapter 4, “Coleridge at Sea,” I argue that his great poem “Kubla Khan,” far from aligning seamlessly with the progressive narrative of 1688, in fact reaches back over the eighteenth century into the more unsettled seventeenth. The poem’s supposed source in Purchas’s Pilgrimage, the most popular travel book of the seventeenth century, has long been a critical commonplace, but Coleridge uses Purchas for more than a few impressive images. In my account, “Kubla Khan” is best read as a report of the modern invention of “religion” itself—its invention, that is to say, as something dark and irrational that sits uneasily, if at all, within the tolerant confines of the liberal nation-state.

Chapter 5, “Hippogriffs in the Library,” continues to explore the legitimacy of eighteenth-century toleration discourse. It begins with a discussion of David Hume and William Warburton, combatants in the polite world of eighteenth-century letters. Though they officially disagreed on much, the skeptical Hume and the orthodox Warburton agree that the movements of history foreclose on any return to the world before 1688. This progressive narrative, however, consistently produces its spectral negation, a revolutionary possibility that becomes increasingly fantastic over the course of the eighteenth century. What to do with such possibilities is a question taken up by the historical novel and especially by Walter Scott, an enthusiastic proponent of toleration who uses his novels to narrate the settling of possibility into probability, romance into history, the enchantments of unrealistic fantasy into the enchantments of worldly life. Yet even Waverley (1814), the novel that inaugurated this tradition so powerfully, registers its hero’s lingering “sigh” for a life that cannot be his. Waverley is sighing in particular for the Jacobite rebellion, the dream or fantasy of a great reversal that haunted
Britain’s progressive and prosperous eighteenth century. So long as it remains possible to imagine the return of the Stuart monarchs and the final undoing of the 1688 consensus, just so long does history remain alive as a field of contested and contingent forces rather than simply the site of a teleological unfolding. By the time of *Rob Roy* (1817), Scott’s narrator seems to have taken this argument to heart, for in this novel modernity itself is a curious mixture of magical thinking and instrumental rationality. Rather than pitching Jacobitism against the present moment, this retelling of the 1715 rebellion suggests that Jacobitism is one of the ways that Scotland has of *being* modern.32 Even rebellion becomes, in this handling, less an example of romantic nostalgia than a particularly compelling way to oppose the realist impulse to organize and manage change.

This is the logic of minoritization, and it is the dominant theme of the middle chapters of this book. Chapter 6, “The Creation of Religious Minorities,” turns to Scottish Presbyterianism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and to James Hogg’s remarkable novel about those years, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Hogg’s treatment of religious history showcases a different kind of resistance to the moderate Enlightenment, one that takes its inspiration from the political covenantalism of seventeenth-century Calvinism rather than the monarchism of the Jacobite rebellions. Hogg’s novel traces the career of a Scottish Covenanting family in the years 1687 to 1712, in the aftermath of the so-called Killing Times, when Presbyterian sectaries were harassed and murdered in a campaign of terror licensed by an English government intent on subduing anticolonial resistance. The novel presents the same story twice, first in the voice of a nineteenth-century “editor” and then in the voice of Robert Wringhim, a young Covenanter who embarks on a reign of terror and mayhem. Though it is typically read as an indictment of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, *Justified Sinner* is also a powerful condemnation of the violence of the state—what Walter Benjamin called “mythic violence,” the violence that is administrative and law-establishing. Benjamin insists that such violence is more than metaphorical; like actual physical violence, it wields power over mere life for its own sake. Both Hogg and Benjamin suggest that the majority/minority dynamics of the modern state have a tendency to produce rather than suppress religious violence; and in their shared fascination with temporalities that loop or double rather than progress in a linear fashion, both writers point to ways of organizing a life that interrupt the “empty, homogeneous time” of the secular nation-state.33
In her remarkable study *Outside the Fold*, Gauri Viswanathan shows how conversion, especially to minority religious positions, serves as a form of resistance to the official (and frequently colonial) state. Treating conversion at one remove (the visionary poet, the Jacobite, the Covenanter), the texts by Coleridge, Scott, and Hogg that I examine here all show how, in Viswanathan’s words, “In much the same way that religious belief is placed outside public discourse, it is also evident that, in a parallel historical process, the content of minority religions is placed outside the space of national culture.” This process, she goes on, makes it difficult to grasp the worldliness of those minority positions: they seem to reside in a premodern or nonmodern space, set apart from the shared social world. The middle section of *Unquiet Things* describes the way in which the worldliness of these minority positions unsettles settled arrangements of power and self-assured declarations of historical progress.

