

# **Coetzee, Reve, and the Post-Secular**

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Ted Laros

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Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities

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Thesis Supervisor: Prof. Paulo de Medeiros

Second Reader: Prof. David Pascoe

As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet.

—J. M. Coetzee to David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*

BEKENTENIS

Voordat ik in de Nacht ga die voor eeuwig lichtloos gloeit,

wil ik nog eenmaal spreken, en dit zeggen:

dat ik nooit anders heb gezocht

dan U, dan U, dan U alleen.

—Gerard Reve, *Nader tot U*

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## 1. Introduction: Literature and the Post-Secular

Close on a month after “9/11,” on October 14, 2001, to be precise, Jürgen Habermas accepted the annual *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* in the Paulskirche of Frankfurt am Main. In his acceptance speech, which was entitled “Glauben und Wissen,” he coined the notion of the post-secular society (12). Ever since Habermas coined his term, and, more importantly, causally speaking, ever since the catastrophic events that took place in the United States on September 11, 2001, more and more humanities scholars and social scientists have been thinking about that one pivotal question that Habermas indirectly addressed in his speech: What does secularization mean in our “post-secular societies”? (12).<sup>1</sup>

Habermas was not the first to think about what secularization means in late twentieth, early twenty first century societies, however, and although he can be credited with coining the term “post-secular society,” he was not the first scholar to be using the notion of the post-secular either. A case in point, that, furthermore, is very relevant considering the discursive relationship that this thesis focuses on, is literary scholar John McClure, who was employing the term when denoting a certain trend in postmodern fiction, in 1995 already.<sup>2</sup> Yet, be that as it may, the events that only just preceded Habermas’s delivering of his speech “Glauben und Wissen,” and undoubtedly the latter’s continued grappling with the question of the meaning of secularization in our current societies ever since he raised it in the forementioned speech, certainly gave debates over this question an enormous thrust.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of works in which this question is, or, rather, slightly differently phrased, but very similar questions are being addressed that have been published since these two events took place are Talal Asad’s provocative 2003 book *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Hent de Vries’s 2005 work *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, Charles Taylor’s monumental 2007 study *A Secular Age*.

<sup>2</sup> See his article “Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality.” Another example is William E. Connolly, who was applying the term earlier still, namely in his 1991 work *Identity/Difference* (see Connolly 155).

As the number of scholars who are working in the general field of the humanities who have taken up the question that Habermas raised in his speech has gradually been increasing in the last couple of years, so has the number of scholars that are working in the particular field of literary studies. Yet, literary scholars have not solely been ruminating the socio-philosophical question of what secularization might mean in our current societies, they have also—and this will probably not come as a surprise—been contemplating what it might mean for the scholarly field that they themselves are working in. In a provocative 2007 essay entitled “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession,” Michael Kaufmann argues that literary studies ought to “reexamine one of the major assumptions of its professional history” (607), this being the premise that “the . . . fact of secularization [can] serve[. . .] as stable grounds for constructing our professional histories and identities” (607).

The general story of secularization that Kaufmann observes to be underlying the discipline of literary studies, is one that he dates back to the nineteenth century, and that “narrates a triumph of empiricism over superstition, reason over faith, and the emancipation of all spheres—science, knowledge, the market, the state—from the oppressive and authoritarian ‘yoke of religion’” (Kaufmann 607). Kaufmann remarks that this secularization narrative was part and parcel of the progress towards modernism and liberalism that was taking place in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, he observes that it does not so much maintain that secular thought and discourse replace their religious counterparts, but rather that they displace them to the private sphere; in this narrative, religious thought and discourse can justifiably pertain to personal experience, belief, and practice only (Kaufmann 607). The result, or so Kaufmann’s representation of this narrative has it, is that in secular institutions, such as the modern research university, only public discourse based on “scientific evidence,” “objective reason,” and “disciplined methodology” can have a place.

Kaufmann's argument for reopening the narrative of secularization that he perceives to be forming the foundation on which literary studies rests, is based on two linked pairs of assertions that he distilled from recent theories developed by scholars who are working outside the field of literary studies, notably from the ones of anthropologist Talal Asad. These assertions are:

- (IA) There is no idea, person, experience, text, institution, or historical period that could be categorized as essentially, inherently, or exclusively secular or religious;
- (IB) Despite this first claim, we nevertheless act as if there is a meaningful difference between the secular and the religious; (IIA) Following the claims of (I), varying discursive contexts construct functionally meaningful differences between the two terms with differing motivations and consequences; what counts as "religious" at one time and place may count as "secular" in another; (IIB) Not only does the context help to define the two terms, but the difference between the two terms also helps to establish the acceptable boundaries of a given discursive context. (Kaufmann 608)

Kaufmann distinguishes between two different types of secularization narratives: The first is the narrative of "unmasking," i.e., the kind of narrative that posits that so-called "secular" positions will appear to be still religious, or that so-called "religious" positions will reveal themselves to be secular, when one takes a closer look at them. Remarkable examples of critical practices based on this kind of narrative are formed by recent articles and books on Nietzsche that bear such telling titles as "Nietzsche's Affirming Negation of Christianity," *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, and *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief*,<sup>3</sup> all of which are aimed at demonstrating that there is much piety to be found in the philosophy of Nietzsche. The second type of secularization narrative that Kaufmann discerns, is the

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<sup>3</sup> The former was published by Daniel Pellerin in 2002; the latter two were published by, respectively, Julian Young in 2006 and Giles Fraser in 2002.

narrative of “replacement,” i.e., the kind of narrative that sets forth that “religion has been replaced by a secular form of the same idea or practice” (Kaufmann 610). It seems that this observation is in contradiction with Kaufmann’s claim that in the general secularization narrative that underlies the discipline of literary studies it is not so much maintained that secular thought and discourse replace their religious counterparts, but that they displace them to the private sphere, but let us leave that aside here. As literary scholarly representatives of the replacement narrative, Kaufmann points out both Matthew Arnold, to whom he attributes the claim that literature serves as a substitution for religion (Kaufmann 610), and, following Vincent Pecora’s lead, Edward Said, who, according to both, presented his own version of the Arnoldian replacement theory under the heading of “secular criticism.” Indeed, Said’s notion of secular criticism is not uncontested, for it has also been critiqued, and for quite similar reasons as are given by Pecora and Kaufmann, I might add, by Talal Asad, William Hart, Saba Mahmood, and, undoubtedly, by others still.<sup>4</sup>

For Kaufmann, the cardinal faults of both the former and the latter type of narrative is that they are both of an essentialist and linear nature. And indeed, when one was to accept the forementioned pairs of premises, one would have to come to the conclusion that such narratives cannot be maintained. Instead, one would have to conclude, as Kaufmann does, that the relationship between the secular and the religious is typified by an innate circularity, and that this undermines any linear version of secularization. Indeed, when one was to underwrite Kaufmann’s premises, one would have to acknowledge that because the relationship between the two terms is of a dynamic and unfixed nature, this binary can only generate an endlessly *recursive* narrative (Kaufmann 615). Furthermore, when one was to adopt Kaufmann’s meta-critical position, of which the two linked pairs of assertions form the major gambit, or a

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<sup>4</sup> See Talal Asad, “Historical Notes on the Idea of Secular Criticism”; William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*; and Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation.”



position similar to it, this is likely to have consequences for the critical stance one would take vis-à-vis the literary, or cultural objects one examines.

As examples of scholars that take a meta-critical position similar to that of Kaufmann, and that, as a result of this, come up with eye-opening new interpretations of certain literary objects, Kaufmann names Tracy Fessenden, Colin Jager, and John McClure. The first, he observes, traced in American literary texts from the seventeenth through the twentieth century a “continuing effort to withhold [social] legitimacy from religions that do not fall in line with dominant, Protestant articulations of the religious/secular divide” (Kaufmann 621). The second, Jager, interprets Romantic notions of the literary subject not so much as alternatives to religious notions of the subject, as Arnold perhaps would have it, but rather to secular notions of it, Kaufmann states, and by doing so, the latter asserts, Jager “positions the literary as a third term, neither merely secular nor a replacement religion, but through imaginative acts of aesthetic representation, able to stand within and beside both categories” (Kaufmann 622). The last one, McClure, Kaufmann rightly asserts, challenges the view that postmodern literature is determinedly secular or antireligious, and investigates instead the ways in which it offers “sacred alternatives to secular constructions of reality” (McClure qtd. in Kaufmann 622). Kaufmann leaves his illustration of post-secular critical praxis with mentioning the gist of some of the recent work of this latter scholar. Yet, he could have named others as well: James Diamond, Simon During, Gavin Hopps, Michael Warner, or Michael Ziser, for instance,<sup>5</sup> who all depart from meta-critical positions similar to Kaufmann’s, when embarking in their respective critical practices. Furthermore, Kaufmann even could have named the very scholar that basically serves as his shining example, i.e., Talal Asad, for he, and his apprentice

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., James Diamond’s “The Post-Secular: A Jewish Perspective”; Simon During’s *Exit Capitalism: Literary Culture, Theory, and Post-Secular Modernity* and his “Completing Secularism: The Mundane in the Neoliberal Era”; Gavin Hopps’s “Beyond Embarrassment: A Post-Secular Reading of Apostrophe”; Michael Warner’s “What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive”; Michael Ziser’s “Emersonian Terrorism: John Brown, Islam, and Postsecular Violence.”

Saba Mahmood, recently wrote very provocative post-secular critiques of the well-known Danish cartoon affair.<sup>6</sup> And of course there are still others he could have named so as to show what kind of critical praxis is emerging now that scholars have started to take up post-secular meta-critical positions. Nevertheless, I would argue that the scholars he does name are important; especially, for whomever is primarily interested in studying twentieth/twenty first century literature, that is, John McClure, who has been developing theories about what he calls “post-secular fiction” ever since the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup>

In his ground-breaking 2007 study *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, McClure sets out to investigate the relationship between literature and the post-secular in order to achieve three main goals: the first is “to survey the contemporary popular and philosophical movement that is sometimes called postsecularism” (ix); the second is “to show that a surprising number of eminent contemporary novelists are engaged in this movement” (ix); and the third is “to offer, by so doing, a new way of configuring the terrain of contemporary fiction” (ix). “Postsecularism,” McClure explains, after having set forth the three main goals that his study attempts to achieve,

[which is] a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity, is being studied and theorized in North America by thinkers such as Harold Bloom, William Connolly, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor. In Europe the project of inventing and understanding post-secularism is identified with philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Hadot, and Gianni Vattimo. But novelists such as Don DeLillo, Louise Erdrich, Toni

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<sup>6</sup> See Talal Asad, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism”; and Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?”

<sup>7</sup> See his 1995 article “Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality”; his 1997 article “Post-Secular Culture: The Return of Religion in Contemporary Theory and Literature”; his 2007 book *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*; his 2009 article “Do They Believe in Magic? Politics and Postmodern Literature.”

Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Thomas Pynchon, and Leslie Marmon Silko are also vigorously exploring postsecularism and postsecular modes of being. These novelists, whom critics often relegate to separate domains within contemporary fiction, are all thinking in the narrative mode about postsecular movements and possibilities that the theorists and sociologists treat more abstractly. (ix)

McClure's discernment of this trend in contemporary fiction prompted him to coin the notion of post-secular fiction. This notion is meant to signify the kind of fiction that "tells [stories that] trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious" (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 3); of which the "ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real" (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 3); and of which the "ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects" (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 3). Now, with the forementioned third main goal of his study, McClure aims at "begin[ning] [to] clarify[. . .] some of this fiction's most characteristic strategies and claims: its plots of partial conversion, its project of ontological disruption, its efforts at once to reassert and to weaken religious conceptions of reality, and its attempts to imagine a new, religiously inflected, form of progressive politics" (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 7).

McClure is very right to emphasize that his study is aimed at *beginning* to clarify the most typical strategies and claims of post-secular fiction, for his object of scrutiny—a body of contemporary North American fiction—is too narrow to enable him to definitely circumscribe the meaning of a literary theoretical notion that appears to be invented to serve as a *universally* applicable critical instrument. Obviously, when one would want to come to a less provisional sketch of the characteristics of "post-secular fiction," one would have to examine a corpus of texts that is larger, and taken from a larger amount of literatures, than the one that

McClure has researched up to this day. This thesis wants to contribute to the actualization of such an effort, and it will attempt to do so by taking some of the works of an African—although, one must note, very European-influenced—and a European writer as its object, these being the world famous J. M. Coetzee (1940) and the internationally less, but nationally all the more famous Dutch author Gerard Reve (1923-2006).<sup>8</sup> On first sight—as I hope to demonstrate later on—(some of) the works of both of these authors seem viable candidates to be given the predicate “post-secular”—in the McClurean sense of the word, that is. But just how well would they fit the characteristics of post-secular fiction that McClure distinguishes, when one scrutinizes them thoroughly? And, provided that they would meet McClure’s standards to a great extent, would these non-American post-secular works of fiction perhaps also exhibit features that McClure did not discern in the American fictional works he identified as post-secular, and on which he bases his theories? Would these works perhaps demonstrate that McClure’s set of characteristics needs to be expanded, or revised even?

This thesis aims at making a contribution to the search for an answer to all of these questions, and it will do so by addressing this one main question: To what extent is McClure’s notion of post-secular fiction apt for characterizing (some of) the respective works of J. M. Coetzee and Gerard Reve? In order to find an answer to this question, I will first map out what McClure’s notion of post-secular fiction signifies. Secondly, in order to investigate to what extent this notion would be apt for characterizing (some of) Coetzee’s work as “post-secular” in the McClurean sense, I will engage in a close reading of a novel of Coetzee’s that might be considered both one of the greatest works in his oeuvre and a work that one might justifiably categorize as “post-secular,” when adhering to McClure’s theories, namely his 1999 novel *Disgrace*. Thirdly, bearing in mind an objective identical to that towards which

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<sup>8</sup> Together with Willem Frederik Hermans and Harry Mulisch, Reve is generally considered to be one of the so called “Great Three” of post-WWII Dutch literature.

the reading of *Disgrace* is directed, I will do exactly the same thing with several works of Reve that are also likely to pass for McClurean post-secular fiction. Fourth-, and lastly, I will formulate a conclusion to the main question that this thesis addresses.

## 2. “Post-Secular Fiction”: The Post-Secular Hermeneutics of John A. McClure

In the forementioned study *Partial Faiths*,<sup>9</sup> McClure states that one can descry a “surprising number” of literary works in “virtually every domain of contemporary fiction” to be sharing a number of fundamental structures and themes: they all “represent[. . .] . . . a secular-minded character’s partial and painful conversion toward the religious” (3); they all “dramatic[ally] disrupt[. . .] . . . secular structures of reality” (3); all “repudiat[e] . . . fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being” (3); and, finally, they all “insist[. . .] on the need to articulate the religious with progressive political projects” (3), or, rather, they insist on the need to “rearticulate[. . .] . . . a *dramatically ‘weakened’* religiosity with *secular*, progressive values and projects” (3; my emphases). This body of literature may, therefore, be called “post-secular,” McClure assures (3).

McClure immediately qualifies the signification of his notion of post-secular fiction, however, by stating that “not all post-secular styles and themes are unique to contemporary literature, and not all postsecular texts are alike” (3). “Postsecularism itself,” he further explains, “has been a feature of literary thinking since the romantics . . . , [a]nd while postsecular texts do share certain features, they are stylistically and thematically diverse” (3). Thus, both the intensity with which the turn to the religious is taken and the degree to which “the process of ontological opening” (3) is being carried out, will vary among different works of post-secular literature, McClure states, and he then continues his explanation by remarking that, furthermore, “the substantial affirmations of the extraordinary” (4) that is being developed in such works, are “drawn . . . from a whole range of religious discourses and produce new, weakened and hybridized, idioms of belief” (4).

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<sup>9</sup> Hereafter referred to as *PF*.

## 2.1. Characteristics of Post-Secular Fiction

Despite the fact that not all post-secular texts are alike, there are, however, a number of characteristics that can be discerned in all of them, McClure asserts in his *PF*:

(I) The conversions that post-secular works of fiction describe are of a partial nature; they “do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief” (4), McClure observes. “Instead,” he states, “they tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative, zones through which the conventional protagonist passes with all possible haste, on his way to a domain of secure religious dwelling” (4). The “postsecular characters” that are stranded in these zones do not seem particularly bothered by the fact that they are though, and they are not “particularly impatient to move on to some more fully elaborated form of belief or practice” (4) either, McClure remarks.

(II) The representations of reality that post-secular works of fiction provide are instable: “the break with secular versions of the real does not lead in postsecular narrative to the triumphant reappearance of a well-mapped, familiar, religious cosmos, as it often does in conventional narratives of conversion,” McClure states; “Gods appear, but not God. Other realms become visible but either partially and fleetingly or in bizarre overabundance. Miracles and visitations suggest that the laws of nature may be contingent but without providing any clearly coded alternatives” (4). As being grounded in a zone somewhere between secularity and religiosity does not seem to bother the “postsecular characters” that McClure identifies much, so does the instability of the worlds that post-secular narratives sketch out fail to discomfort the authors that write these narratives, or the characters that these authors create.

(III) The spiritual communities that are being represented in post-secular fiction are characterized by incompleteness and instability just as much as the conversions of the characters and the constructions of reality that post-secular fiction presents respectively are, McClure asserts: “As in traditional narratives, conversion is in part a matter of coming into community. But the communities founded or discovered by postsecular pilgrims are dramatically small, fragile, and transitory—the very opposite of the dogmatic faith communities and vast megachurches that are now a troubling feature of the American landscape” (4). “[I]n postsecular fiction,” he further remarks, “. . . ragtag congregations gather on highway overpasses or in abandoned churches and nunneries or woodland clearings—places identified with the religious but at a distance from its more articulated and institutionalized domains” (4).

(IV) Scripture is destabilized and granted only partial authority in post-secular stories, McClure states; in the latter kind of narratives, sacred discourses are presented as instable and incomplete, just as much as the conversions, structures of the real, and spiritual communities that form such important components of them are. In post-secular fiction, references to scriptural traditions abound, McClure observes, but they “tend either to be selectively cited, interrogated, and affirmed or to be brought into vertiginous relation with one another, so that any larger claims for any one tradition’s universal reach, absolute accuracy, and authority are denied” (5). Indeed, McClure asserts, “the postsecular attitude toward received tradition” is “radically nondogmatic and ecumenical” (5); in post-secular fiction, “great religious stories are simultaneously [being regarded as] the vessels of important intimations and [as] ‘all false,’ all mere approximations that become, when they are too fully elaborated or too emphatically endorsed, mortally dangerous” (4-5). For post-secular-minded authors and characters, McClure concludes, “there can be no question . . . of any affirmation of orthodoxy, let alone of the dogmatic stringencies of fundamentalism. But there can be no question, either, of a



wholesale abandonment of any discourse that gestures toward the most profound dreams, promises, and possibilities” (6).

The most important move that post-secular fiction makes, its most crucial characteristic, McClure states in so many words, is, thus, that it “affirm[s] the urgent need for a turn toward the religious even as [it] reject[s] (in most instances) the familiar dream of full return to an authoritative faith” (*PF* 6); “[t]he paths [it] chart[s],” he remarks, “do not, for the most part, lead back into the domain of conventional religious dwelling, where life unfolds under a sacred canopy of ontological givens, moral codes, and organized community . . . . Instead, they lead into zones where characters must learn to reconcile important secular and religious intuitions and where they receive ‘limited gift[s]’ of the spirit” (6). These post-secular zones, where life unfolds under a canopy of ontological, moral, and communal uncertainty, one could say, are, strikingly enough, not experienced as particularly uncomfortable zones to be in, by the characters that appear in post-secular fiction, McClure maintains—as was mentioned earlier—and after having implicitly advanced what post-secular fiction’s major move is, he takes up this point again, and illuminatingly elaborates on it by observing that

[t]hese characters are transformed and steadied, as it were, by the sense that the world is seamed with mystery and benignity, by awakened impulses to reverence, wonder, self-forgetfulness, and care, and by coming into company with others. These gifts make life more bearable, but they fall short of the gifts of absolute conviction and secure dwelling identified with traditional experiences of conversion or revival. For those who receive them are still compelled to navigate without any reliable map of the cosmos or of history, any full diagram of divine power or comprehensive census of

supernatural beings, any formally elaborated moral code or clearly marked path toward salvation. (*PF* 6)

The fundamental and insurmountable incompleteness and instability that characterizes the ontological, moral, and social positions that post-secular fiction takes, distinguishes this kind of fiction from both contemporary fundamentalist fiction and from New Age spiritual fiction, McClure asserts (*PF* 6). The reason for this, he states, is that in such fiction<sup>10</sup> “the enchanted world waiting just beyond the boundaries of secularism offers answers to all problems, and the only challenge is to get there, learn its laws, and submit to them” (6). McClure subsequently drives home his argument by writing that in post-secular narratives, on the contrary,

characters may be delivered from secular styles of being that have become unendurable to postsecular, religiously inflected styles that help sustain them, but these alternatives still possess their own stubborn difficulties and darkneses. Thus, while it may be accurate to speak of the project of these texts as one of reenchantment, this process also must be seen as fraught with risk and uncertainty and these texts as emphasizing not only the false promises of secularism and religious fundamentalism but also the profound difficulties of any life, including that lived within the mysterious precincts of the spirit. (*PF* 7)

Post-secular fiction thus (re)presents a “third way,” one might say; one that is sharply distinguished, as McClure puts it, both from philosophical secularism and from culturally dominant forms of religious revival.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As examples of such fiction, he names the top selling novel series *Left Behind* by “fundamentalist novelists” Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, and James Redfield’s best-selling “New Age adventure novel” *The Celestine Prophecy* (see *PF* 6).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *PF* 7.

