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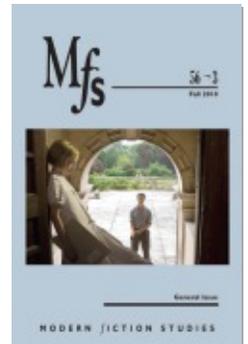
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## Is the “Post” in “Postsecular” the “Post” in “Postcolonial”?

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## IS THE "POST" IN "POSTSECULAR" THE "POST" IN "POSTCOLONIAL"?

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**Graham Huggan**

If it is one of the givens of postcolonial criticism that it uneasily shares radically different historical trajectories, it is another that whichever trajectory is privileged is likely to tell us as much about the practitioner as the practice, and as much again about the method of study as the object of study itself. One way of charting this history is to look at the shifting relations between the various "post" terms that—in what remains probably the most popular of its own institutional trajectories—have helped shape postcolonial studies as an academic subdiscipline over the last twenty-odd years. Thus, for many, postcolonial criticism will always be a child of poststructuralism and a close if distinctly quarrelsome relative to postmodernism, even though there is no shortage of evidence to the contrary and plenty more that this mediated battle of the "posts," never too likely to be attentive to the complexities of intellectual history, has only been ideologically effective insofar as it has been strategically misunderstood.

More recently, however, a new "post" term, "postsecularism," has entered into the fray, encompassing a reawakened interest in the role of religion in world society and politics, some of the latest ethical developments in continental philosophy, and a recognition—inexorably shaped by the events and aftermath of 9/11—of the increasing politicization of religious attitudes, values, and beliefs in an unevenly developed late-capitalist world. Three important monographs, each published in 2009, signal what some claim to be a "post-secular turn" in postcolonial theory and criticism (Mandair,

"Hegel" 1). The first of these, Manav Ratti's misleadingly titled *The Postcolonial Secular*, is concerned primarily with the multireligious nature of the subcontinent and with the emergence of what he calls a "post-secular condition" coinciding with the failure of organized religion in South Asia, and the need to retain the capacity for faith, wonder, and enchantment without political constraint (1). The second, Debjani Ganguly's *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*, combines postcolonial and postsecular approaches to caste, which she insistently sees not as an archaic remnant within a progressivist narrative of secular modernity, but rather as a complex set of interlinked practices that are in a constant state of flux. The third, Arvind Mandair's *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*, is more critical of a postsecularist school of thought, which, in association with poststructuralist theory, forms part of what he sees as a generalized translation mechanism that has fatally misshaped both internal and external perceptions of India's relationship to the West. It seems significant, especially in the post-9/11 context, that each of these studies focuses on South Asian religions other than Islam, possibly confirming the reluctance of postcolonial critics—with some notable exceptions—to engage with Islamic beliefs.<sup>1</sup> And, lest Edward Said be seen as one of these exceptions, it bears reminding that Said throughout his life remained a firmly secular critic, whose particular brand of secular humanism has been hugely influential for postcolonial studies even if—as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin suggest—his downplaying of "theological" schools of contemporary theory was neither an attack on religious belief per se nor an attempt to bypass religion as an object of postcolonial analysis, but rather a call to challenge fundamentalist dogma in all societies and cultures, whether these are identified as "religious" or not (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 212).

Be this as it may, it is not until relatively recently that debates around religious belief—particularly those concerned with the "deprivatization of religion" (Beaumont) and the realignment of political subjectivity and religious agency—have come to assume central importance in postcolonial studies, partly as an attack on self-privileging versions of Western modernity even as it trains its morally disapproving gaze on the illiberal cultural practices of the non-West. Still, these challenges are not in themselves confirmed signs of a "postsecular turn" in contemporary literary and cultural theory, still less of what Peter L. Berger et al. call, in what appears to be a misplaced fit of revivalist enthusiasm, the "deseccularization of the world." Thus, rather than assuming "postsecularism" exists, this essay maintains that the

question still needs to be asked as to *whether* it exists. And where is "postsecularism," for that matter? Is it locatable in any meaningful sense—is it a situated entity—or is it just another generalizable condition for our contemporary world? I must admit that my first reaction to a term like "postsecularism" is one of skepticism, though in religious parlance this would be agnosticism rather than atheism: it's not that I am convinced it doesn't exist, but I'd much prefer sociological proof it does than philosophical speculation it might. But there lies the rub: for postsecularism seems to me to belong to the realm of philosophical possibility rather than sociological reality—which would be a problem if I were a sociologist, but maybe isn't such bad news for a literary critic trained in the battering of interpretive possibilities onto other people's possible worlds.