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes the modern self as a “buffered self,” for whom “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.” He contrasts this to a premodern “porous self” open to the powerful forces of a spiritual or magical realm not necessarily isomorphic with Christianity. Taylor proposes that a buffered self relates to religion mostly as a belief that it owns, or that it has lost, or from which it can opt out. Indeed, the felt sense that we *can* opt out is, for Taylor, the central phenomenological fact of the secular age, and accounts for both the intensity and the fragility of religious faith in the modern age: we feel how many other people there are, very like us in numerous ways, whom we like or respect or feel close to, yet who believe differently than we do. Taylor writes that this is now a condition of our lived experience: reflexive distance even from those things that seem to us most intimate.

This may seem like speculative or conjectural history. Indeed, the real story is a good deal messier than Taylor implies, and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were in fact home to a variety of creative struggles—intellectual, aesthetic, and political—within and against the developing modern order. But whatever its problems, Taylor’s history shares with the writers considered in the final section of this book a sense that we now confront a domain of buffered selves, of minds set apart from the world in a distinct
way. The construal of religion as a set of cognitive beliefs, the political development known as confessionalization, the intellectual innovations that Stephen Toulmin calls the “quest for certainty,” and the social transformation that Philip Gorski calls the “disciplinary revolution,” had, by the early years of the nineteenth century, made possible a new set of intimate relations among individual subjects, their religion, and the nation-state. And so the writers and critics of the romantic era felt themselves to be confronting a world uniquely inhospitable to alternative ways of organizing bodily and spiritual life. It was against the political and social consequences of the buffered self that many of them understood themselves to be writing—and this is why their interventions can look so very much like an alternative religion.

The final section of the book explores the paradoxes and contradictions of this picture of the buffered self. Chapter 7, “Byron and the Paradox of Reading,” turns to *The Giaour*, Lord Byron’s poetic romance about the confrontation between romantic pluralism and the kind of antimodernism that we know as fundamentalism (and that the eighteenth century knew as fanaticism). Picking up on some of the threads already woven through my discussion of Hogg’s *Justified Sinner*, I interpret Byron’s poem as an acute meditation on the mutually constitutive character of fanaticism and pluralism. This is not because pluralism is unable to muster a sustained critique of fanaticism, as many on both the left and right argue today, but for the very opposite reason: in Byron’s poem, pluralism harbors at its core a violence indistinguishable from that of its fanatical rival. The stateless and nameless Giaour thinks of himself as a cosmopolitan citizen of a world utterly different from that of Hassan, his stereotypical Muslim adversary; and yet the poem insists that the two men share a great deal, especially their indifference to the plight of Leila, the woman each claims as his own.

Multicultural pluralism may be limited by its philosophical roots in a romantic cultural relativism, then, but *The Giaour* suggests that the cosmopolitan alternative has its own limitations and its own, largely disavowed, violence. Chapter 8, “The Constellations of Romantic Religion,” continues to explore this problematic by tracing the career of what I call “romantic religion”—a nondoctrinal spirituality simultaneously everywhere and nowhere—from its development in the eighteenth-century linguistic theories of Robert Lowth and J. G. Herder to its full-blown essentialization in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *On Religion* and then to its critique in Friedrich Schlegel’s meditations on the fragment. I end the chapter with Percy Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam*, highlighting the moment when the heroine Cythna learns to forgo
her dreams of secular freedom in place of a different and more vexed practice that she describes as a “subtler language within language.” With this phrase, politically modest but theoretically sophisticated, Cythna finds the voice that Leila, the dead woman of *The Giaour*, is never granted.

Conceptually, these two chapters work together to explore some of the complicated issues surrounding the politics of secularism in the context of a world that for all our talk of globalization remains nonetheless strongly tied to both the idea and the institutional power of the nation-state. Byron’s poem offers an internal critique of its own fantasy of a cosmopolitan life able to transcend the limitations of a traditional culture; the career of romantic religion likewise points to the way that global and local interpenetrate. Both chapters, then, argue against the tendency to locate “culture” within the boundaries of the nation-state. This is because the nation-state is the prime carrier of secular modernity, and so resistance will have to come from somewhere other than alternatives already theorized in advance as private: those activities constructed as religious, to be sure, but also the remnants of the carnivalesque itself, understood today largely as a zone of personal self-exploration, artistic creation, and spiritual experimentation held securely within the container of a state whose boundaries are porous to capital but buffered to everything else.