## 2.2. The Practical Projects that Post-Secular Fiction Converses with

In his *PF*, McClure states that post-secular fiction is engaged with “broader post-secular movements” (7), both practical and theoretical ones. “These movements—including the explosive growth of fundamentalist and pneumatic forms of organized religious practice, ‘New Age’ experiments in alternative spiritualities, and the turn toward religion in certain philosophical circles—all reflect a strong but selective disenchantment with secular values and modes of being and a determination to invent alternatives” (7), he observes.

The latter observation seems, however, problematic to me; that is to say, in part. For although the general claim that McClure implicitly makes here is a correct one—it is true that in the “postmodern” age that we are living in, there has occurred an emersion of movements that are “disenchanted” with certain aspects of secularism and that are, therefore, determined to come up with “alternatives”—the movements that he lumps together under the notion of the post-secular do not all seem to be so constituted that one could rightfully categorize them as such—indeed, not even if this was to be done only provisionally, I would argue. The reason for this is that if the post-secular is to be thought of as (re)presenting a “third way”—as McClure indeed seems to feel it ought to be<sup>12</sup>—as being a hybrid between rigorous secular and rigidly religious positions, neither “fundamentalist,” nor “pneumatic” variants of “organized religious practice,”<sup>13</sup> can all justifiably be given the predicate “post-secular.” At least some forms of religious and spiritual practices that would have to be classified under one of these (sub)categories would, on a more abstract level, i.e., in the religious/secular dyadic scheme, or, indeed, in the religious/secular/post-secular triadic framework, have to be

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<sup>12</sup> He does not characterize the philosophical, political, and religious positions that post-secular fiction takes as one that “distinguish[es] it sharply both from defenses of philosophical secularism and from the most salient forms of religious revival” (*PF* 7) for nothing.

<sup>13</sup> McClure surely does not distinguish the spiritual communities, or, as he puts it, “ragtag congregations” (*PF* 4-5) that he encounters in post-secular fiction from various kinds of, indeed, (highly) *organized* religious practice for nothing either.

categorized—even though, of course, this could only be done pragmatically—under the notion of the religious, not under that of the post-secular.

It looks as if McClure equates the post-secular with the notion of religious resurgence in the passage quoted above, for after he has discussed the re-emergence of so called “fundamentalist” movements,<sup>14</sup> he remarks that “fundamentalism is, of course, not the only form of religious resurgence to emerge over the past thirty or forty years” (8). Let us, however, leave for the current discussion indeed rather minor issue of separating the post-secular wheat from the religious chaff aside, and, instead, focus on the main argument of which the partly problematic passage that is quoted above forms the beginning.

The major thesis that is being advanced in this argument is that the novelists whose work McClure labels “post-secular” are “disenchanted with secular values and modes of being” (7) and determined “to invent alternatives” (7)—as we saw above, they share this disposition with the “broader postsecular movements” (7) that McClure discerns—and that their main effort lies in both “evaluat[ing] the culturally dominant modes of postsecular innovation” and “develop[ing] their own religiously inflected alternatives to secularism” (7). Now, even though one had arguably better characterize (certain) “fundamentalist” movements as “culturally dominant modes” of religious resurgence, rather than of “postsecular innovation,” it could very well be possible that post-secular authors evaluate these modes of religiosity and employ elements of them in their efforts to develop a “religiously inflected alternative[. . .] to secularism” just as much as they evaluate and employ components of “proper” modes of “postsecular innovation” in their developing of such an alternative. Indeed, this idea becomes all the more defensible when one adheres to a similar definition of the notion of fundamentalism as McClure does. He namely adopts Gabriel Almond et al.’s

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<sup>14</sup> McClure rightly points out that the term is disputed (cf. *PF* 7). For an interesting post-structuralist account of the birth of the term, see the chapter “Fundamentalist Exile” in Susan Friend Harding’s *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*.

definition of it, and this definition is a rather broad one, as becomes evident in McClure's citation of it:

Fundamentalisms . . . seek to transform "sacred texts[,] . . . epics and poems[,] and other open-ended genres" into "the stuff of 'fundamental,' 'inerrant' Scriptures" . . . and to render the entire community subject to their divinely ordained and incontestable "doctrines and codes" . . . In order to protect the "purity" of the community, its "uniformity of belief and practice" . . . they establish sharply exclusive boundaries around the community. And in order to maintain the entire system, they establish an elite of leaders who are deemed to be "unassailable in their authority over contemporary belief and praxis" . . . (*PF* 8)

As one could of course easily argue that both certain traditions within all three great Abrahamic religions and numerous non-Abrahamic movements would fit this description, it seems, as said, certainly not unlikely that post-secular authors would engage themselves with "fundamentalisms" so defined in order to develop their "religiously inflected alternatives to secularism."

Whereas McClure does not explicitly state that post-secular novelists are in conversation with fundamentalisms of any kind, he does expressly remark that these novelists engage with another social phenomenon that is also symptomatic of the (post)modern turn towards religion. McClure quotes a number of sociologists of religion who have observed that "the last several decades have . . . been marked by the growth of a different sort of religious sensibility among members of the best educated and most thoroughly secularized sectors of American public life" (*PF* 8). One of the sociologists of religion that McClures cites, Wade Roof, describes, according to the former, "privileged American baby boomers as a 'generation of seekers,' who have sought to satisfy a restless spirituality not only 'in evangelical and

fundamentalist<sup>15</sup> teachings’ but also ‘in Eastern religions[,] . . . in mysticism and New Age movements, in Goddess worship and other ancient religious rituals” (*PF* 8). Roof furthermore shows that “[t]hese seekers . . . often bring habits of critical thinking and progressive political ideas to their religious explorations and innovations” (*PF* 8), McClure states. The second of the sociologists of religion that McClure quotes, is Robert Wuthnow, who, in the former’s view, “draws a similar picture of a religiously animated culture divided in its inclinations between increasingly fundamentalist forms of religious ‘dwelling’—unquestioning commitment to a particular faith . . . —and more exploratory styles of religious life—‘seeking’ and ‘practice’” (*PF* 8). Some Americans “struggle to shore up (or invent) traditional religious structures” (*PF* 8), McClure writes—paraphrasing Wuthnow—but many others, he states—and herein he again quotes Wuthnow—“have been losing faith in a [traditional religious] metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe” (Wuthnow qtd. in *PF* 8). “Religiously unhoused, but spiritually hungry” (*PF* 8) as the latter people are, according to McClure, they “increasingly negotiate among the competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom” (Wuthnow qtd. in *PF* 8), he states, quoting Wuthnow for the final time, and he adds to this that “religious experience returns, in many contemporary novels, as just this sort of fragmentary, plural, and only partially illuminating phenomenon” (*PF* 8).

McClure notes that quite recently, philosopher Charles Taylor came to make an observation of the return of religion in contemporary North America that is similar to the respective perceptions of this phenomenon that the sociologists of religion that McClure quotes make. In his 2002 study *Varieties of Religion Today*, Taylor namely signals, thus McClure writes, that

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<sup>15</sup> I assume that Roof is using the notion of fundamentalism in the narrow sense of the word here, i.e., as denoting a certain movement within American Protestant Christianity. For an illuminating account of this narrow understanding of the word, see the chapter from Harding’s *The Book of Jerry Falwell* that was mentioned in note 14.

[a]n “essential feature of our divided age,” . . . is that many secular-minded persons find themselves drawn back toward the religious by inchoate inner promptings— “beginning intimations and intuitions that [they] feel bound to follow up” . . . These promptings can take the form of a “profound desire that has been ignored,” . . . or of an encounter with “some greater reality . . . [that] has been closed off” by secularism; “most people feel both pulls.” (*PF* 9)

With this passage, McClure remarks, furthermore, Taylor draws our attention to the fact that many of the people whom the former, following Roof and Wuthnow’s lead, refers to as “seekers,” i.e., the people who, as he puts it, have become “disenchanted with secular values and modes of being” and are determined to “develop their own religious alternatives to secularism” (*PF* 7), are “religious beginners, products of a culture in which many people remain almost completely unschooled in religious beliefs and practices” (*PF* 9).

These “religious beginners,” McClure states, are not the only Americans who are “caught up in a postsecular renegotiation of the religious” (*PF* 9), however. Generations of Americans, he maintains, “have been instructed in, and remained ambivalently committed to, both religious and secular modes of seeing and being” (*PF* 9). These Americans represent another form of “secular/religious hybridity” (*PF* 9), and “[t]heir struggle to accommodate both modes and to fashion something new in the place of their convergence,” McClure asserts,

has been a feature of American cultural life, both within organized religious communities and in unchurched settings, for more than a century and a half. It is itself a postsecular struggle—if not in the strong sense of a movement that breaks selectively but dramatically with a dominant secularism, then in the sense of one that both selectively assimilates and refuses to fully endorse secular ideas. (*PF* 9)

As many contemporary novels are engaged with the post-secular projects of the generation of “seekers,” so is much literature of the present period “a product of this [latter] sort of postsecularism” (*PF* 9), McClure contends.

To wrap up his discussion of the connection between the post-secular fiction of our age and the practical projects of secular/religious hybridity that one might discern in contemporary North America, McClure writes that “a diverse population of contemporary Americans inhabits the border zone between the secular and the religious, and like other populations, this one is producing new, complexly hybridized forms of thought and life” (*PF* 10); indeed, he asserts that this population is “struggling to think the world in terms of a turbulent mixture of secular and religious categories” (*PF* 10).<sup>16</sup> Whatever else they might be identifying with, McClure concludes, “contemporary postsecular novelists emerge from this population and address its concerns in their work” (*PF* 10).

### **2.3. The Theoretical Projects that Post-Secular Fiction Converses with**

As was mentioned in the previous section, McClure maintains that post-secular novelists do not solely address the pre-eminently practical issues that the forementioned social groups are concerned with; as said, he states that they also engage with issues that contemporary scholars address out of (primarily) theoretical concerns. McClure points out that several philosophers of the present period have been making efforts to explain the return of religion in contemporary culture. What these scholars remind us of, he remarks, is that “[r]eligion returns . . . as it always has, when worldly life becomes intolerable” (*PF* 10). And he adds to this that

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<sup>16</sup> Although it might seem that McClure is using his categories rather essentialistically here, one could of course argue along Kaufmannian lines that from a pragmatic point of view, the construction that McClure sets up here is a meaningful one. Moreover, in his discussion of recent work of philosopher William E. Connolly, it becomes apparent that McClure is aware of the fact that “assertive summar[ies]” of post-secular positions—like the one he presents here—are problematic, and can only serve pragmatic purposes (cf. *PF* 15-6).



“it returns with a specific, historically supercharged force, as secular modernity’s promises of peace, prosperity, and progress fail to materialize and as reason itself begins to undermine secular rationalism’s claims to exclusive authority on matters of truth” (*PF* 10).

McClure identifies four themes that contemporary scholars are contemplating: (I) the theme of the logic of (partial) belief (*PF* 10ff); (II) the theme of “weak religion” (*PF* 12ff); (III) the theme of “crasser supernaturalism” (*PF* 17ff); and (IV) the theme of “preterite spiritual” communalism/“neo-monastic” politics (*PF* 19ff). According to McClure, today’s post-secular fiction is in conversation with some of the theories on these themes that have recently been, and are currently being, developed (primarily) within the field of philosophy. The next four sub-paragraphs will thus focus on the theories on the forementioned themes that McClure sees post-secular fiction to be engaging with, and, furthermore, it will investigate how McClure takes the latter kind of fiction to be conversing with the former kind of theories.

### **2.3.1. The Logic of (Partial) Belief**

With his 1999 book *Belief*, philosopher Gianni Vattimo presented an analysis of, and made a “contribution to” (*PF* 10), the religious revival of our times, McClure remarks. Part of Vattimo’s study is an autobiographical account of “his own turn toward the Christianity of his youth” (*PF* 10), McClure writes, and in the latter’s reading of this account it is being asserted that two experiences lived through by Vattimo, along with two other factors, facilitated his (re)turn towards Christianity. These experiences were “the experience of death” (Vattimo qtd. in *PF* 10-1), i.e., of the death of loved ones, and the experience of disappointment—disappointment, McClure writes, hereby partly quoting Vattimo, “in the course of which secular ‘projects, dreams of renewal, hopes even for (political) redemption . . . were shattered

in a wholly contingent way” (PF 11). The particular relationship between cause and effect that one, according to McClure, can find in Vattimo’s story—a (re)turn towards religion that is at least partly instigated by experiences of personal loss and political disappointment—is one that can be discerned in, and that, indeed, forms “a major feature of” (PF 11) practically all “postsecular narratives of turning” (PF 11), McClure asserts: “in virtually all of these narratives,” he writes,

the event of turning is set in motion by personal catastrophe, experiences that shatter characters’ habitual modes of seeing and being. Mortal illness, the horrors of war, extreme experiences of displacement are represented in these novels as painfully enabling sources of self transformation. But . . . this dynamic is represented as partial and mysterious. Not all who suffer are awakened to the extraordinary and to a care for others; not all who experience acute vulnerability respond by opening their hearts to the world. (PF 11)

Yet, to return to Vattimo, apart from the experiences of personal loss and political disappointment, there are also “two broad socio-intellectual developments” (PF 11) to which Vattimo relates his (re)turn towards religion, McClure states, namely: (I) “the historical weakening of confidence in secular-rational promises of peace and progress”; and (II) “the philosophical weakening of secular reason’s claims to exclusive authority on matters of the real” (PF 11). McClure reads Vattimo to be suggesting that for many people, the great social horrors that occurred throughout the twentieth century and the social improvements that failed to occur in it “severely undermined the great modern master narratives of secular enlightenment and emancipation” (PF 11). Furthermore, the former reads the latter to be observing that “developments within philosophy undermined secular rationalism’s claim to

exclusive and absolute authority” (*PF* 11).<sup>17</sup> Rationalism’s major project of demythification “finally turned against itself, recognizing that even the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth” (Vattimo qtd. in *PF* 11), McClure quotes from Vattimo, and he then continues his reading of the latter by remarking that “[a]s a consequence, ‘Reason faces many problems that have deepened in recent years’—problems of ecological collapse and social violence—with an unprecedented ‘sense of defeat’” (*PF* 11). In winding up his reading of Vattimo’s *Belief*, McClure indicates that in this latter study, the Italian philosopher demonstrates that “[i]n the particular vacuum produced by these developments, the counterpromptings and propositions of the religious again became audible and attractive” (*PF* 11); as Vattimo himself puts it:

whereas for many decades in this century, religions appeared, according to the Enlightenment and positivist idea, as ‘residual’ forms of experience destined to be deleted by the imposition of the modern form of life (techno-scientific rationalization of social life, political democracy, and so on) today they appear again as possible guides for the future. (Vattimo qtd. in *PF* 11)

### 2.3.2. “Weak Religion”

As it thus seems that several historical events have restrengthened the appeal of the religious, the latter has not become so strong as to facilitate an unconditional return to religion for Vattimo or the individuals that take up political and philosophical positions similar to the one he takes. In their view, its history is too tainted for an unrestricted return to be able to justifiably take place. And so, McClure observes, one can find Vattimo asking: “If the

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<sup>17</sup> For interesting specimens of this trend in philosophy, cf., e.g., Akeel Bilgrami’s “Secularism and Relativism”; Charles Taylor’s “Modes of Secularism,” and his *A Secular Age*; and the agenda of UC, Berkeley’s Mellon Strategic Group in Critical Theory, which is “to bridge conventional divides between modern European critical theory and non-Western and post-Enlightenment critical theoretical projects” (Brown 7).

religious beckons so powerfully in our times . . . how is it to be rendered free of the features that make for dogmatism and violence?” (PF 12). McClure states that the question that Vattimo raises is central to post-secular fiction. Furthermore, he remarks that historian of religion Mircea Eliade already raised the same question some thirty-five years ago, and that the way in which Eliade dealt with the question is being mirrored in today’s post-secular fiction: “Addressing the question of religion’s future,” McClure writes, “. . . Eliade called for a “demystification in reverse,” one that would affirm ‘the mystery of divine presence today . . . without returning to a pre-critical naivete with its “enchanted enclosure of consciousness” . . . In so doing, Eliade identified the two challenges that shape postsecular thinking in contemporary fiction” (PF 12), these being: (I) “[T]o fashion compelling spiritually inflected alternatives to the most relentlessly secular modes of seeing and being” (PF 12); and (II) “[T]o ensure that these alternatives will leave room for reflection, disagreement, difference, and innovation” (PF 12).

McClure contends that in the work of various contemporary philosophers, one can find “secular thought reopening negotiations with the religious” (PF 12); in the work of these philosophers, he asserts, “a postsecular alternative [is] taking shape in the space between traditional secular and religious discourses” (PF 12). As a first example of “a postsecular project of responsible return” (PF 12)—one which he indeed labels “one of the most useful descriptions” (PF 12) of such a project—he discusses the one offered by Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty in their 1994 book *The Future of Religion*. In this book, McClure states, Vattimo endeavors to develop his notion of weak religion, and with a passage that I will now quote at length, the former makes an effort to indicate what the notion of the latter signifies:

While fundamentalism celebrates an all-powerful God whose absolute law is dictated to humans through infallible spokespersons, scriptures, and institutions, weak religion,

guided by insights drawn from hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and pragmatism, avoids absolute assertions and totalizing schemes and checks institutional religion's impulse "to participate in power and grandeur" . . . The weakened Catholicism Vattimo affirms draws back from the idea of an infinite, all-powerful deity, refuses to provide comprehensive descriptions of the real and the good, and distances itself from "the visible, disciplinary, and dogmatic structure of the Church" . . . Its relation to the traditional idea of redemption is equally unorthodox. Setting aside ideas of transcendence, eternal life, and absolute truth, weak religion "summons humans back" . . . to their historicity, their finitude, and their fallibility. And it makes a conversion to charity (rather than an anticipation of judgment and eternal life) the core of its message. (*PF* 12-3)

Vattimo and Rorty's promotion of a "deliberately 'weakened' religiosity" (*PF* 13) forms, thus, yet another answer to the question of the future of religion; furthermore, McClure states, it "help[s] us [to] recognize the tricky task of postsecular fiction, which aims at once to reaffirm and to weaken the religious, to represent it as a source for personal and collective empowerment that must itself be weakened in order to be responsibly deployed" (*PF* 13). A major task of post-secular fiction is thus to "delink the religious from projects of power and grandeur" (*PF* 13), McClure asserts, and, additionally, he points out that the forementioned "double practice of disavowal and reaffirmation" (*PF* 13) is being carried out with great frequency in post-secular fiction: again and again it refuses to honor "the conventional equations of belief with power, certainty, and infinite satisfaction" (*PF* 13), while at the same time it "suggests that the religious still makes a difference without them" (*PF* 13). McClure points out, though, that the "practice of disavowal and reaffirmation" unfolds in different ways: "[i]n some [post-secular narratives], the work of weakening goes on within an established tradition, rendering it more inclusive; in many others, however, the religious

reemerges in a space, social and discursive, beyond or between traditions, and this positioning of the spiritual is in itself a major mode of weakening” (*PF* 13).

In his 1995 work *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida identifies another strategy of “deliberate weakening,” McClure states. “In our day,” Derrida writes, “many discourses . . . seek to be religious—discourses of a philosophical type if not philosophies themselves—without putting forth theses or *theologems* that would by their very structure teach something corresponding to the dogmas of a given religion” (Derrida qtd. in *PF* 13-4; emphasis in the original). In the forementioned work of his, Derrida signals that there is a tradition within contemporary philosophy—and he points out that figures such as Levinas, Marion, Patočka, and Ricoeur belong to this tradition—that “propos[es] a nondogmatic [sic] doublet of dogma . . . a *thinking* that ‘repeats’ the possibility of religion without religion [or] without reference to religion as institutional dogma” (Derrida qtd. *PF* 14; emphasis in the original). McClure observes that “[t]his strategy of ‘perhaps’ is characteristic of post-secular literary rhetoric” (*PF* 14), and as a typical example of a post-secular work in which this strategy is being employed, he names Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America* (1991), “which,” he remarks, “refuses ever to resolve the relentlessly thematized question of the status (hallucination or visitation?) of its many extraordinary events” (*PF* 14).