Having said that, it still seems much easier for me to say what I think postsecularism isn't than what I think it is. It isn't Creationism, for instance, or that contradiction, Intelligent Design; nor is it New Age spiritual pluralism; nor yet (with apologies to Berger) a sign of religious resurgence in an increasingly desecularized world. Rather, I tend to agree with the British sociologist Steve Bruce when he says that examples like these, once put in context, are paradoxical signs of what he calls the "secularization paradigm" (4)—a paradigm that applies first and foremost to the liberal democracies of the West. Western liberal democracies—if I understand Bruce correctly—are not postsecular at all but are rather caught in a continuing process of secularization, one symptom of which is the efflorescence of alternative spiritualities, and another the fundamentalist recoil against spiritual pluralism in the context of a consumer oriented late-capitalist world. These symptoms are visible enough, but they don't alter the fact—they merely draw attention to the fact—that religious institutions are in decline in the West, though less in decline in certain parts of the West than others; and that religious beliefs—while certainly not dying out—are now focused on individual consumer choice. If this sounds like postmodernism, then it probably is, though the best example of the postmodern commoditization of spirituality is the New Age, while all the evidence suggests that the influence of more established forms of religion in the West—particularly denominational Christianity—is waning, and that the social significance of religion among the general populace in most Western nations, with the possible exception of the US, is in free fall.

While this thumbnail sketch of the secularization paradigm applies solely to the West and is principally applicable to Christianity, it suggests that the heady view of secularism as a spent force and of postsecularism as a revolutionary "reaction to the monologue of the

Enlightenment" (Kyrlezhev 26) requires serious rethinking. I don't myself believe that we have entered a new "postsecular age" or that secularism has "lost its function as a social integrator" (30), but I should also acknowledge that only the most extreme among the adherents of postsecularism—the fundamentalist postsecularists—actually announce the death of secularism and celebrate the rebirth of religion in its place. Most theorists of the postsecular, in fact, go to great lengths to say that postsecularism is not about the end of secularism, but rather about an attempt to "overcome the antinomy of secularism [and] religiosity in a manner which recognizes the strengths and weaknesses" of both (Geoghegan).<sup>2</sup> Vincent Geoghegan presents this view succinctly: a postsecularist perspective, he says, "no longer feels the need to counterpose the secular to the religious. This approach therefore betokens not a rejection of the secular, but a recognition that the achievements of the secular will not be lost by a more nuanced approach to religion." Postsecularism, seen this way, stakes out a radically antifundamentalist position that recognizes that "religious fundamentalism is linked to the Enlightenment project as a form of tragic reactivity against it" (Geoghegan); or, to paraphrase another postsecular theorist, Mike King, postsecularism articulates the avoidance of *both* the extremes of dogmatic religion and the equally dangerous hyper-rationalist convictions of the so-called secular mind.

Needless to say, I have several problems with this watered-down view, and not just with the use of hazy concepts like the "secular mind" and the "Enlightenment project." I readily admit, though, that I'm more sympathetic to Geoghegan's view of postsecularism as a set of tools for the rereading of religious narrative, and—as I hope to show later in this essay—for the rereading of other literary-cultural narratives as well. Geoghegan sets up two kinds of readings here: the deconstructive and the dialectical. The first works toward the poststructuralist dismantling of a linked antinomy (for example, secular-religious); the other works toward the combination of terms ("faith" and "reason") that are sometimes seen as being in opposition to one another, but are better seen as mutually enriching and, in the process of dialectical convergence, are mutually transformed. Obviously, this argument is made at a high level of abstraction that has little to do with the existence or not of postsecularism as an observable social phenomenon. However, part of what I want to argue is precisely that postsecularism may be more valuable as a critical methodology—as a specific set of ways of reading narrative—than as an indicator of social realities; and that it is more useful in this sense to the literary critic than to the sociologist, even if the former's textual

discoveries are by no means incompatible with the latter's empirical finds. It is with this distinction in mind that I now turn again to the two other "post" terms with which I began, "postcolonialism" and "postmodernism," both of which can also be understood as reading strategies. What is the relation between these "posts" in terms of the reading of literary and other cultural texts?