I locate that “someplace other” at the confluence of *metaphor* and *becoming-minor*, the two terms that define the final third of the book. Theories of metaphor are legion, of course, but most definitions recognize the surprising coincidence or juxtaposition of unlike things, and the process by which language makes new meanings by carrying one set of referents across to another. “Becoming-minor,” meanwhile, is a term developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to describe the way Kafka worked within the interstices of German to bring out a hidden or occluded story vibrating within the confines of a dominant language. “Unquiet,” as I develop it over the course of this book, is a similarly interstitial or immanent critique of the surrounding secular quiet, a way of marking things that exceed the spaces marked out for them. As registers of resistance and as theoretical interventions, unquiet things reject the distinction between politics, on the one hand, and aesthetic or spiritual self-fashioning, on the other. In this respect, Cythna’s subtler language offers a sophisticated and conceptually rich theorization of an alternative, what I describe in Chapter 8 as a practice of making room for others while eschewing the political languages of “freedom” to which resistance had been traditionally committed. It is, crucially, a language that
arises through a process of self-criticism, but self-criticism made possible in this case by its transposition out of Europe and into an exotic, Orientalized clime.

In this age of globalized public religion it has become fashionable in some quarters to plead for a return of the Enlightenment. We need another Hobbes, or another Voltaire. Joined to that thought is generally another one: that what came after the Enlightenment—that is, romanticism—is in some indirect way responsible for what currently ails us: our reflexive obeisance to identity, difference, and cultural autonomy, and our collective failure of nerve when it comes time to stand up for universal values. One encounters this thought across the ideological spectrum. For liberals like Mark Lilla, the broad romantic tradition stretching from Rousseau through Schleiermacher to nineteenth-century German theology discovered the power of individual consciousness and wedded it to notions of cultural and national difference, thereby unleashing a series of political messianisms—nationalism, communism, fascism, and fundamentalism—that it was unequipped to handle. Neoconservatives have sounded a similar theme at a higher frequency. Thus Samuel Huntington, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Niall Ferguson, and policy institutes such as the Rand Corporation have argued in recent years that the defense of the Enlightenment and the defeat of terrorism require that we repudiate our romantic impulses in favor of a militant—and military-backed—secularism. For them, the line from romanticism to “Islamo-fascism” is apparently easy to see, and the Enlightenment our only hope for combatting it. Even elements of the academic Left have begun calling for a critique of multiculturalism from the standpoint of a democratic universalism. Ideological differences aside, these parallel movements share a structure according to which romanticism is a stalking horse for ethnic tribalism and the Enlightenment is the only alternative way to model our increasingly connected world. In these accounts Enlightenment means a secularized Christianity—self-evidently so on the right, but also on the left, where Alain Badiou, to take a prominent example, though he has “never really connected Paul with religion,” nonetheless turns to Saint Paul as a model for what he calls the “fidelity to the event” that grounds the Christian community in the aftermath of Christ’s resurrection and for which the French Revolution serves as the primary modern correlative.

But it is precisely the enlightened secular language of the French Revolution that Cythna, trapped in her cave in *The Revolt of Islam*, forgoes. In instructing his readers to think beyond the Revolution and its failures, Shelley offers perhaps the most resolute and ambitious version of romanticism’s
political project: a countermodernity that not only refuses the too easy solace of nostalgia for the way things used to be but also refuses to accept the revolutionary model as the only possible way of thinking the future. Organized religion plays a vexed role in this endeavor: Shelley’s thinking is clearly indebted to Christianity at numerous points; equally clear, though, is his self-professed atheism and support for the secular ideals of the French Revolution and the tradition of radical Enlightenment thinking on which the revolutionaries drew. This makes Shelley an essential thinker for our own age, caught as we are, conceptually and politically, between the impulses of an enlightened universalism (figured now as the reign of both global capital and human rights) and a cultural particularism (whether construed as identity politics, ethnic conflict, or as forms of traditional knowledge, indigenous ontology, or diasporic community). As I argue in “Shelley After Atheism,” the ninth and final chapter, Shelley’s poetic thinking helps us to see these oppositions as products of secularism itself. Shelley recognized that the Revolution’s anticlericalism was deeply embedded in a politics of secularism that led first to terrible violence, then to Napoleon, and finally to the restoration of monarchies across Europe. In repeating the secularizing gesture of the Jacobins, then, supporters of enlightened universalism reiterate their primary mistake.