A third philosopher who has been endeavoring to create “a postsecular alternative . . . in the space between traditional secular and religious discourses” (*PF* 12), is William E. Connolly. His post-secularism, McClure states, resembles Vattimo’s weak religion in more than one way, although he only gives two instances of it to underpin his claim: the first is that it rejects “sovereign divinities and discourses” (*PF* 14), and the second is that it “refuses to make “eternal life . . . the essential aim of religion” . . . advocating in its place a ‘reverence for life and earth’ . . . and a reconciling of oneself to mortality” (*PF* 14). The worldliness that

the latter fact attests to, McClure remarks, challenges not only hegemonic religious traditions, but reigning secular ones as well (*PF* 14). Moreover, he points out that this particular worldliness represents a tendency that can be discerned not only in contemporary philosophy, but in many contemporary post-secular narratives as well: “In these works,” he observes, “the path of redemption leads down not only from the false heights of material privilege, amoral play, or ideological rapture but also from imagined spiritual transcendence. These are narratives, then, of worldly and mortal redemption, in a world powerfully but only partially restored by the discovery of its spiritual dimensions” (*PF* 14-5).

With his 1991 essay “A Letter to Augustine,” Connolly can be found to be throwing light upon yet another feature of post-secular fiction, McClure states. In it, the former namely “set[s] the religious, the secular, and the postsecular representations of the real side by side in a manner that suggests both a timeline and a debate” (*PF* 15), and by doing this, McClure asserts, Connolly “illuminates the basic discursive structure of postsecular literature” (*PF* 15). McClure cites a concise passage from the essay in which Connolly sums up the three positions:

*The Augustinian moment:* we are fragile; god is perfect; the earth is solid and bountiful; we have been given dominion over it.

*The secular reply:* we are powerful; the old god is good only for marriages and funerals; nature is pliable and bountiful; we will attain mastery over it.

*The posttheist, postsecular rejoinder:* the earth is fragile; highly organized human economies are interwoven with its fragility; the *sovereign* god was on balance a destructive construction; the hegemony of the modern project of mastery results in the globalization of contingency; nontheistic reverence for life and the earth remains to be cultivated. (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15; emphases in the original)

What Connolly illuminates here, according to McClure, is “both the dialogic structure of postsecular narrative, in which the three positions [that Connolly] defines are repeatedly put into play, and the outlines of postsecular thought itself, as it develops in text after text.” (*PF* 15). Post-secular thought indeed “stresses the fragility of the Earth and its preciousness” (*PF* 15), as Connolly states, and the latter is also right to say that it “asks us to question the notions of absolute power embedded both in conventional monotheism and in secular humanism” (*PF* 15), McClure asserts. Conclusively, he adds to this that “these are,” moreover, “the themes of a whole range of contemporary literary narratives” (*PF* 15).

McClure observes that “Connolly’s astute reconstruction of a postsecular position goes to matters of thought and style as well as to its propositional structure” (*PF* 15). However, he signals, this reconstruction cannot go without a disclaimer: “Given that postsecularists affirm the ‘inexorable excess of being over structures of interpretation and identity’ . . . , accept the contestability of the most powerfully helpful propositions, and reject the program of ‘conversion or conquest’ . . . [that is being] promoted by certain sacred texts and communities,” he writes, “they cannot be completely comfortable with the sort of assertive summary of their position [that Connolly provides]” (*PF* 15-6).<sup>18</sup> Connolly himself must be aware of this too, though, because McClure writes that the former “[f]or all of these reasons . . . writes [that post-secularists] tend to weaken the presentation of their own beliefs not only by strategies of overt qualification, but also by . . . [a] strategy of ludic avowal” (*PF* 16), i.e., “by means of impious comedy (‘laughter is a solvent of piety’ . . . ) and even blasphemy” (*PF* 16). McClure remarks that this “strategy of ludic avowal” is being employed in many contemporary works of post-secular fiction. Furthermore, he explains what this strategy effects: “Absurd excess, extravagant impiety, and parody,” he states, “function in these works both to make the reintroduction of the religious palatable to secular-minded

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. note 16.



readers and to check the tendency of religious speculation to drift toward dogmatism and intolerance” (*PF* 16).

The strategies of “deliberate weakening” that McClure reads Vattimo and Rorty, Derrida, and Connolly to be both describing and promoting—as we have seen, he distinguishes four: (I) the strategy of “disavowal and reaffirmation”; (II) the strategy of “perhaps”; (III) the strategy of “overt qualification”; and (IV) the strategy of “ludic avowal”—have broader political potential, McClure, following Connolly’s lead, advances. The former approvingly reads the latter to be suggesting that

[t]he productive weakening of all dogmatisms . . . promotes a philosophically grounded public pluralism in which “multiple constituencies honoring a variety of moral sources and metaphysical orientations” operate in a public sphere where no constituency’s claim to authority is sanctified. Instead, all parties recognize “the contestable character of the fundamental faith they honor most.” (*PF* 16)<sup>19</sup>

As post-secular philosophers endeavor to consolidate such a development, so do contemporary post-secular writers of fiction.

### 2.3.3. “Crasser Supernaturalism”

As post-secular theory and literature thus seem to take up very similar political and philosophical positions, they do take different courses, McClure asserts, when it comes to one important theme: the supernatural. McClure contends that although post-secular philosophy certainly evidences of having great respect for the religious, it at the same time reveals to have

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<sup>19</sup> For other interesting post-Enlightenment strategies to promote a “philosophically grounded public pluralism,” see Akeel Bilgrami’s “Secularism and Relativism” and Charles Taylor’s “Modes of Secularism.”

“a strong desire to de-emphasize its supernatural elements” (*PF* 17), i.e., to “naturaliz[e] . . . the religious” (*PF* 17). Post-secular literature, on the contrary, often is “replete with instances of extraordinary, improbable, and miraculous events” (*PF* 17), McClure observes; indeed, he states that in many works of post-secular fiction, “[t]he religious returns . . . with the vulgar exuberance of a tabloid headline” (*PF* 17). Astutely McClure remarks, however, that this “hypertrophied supernaturalism” (*PF* 17), as he puts it, that partly characterizes much post-secular fiction, “is itself a strategy of weakening” (*PF* 17).

Although contemporary post-secular philosophers thus seemingly want to downplay the supernatural elements of religion, there is, however, an older thinker who in his work, as he avowedly stated himself, endorsed a supernaturalism “of the piecemeal or crasser type” (James qtd. in *PF* 18), McClure remarks, namely psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910).<sup>20</sup> James’s supernaturalism, which, according to himself, affirmed “conversations with the unseen, voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, assurances of support” (James qtd. in *PF* 18), prefigures that of a certain branch of post-secular fiction, McClure asserts. And he goes on to insist that although it might seem that to endorse such a supernaturalism is to place oneself in “the camp of strong religion” (*PF* 18), it really does not. The reason for this, he explains, is that “unlike the crasser supernaturalists of the organized faiths, James incorporates and honors a diversity of supernatural entities, speculations, and experiences in his writing” (*PF* 18).

James’s supernatural pluralism does not only pertain to questions of epistemology, however; it relates to questions of ontology as well, McClure states, and he adds that when it addresses the latter kind of questions, it prefigures post-secular fiction in yet another way. James namely “entertains . . . the idea that religious differences are a product not just of

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<sup>20</sup> This American psychologist/philosopher, who spent almost his entire academic career at Harvard, was the brother of writer Henry James.

diverse systems of thought but also of a more extraordinary diversity in the very structure of the cosmos, which is imagined to contain—in some virtually unthinkable manner—a range of different but ‘interpenetrating’ religious domains and divinities” (*PF* 19), McClure writes, and he states that “[t]his speculative sketch is fleshed out, as it were, in a range of contemporary works of fiction, where domains and divinities proper to profoundly different supernatural traditions share space in a pluralistic universe” (*PF* 19).

The “crasser supernaturalism” of James and the “range of contemporary works of [post-secular] fiction” that McClure is referring to, seems, yet again, to unfold by means of the paradoxical strategy of “disavowal and reaffirmation,” as the passage with which McClure concludes his discussion of it appears to be revealing: “The crasser supernaturalism keeps company, in these novels, as it does in James’s work,” he namely states in this passage,

with a peculiar sort of epistemological humility and ontological abundance: the suggestion is that all truths are potentially true, all realities are potentially real, but no truth and no reality is exclusively true or real. This vision of things—a kind of supernatural multiculturalism—produces its own sort of weak religiosity then, even as it affirms the crasser supernaturalism. And it represents the most radical narrative innovation of postsecular fiction in our time. (*PF* 19)

#### **2.3.4. “Preterite Spiritual” Communalism/“Neo-Monastic” Politics**

With its different strategies of deliberate weakening, post-secularism thus “effect[s] a return to the religious that does not sponsor the fierce enclosure of consciousness identified with fundamentalism and its political militancies” (*PF* 19), McClure asserts. Another way in which post-secularism is at once similar to and different from (some of) the forms of religiosity and

ideology that McClure is referring to here, is in that it would allow, as we have seen, for the religious to re-enter politics, yet, this, of course, in a way that is almost completely opposed to that in which (some) fundamentalisms would allow for this to happen. Nevertheless, the point is that both are willing to commit what in the eyes of many secularists is a mortal sin: mix politics with religion.

Secularists of all sorts generally seem to be suspicious of thinkers who in their work seek to approach or go beyond the boundaries of secularism, especially when it comes to questions concerning epistemology or politics. Saba Mahmood, for instance, who in her work primarily aims at rethinking secularism, cannot but signal that again and again, she is met with suspicion when presenting her work at universities in the U.S. and Europe (Mahmood, “Reply” 152; “Feminist Theory” 223). In her provocative 2006 essay “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” she articulates what might be the most important reason for this: “Since the events of 9/11,” she writes in her peroration of this essay,

it has become customary to hear pleas—in the academy as well as in the popular press—for the restoration of secular reasoning, principles, and orientations so that some semblance of order may be restored from the havoc religious politics has wrought in the world today. For many intellectuals, what is needed right now is a fierce and reasoned assertion of the moral necessity and superiority of secularism. (Mahmood, “Secularism” 346-7)

Post-secularists like Mahmood would argue, however, that “in a culture where spiritual intuitions and religious impulses, far from withering away, are so vigorously reemerging,” as McClure puts it, “it could also be claimed that it is equally [if not: *more*] responsible to imagine vigorous forms of spiritual life disarticulated from the will to ‘power

and grandeur' [Vattimo] and from other predispositions fostered by traditional religious discourses and institutions" (*PF* 19-20). As post-secularism is clearly doing exactly this, McClure asserts, it is "political through and through" (*PF* 20).

Yet, "conventional postsecular narratives are political in other ways as well," McClure asserts (*PF* 20). These narratives namely imagine communities that constitute what he calls, with a term that he borrows from Thomas Pynchon, "'preterite' spiritualities" (*PF* 20). In order to sketch out where these preterite spiritual communities emerge, what they look like, and what they are aimed at, McClure remarks that they

arise in the cracks of the social order, among the anonymous and the excluded . . . And they bear the imprints of their origin. Scorning the codes of theological order and exclusivity that characterize "high" religious traditions, they develop modes of thought and practice that are scandalously impure. They directly address recognizable social evils—militant nationalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and the ongoing assault on the environment. And they seem to work: the characters who embrace them are spiritually regenerated and the communities themselves provide hints of new social practices and ideas. (*PF* 20)

McClure further states that in holding up its preterite spiritual communities as exemplary sites of resistance, post-secular fiction is part of a certain trend within current progressive thought: "In the wake of the collapse of the large-scale organizations of the traditional left," he observes, "contemporary progressive thinkers—Graeber, Blaug, Hardt, and Negri, for example—are paying considerable attention to spontaneously emerging, small-scale, and informally structured contrast communities" (*PF* 20). Yet, unlike the preterite spiritual communities of post-secular fiction, these contrast communities are modeled on outspokenly secular principles, according to McClure: "the 'prefigure communities' . . .

they celebrate,” he remarks, “are cast in a familiar progressive mold. They tend to embody, that is to say, familiar confidence in human powers and the emancipatory logic of history and to function as bases for the continuation of familiar forms of militancy” (*PF* 20).

The preterite spiritual communities of post-secular fiction are not quite as confident and immodest regarding their revolutionary potential as the contrast communities of the secular left are, McClure points out: although “[t]hey, too, are communities of resistance,” he writes,

they are founded in and seek to foster dispositions that reflect a sense of human limitation and historical caution. And they make no claims to be the first, “prefigurative” flowerings of emancipated modes of being that will quickly become more general [as the contrast communities of the secular left do]. Instead, they are dedicated to local efforts at survival, self-transformation, and face-to-face service, and while they testify against systematic forms of injustice, they have no strongly articulated political agenda. (*PF* 20)

As post-secularism and secular-leftism thus seem to envision communities of resistance that are of a particularly different nature, McClure remarks that there are in fact contemporary leftist thinkers, and rightist ones too, for that matter, that imagine and promote communal projects that in several respects greatly resemble those represented in post-secular fiction. What these thinkers unites, McClure states, is that they all have “a sense that the conventional political options of modernity are exhausted and its geopolitical order [is] in crisis” (*PF* 21) and all “find precedents for an enabling response to this crisis in the monastic movements of the early Christian era, when the Roman Empire collapsed, the ‘Dark Ages’ descended, and monasteries became sites of refuge, reflection, and social support” (*PF* 21).

As a first example of the forementioned thinkers, McClure discusses Alasdair MacIntyre. In his vastly influential 1981 book *After Virtue*, the latter signals that we have reached a historical turning point which can be compared to the one that marked the transition from antiquity to the Dark Ages. “What matters at this stage,” he writes, “is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us . . . We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict” (MacIntyre qtd. in *PF* 21).<sup>21</sup> McClure observes that the “spiritually inflected, quasi-religious communities of refuge and reformation” (*PF* 22) that are founded “everywhere in post-secular fiction” (*PF* 22) are very similar to the “local forms of community” that MacIntyre envisions: just like the latter communities do, “the neomonastic communities of postsecular narratives . . . function as repositories for values and ways of life no longer nurtured in the larger society and as vessels of spiritual and social innovation” (*PF* 22), McClure writes.

As a second example of a philosopher who valorized the “very weak politics” (*PF* 22) of “desertion, retreat, and loosely articulated communities of survival and resistance,” McClure points out Herbert Marcuse. “In the 1970s, when the first contemporary postsecular narratives were being published,” the former remarks, the latter outlined “a political argument for retreat and inwardness” (*PF* 22). Yet, whereas this argument of Marcuse might still be of a quite secular nature, McClure names another leftist thinker, Rudolph Bahro, who, according to McClure, developed a similar argument at greater length, and, what is more, gave it a “fully postsecular” (*PF* 23) imprint, in the 1980s.

A final example of a “neo-monastic” project contemplated by contemporary thinkers, McClure finds in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s widely discussed 2000 book *Empire*.

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<sup>21</sup> Although McClure seems to find MacIntyre’s analogy useful, many a medievalist would want to contest the image of the “Dark Ages” as representing “ages of barbarism and darkness” (MacIntyre qtd. in *PF* 21) that the philosopher is sketching with it.

McClure reads Hardt and Negri to be insisting in this work of theirs that “‘the organizational formulas of the old revolutionary working class’ are exhausted and that new struggles will be based not on ‘representational but constituent activity’ . . . that is, on the work of diverse cooperative communities. The work of these communities . . . will be ‘a project of love’ . . . And it will resemble the work of a medieval Christian community” (*PF* 23). Indeed, in the final paragraph of their *Empire*, McClure points out, “Hardt and Negri invite us to turn our attention to ‘an ancient legend that might serve to illuminate the future of communist militancy: that of Saint Francis of Assisi’ and the communities he founded” (*PF* 23). The philosophies of certain contemporary moral and political thinkers thus give evidence of being inspired by both the Benedictine and Franciscan model of monasticism. Contemporary “literary neomonasticism” (*PF* 23) does so too, McClure asserts.

Although “the calls for a neomonastic politics” (*PF* 23) made by the philosophers mentioned above “have had little or no apparent effect on formal political thinking in our time” (*PF* 23-4), according to McClure, he argues that, at the same time, “. . . they may well cast light on actual social practices, and [that] they certainly illuminate the recipes for resistance implicit in a great deal of postsecular literature” (*PF* 24). Turning his focus to the latter discursive practice again, McClure enumerates the main motifs that it employs in presenting these “recipes”: “the darkening world; the retreat into local communities of refuge; the discovery, in these soulful communities, of new, spiritually inflected sources of hope; the patient dedication to reflection and self-fashioning; . . . the dream of larger social possibilities on the horizon” (*PF* 24)—together they represent “the key tropes” of neo-monastic post-secular fiction, McClure observes.

Neo-monastic post-secular fiction thus often promotes a “politics of engaged retreat” (*PF* 24). However, McClure points out, just as “‘withdrawal and retreat [are] not the last



position” (PF 24) in Marcuse’s neo-monasticism, in many a neo-monastic post-secular narrative they are not the final goal either; instead, McClure explains, both in the neo-monastic project that Marcuse contemplates and in the ones that the latter narratives envision, “the quest is for ‘paths of resistance’” (PF 24).

## 2.4. Conclusion

Let me recapitulate the main ideas that together comprise McClure’s (heuristic and) hermeneutical model as proposed in his *PF*, before moving on to assess how they would relate to Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.

McClure identifies four characteristics that can be discerned in all post-secular works of fiction: (I) They describe conversions that are of a partial nature; (II) They provide representations of reality that are unfixed and that disrupt secular constructions of the real; (III) They represent spiritual communities that are incomplete and instable as well; (IV) They abundantly make reference to scripture, but the sacred discourses to which it refers are being destabilized and only granted partial authority by them. In sum, post secular fiction rejects both rigorous “secular” and rigid “religious” positions on philosophical, political, religious, and spiritual matters; the position it takes on such matters might best be described as representing a “third way,” as a position between the two.

McClure further observes that post-secular fiction is in conversation with wider post-secular movements, both practical and theoretical ones. As these movements are “disenchanted with secular values and modes of being” (PF 7), and, therefore, determined to invent alternatives to them, just like post-secular fiction itself is, McClure remarks, the latter pursues its main goal of developing religiously inflected alternatives to secularism partly

through evaluating the modes of post-secular innovation that the former come up with. Thus, post-secular fiction is in conversation with generations of “seekers”—whether or not they are “religious beginners”—and with people who “have been instructed in, and remained ambivalently committed to, both religious and secular modes of seeing and being” (*PF* 9). Furthermore, it engages itself with a range of philosophical projects that several contemporary thinkers have embarked in. It narratively mirrors a set of four issues that post-secular philosophy concerns itself with: (I) the—indeed, rather common-sensical—thesis that Vattimo might remind us of, namely that a (re)turn towards religion is often at least partly instigated by experiences of personal loss and political disappointment; (II) Vattimo and Rorty’s theory of weak religion, and similar theories that have been developed by Derrida, and by Connolly; (III) James’s celebration of “crasser supernaturalism”; and (IV) MacIntyre’s, Marcuse’s, and Hardt and Negri’s respective calls for a neo-monastic politics.

Let us now turn to Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, then, in order to examine how these ideas would pertain to this work of fiction.

### 3. Coetzee and the Post-Secular

If one would adhere to the definition of post-secular fiction which McClure provides in his *PF*, and thus take post-secular fiction to be signifying the kind of fiction that “tells [stories that] trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (3); of which the “ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real” (3); and of which the “ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects” (3), could one then, after having examined Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,<sup>22</sup> conclude that it would be justified to state that this novel represented a work of post-secular fiction?

On first sight, there seems to be a fair chance that one could. The protagonist of the narrative, South African Professor David Lurie, appears to be undergoing a metamorphosis in the plot that the narrative describes: his absolutely rejective stance towards ideas and practices that cannot be incorporated into his rigidly secular paradigm, seems to make place for receptiveness towards them. Indeed, it looks as if the arrogant disapproval of the arational life stances and (micro-)communal politics of his “post-industrial-age hippie” (Attwell 866) daughter Lucy and her “shamanic” (DeKoven 847) friend Bev Shaw, that so clearly marks his relationship with these two women when he first arrives in Salem, their place of residence in South Africa’s Eastern Cape province, shifts to utmost approval as the narrative moves towards its end. Moreover, the ambiguous representation of Lurie’s work as a “dog psychopomp” (*D* 146), the work that he undertakes towards the end of the narrative, seems to leave room for the interpretation that at this stage in the unfolding story, Lurie is indeed moving towards religiosity.