### **Between the "Posts"**

As a roundabout way of addressing this question, I want to turn now to the piece to which my essay title alludes: Kwame Anthony Appiah's anthologized 1991 essay "Is the 'Post-' in 'Postcolonial' the 'Post-' in 'Postmodern'?" Appiah's answer to his own question is—unsurprisingly—yes and no. Both "post" terms, he suggests, are motivated by a "space clearing gesture" through which the distancing prefix signals a challenge to the root word ("modernism," "colonialism") to which it remains inextricably connected (428–29). Postcolonialism is thus bound to the colonialism it contests and postmodernism to the modernism it continues. Extending this split logic, we might expect postsecularism to be intrinsically connected to the secularizing processes to which it is explicitly or implicitly opposed. However, what Appiah implies about postsecularism in the essay (he never names the term directly) is rather different. If the term were named, it would almost certainly be given to those commoditizing processes, most evident in the US, by which "religions have reached further and grown—their markets have expanded—rather than dying away." This doesn't exactly imply a resurgence of religion (as some of the postsecularists might contend), but neither does it confirm the secularization paradigm (as some of the secularists would counter). Rather, what it shows is "a new way of understanding the multiplication of distinctions that flows from the need to clear oneself a space—the need that drives the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity" (428). Modernism, Appiah says in support of this key point, "saw the economization of the world as the triumph of reason; postmodernism rejects that claim, allowing in the realm of theory the same multiplication of distinctions we see in the cultures it seeks to understand" (429).

Postsecularism, if I can extrapolate from this, is effectively a function of postmodernism's challenge to the legitimating narrative(s) of Western modernity, or what Appiah calls elsewhere in the essay "the modernist characterization of modernity," which—like most postsecularists—he sees as being in hock to Weberian rationalization and the ideological centrality of the West (427–28). Now this

sounds very much like postcolonial critique to me, but—as I previously mentioned—Appiah is also careful to distinguish between the "post" in postmodern and the "post" in postcolonial. This distinction is embedded in the tension between what I will call—loosely paraphrasing Appiah—postmodern "pluralism" and postcolonial "humanism." Interestingly enough, Appiah turns to literary examples to examine this tension, more specifically the English- and French-language novels of postindependence Africa that he reads, antiprogrammatically, as turning the tables on an Africa all too often fashioned as other to the West. There is a clear sense in this writing that "the postulation of a unitary Africa over and against a monolithic West—the binarism of self and other—is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without" (439). However, there is another lesson in store, this time for the postmodernists: for if the largely negative condition of African postcoloniality is a "'post-' that challenges earlier legitimating narratives," then it also challenges them in the name of the continent's suffering victims, in the name of humanity itself. This suggests that it is possible to "recover *within* postmodernism the postcolonial writer's humanism—the concern for human suffering [and] the victims of the postcolonial state . . . while still rejecting the master-narratives of modernism" (438; emphasis added).

It might come as a surprise to hear a postmodernist like Appiah reclaiming humanism when other postmodernists already seem to have done such a good job of discrediting it; but then it bears reminding that humanism—or rather a certain kind of humanism, an anticolonial humanism—has long been a staple of postcolonial thought. Humanism, Appiah insists, can be "provisional, historically contingent and antiessentialist (in other words, postmodern) and still be demanding. We can surely maintain a powerful engagement with the concern to avoid cruelty and pain while nevertheless recognizing the contingency of that concern" (438). Note, however, that nowhere in the essay does Appiah say that the humanism he has in mind is a secular humanism; indeed, he seems to suggest that humanism overrides and, in so doing, effectively falsifies the secularist tendency to equate modernity and modernist rationalization with history and the West. I'm not arguing that Appiah is a representative postcolonial critic in this regard; after all, ideological confusion is endemic to a field that pits secular humanists (Edward Said) against Marxist antihumanists (Gayatri Spivak), then gets anti-Marxist posthumanists (Homi Bhabha) to agree with both. Rather, the point I'm trying to make here is that humanism is not necessarily incompatible with a view that might otherwise be labeled as "postmodern" and/or "postsecular," still less with a view that is labeled "postcolonial"; nor am I just talking about the hazards of category in which one "post" term

easily slides into another, and pious statements about the need to resist the self-privileging narrative of Western modernity are used to embrace them all. On the contrary, the nonidentical status of these "posts" is of crucial significance in establishing the grounds for what I will call, loosely again, the philosophical projects of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and postsecularism—projects that perhaps have no direct political purchase but still hold out the promise of different ways of reading global modernity in our times. This emphasis on reading differently (not quite the same thing as reading for difference) will bring me eventually to imaginative literature, and later I'll be using two contemporary postcolonial literary narratives, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, to test out Geoghegan's intriguing thesis that postsecularism is—among several other things—a strategy for the deconstructive reading of established religious texts. My hopefully unexceptionable contention here will be that what Said might have called a "contrapuntal" reading of legitimating narratives gives common ground to postsecular, postmodern, and postcolonial critics, with a further "post," poststructuralism, acting as the bridge between each. First, though, I want to offer a reading of another academic text that moves self-consciously between the "posts," Ananda Abeysekara's 2008 monograph, *The Politics of Postsecular Religion*, a hugely ambitious attempt to reexamine, from a broadly postsecular perspective, the philosophical and political opportunities offered by religion in our postcolonial world.