My test case for this claim is Shelley’s great poem Mont Blanc. This poem is often read as an expression of its author’s atheism; I argue, by contrast, that to view the poem as “expressing” any kind of content at all, even the negative content of a-theism, badly misconstrues the sophisticated conceptual project of Shelley’s middle period—a project better understood as a critique not of organized religion but of the discourses, especially the radical Enlightenment and the French Revolution, that have made organized religion their primary target. To think of religion as something from which secularism will save us is to misunderstand how secularism helped to create religion in the first place, and to forget how political and military intervention continues to shape the forms that “religion” assumes. By placing Shelley “after atheism,” rather than within it, my aim is to demonstrate that Shelley himself recognized the practical and philosophical limitations of the modern secular order.

The book’s final section is called “After the Secular.” Though the term “postsecular” has become popular for describing much recent work in the humanities and social sciences, I avoid it for good reason. It seems to me too simple and linear a description of the complex sociological and theoretical realities of our present moment. It is also frustratingly imprecise about the very term—secular—whose passing it understands itself to be narrating.
The term “postsecular” might mean that we were once secular, but are no longer. In this case, the “post” in “postsecular” would be like the “post” in postmodern. One response is that just as we have never been modern (purely rational, purely instrumental, purely scientific, and so on), so we have never been secular. For in this case, “secular” presupposes a narrative of religious decline, and this is at minimum a debatable assumption, since it is not clear that religion ever went away. To be sure, academics in the North Atlantic regions have paid it less attention in the past half-century, and sociological data suggest that levels of participation have ebbed and flowed over the past centuries. But the trajectories are varied enough to cast doubt on any simple decline-and-return narrative. To cite only the most obvious examples, Christianity has declined markedly in Western Europe, held steady or declined only slowly in the United States, revived in parts of Eastern Europe, and grown strikingly in much of the Southern Hemisphere. Religion continues to be a primary fault line in the Middle East and Southeast Asia; many East Asian societies, by contrast, have long been predominantly irreligious. And just as the evidence of decline is mixed, so too is the evidence of return. Many sociologists continue to insist that the overall trend for religious participation remains downward, and if this is correct it casts doubt on the “return” part of the decline-and-return narrative. Moreover, the continual and dramatic movements of peoples, driven by the churning of global capital, by environmental calamity, and by political conflicts that are themselves often related to questions of the legacy of secularism, means the ebb and flow of religious participation is now truly a global question. It seems quite simplistic, for example, to assert that the presence of large communities of Turkish Muslims in Germany, with all the attendant social questions and tensions, is evidence that we are living in a postsecular world. If anything, those questions and tensions are evidence of the continuing salience of secularism. And this leads finally to the crucial point already mentioned above and developed at length in the second section of this book: that “secularism” does not follow “religion” in any straightforward sense because the two notions are bound up together: without secularism, there is no religion as we know it today.

The “secular” in postsecular might, by contrast, mean a political doctrine involving the separation of religion and the state. In this second instance, we can remain agnostic about religious decline, and focus instead on religion’s privatization and depoliticization. Again, the terrain is remarkably varied, from officially secular states within religious societies (Turkey, Egypt,
India, the USA, all in different ways the legacies of the colonial era) to nominally secular states within religiously indifferent societies (the northern band of Western Europe). Tying together such disparate cases, however, is the notion that the political doctrine of secularism is itself a comprehensive theory of the good. In his well-known 2008 lecture “Notes on a Post-Secular Society,” Jürgen Habermas puts it like this: “To the extent that the government assumed a secular character, step by step the religious minorities (initially only tolerated) received further rights—first the freedom to practice their own religion at home, then the right of religious expression and finally equal rights to exercise their religion in public. An historical glance at this tortuous process, and it reached into the 20th century, can tell us something about the preconditions for this precious achievement, the inclusive religious freedom that is extended to all citizens alike.” As this process starts to come apart, Habermas argues, we enter the domain of the postsecular. Importantly, this is less a matter of governance itself than it is of citizen’s ideational commitment to the ideal of secularism. “The description of modern societies as ‘post-secular’ refers to a change in consciousness,” Habermas concludes.49

It is hard to know what to make of this claim. Various multicultural or communitarian initiatives notwithstanding, there does not appear to be much evidence for a widespread turn away from secular governance. Habermas’s formulation in fact seems to smuggle in the first definition of “post-secular” (the return of religion) as evidence for the demise of the second (the breakdown of a secular polity). But there is no logically necessary relation between the two. Indeed, the very thing that makes political secularism so precious, in Habermas’s words, is precisely its religious inclusivity—in theory, one could have a secular state in a society of complete religious participation. The “change in consciousness” to which Habermas refers might therefore be a result of religion’s de-privatization, a phenomenon remarked on by Jose Casanova already in 1994.50 Irreligious citizens may thus feel themselves to be surrounded by religious discourse of surprising intensity. But does the feeling that one is living in a postsecular society make it so? This ignores the fact that religion is easily used by secular formations, particularly the state in search of its own agenda. To take an example from the United States: each session of the House of Representatives opens with a prayer offered by the House Chaplain. Is this evidence of postsecularism, or evidence of the way that religion can be interpellated? As James A. Beckford notes, religious identities can be summoned at moments like this one; even largely secular citizens may take comfort in the thought of such
gestures. Therefore the mere invocation of religious values does not by itself indicate the emergence of the postsecular.