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<sup>22</sup> Hereafter referred to as *D*.

But let us now subject the novel to a close examination in order to determine whether or not it really would be justified to consider *D* a work of post-secular fiction.

### 3.1. A Change of Heart

In her 2009 article “Crossing the Borders of Identity Politics: *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee and *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk,” Rosemarie Buikema contends that the aesthetic of *Disgrace* effects that the novel opens up a “twilight zone between language and non-language, between human and animal, black and white, man and woman” (318)—an effect that indeed, as she observes herself, is very “political” (318). Reading Buikema’s contention, one might find it striking, considering the ambiguous game with religion that is being played all throughout the novel, that the binary opposition between the secular and the religious is missing in her enumeration. However, the latter fact might not come as a surprise to whomever is familiar with the scholarly literature that has been written on the novel in the past decade or so. The major part of the, indeed, vast amount of articles that one can find to be dealing with the novel, is namely principally devoted to ruminating the ethical and/or political lessons it might teach us;<sup>23</sup> not to exploring how it deals with the secular/religious dyad—although this is not

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<sup>23</sup> For instances of articles, apart from that of Buikema, that are committed to doing this, see Elisabeth S. Anker’s “Human Rights, Social Justice, and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Derek Attridge’s “Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Rita Barnard’s “J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral”; Margot Beard’s “Lessons from the Dead Masters: Wordsworth and Byron in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Deirdre Coleman’s “The ‘Dog-Man’: Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Ortwin de Graef’s “Suffering, Sympathy, Circulation: Smith, Wordsworth, Coetzee (But There’s a Dog)”; Marianne DeKoven’s “Going to the Dogs in *Disgrace*”; Isidore Diala’s “Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and Andre Brink: Guilt, Expiation, and the Reconciliation Process in Post-Apartheid South Africa”; Tom Herron’s “The Dog Man: Becoming Animal in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Jon Kertzer’s “Time’s Desire: Literature and the Temporality of Justice”; Sue Kossew’s “The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Jonathan Lamb’s “Modern Metamorphoses and Disgraceful Tales”; Harald Leusmann’s “J. M. Coetzee’s Cultural Critique”; Mike Marais’s “‘Little enough, less than little: nothing’: Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee”; Don Randall’s “The Community of Sentient Beings: J. M. Coetzee’s Ecology in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*”; Kimberly Wedeven Segall’s “Pursuing Ghosts: The Traumatic Sublime in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching”; Louis Tremaine’s “Embodied Soul: Animal Being in the Work of J. M. Coetzee”; Gilbert Yeoh’s “J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Ethics, Truth-Telling, and Self-Deception”; Michalinos Zembylas’s

to say, of course, that this binary opposition would not be inextricably bound up with questions of ethics and politics, or that the two terms that constitute the binary, when they are being employed separately, could not pertain to such questions; rather, it is to say that the critics that set out to contemplate the ethical and political issues that *D* might be read to be touching upon, were not doing so in order to pursue an outspokenly post-secular agenda.

Although the bulk of the scholarly articles on *D* thus mainly focuses on the “ethical” and “political” hints that one might read the novel to be giving, literary critics have not remained completely blind to the ways in which the novel might be seen to be engaging with issues concerning secularism and religion, however. In fact, discussions of such theologically laden or downright theological notions as “confession,” “repentance,” “penitence,” “atonement,” “expiation,” “grace,” “sacrifice,” “redemption,” “salvation,” and “soul,” abound in the literature on *D*—also in the “ethico”- and “politico”-centric part of this literature. And, indeed, it seems inevitable that they would, for it seems well-nigh impossible that one could write a critique of *D* that would contain no reference to any of these notions whatsoever, and be acceptable nonetheless. As discussions of theologically laden/theological notions thus are plentiful within “*D* scholarship,” they are for the largest part being guided by frameworks that generate rather secular readings of the novel. Yet, certain critics frame their reading of *D* differently, and, doing thus, come up with readings that either verge towards being post-secular, or might even be considered to be it in full.

One of these critics is Gareth Cornwell, who in his searching 2003 article “Disgraceland: History and the Humanities in Frontier Country” concludes that in the course of the narrative that *D* presents us with, “a ‘faith’ that [protagonist David Lurie] . . . has himself not yet begun to understand” (Cornwell, “Disgraceland” 63) is beginning to emerge in

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“Bearing Witness to the Ethics and Politics of Suffering: J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Inconsolable Mourning, and the Task of Educators.”

the latter. Because Cornwell both puts the word *faith* in quotation marks, and stresses Lurie's unknowingness, and perhaps confusion regarding this emerging "faith," his proposition becomes reminiscent of the manner in which John McClure describes the "partial conversions" that he reads the characters of what he labels "post-secular fiction" to be undergoing in narratives that this kind of literature presents its readers with. Considering both that McClure uses his notion of the partial conversion to identify one of the four distinguishing features of what he terms "post-secular fiction," and that the main aim of this thesis is to contribute to, and perhaps sharpen McClure's post-secular hermeneutical model, Cornwell's claim is important here. Unfortunately, though, Cornwell himself barely substantiates his claim in the forementioned article of his—this, probably, because it does not form a major thesis in the article—so, when one wants to determine the plausibility of it, one has to collect and weigh the arguments for and/or against this thesis that *D* might be presenting oneself. The remainder of this section will be devoted to doing exactly this; it will present a close reading of *D* in order to decide how valid Cornwell's claim is.

The very first sentence of *D* already opens up the possibility that the mindset of protagonist and focalizer David Lurie is a rather secular one: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced," the sentence reads, "he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (1). The fact that Lurie thinks of sex as a "problem" that can be "solved," suggests that he might be holding the view that William Connolly so tersely summarized under the heading of "the secular reply [to the "Augustinian moment"]" (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15)—the view, namely, that "we are powerful; . . . nature is pliable and . . . we will attain mastery over it" (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15). Sex, of course, is a "problem" that nature confronts us with, but as nature also endowed us with a "mind"—as the phrase used in the opening sentence reminds us of—one can, through clear reasoning, "solve" this "problem," thus Lurie appears to be thinking. Both

the remainder of the first and the entire second paragraph succinctly sketch the smoothly running economy that Lurie has set up in order to effectively deal with his “problem of sex”:

On Thursday afternoons he drives to Green Point. Punctually at two p.m. he presses the buzzer at the entrance to Windsor Mansions, speaks his name, and enters. Waiting for him at the door of No. 113 is Soraya. He goes straight through the bedroom, which is pleasant-smelling and softly lit, and undresses. Soraya emerges from the bathroom, drops her robe, slides into bed with him. “Have you missed me?” she asks. “I miss you all the time,” he replies. He strokes her honey-brown body, unmarked by the sun; he stretches her out, kisses her breasts; they make love.

Soraya is tall and slim, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes. Technically he is old enough to be her father; but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve. He has been on her books for over a year; he finds her entirely satisfactory. In the desert of the week Thursday has become an oasis of *luxure et volupté*. (1)

The suggestion that the action that is being represented here reiterates itself so monotonously and clockwork-like; the description of his entering the mansion almost as a worker who has to pay heed to a time clock—“Punctually at two p.m. he presses the buzzer at the entrance to Windsor Mansions, speaks his name, and enters”; the book-keeperesque phrase that says that “[h]e has been on her books for over a year” (1)—all might be read to stress the outspokenly rational character of Lurie’s economy of his sex life. It is needless to say that in the archetypal secular view, it is man’s ratio that subjugates nature, and that to read the passage quoted above as amplifying the rational nature of Lurie’s solution to “the problem of sex” might also be to read it as augmenting the suggestion that Lurie has a secular disposition of some sorts.

As the beginning of the narrative opens up the possibility that Lurie might be of a secular disposition, a dialogue between him and his daughter Lucy that is represented towards the end of chapter eight, seems to settle the matter. In this dialogue, Lucy, who feels that Lurie disapproves both of her lifestyle as a market gardener in the rural Eastern Cape province of South Africa and of her friends Bev and Bill Shaw, “animal-welfare people” (73) who run an animal refuge in a town not far from the village where Lucy lives, comes to ventilate her frustration about this perceived, and to her, indeed, narrow-minded, disapproval: “You think I ought to involve myself in more important things,” she says, and then continues by saying: “You think, because I am your daughter, I ought to be doing something better with my life” (74). Lurie reacts by shaking his head and murmuring “[n]o . . . no . . . no” (74)—although in reality, Lucy might not be so very far off, since earlier on in the narrative, Lurie had said to himself that it was “[c]urious that he and her [i.e., Lucy’s] mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler” (61). But despite Lurie’s negative answer, Lucy goes on, saying: “You think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don’t approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life” (74). When Lurie replies, stating that “[t]hat’s not true,” (74), Lucy answers that “. . . it is true” (74), and, furthermore, that

[t]hey are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. That’s the example that people like Bev try to set. That’s the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts. I don’t want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us. (74)

Yet, Lucy grants Lurie the last word in the discussion, and thus, the latter closes it by saying:



Lucy, my dearest, don't be cross. Yes, I agree, this is the only life there is. As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution. (74)

Now, although it appears that the first time Lucy uses the notion "higher life" she means to be signifying a higher *cultural* life, it is not likely that she is using the notion in this sense the second time she employs it. True, one could interpret the sentences that read "[T]here is no higher life. This is the only life there is" as forming an aesthetical or cultural relativist and reductionist credo that Lucy might be adhering to: one could interpret Lucy to be saying something like "There is no higher life: That which is being regarded a 'higher life' is a fiction. This is the only life there is; 'aesthetics' and 'culture' play but a minor part in it." However, when one would read her statements thus, the added "[w]hich we share with animals" seems not to be a very logical afterthought. For, although one could, admittedly, lay emphasis on the word *share*, so as to imply that those who hold that there is such a thing as a higher life feel that animals do not share such a life with humans, it is not very likely that Lucy's afterthought is aiming at conveying such a message. The reason that it is not, is that Lucy, who grew up in an "intellectual" milieu, would probably know from her upbringing that this world has its J. M. Coetzees, i.e., its people who combine leading a "high(er) cultural life," that is to say, a "highly cultivated" life, with advocating animal-welfare, and if not, she, intelligent as she gives evidence of being, should be able to realize that it can hardly be unthinkable that the two might be combined. The additive "[w]hich we share with animals" seems, thus, to indicate that the statements that "there is no higher life" and that "[t]his is the only life there is" ought to be viewed from another perspective; in fact, it appears to suggest

that these two statements are meant to signify that this *secular*, i.e., worldly, life, “is the only life there is”; that there is no such thing as a *spiritual*, i.e., an otherworldly, life.

Lurie’s endorsement of Lucy’s remark to all probability concerns the second sense in which Lucy uses the notion of higher life. After having said “[y]es, I agree, this is the only life there is,” Lurie namely immediately goes on to address Lucy’s remark about animals; he thus seems to be concerning himself with the utterance of Lucy’s that immediately precedes his answer, not with an earlier one, that is to say, not with the one in which she introduces the notion and seems to be using it in a different sense. Moreover, Lurie’s qualifying of his position with respect to Lucy’s point about animals further indicates that he is using the notion to refer to—and, thus, also has interpreted Lucy as having used it in the same way—otherworldly life: “We are of a different order of creation from the animals,” he namely says, and it would be much more logical to utter such a statement in a continuation of a conversation on the nature of human existence—cf. the term “order of *creation*,” or, for that matter, the notions “human privilege” and “existence,” which occur in the utterance of Lucy’s that immediately precedes the remark on life and human-animal relations that constitutes Lurie’s answer to it—than to express it in a continuance of a talk on the nature of aesthetic or cultural judgment.

Now, one might object that it is unwarranted to read a passage in Coetzee in the manner in which I did this just now, because one cannot read a postmodern novel, which *D* arguably is, as if it would, or should answer to the laws of realism. One could oppose to this, however, that postmodern narratives cannot but comply with some of the rules of realism, and, moreover, as we will see in the next section, that one of the main narrative strategies that Coetzee applies in *D* certainly compels him to do so. It seems, thus, that one might plausibly

infer from the passages that have been discussed above, that Lurie, at least up until a certain point in the narrative, is a character of a rather secular disposition.

Yet, would the text also provide arguments that could justify the claim that Lurie, as the story unfolds, undergoes a—whether or not “partial”—“conversion” of some kind? As was mentioned in section 2.3.1., John McClure argues that in virtually all post-secular narratives,

the event of turning [towards religion] is set in motion by personal catastrophe, experiences that shatter characters’ habitual modes of seeing and being. Mortal illness, the horrors of war, extreme experiences of displacement are represented in these [narratives] as painfully enabling sources of self transformation. But . . . this dynamic is represented as partial and mysterious. Not all who suffer are awakened to the extraordinary and to a care for others; not all who experience acute vulnerability respond by opening their hearts to the world. (*PF* 11)

Obviously, both Lurie and his daughter Lucy get to experience a personal catastrophe at a certain point in the narrative, as they become the victims of an attack by three men, during which Lurie is set on fire, Lucy gets raped, and the dogs that stay in Lucy’s kennels are all but one killed. In her 2009 article “The ‘Dog-Man’: Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” Deirdre Coleman rightly observes that after this traumatic event, Lurie undergoes a “change of heart” (613-4). Yet, Coleman relates Lurie’s conversion to a different frame of mind to two things only: first-, and particularly, to the relationship between humans and animals; second-, and less markedly, to that between men and women. Could it be, however, that his change of heart also pertains to the secular and/or the religious, and/or to the relationship between these two opposites?

It is true, I would argue, that Lurie's conversion manifests itself in his changing attitude towards animals and women; however, it also seems that one might read in these manifestations that this turn of his is also directed towards the religious, or even that his shifting position with regard to animals and women are an effect of such a turn. Let us now, therefore, zoom in on some passages that might reveal how one might interpret the nature of Lurie's "change of heart." A couple of passages in which focalizer Lurie comes to think or speak about animals in general and dogs in particular, people who advocate animal-welfare, and the practice of Bev Shaw seem especially adequate in this respect.

In the passage regarding the notion of higher life, we already saw Lurie remarking the following about animals: "As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are off a different order of creation from animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different" (*D* 74). At this point in the narrative, as Coleman also suggests in her forementioned article,<sup>24</sup> Lurie still upholds a position similar to that of the Church Fathers, who once, as he himself relates to Lucy shortly after the dialogue on higher life has taken place, "had a long debate about them, and decided they don't have proper souls," and that "[t]heir souls are tied to their bodies and die with them" (*D* 78). Of course, Lurie phrases his own standpoint differently, and would probably never clarify his position by using the words of the Church Fathers in a non-ironical way, nevertheless, the hierarchical frameworks that both the Church Fathers and Lurie feel should be set up to govern human-animal relationships are identical, and the arguments that they use to justify their identical frameworks appear to be almost, if not entirely, identical too.

Bev Shaw, the animal-welfare worker, feels rather differently: she is not hindered by what Coleman refers to as a "species-specific conception of love" (Coleman 612), like Lurie

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Coleman 613-4.

evidently is up to a certain point in the narrative; she is willing, as Lucy phrases it, to “share[s] some of our human privileges with the beasts” (*D* 74). Now, for as long as Lurie demonstrates to be adhering to his “species-specific conception of love” in the narrative, his feelings towards animal workers like Bev Shaw and his own daughter Lucy are characterized by ambivalence. As he, on the one hand, indicates that “[h]e has nothing against the animal lovers with whom Lucy has been mixed up as long as he can remember” (*D* 72), these “animal lovers” can, on the other hand, also arouse feelings of irritation in him: After Lucy has introduced Lurie to Bill and Bev Shaw, and tries to explain to him, as they are driving back to Lucy’s home again, just how important the work that Bev does is, since it greatly relieves the animals that it helps, Lurie responds as follows:

That’s wonderful, then. I’m sorry, my child, I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. It’s admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat.<sup>25</sup> (*D* 73)

Yet, Lurie does not only object to what he perceives to be the excessive cheerfulness and well-intentionality of the “animal-welfare people”; he also objects to the “New Age mumbo jumbo” (*D* 84) that some of them are, or, at least, Bev Shaw is, “full of” (*D* 84). After having been suggested by Lucy to help Bev Shaw at the clinic where she voluntarily treats the animals that the locals bring in, Lurie agrees to do so, and as he assists Bev, who is treating a

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<sup>25</sup> Incidentally, this passage seems not only designed to clarify Lurie’s feelings towards advocates of animal welfare: it appears also to be meant to serve as a *mise en abyme* of sorts, in which “everyone so cheerful and well-intentioned” could be read to refer to the spirit of “cheerfulness” and “well-intentionality” that accompanied the birth of the “new South Africa” and that attempted to hypostasize itself in the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, amongst other things; what the sadistic violence done to Lucy and Lurie later on in the story and the non-fictional counterparts of this brutal assault that seem also to have accompanied the emergence of the “new South Africa” might then be seen to attest to, is that both this spirit of “cheerfulness” and “well-intentionality” and its projects, notably the T.R.C., might indeed make that some people get an “itch to go off and do so some raping and pillaging.”

dog for an abscess from an impacted tooth, she tells him to “[t]hink comforting thoughts, think strong thoughts. They can smell what you are thinking” (*D* 81). Lurie’s reacts to these remarks by saying to himself: “They can smell what you are thinking: what nonsense!” (*D* 81), and murmuring “[t]here, there!” (*D* 81) to the dog. When Bev is done with the dog, she thanks Lurie by saying: “Thank you, Mr Lurie. You have a good presence. I sense that you like animals” (*D* 81). Yet, Lurie evidently cannot but respond to this in a sarcastic manner: “Do I like animals?” he asks rhetorically, and then goes on by saying, “I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them” (*D* 81). Bev, however, seems to have missed the tone of Lurie’s words, and answers to Lurie: “Yes, we eat up a lot of animals in this country. . . . It doesn’t seem to do us much good. I’m not sure how we will justify it to them” (*D* 82), and this answer prompts Lurie to jeeringly ask himself: “Justify it? When? At the Great Reckoning?” (*D* 82). Bev’s remarks make Lurie “curious to hear more,” but, unfortunately, for him, it “is not the time” (*D* 82).

Bev does not astound Lurie merely by the remarks that she makes though; her behavior towards the animals that are being brought into the clinic namely also strikes him with amazement. Consider the next scene:

She [i.e., Bev] kneels down again beside the goat, nuzzles his throat, stroking the throat upward with her own hair. The goat trembles but is still. She motions to the woman [who has brought the goat in] to let go of the horns. The woman obeys. The goat does not stir.

She is whispering. “What do you say, my friend?” he [i.e., Lurie] hears her say.  
 “What do you say? Is it enough?”

The goat stands stock still as if hypnotized. Bev Shaw continues to stroke him with her head. She seems to have lapsed into a trance of her own. (*D* 83)

As Bev “collects herself” (*D* 83), she tries to persuade the woman who brought in the goat to leave the animal with her; she offers to “give him a quiet end” (*D* 83). The woman refuses, however, and leaves. After she has left, Lurie tersely asks: “What was that all about?” (*D* 83). Yet, although this question might be speaking volumes, the context in which it appears, does not provide the definite answer as to whether or not it would be, since it does not settle whether Lurie’s question concerns the reaction of the woman, who brought in the goat, to Bev’s attempt to persuade her to leave the animal with her, or the ritual that Bev performed with the goat. As Lurie ponders what he has just been witnessing, he conclusively labels Bev Shaw “not a veterinarian but a priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo” (*D* 84); the project that she tirelessly commits herself to, he describes as an “absurd” effort “to lighten the load of Africa’s suffering beasts” (*D* 84).

Up to this point in the narrative, as Lurie’s stance towards animals, animal-welfare, Bev Shaw, and, most probably, others, who, like the latter, are also “full of New Age mumbo jumbo” too seemingly evidences to, Lurie appears still to be adhering to the kind of paradigm that William Connolly observes to be representing “the secular reply” to “the Augustinian moment”—“we are powerful; . . . nature is pliable and . . . we will attain mastery over it” (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15). To Lurie’s mind, “[w]e are of a different order of creation from the animals” (*D* 74); in his view, people like Bev Shaw have “los[t] perspective” (*D* 74) regarding this issue, and as his remark about the latter being “full of New Age mumbo jumbo” attests to, he further seems to feel that the theme of human-animal relationships is not the only theme with respect to which Bev, and people like her, have lost perspective.

But, as was mentioned above, Lurie undergoes a “change of heart” (Coleman) after the traumatic experience that he and Lucy live through. Not long after the attack, Petrus, Lucy’s neighbor, who used to be her assistant, has brought home with him two sheep—two Persians, to be specific. These sheep are destined to be slaughtered for a party that Petrus is planning on organizing a couple of days later. Remarkably enough, “a bond seems to . . . come into existence between [Lurie] . . . and the two Persians” (*D* 126). This bond “is not one of affection,” however, Lurie notices, and, furthermore, he realizes that “[i]t is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field” (*D* 126); nevertheless, he must acknowledge that “suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him” (*D* 126).