### Reading Differently: Abeysekara

Let me start with a brief summary of what I take to be the book's main arguments. Postsecularism, Abeysekara suggests, is caught within the logic of inheritance, a variation on Appiah's space-clearing gesture according to which the modifying prefix ("post") paradoxically acts to resubstantiate the historical legitimacy of the original word. This is what I take Abeysekara to mean when he says that "there can be no such thing as the postsecular because the secular cannot be reconstructed" (10), that is, secularism is retained even when it is apparently rejected because of the sovereign authority previously invested in the proper name. However, if secularism cannot be *reconstructed*—in the sense of being improved or corrected—it can still be *deconstructed*: it can be made, that is, to reveal its blind spots (Abeysekara uses the Derridean term "aporia"), and to expose the complacency of those who appropriate it, claiming its inheritance for their own. Postsecularism, in this sense, describes the process of un-inheritance or un-naming by which secularism is made to lose

its solid grounding and by which some of its historically associated concepts—democracy, human rights, justice, the rule of law, and so on—are effectively deprived not of their meaning but of the normative authority that is "self-evidently" exercised in their name.

Here one can see the grounds for a postcolonial critique of the normativity of the West that belies secular modernity as tautology. This alignment of the "posts" is apparently confirmed when Abeysekara says in a rare moment of confession that "today we, the post-modernists, the poststructuralists, the postcolonialists, have come to realise that we can never take truth for granted and that the enlightenment values of modernity and democracy are not self-fulfilling prophecies" as the logic of inheritance might seem erroneously to suggest (88). We (a different "we"?) should know better, however, than to take poststructuralists at their word, and Abeysekara then proceeds to take issue with the postcolonialists for their continuing failure to think beyond the problem of identity and difference and for their naïve insistence that, so long as they "speak of the non-homogeneous, fluid nature of identity," the problem can be solved or at least kept at bay (99). I'm not at all sure that postcolonialists think this, but it conveniently supports Abeysekara's point that postcolonial critique remains in thrall to the very self-other distinctions it seeks to unravel—distinctions also apparent in the liberal-pluralist project of accounting for "cultural and religious differences in a new postsecular world" (45). He isn't arguing, of course, that these differences don't exist or that they don't need accounting for, but rather that they are based on an assumption of identity as a fixed presence that always risks reproducing the very violence it seeks to manage and contain.

An example may be useful here. Probably the best chapter in the book is an extended meditation on the Sinhalese greeting "ayubowan," the use of which has become standardized in the tourist literature on Sri Lanka and which is also used on the national airline. (Similar greetings follow in Tamil and English, but "ayubowan"—apparently confirming the de facto prioritization of Sinhalese within the multicultural polity of Sri Lanka—comes first.) I can't do justice here to the subtlety of Abeysekara's analysis of the uses of ayubowan, but let me summarize his conclusions. The problem of ayubowan, he suggests, might well be seen as a problem of multiculturalism and the tacit hierarchies embedded within it; it might be seen, that is, as essentially a problem of recognizing minority rights. Abeysekara, however, sees it as being a different kind of problem—one relating to an aporia in the liberal-democratic conception of cultural difference that pluralist policies such as multiculturalism are designed both to recognize and contain. This aporia, for Abeysekara, consists in the very notion of

identitary differentiation, or as he puts it in the Sri Lankan context: "The use of Ayubowan . . . mirrors the very history of the distinction between the Sinhalese and their (excluded) others. Hence to think about un-inheriting this problem is to think about un-inheriting the very history of that distinction, a history of violent racisms and even genocides that we know quite well today" (248).