Finally, “postsecular” is sometimes taken to mean a primarily theoretical development in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, highlighting the intellectual resources offered by the Christian tradition. The references here range from Radical Orthodox theology to Marxist and post-Marxist political theory to the revival of interest in political theology. With few exceptions, these movements have addressed themselves specifically to the Christian legacy, perhaps without fully recognizing that Christianity itself bears a special relationship to the secular. This was a theme developed by Weber, of course, and it has been picked up and modified by a range of more recent writers, including Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and Tomoko Masuzawa. Those three offer quite divergent genealogies of the secular (from the viewpoints of, respectively, European social history, post-colonial theory, and religious studies), but they all agree that one cannot tell the story of the secular without also telling a story of the transformation of Christianity during the modern age. From this perspective, the assertion that we are living in a postsecular age would entail the claim that we are also living in a post-Christian age. This seems a highly debatable assertion, especially insofar as Christianity remains entangled in foreign policy and international relations. Even in western Europe, “Christianity” encompasses not only levels of participation or subjective belief but also influences how we think about practices of the self, of governance, of social collectives, and of aesthetics.

It is notable, finally, that each of the versions of “postsecular” offered above are in tension with one another. This is because they begin with different implicit definitions of the secular itself: as a real narrative of religious decline (sense one), as a political theory that encodes its own comprehensive notion of the good (sense two), and as a concept requiring a particular genealogy (sense three). One cannot be postsecular in all three senses simultaneously without changing the definition of the term itself, nor can one be simultaneously skeptical of all three senses of the term without also changing the definition. The cluster secular/secularism/secularity simply has too many connotations to be stabilized in this way without distortion.

In place of “postsecular” I therefore propose a different term: after the secular. The word after connotes a richer set of possibilities than post: one might come after the secular in a temporal sense; one might also pursue the secular, in the way that one pursues an aspiration or a model; and one might,
finally, *take after* the secular, in the way a child takes after a parent, manifest-
ing basic genetic similarities while at the same time developing her capacities in new and different ways. “After the secular” may not have the aphoristic ring of “postsecular,” but it does a better job of capturing the multivalent meanings of the term, and the variety of relations one might have to it.

To be after the secular, then, is to start one’s thinking from a romantic insight: a cautious, ambivalent recognition that the religious and the secular constitute each other, and that the attempt to pull them apart leads to a level of harm that is (or ought to be) morally intolerable. This is a simple theme, though its manifestations are legion. I do not claim that Shelley and Byron would be especially happy with this conclusion—any more than James Hogg would be happy about it. But some of the great poems and novels of the romantic era nonetheless leave us with the difficult thought that although it may be emotionally satisfying to eliminate the voice of “religion” from the modern conversation, or to assign it labels (religious, secular, postsecular), the cost of such satisfaction is steep. Better, they suggest, to let the unquiet things remain, a constant reminder that modernity has not yet delivered on its promises. To be “after the secular” in this sense means that one is, simultaneously, positioned chronologically after it, that one pursues it, and that one takes after it, carrying it forward while living into a different future than any it might have imagined.

Readers may have noticed a set of tonal shifts in my summary of the book’s argument so far. Part I of *Unquiet Things* employs a definition of the secular as a form of governmentality. Its characteristic mood is *melancholy*. By con-
trast, Part II highlights those figures and characters who disrupt or otherwise trouble the quiet. It is characterized by what I call *minoritization*. Part III, meanwhile, begins to construct an image of the secular as a normative posture toward the world. It is characterized by the tension between *metaphor* and *becoming-minor*. These shifts are deliberate.