Significantly, it seems, the description of Lurie’s sudden and confusing realization can remind one of the conversion of Paul: Acts 9.3 relates to us that “as [Saul] journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven” (Bible: King James Version, Acts 9.3); immediately upon seeing this light, Saul/Paul hears the Lord calling him. Lurie, realizing that a bond has emerged between himself and the two sheep, “stands before them, *under the sun*, waiting for the buzz in his mind to settle, waiting for a sign” (*D* 126; my emphasis). Some lines further, as the short passage describing the “revelation” reaches its climax, it says that “[t]he sun beats on his face in all its springtime radiance” (*D* 126), and as it does, Lurie asks himself, just like Saul asks the Lord in Acts 9.6, what he has to do: “Do I have to change?” he thinks, “Do I have to become like Bev Shaw?” (*D* 126). As Lurie subsequently tells Lucy he would rather not go to Petrus’s party because of the two sheep, and additively observes that he “never imagined [he] would end up talking this way” (*D* 127), Lucy conclusively responds: “God moves in mysterious ways, David” (*D* 127). In the light of the foregoing, I would argue that this latter remark is one that might be read to



have been presented here with an irony that neither Lucy, nor Lurie—who reacts to it by saying: “Don’t mock me” (*D* 127)—could possibly understand.

While Lucy is trying to recover from the attack, Lurie goes off to help Bev with her work in the Animal Welfare clinic as often as he can. On Sunday afternoons, when the clinic is closed, Bev and Lurie euthanize the “superfluous” dogs that have been brought to the clinic. And as becomes clear from the description of Bev and Lurie’s “sessions of *Lösung*” (*D* 218) on these Sunday afternoons, Lurie’s attitude towards what he earlier on referred to as Bev’s “New Age mumbo jumbo” has changed as well: now Lurie tries to think “good thoughts” too, so as to try and comfort the dogs in their final minutes, and in, what he calls, their “passage” (*D* 142-3). Moreover, his love<sup>26</sup> for the dogs has grown to such an extent that he even takes pains to ensure that their bodies are disposed of in a “honorable” fashion (*D* 144-6).

The final passage in the novel depicts one of the forementioned Sunday afternoons. Harald Leusmann remarks that the scene represents a “clear religious conclusion” (Leusmann 63) and he might very well be right. “Sunday has come again,” thus the passage begins. One by one, Lurie brings in the cats, and then the dogs; one by one, “Bev touches them, speaks to them, comforts them, and puts them away, then stands back and watches while he [i.e., Lurie] seals up the remains in a black plastic shroud” (*D* 219). “He and Bev do not speak,” the passage continues, “He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has the difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (*D* 219). As Lurie closes the last bag and brings it to the door, he realizes that there is just one dog left, a young dog “with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it” (*D* 215)—Bev calls it, symbolically enough, Driepoot—for which “he has come to feel a particular fondness” (*D* 215); “the one,” Lurie broods, “who likes music, the one who, given

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *D* 219.

half a chance, would already have lollopped after his comrades into the clinic building, into the theatre with its zinc-topped table where the rich, mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul” (*D* 219). As this last remark already appears to indicate: Lurie has seemingly come to adopt an idea that completely opposes the theory on the soul of *canis* that the Church Fathers adhered to—the theory, namely, that says, as we saw above, that dogs “don’t have proper souls,” and that “[t]heir souls are tied to their bodies and die with them” (*D* 78). And as the passage continues, the suggestion that Lurie has come to take up such an idea becomes even stronger:

What the dog will not be able to work out (*not in a month of Sundays!* he thinks), what his nose will not tell him, is how one can enter what seems to be an ordinary room and never come out again. Something happens in this room, something unmentionable: here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and consorting; then it is sucked away and is gone. It will be beyond him, this room that is not a room but a hole where one leaks out of existence. (*D* 219; emphasis in the original)

One might argue that the passage ought to be read metaphorically, rather than literally<sup>27</sup>—the occurrence of the word “unmentionable” and the phrasal “[i]t will be beyond him” in the passage could be used as arguments to defend such a position—however, that would not alter the fact that the passage seems expressly designed to contrast with the position of the Church Fathers. Moreover, one might also argue that passages like the one that appears to echo the Pauline conversion actually legitimize a (rather) literal reading of the text.

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<sup>27</sup> To suspend, if only momentarily, the Nietzschean claim that all language is “metaphorical”; that there is no such thing as “literal” language (see Nietzsche’s “Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne”).

Thus, although one might, or might not downplay the degree to which Lurie, in this and other passages in the narrative, is attesting to have turned towards the religious, it seems incontestable that he undergoes a “change of heart” as his story unfolds, and that this change of heart makes him drift away from the sort of secular paradigm that he seemingly adhered to for a very long time<sup>28</sup>—the sort of paradigm, that is, of which the gist is so aptly being sketched out by William Connolly with the phrases “we are powerful; . . . nature is pliable and . . . we will attain mastery over it” (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15). It indeed looks as if Lurie, as the narrative proceeds, comes to develop a “reverence for life and the earth” that, from a “posttheist, postsecular” point of view, “remains to be cultivated [universally]” (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15). Furthermore, there is every appearance that as the narrative action carries on, Lurie comes to open himself up to a certain kind of “New Age mumbo jumbo.”

### 3.2. Between the Real and the Anti-Real

As the previous section dealt with one of post-secular fiction’s most important features, namely, that it describes conversions that “tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative, zones through which the conventional [character] passes with all possible haste, on his way to a domain of secure religious dwelling” (*PF* 4), this section will deal with another major characteristic of this kind of fiction, to be specific, with the fact that the representations of reality that it provides are profoundly instable, and, moreover, thoroughly disruptive of secular versions of the real.

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<sup>28</sup> Some time prior to the “revelation” described above, Lurie observes that “[h]is mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go” (*D* 72); and after making this observation, he says to himself that “[h]e ought to chase them out [these old thoughts], sweep the premises clean” (*D* 72). However, he immediately realizes that “he does not care to do so, or does not care enough” (*D* 72).

In his article “Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality,” John McClure connects a theory that Zygmunt Bauman set forth in his 1992 book *Intimations of Postmodernity* to his own theories concerning post-secular fiction. As McClure discusses a passage from the latter book, he observes that Bauman “defines the postmodern moment as one in which sacred and secular counter-discourses silenced by three centuries or more of Western secular rationalism (and rationalized religion) stage an exuberant comeback” (McClure, “Postmodern” 147). Bauman writes that “[a]ll in all, postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*” (Bauman qtd. in McClure, “Postmodern” 147; emphasis in the original). McClure reads Bauman to be asserting that “[what is] at stake in this project of dis-enchantment . . . is ‘the right to pronounce on meanings, to construe narratives’” (McClure, “Postmodern” 147). “In order to win ‘the war against mystery and magic,’” thus McClure’s reading of Bauman continues, “‘the world had to be *de-spiritualized*’”; yet, this war, McClure writes, “was never fully won, and in contemporary culture ‘it is the modern artifice that has been dismantled; the modern conceit of meaning-legislating reason that has been exposed, condemned and put to shame’” (McClure, “Postmodern” 147; emphasis in the original). Among the discourses that seek to challenge “the hegemony of ‘meaning-legislating reason,’ and of realism, its narrative manifestation” (McClure, “Postmodern” 147)—and it is through this claim, of course, that McClure ties Bauman’s notion of re-enchantment to his own theoretical project—is a certain type of fiction that many qualify with the term “postmodern,” yet that McClure proposes to mark out by using the qualifier “post-secular.”

Although it is not McClure's intention to replace the concept of postmodern fiction with his concept of post-secular fiction, or to suggest that the two are interchangeable,<sup>29</sup> some actually do feel that, as John D. Caputo puts it, "'postmodern' must be understood to mean or at least include 'postsecular,' that the delimitation of the claims of Enlightenment rationalism must also involve the delimitation of Enlightenment secularism" (Wyschogrod and Caputo par. 5); in their point of view, "[a] critical stance toward modernism goes hand in hand with a critical stance toward secularism" (Wyschogrod and Caputo par. 5). Now, if the postmodern might be understood to mean, or at least include the post-secular, one could certainly argue that *D* represented a work of post-secular fiction, for, as certain critics demonstrate, "Coetzee's seeming adoption of *realism* is undercut by a deceptive combination of modes and a jostling of stories" (Easton 126; emphasis in the original).

In his provocative 2002 article "Realism, Rape, and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," Gareth Cornwell lucidly expounds how realism manages to stay alive in all of Coetzee's fictions, albeit by halves only. As the article reaches its conclusion, Cornwell contends that "all Coetzee's fictions, although—to use . . . Costello's [i.e., Elisabeth Costello, one of Coetzee's fictional characters] phrase[. . .]—adequately 'embedded in life,' are essentially allegorical rather than mimetic plots" (Cornwell, "Realism" 320). And he continues by remarking that "[o]ne might say, that in *Disgrace*, the allegorical or didactic plot is comprehensively disguised as a mimetic one, but that at certain moments the wig slips, the make-up runs. Yet I think that it would be truer to say that in this novel the two modes are embodied (Costello's word, again) in the process of representation in a relationship of negotiation or mutual interrogation" (Cornwell, "Realism" 320). This relationship, he observes furthermore, is one that "perfectly reflects Coetzee's abiding ambivalence toward realism and his suspicion of the reflexivity of antirealism or 'antiillusionism' [sic; as Coetzee calls it] as the alternative"

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. McClure, "Postmodern" 148.

(Cornwell, “Realism” 320). As Cornwell mentions, Coetzee himself remarked in his and David Attwell’s 1992 book *Doubling the Point*:

Illusionism is, of course, a word I use for what is usually called realism. The most accomplished illusionism yields the most convincing realist effects. Anti-illusionism—displaying the tricks you are using instead of hiding them—is a common ploy of postmodernism. But in the end there is only so much mileage to be got out of the ploy. Anti-illusionism is, I suspect, only a marking of time, a phase of recuperation, in the history of the novel. The question is, what next? (Coetzee qtd. in Cornwell, “Realism” 320)

As a prelude to his own exposing of the kind of answer that Coetzee must have come up with, Cornwell invokes yet another passage of *Doubling the Point*. In this passage, Cornwell explains, Coetzee gives evidence of regretting “the passing of belief in the word-mirror” (Cornwell, “Realism” 320) and having come to the distancing awareness that, as Coetzee puts it himself, “as you put pen to paper, . . . you are setting in train a certain play of signifiers with their own ghostly history of past interplay” (Coetzee qtd. in Cornwell, “Realism” 320). Indeed, the passage seems to reveal that this awareness leads to a certain melancholy, or that, at least for Coetzee it does; in it, Coetzee namely describes “the pathos—in a humdrum sense of the word—of [this] position” (Coetzee qtd. in Cornwell, “Realism” 320), and his description of it runs as follows: “[we adherents of this position are] like children shut in the playroom, the room of textual play, looking wistfully through the bars at the enticing world of the grownups, one that we have been instructed to think of as the mere phantasmal world of *realism* but that we stubbornly can’t help thinking of as the *real*” (Coetzee qtd. in Cornwell, “Realism” 320). After having quoted this passage, Cornwell moves on to present the ultimate conclusion of his article, which is that “[i]n this perspective, realism [sic]—whether thought

of as illusionism or, more generously (and minimalistically), in terms of embeddedness in life—although no longer uncomplicatedly alive, can never altogether die; and *Disgrace* bears eloquent testimony to the vigor of its continuing half-life” (Cornwell, “Realism” 320).

It seems, thus, that yet another binary opposition might be added to the list of binaries that Buikema presented in her article “Crossing the Borders of Identity Politics” in order to characterize the “twilight zone” that she perceives *D* to be opening up,<sup>30</sup> namely that between the real and the anti-real. Yet, Coetzee’s post-structuralist inspired strategy of at once employing and undermining realist methods seems not to be the only strategy that he employs in order to challenge (“narrative manifestation[s]” (McClure, “Postmodern” 147) of “the hegemony of ‘meaning-legislating reason,’” (Bauman qtd. in McClure, “Postmodern” 147): he also seems to be utilizing some of the strategies of “deliberate weakening” that McClure discusses in his *PF*.

In her 2005 article “Metamorphosis and Sexuality: Reading the Strange Passions of *Disgrace*,” Pamela Cooper presents us with an excellent exegesis of the apotheosis of the narrative that *D* represents, and, implicitly, this exegesis seems to demonstrate that in the latter narrative, two different strategies of “weakening” are being employed, namely: (I) the one that McClure labels the strategy of “perhaps”; and (II) the one that he calls the strategy of “disavowal and reaffirmation.”

In the final scenes that the novel depicts, Lurie decides to no longer postpone giving up Driepoot—the dog which, as we saw towards the end of section 3.1., he “has come to feel a particular fondness for” (*D* 215)—to “the needle” (*D* 215). In her reading of these final scenes, Cooper remarks that the dog is “an ancient figure of passage in many cultures” (Cooper 35), and that as such, the dog represents the other as medium and mediator” (Cooper

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. the beginning of section 3.1.

35). After having made this observation, she moves on to set forth some ideas on the intertextual strategies that she claims are being applied in the novel's (anti-)climax: "In a revision both moving and farcical," she writes, "Coetzee creates the dog, rather than the disgraced man [i.e., Lurie] or the semiotic zero of the woman [i.e., Lucy], as the 'hinge' or Christly figure, 'the category of the third, the middle'"<sup>31</sup> (Cooper 35). "Driepoot," she continues,

whose three legs are symbolic as well as comical, carries whatever salvific charge the novel has. Whether Coetzee's rephrasing of Christian myth as both a burlesque and a revived promise in South Africa fully mobilizes such a charge remains ambiguous; but if Lurie is redeemed in *Disgrace*, it is (as I will argue) through his giving up of Driepoot on the last page. (Cooper 35)

The way in which, according to Cooper, the narrative of *D* paradoxically does and does not suggest that its intertextual play with sacred discourses implies that it ought to be interpreted to be carrying a salvific charge, might be seen to represent exactly what McClure calls the "strategy of 'perhaps'" (*PF* 14), i.e., the strategy which he, in so many words, describes as representing the refusal ever to resolve the question of the ontological status of important narrative events.<sup>32</sup>

But as was indicated above, it seems that there is yet another strategy of "weakening," as described by McClure, that Cooper unwittingly reveals to be operative in *D*, namely the one that the former labels the strategy of "disavowal and reaffirmation." As we saw in subsection 2.3.2., McClure remarks that post-secular fiction attempts at once "to reaffirm and to weaken the religious, to represent it as a source for personal and collective empowerment that must itself be weakened in order to be responsibly deployed" (*PF* 13). However, as we

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<sup>31</sup> This latter notion Cooper derived from Derrida (see Derrida 144).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *PF* 14.



also saw in that subsection, he observes further that the practice of disavowal and reaffirmation unfolds in different ways; that in some post-secular narratives, “the work of weakening goes on within an established tradition, rendering it more inclusive,” yet, that “in many others . . . the religious reemerges in a space, social and discursive, beyond or between traditions” (*PF* 13).

Let us return to Cooper’s interpretation of the final passage of *D*, then, in order to see in what way the strategy of disavowal and reaffirmation might be seen to be at work in the narrative that this novel presents us with. Taking up Cooper’s interpretation where we just left off, we find her to be observing the following:

Conventionally, the animal body gives the godhead a form—a “skin”—both ancient in its provenance and, the novel implies, appropriate to a society in flux. The story of the god-as-animal may itself be read as a story of flux—of shapes, bodies, and meanings in disguise or transition. To this end Coetzee, once again accommodating and eviscerating a traditional figure, draws not only on Christian but on Egyptian mythology, where the bodies of gods and animals combine iconographically—to suggest the imminence of divinity within *all* flesh, and to further estrange and intensify the capacities of flesh for metamorphosis. (Cooper 35)

As the narrative both “accommodates” and “eviscerates” sacred figures taken from both a Christian and an ancient Egyptian tradition, it, thus, at once seems to “reaffirm” and dramatically “weaken” the religious meanings that these figures might be regarded to be conveying traditionally. “Estranging” and “intensifying” the “capacities of the flesh for metamorphosis,” the narrative might be seen to enact an almost dizzying, because simultaneously executed, secularization of the religious and sacralization of the secular. Moreover, as it invokes and weds the sacred figures from a Christian and an ancient Egyptian

tradition—which is, according to McClure, in itself an applying of the strategy of “disavowal and reaffirmation,” as we saw in subsection 2.3.3.—it appears to be opening up—yet again—a zone between, or, indeed, *beyond*, fixated terms. Phrasing it somewhat differently, one might also say, to quote Cooper for a final time, that the novel “suspends, without banishing or fulfilling, the possibility of redemption and of the revivification of its languages. . . . In Lurie’s sacrificial gesture [as enacted in the narrative’s apotheosis], the signs—the pellucid meaning of the act; the making of meaning through images—are left . . . to hang” (Cooper 36).

To sum it up, *D* seems to be challenging (“narrative manifestations” (McClure) of) “the hegemony of ‘meaning-legislating’ reason” (Bauman) not only by applying a strategy of at once employing and undermining realist methods, it also appears to be contesting them/it by employing a couple of outspokenly “post-secular literary rhetoric[al]” (*PF* 14) strategies of “deliberate weakening,” namely: (I) the strategy of “perhaps”; and (II) the strategy of “disavowal and reaffirmation.” The representation of reality that is effectuated by the employment of all of these strategies can, I would argue, neither be termed secular, nor religious.

### **3.3. “Ora et labora”/“A Project of Love”**

As the previous two sections were respectively aimed at establishing whether or not Coetzee’s *D* could be seen to exhibit two of the tree kinds of features that McClure describes as forming the major features of post-secular fiction, i.e., whether or not it could be found to “trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (*PF* 3), and whether its “ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real”

(*PF* 3), this section will be devoted to examining whether it might be seen to display the third and last defining feature of post-secular fiction that McClure distinguishes, namely, that its “ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects” (*PF* 3).

As I already mentioned at the beginning of section 3.1., the major part of the critics that have been writing articles on *D* in the past decade or so, have been devoting themselves in these articles to contemplating the ethical and/or political message(s) that the novel might be seen to be spreading. Several of these critics have read *D* to be advocating an eco-ethics that is quite critical of secular anthropocentrism; they have read it to be arguing that, to quote William Connolly once more, “the hegemony of the modern project of mastery results in the globalization of contingency” (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15), and that a “reverence for life and the earth remains to be cultivated” (Connolly qtd. in *PF* 15).

One of the critics that has been reading *D* thus, is Margot Beard. In her 2007 article “Lessons from the Dead Masters: Wordsworth and Byron in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” she ruminates what the invocation of the great romantic poets Wordsworth and Byron in the narrative might be seen to point out. Beard’s thoughtful discussion leads her to draw the conclusion that

*Disgrace* . . . argues that Romanticism is not simply a Eurocentric throwback, something to be rejected out of hand in post-colonial South Africa. Instead, this novel addresses the major proposition of Romanticism—the essential nature of the creative imagination which is our only means to enter the experience of another, of overcoming our atomistic isolation from the rest of creation. Keith Sagar has observed that it is the “very nature of the creative imagination . . . to seek patterns and wholes; to break through the hard shell of the ego and anthropomorphism into what we now call holistic

or biocentric consciousness” . . . Or, to put it into Lucy Lurie’s terms, “[t]here is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with the animals” . . . It is not surprising to hear in these words an echo of Wordsworth who tells of how all are “called upon to exercise their skill, / Not in Utopia . . . But in the very world, which is the world / Of all of us,—the place where, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all” . . . (Beard 74)

In this reading of Beard’s, the creative imagination that romanticism cultivates and that *D* subsequently (re)valorizes, is considered by both the former movement and—more importantly, considering the theme of the current discussion—the latter novel to be representing the single instrument that could be applied to try and bring “the hegemony of the modern project of mastery” to a halt, and to replace it with a project of “reverence for life and the earth.”

Another scholar who has been contemplating the eco-ethical message that *D* might be seen to be representing, is Don Randall. In his article “The Community of Sentient Beings: J. M. Coetzee’s Ecology in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*,” he asserts that the two novels that the title of his article refers to, argue that “sentience rather than reason [ought to be made] the criterion for inclusion in community” (Randall 211). In these novels, he states, “[s]entient being emerges as the criterion of value determining the human being’s relations of responsibility with other humans and with animals” (Randall 211). The reason that in these novels, sentience is chosen over reason, “has to do with reason’s historical failures,” he explains: “‘reason’ has been used to legitimate the abuse of animals and of human groups. The full and dignifying claim to reason has been denied not only to animals but also occasionally to human groups—to women, to non-European peoples—and this has been accompanied by denial of full status within the human community, and by consequent

abuses” (Randall 211). The ecology that the two novels enunciate, Randall concludes, “demonstrates that such uses of the animal and of privileged reason are essentially, inescapably abusive (rather than only occasionally, circumstantially so); that such uses are not to be remeasured, limited, and corrected, but denounced” (Randall 224).