Earlier in the book, Abeysekara had seen this problem as central to the logic of inheritance he sees as undergirding secularism, which, in failing to understand that the "demarcation between the religious and the secular is fleeting," finds itself ill-equipped to oppose those "nationalisms that insist on an unchanging relation between religion, nation, and identity [or] to affirm other non-nationalist, non-hegemonic practices of being and freedom" in their place (191). While there is some slippage in the categories he uses, his larger point is clear enough: there is a pressing need to think beyond the binaries that inform both secularism and the democratic principles that support it; a need to "un-inherit" the "distinction of majority/minority that remains crucial to the idea of democracy" itself (193). The crucial notion here—difficult though it is to grasp—is "un-inheriting"; for if democracy is founded, as Abeysekara believes, on the logic of binaries such as self and other, majority and minority, Western and non-Western, then these binaries need to be understood as being created and consolidated in relation to a history that apparently sustains them, an inheritance that must be unmasked for the self-validating fiction it is.

It is important to see that Abeysekara isn't arguing against democracy or secularism per se but against the reified distinctions they encourage—distinctions that also lie behind a multicultural politics of recognition that honors the rights of minorities while keeping them locked in place (226). What is needed, he believes, is to move beyond liberal democracy's reliance on "the politics of measuring and identification" toward other modes of "proximity to the other" that are not necessarily constrained by the legitimating narratives of history, state, and law (265).<sup>3</sup> What these other modes might be remains—to me at least—mysterious, though they are clearly related to Jacques Derrida's seminal notion of *différance*, according to which otherness takes the form of a radical alterity that can never be produced or reproduced in the form of a fixed presence, and that can thus never be opposed to selfhood since both self and other remain fundamentally other to themselves. They are also related to Derrida's later notion, taken from his 1997 book *The Politics of Friendship*, that the idea of democracy is a "promise" that can never be embodied in any actual democracy, and that this idea needs to be dissociated from the "name of a regime" and attached instead to "any kind of

experience in which there is equality, justice, equity . . . and respect for the singularity of the Other at work" (qtd. in Abeysekera 273). While I am hard put to understand the practical significance of this, I side with Abeysekera when he insists that this is not mere philosophical obscurantism and that the kind of deconstructive imagining it encourages has profound implications for the way in which such terms as "democracy" and "secularism"—and the modernity to which they are yoked—are invoked as being self-evidently for the public good. Like Derrida, his mentor, Abeysekera is careful to distinguish his deconstruction from critique, which he sees as merely drawing attention to problems it can't solve. Abeysekera thus indicates another way of seeing the relation between the "post" terms: they are neither definable nor interchangeable but belong to an infinitely expandable deconstructive process in which they gesture toward a horizon they can never reach (for instance, Derrida's democracy to come). This I take—following Abeysekera and Derrida—to be the promise of postsecularism, and in the next section of the essay I want to look at what creative writers have to say about it, since it is perhaps they, rather than religious scholars and philosophers, who have the imaginative reach to envision the possibility of alternative worlds, and the alternative narratives that embody them, that our own world can aspire to but necessarily never achieve.

### Reading Differently: Smith and Martel

Let me begin this section by looking briefly at a literary work that burst on to the British scene at the turn of the twenty-first century, Smith's debut novel *White Teeth*, which most commentators—while parting company on just about everything else—agree is a good example of a contemporary postsecular text. Expertly timed to coincide with the new millennium, Smith's novel takes satirical aim at fanaticism and zealotry of all stripes, encompassing the documented "holocausts" of animal rights and the fabricated "apocalypses" of Seventh-Day Adventism—and all in the overriding context of a "great immigrant experiment" (281) in which opportunities for postcolonial and postsecular conviviality have repeatedly been squandered in the face of lingering colonial hierarchies and persistent racial contempt (53–54).<sup>4</sup> Like its own most obvious literary precursor, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, *White Teeth* is at once an apology for cultural "mongrelisation" (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 394) and a spirited attack on its implacable opposite, cultural purism, offering an exhaustive Rushdiean medley of self-deconstructing immigrant legends: the chameleonic figure of the migrant, the imagined panacea of self-renewal, and the ever-present burden of the past.

However, if the promises and illusions of Islam remain very much at the center of Rushdie's novel, their space in Smith's has largely been usurped by the secular history of the genome, that "holy grail of modern biological research" through which popular scientific images of human perfectibility are played out (Graham 117). *White Teeth*, in this sense, is *The Satanic Verses* for the age of the Human Genome Project. It is a cautionary tale, improbably prophetic in its intensity, for an age in which competing religious (fundamentalist) as well as secular (civilizationist) extremes have since converged in the nightmarish collision courses of 9/11, 7/7, and Iraq. Elaine Graham's succinct itemization of the discursive properties of the gene perfectly maps the satirical coordinates of Smith's novel:

Within the discourse of the Human Genome Project and throughout contemporary molecular biology the gene occupies a number of discursive spaces simultaneously. It is a thing of nature and the very essence of life. For a biochemist it is the catalyst for the formation of essential proteins. In the bioinformatics systems that record the genes' sequences, it is a string of binary data that encodes its own particular molecular "signature." In sociobiological discourse, it is the icon of destiny; and for the biotechnological corporations that stand to profit from the patenting and marketing of genetic information for medical research purposes, it is a highly lucrative commodity. The gene is [both] a potent object of desire [and] a convenient element that comes to stand vicariously for the complex mixture of environment, sociability, natural selection and biology which separates "human" from "almost-human." The gene, and by association the Human Genome Project, thereby comes to *represent* what it means to be human, [allowing DNA to play] a decisive role in negotiating the mixture of curiosity and anxiety engendered by a blurring of the boundaries between "us" and "them." (24)

These discourses come together in Smith's novel in the figure of the brilliant geneticist Marcus Chalfen, a satirical perversion of the liberal improver, whose biomedical research on transgenic animals accords with his "firm belief in the perfectibility of all life" (269). Chalfen believes the underlying purpose of his research to be the elimination of the random; as the press release accompanying his latest work announces, "The FutureMouse holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate" (370). Needless to say, the events of the novel prove otherwise, un-

folding as they do through a succession of biological accidents and historical contingencies and featuring a catalogue of dysfunctional families and thrown-together characters whose shifting alliances and friendships defy the laws of genetic predictability. The novel, in this sense, provides a comic exercise in not only the cultural confusions, but also the social normalcy, of hybridity; similarly, it finds nothing special about those who consider themselves to be special, rejoices in the blunders of would-be heroism, and uses the tangle of history—mostly colonial history—to repeatedly disprove the "inevitable consequences" of nature's laws (249). The novel's various modulations of celebratory hybridity—the mixed-race child (Irie) and the cyborg dyad (Archie-Samad)—provide the grounds for Smith's wide-ranging satire on both genetic determinism (as an historical explanation for human characteristics and behavior) and genetic determination (as a future rationale for human improvement and the racialized modeling of ideal types). *White Teeth* thus gives the lie to those ideological "geneticization" processes that either falsely equate human genetics with human biology or, equally erroneously, assume a metonymic relationship between the gene and the sum total of human life (Graham 121–22).

The "promise" of the gene is satirically connected in Smith's novel to the liberatory potential of the posthuman in a twisted version of the scientific salvation narrative in which the corporate geneticist features as a postmodern Dr. Moreau, the author of life as both dispensable commodity and patentable code (Haraway 97). Both "promises" are linked to Smith's criticism of the ideological implications of genetics as the scientific study of hybridity, dedicated to the controlled production of experimental posthuman hybrids of its own. The novel duly recognizes that "the scramble for the control of genes" (Haraway 57) is one of the global-capitalist battles of the moment; while at the center of this battle is the figure of the transgenic mouse, as much cultural metaphor as scientific model, and privileged pint-sized symbol for the "monumental tussles over meanings, purposes, violations, and origins" that characterize the new posthuman sphere (Haraway 85). However, the novel also makes clear that the FutureMouse project is being made to bear a symbolic weight that its cyborg protagonist cannot possibly carry; freighted with both the promises and the threats inscribed within the ambivalent figure of the posthuman, the mouse eventually does what its natural instincts tell it to: it escapes (Smith 462). In this gleefully ironic version of the return to nature, the instinctive need to survive trumps the redemptive promise of the genome, while a further moral to the tale might be that the "natural" (animal and human) triumphantly reemerges at the point where it has already been discredited, in a putatively postnatural world.

Smith's larger point here seems to be that the "roots" versus "routes" debate, in both its religious and its secular forms, is essentially unsolvable; what matters more is human beings' enduring capacity to escape repetition while exerting some degree of local agency over the global conditions in which their society is transformed. This emphasis on the human, and on social change, remains characteristic of the postcolonial novel at a time when ideas of the human are increasingly being challenged and where the place of human beings within a broader ecological network of relations is now widely registered, if not always adequately informed. It also squares well with Appiah's view—discussed above—that what distinguishes the postcolonial from the postmodern is its perhaps old-fashioned insistence on the connective qualities of humanism: its capacity to celebrate those common bonds of human friendship that persist in even the most adverse of social circumstances and that hold out the tentative promise of a world in which both human and nonhuman societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed. The humanism that Smith's novel endorses, however, is neither intrinsically secular nor fundamentally religious; rather, it occupies a postsecular sphere of radical indeterminacy in which fundamentalist certainties are rejected and salvationist promises of all kinds are unmasked for the self-serving—and sometimes brutally destructive—ideologies they are. While this may sound cynical on Smith's part, *White Teeth* is, in fact, a hopeful novel, in which the sometimes unlikely human capacity for transformation (*not* redemption) overrides the supposedly revolutionary discoveries of what some social theorists have taken to describing as a "post-bodied and post-human" modern world (Featherstone and Burrows 2).