The first section of the book offers a version of the claim that religion is privatized under the conditions of modernity; by emphasizing secularism rather than religion, though, I show how “unquiet things” register the secular quiet that surrounds them. The story I tell in this section is one of increas-
ingly effective control. At the same time, authority is bought at the expense of a considerable narrowing. (In Austen’s oeuvre, both *Mansfield Park* and
Emma demonstrate this double movement: at the end of these novels, there is a larger world that the principal characters simply turn away from.) My goal in this section is not to offer a history that takes in every aspect of Henrician reform but instead to track a problematic particular to that reform and posed in figural terms: a recurrent opposition between the forces of order and consolidated governmental power on the one hand, and on the other the increasingly marginalized forces of disorder, disruption, and disquiet associated initially with traditional Catholicism but by the eighteenth century simply free-floating signifiers of discontent.

My approach here shares something with that of Jon Mee, whose book *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* (2003) has done much to call attention to modes of expression that “transgress the boundaries of the emergent bourgeois public sphere” during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Mee shows how vulgar religious enthusiasm became an object of concern in the aftermath of the English Civil War; polite culture well into the nineteenth century, he notes, was “haunted by the fear of combustible matter within both the individual and the body politic.”52 Romanticism, in this accounting, is the culmination of a long eighteenth-century process of stabilizing and regularizing enthusiasm so that it could be used. “To transform enthusiasm into art was to make it relatively safe,” as Mee puts it.

I, too, am interested in “combustible matter,” and I share Mee’s supposition that modern power works through production rather than repression.53 But my approach has been to emphasize less the stabilizing function of literature than its sensitivity to instability and disorder: the unquiet things of “Frost at Midnight,” for instance, whose “puny flaps and freaks” continue to inspire “dim sympathies” within the living.54 It is of course true, as Mee notes, that romantic writers were to varying degrees concerned with their professional status and relationship to official culture. But it does not automatically follow that their literary productions speak in the voice of that culture. “Kubla Khan,” for example, gives us two models of literary activity: the more familiar high visionary argument, what the poem names a “miracle of rare device,” that somehow transforms and organizes the tumult of voices that go before it; and another model, lower and more bodily but in its own way every bit as ambitious, that I term an “addiction to history” and that remains resolutely unreformed. In Hogg’s novel of Scottish fanaticism, too, the haunted and haunting character of modernity already nascent in “Kubla Khan” and in Scott’s novels of rebellion—and indeed in the abiding desire
in “Frost at Midnight” for a “stranger”—becomes fully instantiated: not merely in its doublings and Satanic presence but in the historical and physical environment that surrounds the novel’s characters themselves, who, like the unquiet film in Coleridge’s grate, experience modern life not as the power to move but as the inevitability of being moved by larger forces.55

The religious identities in the book’s middle section stretch from visionary Anglican poets to superstitious Catholic rebels to fanatic Presbyterian Dissenters. The range here is deliberate, for my goal is to identify a shared recognition among different texts and differing doctrines: by shifting the nation’s self-identity, I argue, the 1688 consensus also off-loaded basic questions of peace and justice onto a discourse of religious toleration and capitalist prosperity that was, by the early years of the nineteenth century, no longer adequate to its unleashed energies. Scott’s affection for Jacobitical anachronism is certainly patronizing, yet his need to renarrate its demise hints that the possibility of great reversals remains strangely alive even in the early nineteenth century, an era filled with revolutions of a decidedly different kind. I am therefore less interested in the contrasts between enthusiasm and superstition (the twin evils of religious extremism, according to Hume, the one intrinsically Protestant, the other Catholic) than in what both have in common: the shared sense that modern life has somehow passed them by, that they are out of place and out of time.56

This makes the present book quite different from my previous study The Book of God (2007), which addressed questions of romanticism and secularization by keeping its focus resolutely on the mainstream Anglican tradition of natural theology. In that book I was concerned to emphasize writers who in various ways managed to adjust themselves to modernity, and who in so doing revealed it to be considerably less secular than we might have thought. In Unquiet Things, by contrast, I turn my attention to those who have for different reasons been unable to adjust. In this I join other scholars who have brought religion back into circulation as a disruptive political force. A recent example is Jasper Cragwall’s Lake Methodism, which convincingly argues for a two-way traffic between the “high arguments” of the lake school poets and the “disreputable Christianity” of Methodism. Cragwall demonstrates that Methodism was not, in the eyes of its detractors, so much a doctrine as it was a “language and performance” of enthusiasm, prophesy, and sentiment that sat uncomfortably close to the canonical statements of early romanticism.57 I certainly share with Cragwall an interest in the power of plebeian or
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nonelite discontent. But Cragwall focuses on the tension between Anglican authority and Methodist revolt, and on how that tension informed the literature of the period. As such, his concern is explicitly with religion and religious dispute. My objects of analysis, by contrast, are more general. I am more interested in secularism than in religion per se, both because the former sets the conditions for any discussion of the latter, and because it is secularism rather than religion that offers the best analytical window on modernity. I am concerned, that is to say, less with religious dispute than with the atmosphere in which that dispute takes place—less with Coleridge’s flickering film than with the air currents that push it around. This licenses the ideological range of the writers I study and the longer historical sweep of the book. By the same token, I avoid categorizing the flickers of discontent that the book isolates as intrinsically or necessarily religious: especially in the third section of the book, the “unquiet things” of my title are interpreted as a development from within the secular itself.