While Beard and Randall focus on theoretically inspired eco-ethical projects that *D* might be seen to be propagating, other critics highlight more naïve and profoundly practical projects that the novel might be found to be breaking a lance for. Among the latter group of critics, one can place Marianne DeKoven, Sue Kossew, and Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan, who all seem to find that the novel is advocating what one might call, using McClure’s notion, a “politics of engaged retreat” (*PF* 24).

As was mentioned in subsection 2.3.4., McClure finds such politics to be enacted in “preterite spiritual communities,” the communities that, thus he advances, post-secular fiction focuses on. As we saw, McClure observes that these preterite spiritual communities “are founded in and seek to foster dispositions that reflect a sense of human limitation and historical caution” (*PF* 20), and unlike the contrast communities that the secular left celebrates, they “make no claims to be the first, ‘prefigurative’ flowerings of emancipated modes of being that will quickly become more general” (*PF* 20), according to him. “Instead,” he states, “they are “dedicated to local efforts at survival, self-transformation, and face-to-face service, and while they testify against systematic forms of injustice, they have no strongly political agenda” (*PF* 20). Comparing the “politics” of *D*’s Bev Shaw, Lucy, and Lurie with McClure’s notion of the politics of the preterite spiritual community, one might very well find that the two bear striking resemblances. As one reads the descriptions that DeKoven, Kossew, and Sarvan give of the politics of *D*’s main characters, one could, as I indicated above, find

that these descriptions harmonize with the image that McClure sketches of the politics of his “preterite spiritual communities” too.

In her 2009 article “Going to the Dogs in *Disgrace*,” DeKoven describes the projects that Lurie engages in after his “transformation,” as pertaining to an overarching (Buddheo-Christian) project of renunciation: “[B]ecause his state of disgrace (the state of the world as Coetzee finds it) is incurable despite Lurie’s insights and his radical transformation,” she writes,

he can have nothing for himself, even just for a week [he might have given his favorite dog Driepoot a week’s respite from “the needle”]—he must renounce everything but his services to dead and dying dogs, and also this gratuitous opera [that Lurie had set out to compose], in all that it has come to represent of his and the novel’s situation: the only locus of hope for him and, in addition to Lucy’s possible love for her baby, the only hope for/in the novel. Because Coetzee’s ethical stance—I have called it Buddheo-Christian—focuses on renunciation, he must let [everything, but these projects] . . . go. (DeKoven 870-1)

In his 2004 article “Disgrace: A Path to Grace?,” Sarvan also describes Lurie’s “politics” as one of renunciation. “Lurie’s act of giving up the dog [i.e., Driepoot] is symbolic of relinquishment, of a surrendering of attachment, attachment and desire from which, according to the Buddha, come suffering and sorrow,” Sarvan writes, and he conclusively states that “[i]n giving himself up, and in giving himself *to*, Lurie finds himself” (Sarvan 29). As the last sentence might be seen to already indicate, Sarvan wants to stress that Lurie’s renunciation forms the basis for undertaking ethical action, not for defeatist inaction: “The impression that Eastern philosophy advocates withdrawal, passivity, and escape,” he writes,

is directly contradicted by words in the *Gita*: “Not by refraining from action does man attain freedom from action”; “Action is greater than inaction: perform therefore thy task in life”; better than the “surrender of work” is work done with the right motive and to good ends.

Lurie finds meaningful work, reaches acceptance, and so achieves a measure of tranquility, if not the higher serenity. A total failure in competitive—social and material—terms, he achieves moral regeneration and tranquility. (Sarvan 29)

Sarvan does qualify this observation though—and rightly so, I would argue: a little further, he namely remarks that “[i]t is not that Lurie has found complete answers and a final stance” (Sarvan 29); yet, “[f]or a while at least, Lurie has found peace, peace through work. In the words of the *Gita*, ‘In the bonds of works I am free, because in them I am free from desires. The man who can see this truth, in his work he finds his freedom’” (Sarvan 29).

Sue Kossew, finally, can be found to make a quite similar observation in her 2003 article “The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.” Like Sarvan, she too at once recognizes that “[i]t is important to remember . . . that this [i.e., *D*] is a novel about ethical choices” (Kossew 161), and she also seems to be finding the novel to be celebrating “modest work” (Sarvan 28): “towards the end of the novel,” she observes, “. . . David and Lucy each find a ‘modus vivendi’ not through any grand revelation or absolution, but through attending to the everyday, to the respective needs of an unborn child and desperate dogs. In this quiet way, humanity is measured in a society that has made a spectacle of its inhumanity” (Kossew 161).

In sum, I believe that the readings of *D*, that are represented above, all demonstrate that the novel is directed at bringing an expressly ethical/political message across. Moreover,

what the latter three scholars that have passed in review make apparent—albeit unwittingly—is that the rather spontaneously emerged projects that the novel’s three main characters—Bev Shaw, Lucy, and Lurie—are engaged in, might be characterized as projects that are, to quote McClure, “dedicated to local efforts at survival, self-transformation, and face-to-face service, and while they testify against systematic forms of injustice, they have no strongly political agenda” (*PF* 20). To phrase it more concisely, these projects might, thus, be regarded to represent a, what McClure calls, “politics of engaged retreat” (*PF* 24).

Looking at these projects from this perspective, one might even consider it possible that one could justifiably label them manifestations of McClurean “preterite spiritual”—or post-secular “neo-monastic”—politics, i.e., of a *spiritually inflected* politics of engaged retreat. Indeed, Bev Shaw, to begin with, certainly seems to invest her project with a certain form of spirituality.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the critics that have been discussed above, all but one seem to be either ignoring the spiritual dimension that these projects perhaps might be regarded to have, or to consider the projects—or rather: project, singular, for Lurie’s project, understandably, draws most attention from the scholars that have been mentioned in this section—to be of a thoroughly secular nature.<sup>34</sup> Marianne DeKoven is the critic that forms the exception in this matter: of all the readings that we have been examining in this section her reading seems to respect the profound ambiguity that so clearly characterizes especially the second half of *D* best. And it is very right that it does, I would argue, for it seems evident to me that the “politics” of Lurie is inextricably interwoven with the “change of heart” that he, as I argued in 3.1., unmistakably undergoes in the second half of the narrative, and that, as I also contended in that section, is being described in a way that neither allows one to regard the changed Lurie

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<sup>33</sup> Lurie probably does not think of her as “a priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo” (*D* 84) for nothing.

<sup>34</sup> Although it might seem that Sarvan would form the exception in this issue, he actually does not: as he offers an avowedly existentialist reading of *D*, he would have to be grouped among the latter category. (Cf. Sarvan 26, 29).



to represent a completely secular character, nor permits one to consider him an entirely religious personage.

McClure discusses two monastic models that are of great influence for post-secular fiction, namely the Benedictine, and the Franciscan one. Now, if the former might be identified, as McClure does, with “a certain disciplined austerity—‘pray and work’” (*PF* 23), and the latter with “‘a joyous life, including all of being and nature [and] the poor and exploited humans’” (*PF* 23), or, as McClure seems to be implying, with “‘a project of love’” (*PF* 23), then the respective projects of Bev Shaw, Lucy, and Lurie might perhaps all be seen to answer to the description(s) of both in significant ways. All seem to have found, i.e., “for a while at least” (Sarvan 29), “. . . peace, peace through [profoundly ethical] work” (Sarvan 29)—N.B. through work that gets harder, not easier, the more they do it, as Sarvan rightly observes;<sup>35</sup> all seem to wish, to quote the words that Lucy utters at a certain stage in the narrative, “[t]o share some of our human privilege with the beasts” (*D* 74); all seem to be eager to give to animals too, that “what [Lurie] no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (*D* 219).

### 3.4. Conclusion

Let us return to the question that this chapter began with: If one would adhere to the definition of post-secular fiction which McClure provides in his *PF*, and thus take post-secular fiction to be signifying the kind of fiction that “tells [stories that] trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (3); of which the “ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real” (3); and of which the “ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular,

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Sarvan 29.

progressive values and projects” (3), could one then, after having examined Coetzee’s *D*, conclude that it would be justified to state that this novel represented a work of post-secular fiction?

As I attempted to demonstrate in section 3.1., it seems incontestable that protagonist Lurie undergoes a “change of heart” as the narrative unfolds. Whether or not the metamorphosis that he goes through ought to be interpreted as a (re)turn towards the religious, remains uncertain though: the narrative is namely presented in such an ambiguous way that it is impossible to tell whether the religious notions that it unmistakably employs should be interpreted to be denoting that Lurie is indeed moving towards religiosity, or whether they ought to be read as “constitut[ing] a convenient metaphoric for a transcendent secular ethics that as yet lacks its own discourse” (Cornwell 63-4), as Gareth Cornwell so aptly puts it. Yet, although it cannot be inferred from the narrative to what extent Lurie’s “change of heart” would imply a change of heart with regard to religion, it can be deduced from the text that his transformation makes him drift away from the anthropocentric secular paradigm that he adhered to for, it seems, a very long time. Indeed, his anthropocentrism seems to make place for what might be called a “holistic, or biocentric consciousness” (Sagar qtd. in Beard 74), or, perhaps, a *post-secular* biocentrism. Furthermore, Lurie’s “change of heart” might be considered to have made him go beyond the secular in yet another way: after it has taken place, his attitude towards certain spiritual paradigms—i.e., at least, towards Bev Shaw’s “New Age mumbo jumbo” (*D* 84)—changes from downright rejection to utmost appreciation.

As I argued in section 3.2., *D* appears to be challenging (“narrative manifestations” (McClure) of) “the hegemony of ‘meaning-legislating’ reason” (Bauman) in two ways: (I) By a strategy of at once applying and undermining realist methods; (II) By employing two pronounced post-secular literary strategies, which McClure calls strategies of “deliberate

weakening,” namely: (A) the strategy of “perhaps”; and (B) the strategy of “disavowal and reaffirmation.” The representation of reality that results from the application of all of these strategies can neither be termed secular, nor religious.

As I observed in section 3.3., finally, *D* evidently is directed at disseminating an expressly ethical/political message. Moreover, the “political” projects that its main characters engage in might be seen to represent a, what McClure terms, “politics of engaged retreat” (*PF* 24): they are namely “dedicated to local efforts at survival, self-transformation, and face-to-face service, and while they testify against systematic forms of injustice, they have no strongly political agenda” (*PF* 20). It might even be considered possible that one could rightfully regard them to be representing a *spiritually inflected* politics of engaged retreat, since it seems likely that the “politics” of Bev Shaw is invested with some kind of spirituality, and possible that Lurie’s “politics” is too. Comparing, finally, the projects of Bev Shaw, Lucy, and Lurie to McClure’s description of the two monastic models that he takes to be influencing post-secular fiction so greatly—these being the Benedictine and the Franciscan model—one could find striking similarities between these respective monastic models on the one hand and the projects of the main characters of *D* on the other: like Benedictine monasticism, the projects of Bev Shaw, Lucy, and Lurie celebrate modest work; like Franciscan monasticism, they are profoundly biocentric.

So, would it be justified to state that this novel represented a work of post-secular fiction? I suppose that it would, although one would be missing the point, I would argue, if one was to take this contention as representing the definite and exhaustive answer to “the problem of *D*”—or that of Coetzee, for that matter. Yet, let us leave this issue for now, and direct our gaze at another author that might be considered to be a post-secular author; let us now turn to Gerard Reve.

#### 4. Reve and the Post-Secular

I believe that an introduction to the life and works of Reve would not be redundant here; let me, therefore, first provide a rough sketch of his life and literary career, before moving on to the announced examination of (some of) his works.

Gerard Kornelis van het Reve<sup>36</sup> was born on December 14, 1923, to Gerard Johannes Marinus van het Reve and Net van het Reve (née Doornbusch), in a third-floor apartment at 25 Van Hallstraat, Amsterdam (Maas 1: 19-23). Gerard sr. was an editor of the communist newspaper *De Tribune*; Net was a housewife (Maas 1: 23-4). Gerard jr. had one brother, who was older than him, and whose full name was Karel van het Reve. The latter was to become a professor of Slavic Literature at Leiden University and one of the most prominent figures within post-WWII Dutch literary criticism. Shortly after the birth of Gerard, the family moved to what in the vernacular is called “Betondorp,” a quarter in the eastern part of Amsterdam that had then just been built. The quarter comprised some two thousand fairly small houses, which were being rented to young and skilled socialist workers (Maas 1: 30). The brothers Reve received a thoroughly communist upbringing, which, judging from statements made by both Gerard jr. and Karel during their adult lives, did not miss its effect: according to both, they had been “believers” while they had been young (Maas 1: 25-6, 192-5).

From 1936 to 1940, Reve went to the Vossius gymnasium in Amsterdam. Yet, even though he was not a poor student, he failed the re-examinations he had to undergo in his

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<sup>36</sup> Let me, in order to clarify why I, in this thesis, refer to the author that shortly after his birth was registered at the Dutch Register Office as Gerard Kornelis van het Reve by using the signifier “Gerard Reve,” and not his birth-name, remark that as of 1973, van het Reve’s books were no longer being published under the name of Gerard Kornelis van het Reve, or, G. K. van het Reve, as they had been earlier, but under the name Gerard Reve (Maas 1: 13), and that, apparently, on a certain date during the 1970s, the author’s (civil) name was also officially, i.e. by Royal decree, changed into Gerard Reve (“Biografie Gerard Reve” par. 1).

fourth year, and subsequently left the gymnasium (Maas 1: 83, 117). After he had left Vossius, he went to a graphic arts school, also in Amsterdam, from which he graduated in 1943 (Maas 1: 117-8). After his graduation, he alternately went through periods of being unemployed and periods in which he had jobs of different kinds. In 1945, his father managed to fix Reve up with an editing job at *Het Parool*, a social-democratic newspaper that had been established illegally during the war (Maas 1: 180). Reve worked at this paper until 1947, the year in which his debut novel *De avonden* appeared in print.

Immediately after the latter novel was launched,<sup>37</sup> it became surrounded by controversy, not in the least because almost simultaneously to this event, the novel was granted the Reina Prinsen Geerligsprijs, a literary award for men/women of letters of the age of twenty to twenty five (Maas 1: 246). At stake in the controversy was the question whether or not the image of a group of post-war youth that was being depicted in the novel compromised the entire and actual generation of post-war youth; many saw the image as a rather bleak one, and, moreover, as one that was unrepresentative of the mentality of the actual youth of the immediate years after the war. Probably because of the controversy that surrounded the book, it did not become a great commercial success at first; it was not until the early 1960s, when Reve started to become famous, that *De avonden* started to become successful in this respect. Currently it is widely held—both among literary critics and laymen—to be one of the greatest classics, if not *the* greatest classic of post-WWII Dutch literature.

Following Sjaak Hubregtse, one might divide Reve's literary career into four distinct periods: the First Period (1946-1956); the Second Period (1957-1962); the Third Period

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<sup>37</sup> Incidentally, the novel was published under the pseudonym Simon van het Reve.

(1963-1971); and the Fourth Period (1972-1998).<sup>38</sup> During the Third Period, Reve became a famous author: in this period, he produced his first bestseller, the 1963 collection of epistles *Op weg naar het einde*; his second collection of epistles, *Nader tot U*, which also appeared during this period—namely in 1966—became a bestseller as well.

Yet, although Reve's work became to be commercially successful, controversy kept on accompanying it. In *Op weg naar het einde*, Reve had started to celebrate (his) homosexuality. When Reve, a year after the latter book had appeared in print, was granted a scholarship by the Department of Education, Cultural Affairs and Science, a widely read conservative weekly called *Elseviers Weekblad* reacted to this by writing that the Department was committing itself to the maintenance of pornography, and, moreover, that it was subsidizing someone to publicly declare to be suffering from an ailment that might best be qualified as being contrary to human nature (Maas 2: 133). Reve even became subject of discussion in parliament, when a senator of the ARP (Anti-Revolutionaire Partij), Hendrik Algra, questioned the subsidiary policy of the Department of Education, Cultural Affairs and Science in the Upper Chamber of Dutch Parliament. In his address to the Chamber, Algra explicitly focused on "the Reve case" and objected to his receiving of a scholarship for much the same reasons as *Elseviers Weekblad* had done (Maas 2: 133-4).

In 1966, Reve entered the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, that very same year, MP C. N. van Dis, a member of the Protestant SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij), asked the Secretaries of respectively the Department of Justice and the Department of Culture, Recreation and Social Work questions concerning an article that Reve had written and that had been published in the journal *Dialogo: Tijdschrift voor homofilie en maatschappij* (Maas

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Hubregtse 9. I should perhaps remark here, that if one was to do this, one would not necessarily have to be implying that Reve's oeuvre would not be characterized by an underlying unity though, as Johan Snapper rightfully argues in his study *De spiegel der verlossing in het werk van Gerard Reve*. One could namely at once recognize the pragmatic value of the kind of literary-historical division that Hubregtse makes and assert that Reve's oeuvre is of a very harmonious nature, as Snapper himself indeed does in his forementioned study.

2: 278-80). According to van Dis, the article contained blasphemous passages—at a certain point in the article, Reve depicts an image of himself having sexual intercourse with God, Who has returned to earth as an Ass (Reve qtd. in Fekkes 32)—and was therefore in violation of article 147 of the *Wetboek van Strafrecht*, the Dutch penal code. The Secretaries reacted by directing the Public Prosecutor to institute legal proceedings against Reve. On September 9, 1966, Reve was served a summons, and this summons revealed that a passage from another work of Reve's, namely one from his second book of epistles, *Nader tot U*, had been added to the charge that was being brought against him (Fekkes 31-3). In the trial that followed, Reve was acquitted though, and after both Reve and the District Attorney had brought an appeal against the verdict of the District Court of Amsterdam—the former because this verdict had not fully cleared him of the charge of blasphemy—Reve was eventually completely cleared of the charge that had been brought against him.

Despite the controversies that repeatedly accompanied Reve's work and public performances throughout his career, he nevertheless was awarded a royal honor three times, and, furthermore, won the most prestigious literary oeuvre awards within the Dutch-speaking region, namely the P. C. Hooft-prijs (1969) and the Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren (2001). Yet, commotion surrounded even the awarding of the latter prize to Reve: the planned presentation at the Royal Palace in Brussels, where Reve was to be presented the award by King Albert II of Belgium, was cancelled, most probably because shortly before the presentation was to be held, Reve's partner was accused of sexual abuse of a minor and possession of child pornography (Fransen 12-20).

In 1998, Reve, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease a year earlier, completed his final novel. He died, aged 82, on April 8, 2006, in Zulte, Belgium, and was

buried not far from that place in Machelen, a village that had been his place of residence for more than a decade then.

Let us return to the central issue that this thesis addresses, and ask the same question about Reve as was asked about Coetzee in the previous chapter: If one would adhere to the definition of post-secular fiction which McClure provides in his *PF*, and thus take post-secular fiction to be signifying the kind of fiction that “tells [stories that] trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (3); of which the “ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real” (3); and of which the “ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects” (3), could one then, after having examined some of the works of Reve, conclude that it would be justified to state that they represented works of post-secular fiction?

The fact that in this chapter, the object of investigation is formed by several works of a single author, rather than, as was the case in the previous chapter, just one work of an author, is dictated by the idea that unlike the work of Coetzee, which perhaps, as James Wood contends, “has always been . . . intensely metaphysical,” but of which “in recent years the religious coloration . . . has become more pronounced” (Wood qtd. in Pellow 528), Reve’s work has always been characterized by a deep religious coloration.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the fact that up to this day, critics have been wondering whether or not Reve was “sincere” in his religiosity,<sup>40</sup> indicates that one probably cannot unequivocally call him a religious author. It might, thus, very well be meaningful, I would argue, to determine to what extent it would be justified to regard him as a post-secular author.

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<sup>39</sup> For a similar view, cf. Raat 23-6.

<sup>40</sup> For examples of critics that have been grappling with this question, see, for instance, Paul van Tongeren’s “Ernst en spot: Over religiositeit in het werk van Gerard Reve”; Johan P. Snapper’s “G. K. van het Reve en de re(cidi)vistische Heterokliet.”