Equally hopeful, I want to suggest, is the Canadian writer Yann Martel's award-winning novel *Life of Pi*, perhaps the more obvious candidate for a postsecular reading in so far as it combines "religious" and "scientific" narratives in such a way as to suggest that neither can exist without the other and to envision the utopian possibility that the dialectic they embody might eventually create the philosophical conditions for an ecologically companionate world. The terms of this dialectic are already set up early on in the text, when the eponymous Pi, an Indian zookeeper's son, begins receiving instruction from his twin mentors—his biology teacher Satish Kumar, a committed Darwinian and Enlightenment atheist, and his Muslim namesake, who succeeds in winning over the impressionable boy to Sufism's personal relationship with God. Unable to decide between these alternative worldviews, Pi effectively chooses both—a choice that allows him to reconcile his scientific curiosity for the world's creatures with his religious wonder at the miraculous act of Creation

itself. Later on, the two Mr. Kumars visit the zoo and share a first encounter with some zebras:

"A *zebra*, you say?" said Mr. Kumar.  
"That's right," I replied. "It belongs to the same family as the ass and the horse."  
"The Rolls-Royce of equids," said Mr. Kumar.  
"What a wondrous creature," said Mr. Kumar.  
"This one's a Grant's zebra," I said.  
Mr. Kumar said, "*Equus burchelli boehmi*."  
Mr. Kumar said, "*Allahu akbar*."  
I said, "It's very pretty."  
We all looked on. (84)

This parody of postsecular reconciliation is continued in the adventure that follows, when Pi, after losing family and menagerie at sea, is cast adrift for 277 days in a life boat with only a potentially deadly Bengal Tiger, curiously named Richard Parker after his original human captor, for a mate. That the pair coexists as long as it does is probably less about faith than luck, and is certainly attributable more than both of these to reason in the commonsensical shape of Pi's survival skills and pseudo-scientific understanding of how animals behave in captivity, which is not so different—or so he thinks—from how they instinctively behave in the wild. Pi quickly learns that he must dominate Richard Parker, or at least convey the illusion that he is the dominant partner in their companionate relationship, even as the survival of both God's creatures depends on their ability to store and share the less-than-bountiful dispensation of His gifts. As this unlikely fantasy develops, the adventure increasingly takes on the figurative dimensions of religious allegory or fable—so much so that some of the novel's commentators have been tempted to see more C. S. Lewis than Rudyard Kipling in it, duly likening Richard Parker to the sacrificial-redemptive figure of Aslan-Jesus-God. Should that be the case, though, the fable's resolution doesn't provide the most ringing of endorsements, for, once landfall is made on the Mexican coast, Richard Parker disappears into the jungle and is never seen again.

Perhaps, in this last sense, it is the deconstructive rather than dialectical aspect of the text's postsecularism that needs to be accentuated; for if the narrative ultimately fights shy of identifying itself with religious (Christian-Hindu-Muslim) allegory, then it also avoids falling into the kind of scientism that will only accept the hardest of empirical evidence as truth. Thus, like *White Teeth*—if in an entirely different register—*Life of Pi* might be said to be an antifundamentalist text that pronounces against dogma of all kinds

while provisionally accepting the importance of religious belief as the basis for human interaction in the world. And belief, in both novels, requires an imaginative leap that implicitly accepts the value of other possible beliefs—and the stories that legitimate them—including the explanatory power that is invested in the performance of storytelling itself.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the suspension of disbelief that Pi's story encourages also invites an almost stereotypically postmodern form of skepticism toward the very grand narratives it depends on: Science and Religion, most obviously, but also Freedom, competing claims for which are consistently manipulated in the text. (For example, Pi's early claim that animal freedom is best found in captivity is later put to the test when he himself becomes a captive animal—an irony extended by the postcolonial drive for independence that accompanies the establishment of the zoo and by the location of the frame narrative in another former colony, Canada, so that it may be said that Pi moves from one free country to another but only by experiencing vicarious captivity in each.)