As a way of suggesting how this works, let me appeal to a brief essay by Isabelle Stengers. In “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” Stengers constructs a politics and an ethics that begin with the figure of what she calls the “idiot” (she is thinking of Dostoevsky), the one who “always slows the others down, who resists the consensual way.” Stengers does not romanticize this figure: s/he is not the repository of some hidden knowledge or sensibility that the world desperately needs, but is simply someone who does not understand and who is deaf to the legitimacy of the larger forces that run things. Stengers’s “cosmopolitical proposal” is simply to work out how a politics might proceed in the presence of such figures. She chooses an example from the current rhetoric of just-in-time capitalism. What if, she wonders, all the workers who have been laid off in the name of flexibility and overseas competition were treated with the honor that war veterans receive: parades, commemorations, benefits, and medical care that would keep them from “falling into oblivion and indifference” (998)? If that ever were to happen, she concludes, perhaps the “fact that we are caught in a war with no conceivable prospect of peace might become intolerable” (998). This sort of proposal has several qualities. First, it literalizes the metaphor of economic war: if the world of commerce is really a battlefield, as its proponents insist when justifying their difficult decisions, then that metaphor should be taken all the way, and its veterans honored. Second, it cuts the Gordian knot of necessity that tends to hamstring discussions of economic justice, the argument that runs thusly: if we don’t lay off some workers now, all the jobs will eventually be shipped overseas at some
indeterminate future time. Finally, the proposal does not offer an alternative.
The spectacle of the jobless as war victims “does not concern a program for
another world” but is rather a diagnosis and critique of our “stable acceptance
of economic war as framing our common fate” (998).

In this book, the figures and attitudes variously marginalized by modern
life are Stengers’s “idiots.” I am less interested in the affects attached to such
figures—nostalgia, sentimentality, wise passiveness—than I am in literary
work that confronts history’s winners with the continued and stubborn pres-
ence of its losers. I find an ally in Jerome Christensen, who writes of the
“insistently ethical and potentially political import” of romantic anachronism
as “a place where the excluded and extinct can make common cause, eternally
renewing their claims in effective apposition to the verdicts rendered by his-
tory and achieving thereby a plaintiff immortality.” 59 This is not, of course,
the same as believing that history could be, or ought to be, simply rolled
back. It may even be the case, as the defeated Flora Mac-Ivor declares at the
end of Waverley, that it was “impossible that it could end otherwise than
this.” 60 But as Stengers writes in addressing such arguments, “we may agree . . . ,
but we have to make sure you are fully exposed to their consequences” (997).
In the case of literary art, the consequence is an imaginative construc-
tion of modernity in the presence of those who stand to lose the most. I do
not assert that this is the only story to be told about the literary culture of
the romantic era. Moreover, for the themes I wish to explore, and the general
lessons I wish to draw, there is nothing inevitable about the particular texts I
have chosen; others—other poems, other novels—might have served.
Though not so well, in my view, for I am concerned with the way that certain
canonical and quasi-canonical texts construct their arguments in proximity
to those who have the most to lose if those arguments succeed.