#### 4.1. A Profoundly Weakened Religiosity

In his 1980 novel *Moeder en Zoon*,<sup>41</sup> Reve addresses some of the main critical *aporiai* regarding his religiosity, namely the questions that ask whether or not he is a religious person; whether or not he is a Christian; whether or not he is a “good,” or a “bad” Roman Catholic, or not one at all (Reve, *Verzameld werk*<sup>42</sup> 3: 687). The novel describes the road that leads from an unshakeable belief in communism to the conversion to Roman Catholicism that protagonist Gerard Reve travels, and as the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that not only the path of this fictive Reve’s life, but also his religiosity is indeed highly similar to the biography and most particular religiosity of the flesh-and-blood Reve.

Chapter twenty one of *Moeder en Zoon* presents us with an exemplary illustration of the way in which not only the fictive Reve, but also, I would contend, the actual Reve express(ed) their religiosity; moreover, it provides us with a representative example of the way in which the theme of religion takes shape in the entire literary oeuvre of the latter. The chapter begins with a passage in which I-narrator Reve, who writes down the story of his conversion fourteen years after he has been baptized, unambiguously acknowledges to still have reservations about the Roman Catholic Church as an institute; furthermore, the passage might also be read to be implicitly giving evidence of him having the same reserves about the dogmatic system that it disseminates, or perhaps even religiosity *an sich*, as he had always had too. Let me quote the passage at length:

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<sup>41</sup> Concerning the title of the novel, I have to remark that as of the beginning of his “Fourth Period” (1972-1998), Reve capitalized the titles of his works in the way that is normative in the Anglo-American world; in the manner that is prescribed in the Dutch-speaking region, only the first word of, and names that appear in, a title are being capitalized. In my discussion of Reve’s work, I shall maintain Reve’s idiosyncratic capitalization of the titles of his works, instead of normalizing it, however. The reason for doing so, is that in his work, Reve most frequently uses capitals to indicate that there is being made a, whether or not ironic, reference to the divine, and when one would normalize Reve’s capitalization of his titles, one might lose the ambiguity of a title—as the title of the work that I am about to discuss demonstrates.

<sup>42</sup> Hereafter referred to as *VW*.

Indien de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk een door God ingesteld en geleid instituut mocht zijn, dan heeft Hij terzake mijn bruikbaarheid als lidmaat kennelijk Zijn twijfels gehad, en in ieder geval met mijn toetreding generlei haast gemaakt: het zoude na mijn eerste gesprek met Lambert S. nog vier volle jaren duren, voordat de laatste obstakels uit de weg zouden zijn geruimd. Misschien lag het tevens aan mij: ook ik had mijn twijfels, bleef ze behouden, en heb ze nog steeds; zelfs nu, veertien jaren na dato, moet ik aan mijn katholieke zijn nog steeds gewennen. Mijn schaamte bij het binnengaan van een R. K. Kerk [sic] heb ik bijvoorbeeld nog steeds niet geheel overwonnen: katholieke worden is iets belachelijks—waarom het niet eerlijk toegeven? (Reve, VW 3: 652).

Unequivocally, the subordinate clause with which the first sentence begins, reveals that I-narrator Reve has his doubts about the Roman Catholic Church as an institution. Yet, the way in which the second sentence is formulated, allows one to come up with more than one plausible interpretation of it, for it cannot be determined *what* Reve had had, had kept on having, and, while writing the sentence fourteen years after his definite conversion, still had doubts about: Did he have doubts about the Church as an institution? Did he perhaps have misgivings about the religion that it represented? Or did he possibly have doubts not just about Roman Catholicism, but about religion *an sich*? What was it that made that he still had to get used to the idea of being a Roman Catholic? The same questions could, of course, be asked about the third sentence: What was it that made him feel ashamed every time he entered a Roman Catholic church; that, indeed, made him think that it was ridiculous to become a Catholic? Was being a member of the Roman Catholic Church; believing in Roman Catholicism; or being religious in general the reason that he always felt ashamed when entering a Roman Catholic church and found it ridiculous to become a Roman Catholic?

Perhaps, however, one should not ask whether the one *or* the other reason lay at the basis of his feelings of doubt and shame about having become a Catholic, for it could, of course, also be possible that, simultaneously, all three reasons aroused these feelings. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes apparent that the latter explanation is probably the most plausible one, because even when, in later stages of the story, the I-character is inevitably moving towards a definite conversion, he still is presented as not being able to think of the Catholic Church as an institution other than in terms of “een gesticht waar een kruis op st[aat]” (Reve, *VW* 3: 667) and in the epilogue of the narrative, the I-narrator, who at the moment of writing it had already been baptized—as was mentioned above—states that one can perhaps never tell whether or not one is a religious person, a Christian, or a (good, or bad) Catholic (Reve, *VW* 687).

But let us return to chapter twenty one, in order to examine a passage that might be held to be representative of the way in which the theme of religion takes shape in the literary oeuvre of Reve. At a certain point in the forementioned chapter, narrator Reve describes the visit to a chapel that is dedicated to Mary and located in Heiloo, Netherlands, that character Reve makes together with Lambert S., a Roman Catholic priest. Reve had been brought into contact with S. by someone to whom Reve had revealed that he had an interest in Roman Catholicism. Regularly, Reve and S. now visited each other, and during the visits that Reve made to S., the priest, who had noticed that Reve could never get enough of “Roman kitsch,”<sup>43</sup> oftentimes took the prospective Catholic to all kinds of places of pilgrimage that were to be found in the area of Amsterdam, the place where S. himself resided. Now, as Reve and S. arrive at the forementioned chapel, the latter goes into a covered gallery that is located opposite to the chapel and that harbors framed lithos and pen drawings made by Dutch painter Jan Toorop; the former makes his way towards the chapel by himself. As he enters the chapel,

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 653.

he appears to be the only one there. He then buys two candles, allowing himself a discount of twenty percent, because, as narrator Reve writes, then too, life was continuously getting more and more expensive.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, he lights the candles. He proceeds very quickly, because, as the narrating Reve states, he would have felt ashamed in front of S., when the latter should have walked in, and would rather have had it look as if an earlier visitor had offered the candles.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, narrator Reve writes, he felt a lachrymose desire, as of “an old bag,” to kneel, but he also felt ashamed about that yearning, both in front of S. and in front of himself, and managed to resist the inclination.<sup>46</sup> Then, another, and, indeed, considerably more peculiar, urge announces itself. Let me quote the passage that describes both this urge and the way in which character Reve is said to have dealt with it, in full:

Of het door de stilte kwam, die een lijfelijke spanning bij mij begon op te roepen, weet ik niet, maar een ander drang deed zich gevoelen, die ik niet kon wederstaan [sic]: ik opende mijn gulf, trok mijn zich reeds half tot vuurbereidheid verheven liefdesdeel te voorschijn en begon, terwijl ik de Moeder Gods strak aankeek, het snel te beroeren. Neen, dat was toch te precair: hoe devoot en zedelijk geboden mijn handeling ook mocht zijn, het kon door ontdekking en wanbegrip tot nodeloze schaamte leiden, en ik propte mijn tot volle wasdom gekomen deel wederom snel achter slot en grendel. “Neem mij niet kwalijk,” mompelde ik, waarbij ik opeens, diep in mijn hart, besepte dat mijn verontschuldiging niet het tonen maar veeleer het uit lafheid wederom wegstoppen van mijn liefdesdeel gold.

Nog steeds keek ik het serene, afwezig in de oneindigheid starende gelaat aan, dat noch schreide, noch glimlachte. “U begrijpt het heel goed,” mompelde ik. Ik luisterde in de suizende stilte, of ik buiten voor de deur de voetstappen van Lambert S.

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 654.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 654.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 654.

hoorde, maar deze was waarschijnlijk nog steeds bezig, de geestenfotograaf [i.e., Jan Toorop] de kunst af te kijken [Lambert S. was a fairly good amateur painter himself].

Ik gevoelde wrevel, schaamte, en twijfel, het laatste aangaande de vraag, of Zij het wel “heel goed had begrepen,” dan wel mij in Haar roomse onwetendheid ervan verdacht, vóór Haar altaar te hebben willen pissen. Ik werd kwaad. Welk een onbegrip: zoude er in heel West-Europa behalve ik nog één ander mens zijn met zoveel geloof, hoop en liefde dat hij bereid was te Harer ere en vóór Haar aangezicht zich te ontbloten en zijn liefdesvocht te plengen? Ik gevoelde mij miskend en te kort gedaan, en verlangde genoegdoening. De ene dienst was de andere waard... Waarom Haar niet brutaalweg iets vragen?—dat kostte trouwens niets ekstra [sic]. Ik had Haar mijn deel vertrouwelijk laten zien, en het ware alleszins redelijk, indien Zij van Haar kant nu ook over de brug kwam.

“Kijk,” sprak ik, nadat ik nog even achterom had gekeken, op iets luidere dan mompelende toon. “Als *U* in staat bent... te doen wat geen man, geen vrouw, geen vriend, geen dokter, geen psychiater voor elkaar gekregen hebben... Als *U* mij uit de kruik en de fles kunt trekken... dan bent *U* tenminste ergens goed voor.”

Lambert S. kwam binnen, en ik maakte een grappige buiging naar het beeldje, om hem daarna tegemoet te lopen. “Heel indrukwekkend,” liet ik hem weten. (Reve, VW 654-5)

What makes that this passage might be held to be exemplary for the way in which Reve treats the theme of religion in his literary oeuvre? The religiosity that manifests itself in Reve’s works, is a highly particular one, and I would argue that this particularity is brought about by two means: (I) an extensive employment of the trope of irony; and (II) a rather idiosyncratic

connection of religion with sexuality. When one examines the passage quoted above, one can discern that both of these means are being applied in it: I would contend that an ironic effect is being established in the passage through the exertion of several rhetorical strategies: (i) By the typically Revian hybridization<sup>47</sup> of solemn and (quasi-)archaic language—“gevoelen”; “wederstaan”; “[n]een”; “veeleer”; “schreide”; etc.—with colloquial parlance and worn-out phrases—“achter slot en grendel”; “diep in mijn hart”; “de ene dienst was de andere waard”; “over de brug kwam”; (ii) By the choice of metaphors—“mijn zich reeds half tot vuurbereidheid verheven liefdesdeel”; “liefdesvocht”; (iii) By the choice of marked moral(-theological) concepts of praise—“devoot en zedelijk geboden”—for the description of an act—masturbating in a public chapel while eying the figure of the Virgin Mary—that would most probably be judged to be everything but praiseworthy by the majority of Reve’s contemporary compatriots; (iv) By the choice of a concept with a strong ritual connotation—“plengen”—for the representation of a deed—ejaculating in a public chapel in honor, and in front, of the Virgin Mary—that would most probably be considered a desecrating one by the majority of the 1980 Dutch public; (v) By prosopopoeically depicting Mary as a being that might understand his piety, but might also, “in Her Roman ignorance,” misunderstand it and, furthermore, as a being with which one might bargain—“De ene dienst was de andere waard . . . Ik had Haar mijn deel vertrouwelijk laten zien, en het ware alleszins redelijk, indien Zij van Haar kant nu ook over de brug kwam”; (vi) By hyperbolically presenting himself—through a rhetorical questioning—as perhaps representing the most (Christian-)virtuous human being in the whole of Western Europe: character Reve believes it to be possible that he would have the most faith, *and* hope, *and* love—the three *cardinal* Christian virtues—of several hundred million contemporary West Europeans. As for the way in which religion is connected with sexuality in the passage quoted above, I believe that it does not require an

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<sup>47</sup> Typical for the Reve of the Third and Fourth Period, that is.

elaborate argument to conclude that this way might be characterized as being rather idiosyncratic: not many Christians would find it appropriate—to say the least—to honor the Virgin Mary by visiting a chapel dedicated to Her, and then, while eying Her figure, masturbating and ejaculating in front of that figure.

A few more examples of the aberrant way in which Reve links together religion with sexuality are to be found in *Moeder en Zoon*. In chapter twenty two, one can find three of them; in this chapter narrator Reve namely describes: (I) having had fantasies about having sexual intercourse with Jesus (Reve, VW 659); (II) having repeated the act that he carried out in the chapel in Heiloo several times afterwards, and having, on those occasions, actually offered his “love fluid” to the Virgin Mary (Reve, VW 660); and (III) having had dreams about having “full bodily intimacy” with Mary (Reve, VW 661). One could discover many more instances of it in the rest of Reve’s oeuvre, and more often than not, these passages are being characterized by the typical and profound deployment of irony that one can also discern in the passage quoted above.

As Reve, in passages as the one quoted above, connects religion with sexuality in such a profoundly ironical manner, one might ask oneself—and, as we saw above, many critics, laymen, and even MPs and jurists have actually asked themselves this question in the past: How is one to read such passages? Might one take the religiosity that is being expressed in them seriously, i.e., would it be justified to regard them the concretization of the genuine religious feelings of the characters that appear in them, the narrators that narrate them, or the creator that has created them, or had one better take the “religiosity” that takes shape in these passages as one aimed at satirizing sincere religiosity?

Let us return to the above quoted passage that describes the visit of character Reve to the chapel in Heiloo, and examine it once more, in order to weigh the pros and cons of both of

these possible readings. I already contended that the highly particular character of the religiosity that manifests itself in this for Reve's work exemplary passage is brought about by an extensive employment of irony and a quite idiosyncratic connection of religion with sexuality. Now, on the one hand, both the multiple ways in which this irony is being realized and the aberrant way in which religion is being linked with sexuality in this passage might be seen to undermine the view that the religion that is being expressed in it is the concretization of the genuine religious feelings of both the I-character and the I-narrator of *Moeder en Zoon*, Gerard Reve. On the other hand, these strategies might at the same time be held to be effecting just the opposite, namely, support the thesis that the religiosity that is being expressed in this passage is a genuine one. One could for instance argue that an unproblematic, a-ironical (re)turn to religion is impossible to make for those who have been raised in a thoroughly secular manner, and/or a ditto environment; argue, in other words, that for those people, a (re)turn to religion can only be made through employment of, what McClure calls, the strategy of "ludic avowal" (McClure, *PF* 16). One could also claim that to be willing to both expose one's person, i.e., to show one's (most) private parts, and libate one's "love fluid," i.e., offer up a (potential) life/(potential) lives, in front, and in honor of the Virgin Mary,<sup>48</sup> represents a—albeit rather particular—way of consecrating Her.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, sacrifice (of living creatures) is as old as religiosity itself, as is the fusion of religion with sexuality. One might even argue, as Paul van Tongeren states in his article "Ernst en spot: Over de religiositeit in het werk van Gerard Reve," that one could use satire as a means to accentuate the lofty and mysterious character of the divine (van Tongeren 96). In his article, van Tongeren illustrates his statement by representing an anecdote that Reve once told in an interview on television. What Reve recounted was that he once made a pilgrimage to

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 655.

<sup>49</sup> As narrator Reve himself writes at a certain point in the narrative, "de religieuze erotiek [is pas aantoonbaar], indien zij vertolkt wordt in een zichtbaar getuigenis of offer" (Reve, *VW* 650).



Kevelaer, Germany, to visit the famous chapel dedicated to Mary that is located there. When he had reached his destination, he could not purchase any candles or flowers anywhere. Therefore, he bought a box of chocolates and placed that in front of Mary's effigy, figuring that She had to like chocolates too, although She, of course, had to mind Her weight. Now, to personify Mary in such a way, van Tongeren argues, is to put all forms of (Mary) worship into perspective. For, he asks rhetorically, what is really the difference between flowers, or candles and chocolates?<sup>50</sup> One might thus even argue that satire and a reverence for the divine can go hand in hand.

When we leave the passage that describes character Reve's visit to the chapel in Heiloo, and move on to the last stages of the narrative that *Moeder en Zoon* represents, we will come across some passages that seem to be affirming the seriousness of character Reve when it comes to religious matters. Throughout the narrative, Reve keeps on doubting whether or not he should enter the Roman Catholic Church, and it seems that he confided his doubt regarding this matter to Lambert S.: as the day of his baptism is irrevocably coming closer and is starting to discourage him, he comes to think about S. at a certain moment, and the representation of these thoughts reveal that he had shared certain "worries and mental struggles"<sup>51</sup> with the priest. As religious matters obviously formed an important subject of discussion whenever Reve met with his "guide"<sup>52</sup> S., and as the context in which the passage that describes his thoughts about S. might be seen to suggest, these "worries and mental struggles" most probably concerned religious questions at least partly. And it appears that a bit further on in the narrative, one could find support for such an interpretation: when Reve is being "examined," as he calls it, at the house and in the presence of S., by a professor in theology, so that the latter could decide whether or not Reve could be granted to enter the

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<sup>50</sup> See van Tongeren 96.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 675.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 652.

Church, and the professor proposes to discuss Reve's desire to do so, Reve, who is torn by doubt about whether or not he should go through with the process he had started, wonders if it was not about time that he stopped with, always and everywhere, uninvitingly imparting his doubts, urges, fears, and vanities to everyone, and, furthermore, tries to settle, once and for all, his broodings over the question as to whether or not he should become a Catholic.<sup>53</sup> Yet, let us turn to the passage in which he comes to think about S. Crucial in this passage, i.e., considering the current discussion, is the part in which Reve thinks the following:

Ik had respekt [sic] voor Lambert S.; ik had waardering voor zijn geduld; ik wist wel zeker, dat hij in al mijn tobberijen en geestelijke wortelpartijen, ondanks alle aanstellerij en ademloos gekakel waarmede ik ze omgaf, de kern van waarachtigheid herkende. (Reve, *VW* 675)

The typically Revian irony that characterizes the passage about Reve's visit to the chapel in Heiloo has dissolved here; it seems, thus, that one might take character Reve's qualification of his, arguably *religious*, "worries and mental struggles" as being "sincere" to be a true one. And it appears that both the last scene that the final chapter of the narrative describes and the novel's epilogue further underpin such a reading. In the last scene that the final chapter represents, the forementioned "examination" reaches a climax. As the professor of theology asks Reve: "What do you believe?," the latter, although he realizes that the question, considering the nature of the "examination," can hardly be considered out of order, feels struck by the question as if by a punch nonetheless. And although he had planned to just say something, just "bullshit"<sup>54</sup> about in response to the questions he would be given, he realized that he could not, as he felt a strong(er) urge to perhaps for the first and last time in his life tell

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 683.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 685.

the truth, the truth that he always claimed to seek, and to desire to serve.<sup>55</sup> In the epilogue, finally, narrator Reve asks: “Ben ik een gelovig mens? Een christen? Een goed, een slecht, of in het geheel geen rooms-katholiek? Misschien heb ik in dit boek die vragen beantwoord, misschien ook niet. Ik vraag mij af, of het wel vragen zijn, waarop enig antwoord mogelijk is” (Reve, *VW* 687). In both instances, a touch of irony is far away; in both, the text seems to be indicating that the religiosity of the protagonist is a genuine one.

If one might conclude that character Reve’s religiosity is sincere, the next question that one might want to ask oneself about his religiosity is: What does it amount to? As the passage from the epilogue that was quoted just now already indicates: the narrative does not answer this question in a straightforward manner. It does, however, draw the curtain somewhat, here and there. As I already argued above, it does not seem to be all that evident for protagonist Reve to become a member of the Roman Catholic Church, to believe in Roman Catholicism, or to be “religious” in general. Yet, as the forementioned “examination” reaches its climax, Reve, who as we saw, suddenly feels a strong urge to tell the truth about what he believes, states that he, when it comes right down to it, in fact believes just one single thing.<sup>56</sup> The narrative keeps the reader guessing about what this thing is, however, for as character Reve is about to reveal what it is, he recoils, saying that he cannot say it.<sup>57</sup>

So, what could this one thing be? Reve clearly does not seem to believe that if one has been baptized, one can go and play the lyre on a cloud after one’s death, and that if one has not been baptized, one cannot.<sup>58</sup> And although one can find him asserting that the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church represent primal truths,<sup>59</sup> he qualifies this assertion by stating that the Church has not got the monopoly on those truths, and, moreover, it becomes apparent that

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 685.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 685.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 686.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 684.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 685.

the assertion is being made to buy him time, to postpone revealing what he really believes; in other words, it might perhaps be held to represent an instance of the “bullshit” that Reve had been wanting to give until he suddenly felt the urge to tell the truth about his religiosity, or, at least, to represent a statement that he did not have his heart in.<sup>60</sup> As regards the Bible, finally, Reve remarks: “[D]e Bijbel als geheel...’ . . . ‘Ik kan mij heel goed voorstellen, dat iemand zegt dat die Gods woord is... En waar God echt iets zegt, daar zegt Hij ook iets, waar geen mens omheen kan... Dat vind ik... Maar er staat ook een hoop gelul in de Bijbel... Er staan ook stukken in, die ik doorstreep, of die ik het liefste er uit zou scheuren...” (Reve, VW 686). He is thus only able to endorse the Scriptures in part.