*Life of Pi's* postcolonialism is thus at the service of its postmodernism to a greater degree than is *White Teeth's*, though not to the extent of relativizing its competing liberation narratives out of existence, nor by allowing doubt and playfulness—and there is more of the latter than the former in Martel's novel—to erode to the point of destroying the ingrained structures of belief that drive the complementary salvation narratives in the text. In fact, I would argue that in both novels the structured interplay between "post" terms creates an alternating series of tensions between them that suggests the "post" in "postcolonial" is not quite the same as the "post" in "postmodern," and that the "post" in "postsecular" is not quite the same as either of them, though inextricably connected to both. While this argument might easily collapse into just another version of postmodernism's eternally self-renewing (and tediously self-regarding) language games, it bears reminding that the poststructuralist philosophies that inform them are by no means as nihilistic as is often supposed. Indeed, as Abeysekara among others suggests, there is a tacit utopianism behind Derrida's suggestion of a "democracy to come" in which democracy is—as it must be—a horizon of imaginative possibility, and a similar point might be made for the other terms—"freedom," "equality," "justice"—that his work is attached to all the more for his concerted effort to dissociate them from the dominant regimes that second them to their cause. In this context, postsecularism should be understood, like other "post" terms, as both backward-looking and anticipatory—looking back to the root term it deconstructs, and that can never adequately be reconfigured, but also looking forward to a future society in which the structuring antinomies of our existence

("faith" versus "reason," "self" versus "other," and so on) may be productively undone. Postsecularism—if it exists at all—is thus best seen to exist on the knife-edge between skepticism and idealism, much in the spirit of postcolonialism and postmodernism; and to clear a space that allows, as they do, for a continual displacement of the conceptual categories on which all ideologies depend.

## Notes

Parts of an earlier version of this essay were published in the *Journal of British Cultural Studies* and in modified form in my coauthored book, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*.

1. The most obvious case study here is that surrounding the reception of Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, all too quickly read at the time as (1) a reckless defiance of Islamic cultural and religious authority and (2) a symptomatically secular text. This is not the place to rehearse the plethora of arguments surrounding the novel or the circumstances behind the *fatwa*, which—usefully synthesized in John Erickson's comparative analysis of the function of Islam in postcolonial narrative—ranged from intemperate polemics (Akhtar, Webster) to putatively more balanced, though hardly ideologically neutral, readings of both the controversy and the text (Appignanesi and Maitland, Ruthven). Two of the most powerful responses to emerge were those of Sara Suleri and, more recently, Anouar Majid who use *The Satanic Verses* and the conflict it engendered to make a case for the capacity of progressive Islam to challenge both secular and religious forms of extremist belief. Both critics insist that the text must be read beyond simplistic oppositions between secularism and fundamentalism. Both also decry the Orientalist tone and demeanor of many reviews of the novel, which Majid in particular sees as having been driven by a tradition of "Eurocentric secular scholarship" and as being consequently unable to produce the more textured reading required by the political tensions surrounding the novel and within the novel itself (38). They part company, however, in the conclusions they draw from their own readings. Majid sees *The Satanic Verses* as being a novel about the pain of Southern displacement and the Western cultural hegemony that underwrites it, setting it against his larger mission to promote a universal vision, rooted in Islamic traditions, that might help contemporary Muslims "overcome the cultural dislocations of our time" (153). For Suleri, on the other hand, *The Satanic Verses* neither defies Islam nor categorically defends it; paradoxically, its cross-cultural confusions and heightened awareness of its own blasphemous status are the twin markers of an "oppositional" postcolonial novel and a "religiously attentive" text (191). Both readings are as attached, I would argue, to a postsecular as to a postcolonial sensibility, but whereas Majid's work subordinates the novel to a broader postsecular vision that sees human solidar-

ity as being rooted in the world's rich religious traditions, Suleri's is more intent on following the labyrinthine trajectories of the novel as a postsecular text. To a greater extent than Majid—and, as will be seen, in keeping with the spirit of this essay—Suleri locates the "postsecularism" of *The Satanic Verses*, not so much in the politicized circumstances that have continued to surround it, as in the novel's own deeply ambivalent rewriting and rereading of religious texts. Zadie Smith's 2000 novel *White Teeth*, which I will be examining later in the essay, adds a further layer of postsecular reflexivity by providing a millenarian rereading of *The Satanic Verses* itself (see section 3).

2. See also Habermas and King.
3. See also Chakrabarty and Derrida.
4. See also Gilroy.
5. See Martel, especially pages xii and 302–03.

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