Here Taylor’s distinction between porous and buffered selves becomes
useful less as a marker of a historical change from premodern to modern than
as a way of distinguishing between kinds of literary work. The buffered self
may comport well with a cultural world that seeks to regularize unquiet
things, but the porous self suggests a different kind of relation between per-
son and world, closer to what Schlegel celebrated as the ironic self not “fixed”
or “classified” but “still in the process of becoming.” 61 Taylor insists that
there is a politics implicit in these selves, and a politics as well to the institu-
tionally mandated triumph of the one over the other, and this insistence
allows us to connect literary “becoming” to the flickering unquiet that is my
theme here.
In making this connection, the first point to emphasize is that secularism struggles to recognize the legitimacy of subjective phenomenologies, comportments, and experiences that are not already secular. This is an argument made by Ashis Nandy in “The Politics of Secularism,” a well-known essay that distinguishes between religion as an ideology (inflexible, keyed to authoritative interpretations of certain texts, and therefore complicit with models of secular politics that see religion in exactly those terms) and religion as a “confederation of a number of ways of life, linked by a common faith and with some theological space for heterogeneity.” In making this distinction, Nandy joins those who see the rise of fundamentalism as a result of modernity rather than a development intrinsic to religion itself. As a political doctrine, secularism (especially as it has been exported around the world) articulates well with models of the self that are bounded and individuated, in possession of their own thoughts and beliefs and relating contractually to other, similarly bounded selves. Such selves can be aligned with secular governments or, if they are more recalcitrant, articulated as minorities. But secularism comports much less well with what Nandy describes as the “somewhat fluid definitions of the self with which many South Asian cultures live [and] which can be conceptually viewed as configurations of selves” (324–25). This looks a great deal like Taylor’s premodern porous self, yet while Taylor tends to describe the porous self as open to the world of gods and spirits, Nandy avoids that teleological schema by emphasizing that it is open to other people. “Traditional ways of life have, over the centuries, developed internal principles of tolerance,” he writes; “religious communities in traditional societies have known how to live with each other” (336). It is the advent of colonial modernity, he argues, imported from Europe to South Asia and riding piggyback on the individuated self and on secular governance, that has hardened communitarianism into ideology and created the conditions for religious violence. Strong religion is the only religion secularism can recognize, which it does by trying to contain it; the kind of deep toleration or understanding that Nandy finds intrinsic to fluid conceptions of the self makes modern secularism uneasy.

Nandy’s defense of tradition has been controversial. And my appeal to him here should not, of course, be taken to mean that secularism and colonialism are the same thing. The point is a more basic one: that some ways of life are fluid in a fashion that is hard to recognize from the standpoint of the buffered self. A buffered self may “tolerate” others, in the same way that a state may learn to tolerate minorities; but the mark of a fluid self is that it
not only tolerates others but *imputes tolerance to them*. It is that ethic of
generosity, fluid, porous, and open to the world, that Schlegel described
when he modeled the romantic self on the fragment.\(^65\) Indeed, I read Schlegel’s argument as a brief for a particularly literary kind of self, one in which porosity (Taylor) or fluidity (Nandy) has been retrofitted for the modern age and that shows up consistently in my account as the possibility that one is never entirely alone: the hoped-for stranger in “Frost at Midnight,” the haunted libraries and byways of Scott and Hogg, Hassan’s inscrutable face, the multiple worlds and multiple selves envisioned by Schlegel and Schleiermacher, the transporting power of metaphor, indeed of language itself, variously characterized by Cythna and by “Kubla Khan.”\(^66\) There is, in other words, nothing *intrinsically* premodern, or merely traditional or religious, about this way of thinking of selfhood—it can be, rather, another way of being modern.

This connection between literary becoming and porous selfhood highlights a second point as well. I have remarked already that in my account literature is more than a normalizing device. In this book it chronicles discontent with a developing modern secular order; it is the frequency, as I put it earlier, at which one can hear the strange and sometimes melancholy stillness of the secular age. But the final section of *Unquiet Things* defends a further claim as well: that some romantic-era literature models kinds of thinking about alternative social arrangements that do not depend on an a priori distinction between religious and secular, private and public, nor on models of public discourse installed by secular arrangements of power and left in place by contemporary religious revivalism. One thing that romantic-era literature can do is deterritorialize such discourses. Stengers’s “idiot,” the figure who slows down mobilization in the name of something more or of something else, returns here not as a figure of abjection but of possibility.\(^67\) The modern phenomenon of belief as something inert—something that you hold or have—may emerge with great intensity in romantic writing, but as Robert Miles nicely phrases it in a review of Taylor’s book, “Romanticism is not a rescue operation mounted on behalf of intellectuals alarmed and enthralled by the spillage resulting from secularization, but rather . . . a constant, proliferating, mutual fragilization of immanence and transcendence, desacralized nature and inchoate fullness.”\(^68\) Moving back and forth between discomfiting modes of secularism and the life that chafes against them, *Unquiet Things* places that romantic motion within a history that runs from the early modern period to the present. My goal is to analyze an order with which secularism is
largely complicit and to highlight models for preserving secularism’s entirely laudable ambition to promote human diversity and human flourishing in a world increasingly interconnected. There are, to my mind, few better examples of that ambition than the writings of the romantics and their contemporaries during the early years of the nineteenth century, when our current economic and social arrangements were still unsettled enough to admit of other possibilities.