Perhaps the one thing that character Reve really believes, is that which narrator Reve, in a passage in which he attempts to put into words what had been the former’s real motives for desiring to enter the Roman Catholic Church, states to be his own definition of faith. In the mentioned passage, he states that he holds belief to be the ability to love unconditionally, and he continues by claiming that the essence of every love is that it binds itself to, and lets itself be caught by, an object. Even God’s Love, he asserts, apparently cannot do without binding Itself—particularly through His Incarnation—to, and letting Itself be caught by, His Creation.<sup>61</sup> Possibly also, one can find a clue to what the one thing that I-character Reve believes is, in the final passage of the narrative. In this passage, narrator Reve recounts that after the “examination” at the house of Lambert S. had been over, the latter, the professor of theology, and Reve, who, incidentally, had “passed the exam,”<sup>62</sup> had sat and talked for a while. During their talks, Reve came to ask the professor a question: “Kijk,” he began the preamble to his actual question,

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<sup>60</sup> It is literally being mentioned in the narrative that character Reve was trying to buy himself some time (cf. Reve, VW 685); furthermore, narrator Reve qualifies the statements about the dogmas as ones being made by a “pontificating” character Reve, not by a character Reve that was purposefully conveying a message.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Reve, VW 649.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Reve, VW 686.

“In Jezus Christus zijn God en Mens op volmaakte en onlosmakelijke wijze voor eeuwig in één Persoon verenigd. Is dat zo, of is dat niet zo?”

“Dat is zo,” moest professor Hemelsoet mij toegeven.

“Goed,” vervolgde ik. “Christus is dus ‘waarlijk God.’ Ja of nee?”

“Christus is waarlijk God,” stelde professor Hemelsoet mij gerust.

“Prima,” vervolgde ik. “Maar nu: geen uitvluchten. Als Hij waarlijk God is... als Hij dat dus is... als dat waar is... Wie was het dan, Die aan de vooravond, in de hof van Getsemane, bang was... Die aarzelde... Die twijfelde... Die de Dood aan het kruis vreesde... Ik bedoel: Wie was het dan, Die daar, in Zijn doodsangst... door een engel gesterkt moest worden?...” Ik haalde diep adem. “Wie anders was dat... dan God Zelf, Die wanhoopte, en Die aan Zichzelf twijfelde?...” (Reve, VW 688)

Perhaps, in character Reve’s conception—and in that of narrator Reve, for that matter—God is not the almighty Being that he is generally held to be by both Christendom in general and the Roman Catholic Church in particular. And perhaps he would even consider the possibility that what is represented as a God that fears death, that despairs in the face of Death, that doubts Himself, is not, in fact, God.

A crucial passage from chapter twenty four might be seen to confirm either of these two interpretations. The chapter describes the visit that Lambert S. makes to Reve in order to tell him that there were no objections to the latter entering the Church, and to fill out the Form for the Baptism of Adults that he has brought with him. As they are filling out the form together, Reve comes to experience a vision. Preluding to the actual vision, Reve experiences a sensation of wind: “Waait het zo hard,” he asks Lambert. “Het waait helemaal niet, Gerard,” Lambert answers, and he then goes on to ask Reve if he is cold. To this, Reve answers affirmatively, and subsequently, the reader is given a look inside the head of character Reve,

whereby s/he is made to learn about the vision that the latter comes to experience: “Maar het waaide toch wel degelijk?...” the passage begins,

Ik gevoelde een felle bries langs mijn gezicht en door mijn haren strijken... En ik hóórde de wind... Ik keek rond... Noch in de toppen van de struiken in de tuin, noch in de wilgen aan de slootkant, noch hoog in de populieren verderop was enige beweging of zelfs trilling waar te nemen... En toch hoorde ik iets... Het knapte en ruiste in mijn oren... Ergens in mijn hoofd nam het gedruis toe... Er sprak iemand... Ik?... Lambert S.?... Neen, geen van ons beiden deed een mond open... In mijn strottenhoofd, of in mijn keel, trilde het...: “Troost Mij in Mijn lijden, blijf bij Mij in Mijn eenzaamheid,” sprak een stem... Wat gebeurde er?... Wie was dat?

“Ja... dat beloof ik,” ontviel mij hardop. (Reve, *VW* 673)

As I already argued, this passage can support both the thesis that Reve’s God is one that is far from being almighty and the thesis that Reve might consider the possibility that the God of Christianity is not, in fact, God. The reason that it could, is that the representation of the vision is done in such a way that it would allow for both the interpretation that what Reve hears inside his head is actually the voice of God and the reading that what Reve experiences is actually a delirium tremens; the context of the representation of the vision namely presents evidence for the latter reading. Consider the following passage, which is taken from the beginning of chapter twenty four:

Men moet weten dat ik toen, behalve dat ik bij vlagen niet meer normaal kon oordelen, bovendien overall bedreigingen zag, ook waar zij niet waren, en van lieverlede verwijtende stemmen begon te horen. Het grote delirium zoude pas een maand of zes later komen, maar matige aanvallen van oorzaakloze angst deden zich regelmatig voor, mijn rechter arm was bij tijd en wijle gedeeltelijk gevoelloos en ook wel eens een

gehele dag verlamd, wat ik voor nerveuze reumatiek [sic] hield en niet als een alcoholiese [sic] affliksie [sic] van het zenuwstelsel herkende. Ik bestrijd, dat ik ten tijde van mijn doop niet bij mijn volle verstand zoude zijn geweest, al is het bewijs uiterst moeilijk te leveren. Als ik wilde denken, en mij daartoe inspande, dan was mijn verstand gedurende korte periodes misschien wel helderder dan ooit; ontspande ik mij echter, dan kon het gebeuren dat ik wartaal uitte, en zinnen uitsprak die niet van mij waren, maar die kennelijk door een per ongeluk in de vuilnisbak opgesloten kabouter draadloos uit mijn mond werden uitgezonden. (Reve, *VW* 670-1)

The passage cannot rule out the possibility that what was speaking to Reve, still was God Himself, but it surely renders it uncertain whether that would have been the case. The fact that Reve experienced a vibrating sensation in his larynx, or throat, seems to further weaken the case for the argument that what Reve heard was the voice of God. Yet, the text never gives a decisive answer to the question as to what caused Reve to hear the voice inside his head.

In any case, regardless of whether or not he would consider it a possibility that the God of Christianity really is God, Reve does cultivate an image of God. And it certainly looks as if the image that he cultivates is the image of a God Who can suffer; Who can be lonely; Who can experience fear, hesitation, doubt, desperation, self-doubt. It appears as if the God of Reve is a God that could approach a human being, and ask it to “comfort Him in His suffering, stay with Him in His loneliness.” And in case Reve would consider it possible that the God of Christianity is not, in fact, God—and there certainly seems to be evidence for this thesis in the narrative<sup>63</sup>—one might certainly, I would argue, take him to be thinking of God in a way that is highly similar to the way in which the lyrical I in (actual) Reve’s 1965 poem “Dagsluiting” does this:

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<sup>63</sup> In chapter twenty three, for instance, he contemplates elaborately whether or not religion would not simply be a neurosis and “opium for the people” (Reve, *VW* 665).

## DAGSLUITING

Eigenlijk geloof ik niets,

en twijfel ik aan alles, zelfs aan U.

Maar soms, wanneer ik denk dat Gij waarachtig leeft,

dan denk ik, dat Gij Liefde zijt, en eenzaam,

en dat, in zelfde wanhoop, Gij mij zoekt

zoals ik U. (Reve, *Verzamelde gedichten* 56)

If any label would befit character Reve, it would arguably be that of the “seeker,” the concept which John McClure, following sociologists of religion Wade Roof and Robert Wuthnow, employs:<sup>64</sup> it seems to be beyond dispute that two very important motifs, if not: the *main* motifs, of *Moeder en Zoon* are the search of a character to “satisfy a restless spirituality” (McClure, *PF* 8), and the determination of a character to “develop [its] own religious alternative[. . .] to secularism” (McClure, *PF* 7). It appears to be evident that Reve seeks to satisfy his “restless spirituality” by entering the Roman Catholic Church, yet, at the same time, it seems that he cannot embrace all the dogmas that it teaches, as he is strongly committed to seeking, and desires to serve, verity.<sup>65</sup> The actual Gerard Reve read a statement on the occasion of his baptism, which took place on June 27, 1966, and to me, it seems that this statement is one that could have been written by the protagonist of *Moeder en Zoon*, the renowned Dutch writer Gerard Reve; the gist of it certainly seems to be congruous with the beliefs that the latter, in his two guises, reveals to be having in the forementioned novel—indeed, I believe that one might consider it to be concisely presenting the most essential features of character Reve’s belief. Consider the following passage from the statement, which Reve published about a month after his baptism in literary journal *Tirade*:

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<sup>64</sup> See section 2.2.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Reve, *VW* 685.



Ik heb de grote dogmaas [sic] van de Rooms Katholieke Kerk lief, maar ik geloof niet, dat de Rooms Katholieke Kerk de exclusieve eigenaresse is van de Waarheid of dat zij de “alleenverkoop van God voor Nederland en Koloniën” zou bezitten, noch, dat ooit de Waarheid iemands eigendom zou kunnen zijn: alle dogmaas [sic], hoe waardevol ook om de problematiek van de menselijke opdracht aanschouwelijk te maken, zijn nooit meer dan de tijdgebonden verwoording van een waarheid, die woordloos en tijdloos is.

Mij staat een religie voor ogen, waarvan de belijder niet anders zal beogen dan zichzelf te openen voor God, inplaats [sic] van God te willen bemachtigen en dienstbaar te willen maken aan de vervulling van infantiele begeerten; een geloof, dat misschien eens zal mogen heersen, en waarin de mens de moed zal vinden zijn Godsbegrip los te maken van elke hoop en elke verwachting van welk heil dan ook; een geloof, dat de noodzaak van de Dood zal willen inzien, en begrippen als Verlossing en Eeuwig Leven niet zal interpreteren als een zich na de Dood voortzettend, altijddurend heden.

...

Tenslotte nog dit: God is de enige werkelijkheid—al het andere is een illusie en een begoocheling. (Reve qtd. in Maas 2: 319-20)

Like Reve's double does in *Moeder en Zoon*, the actual Reve declares in this statement that he embraces the dogma's of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, this embracement is accompanied by a substantial disclaimer, as the statements concerning the dogma's of the Church that his double makes in the forementioned novel seemingly are. One could speculate whether or not, or to what extent, the statements that both the actual and the fictive Reve make in these texts

ought to be regarded as ones that are merely being made *pro forma*. In any case, it seems certain that both cannot unconditionally underwrite the Church's dogma's.

Both the actual and the fictive Reve reveal themselves to be critical about the kind of professors that want to "own God and make Him servient to the fulfillment of infantile desires." Both envision a religion that would encourage one to "detach one's image of God from every hope and every expectation of any salvation whatsoever"; a religion that would acknowledge "the necessity of Death," and that would not "interpret notions such as 'redemption' and 'eternal life' as a post-mortem continuing and everlasting present." Both seem to envisage, finally, a religion that would teach its professors to aspire nothing other than to open themselves up to God.

The Catholicism that the fictive Reve champions may remind one of the description that John McClure gives of the "weakened Catholicism" which philosopher Gianni Vattimo, according to the former, affirms: as we saw above, Reve's Catholicism namely also "draws back from the idea of an infinite, all-powerful deity" (McClure, *PF* 12), as Vattimo's Catholicism is said to be doing; it also "refuses to provide comprehensive descriptions of the real" (McClure, *PF* 12); it also "distances itself from 'the visible, disciplinary, and dogmatic structure of the Church'" (McClure, *PF* 12-3); and, finally, "its relation to the traditional idea of redemption" is as unorthodox as that of Vattimo's Catholicism is, as it also "[s]et[s] aside ideas of transcendence, eternal life, and absolute truth, . . . [and] 'summons humans back' . . . to their historicity, their finitude, and their fallibility" (McClure, *PF* 13).

#### 4.2. “De dag is vol tekenen”

As the previous section dealt with one of post-secular fiction’s most important features, namely, that it “tells [stories that] trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (McClure, *PF* 3), this section will deal with another major quality of it, to be specific, with the fact that its “ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real” (McClure, *PF* 3).

In the previous section, I already stated in so many words that a crucial passage in Reve’s novel *Moeder en Zoon* leaves the reader wondering whether or not the novel’s “ontological signature” ought to be taken to be a secular, or an a-secular one: in that section, I namely asserted that the representation of the vision that protagonist Reve has at a certain point in the narrative is done in such a way that it would allow for both the interpretation that what Reve hears inside his head is actually the voice of God and the reading that what Reve experiences is actually a delirium tremens. As we already saw in both chapter two and three, presenting a narrative in such a way, is applying the strategy that McClure calls the “strategy of perhaps.”

In other works of Reve’s, one can find him to be employing this strategy too. To give an example, one can find ample evidence in Reve’s collections of epistles *Op weg naar het einde* (1963) en *Nader tot U* (1966) for the argument that these two books treat God as one of their major themes—plural—if not as their major theme—singular. However, there is just as much evidence to be found in these books for supporting the thesis that not God, but death forms one of the major themes, if not *the* major theme, of these books. Thus, one can find J. J. Oversteegen arguing in his article “Gerard Kornelis Franciscus<sup>66</sup> van het Reve: Eens christens reize naar de eeuwigheid” that death, not God, forms the major theme of both books, and that

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<sup>66</sup> Reve chose to adopt the latter name as his baptismal name (see Maas 2: 318).

the *Thee* from the title of the forementioned 1966 collection of epistles does not refer to God, but to Death (Oversteegen 254-9), whereas Gerard Raat can be seen to argue in his article “Van Frits van Egters tot Hugo Treger”<sup>67</sup> that the theme of God is crucial in both collections of epistles.

Yet, there are more ways in which the ontological signature of his works can be seen to be undermining secular versions of the real. In the article “Reve en romantische ironie,” Sjaak Hubregtse argues that some of Reve’s works, i.e., at least the two collections of epistles of Reve’s that were mentioned above, are characterized by a use of romantic irony, and that, as they employ this form of irony so consequently and extensively, they come to spread a message of profound (ontologico-)epistemological humility. In his article, Hubregtse, inspired by Friedrich Schlegel’s definition of philosophical irony, defines romantic irony as the ability to respect and champion two conflicting beliefs at once (Hubregtse, “Reve” 73); the romantic ironic subject he defines as one that is perpetually willing to bring its beliefs (even its serious and fundamental ones) up for discussion and relativize them; as one that is skeptic and acknowledges the inevitable limitations of its own finite consciousness as much as those of all man-made structures and myths (among the latter, Hubregtse rubricates religions); as one that is diametrically opposed to those who are not able or willing to perform critical introspection and self-relativization (Hubregtse, “Reve” 74). After having set forth his definitions of both romantic irony and the romantic ironic subject, Hubregtse goes on to claim that at least *Op weg naar het einde* and *Nader tot U*, but possibly more of Reve’s works, are of a profoundly romantic ironic nature. Hubregtse namely demonstrates that in the latter two collections of epistles, Reve reveals himself to be able to both cast doubt on his own fundamental “certainties” and to not only acknowledge to be having conflicting beliefs and feelings, but

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<sup>67</sup> The two names mentioned in the article’s title are the names of, respectively, the protagonist of Reve’s 1947 novel *De avonden* and the one of his 1988 novel *Bezorgde ouders*.

also value them. (Hubregtse, “Reve” 81-2). Thus, in the two collections of epistles, Reve can be seen to be deploying, and this, indeed, in more than one way, what John McClure calls the strategy of “overt qualification” (McClure, *PF* 16).

As the strategies employed in the works that have been mentioned up to this point are all being exerted in text that is presented in the indirect form, in many of Reve’s works, a strategy that effects an undermining of secular representations of reality can also be discerned to be at work in text that is presented in the *free* indirect form. The protagonists of many of Reve’s narratives are characters to which reality is incomprehensible and full of hidden dangers. In Reve’s 1949 novella *Werther Nieland*, for instance, one can find such a protagonist. In the perception of eleven year old Elmer, “[d]e dag is vol tekenen” (Reve, *Werther* 52). Elmer feels that the signs of the day relate to each other in a secret and magical way;<sup>68</sup> yet, he acknowledges that it would be impossible to read all these signs, i.e., to understand all that happens, and that some things will always remain mysterious and frightening, as becomes clear from the following passage: “Wel zag ik in dat het onmogelijk moest zijn alles wat er gebeurde te begrijpen en dat er dingen waren, die raadselachtig bleven en een mist van angst deden opstijgen” (Reve, *Werther* 24). Now, as one could of course argue that Elmer might come to adopt a different opinion regarding this matter as he will grow up, i.e., give up his implicit *critique* of secular (ontologico-)epistemological positions, this quote clearly demonstrates that the Elmer who narrates the story—the reader never gets to learn his age—has not done so yet. And as one might want to remark that one can hardly take the (ontologico-)epistemological position of an eleven year old seriously, i.e., as one might want to contend that one can hardly take the forementioned implicit critique of Elmer’s *au sérieux*, many narratives that have found a place in Reve’s oeuvre have protagonists that are adults, yet that still take up a position similar to that of Elmer’s. In Reve’s 1974 novel *Een*

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. e.g., Reve, *Werther* 35 and 74.

*Circusjongen*, one can find the adult protagonist thinking: “Alles had met alles te maken en was op een noodlottige en geheimvolle wijze met elkaar verbonden, maar wie kon het begrijpen? Ik wist slechts, dat alles ongeluk was” (Reve, *VW* 3: 115). In his 1978 novel *Oud en Eenzaam*, one can find the adult I-narrator representing in the free indirect mode the thoughts of the then still young I-character: “Misschien symboliseerden huisnummer, straatnaam of naam van de bewoner van het desbetreffende huis—mij nu, evenals toen, onbekend—op een of andere wijze het noodlot dat, nog ongeweten, boven ons gezin hing, maar pogingen om een samenhang op te sporen heb ik nooit gedaan en zal ik, nu het al lang te laat is, ook niet meer doen” (Reve, *VW* 3: 326). In his 1988 novel *Bezorgde Ouders*, one can find the adult protagonist observing: “Alles betekende iets . . . en alles had met elkaar te maken” (Reve, *VW* 5: 61). Indeed, I would argue that it would not be unwarranted to consider *Werther Nieland*’s Elmer as a paradigmatic protagonist in Reve’s oeuvre.

In sum, many of Reve’s works—perhaps even all of them—can be seen to be undermining secular (ontologico-)epistemological positions through the application of a number of strategies, among which are the strategies that John McClure calls the strategy of “perhaps” and the strategy of “overt qualification.”

### **4.3. A Homosexual Covenant**

As the last two sections were devoted to examining whether or not certain—or perhaps even all—works of Reve’s could be seen to be “trac[ing] the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (McClure, *PF* 3) and whether their “ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real” (McClure, *PF* 3), this section will be aimed at investigating whether or not they might be seen to have an

“ideological signature [that represents] the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects” (McClure, *PF* 3).

As I remarked earlier, Reve’s work has been characterized by a deep religious coloration from the beginning, and as I tried to demonstrate above, the religiosity that has so clearly marked his works ever since his debut novel *De avond*, may certainly be labeled a “dramatically ‘weakened’” one. The question that this section needs to address, then, is: Has it also been marked by a commitment to “secular, progressive values and projects”?

Some of Reve’s earlier works certainly seem to be aimed at furthering “secular, progressive” causes. In his prose debut, the novella *De ondergang van de familie Boslowits* (1946), for instance, Reve describes the tragic fate that befalls an Amsterdam Jewish family during the war. In the article “Litteraire taal,” Andreas Burnier convincingly argues that the genial move that Reve makes in this narrative, is to not mention the Jewishness of the mentioned family; to categorically refuse, as Burnier, observes, to adopt the nazi categories of Jew and/or Aryan, and their derivatives. By doing so, and by representing the Boslowitses as totally ordinary people—some of them are dumb, some are kind, some are boasters, some depressed, some narrow-minded, some broad-minded—the narrative is, furthermore, made to obtain its tragic, and universal, dimension, Burnier remarks. Even the German violence is merely hinted at in the narrative, and because of this, the latter observes, this violence becomes all the more ominous and sinister (Burnier 20-1; Burnier qtd. in Maas 1: 217). As Burnier thus attempts to demonstrate, *De ondergang van de familie Boslowits* can certainly be read to be representing an indictment of racism and racial violence.

A later work of Reve’s, the play *Commissaris Fennedy* (1962), also deals with the theme of racism, as it is situated in a fictive town in 1930s southern U.S.A. and one of its main motifs is the lynching of a black man by whites. Yet, as Reve himself stated, one should

not take the theme of racism to be the central theme in the play; the principal theme that it addresses namely is the problem of justice and injustice, thus he maintained (Reve qtd. in Beekman and Meijer 95). But even if one would take the theme of racism to be central in the play, it is beyond dispute that it does not form a major theme in Reve's oeuvre.

A theme that generally is recognized to be quintessential in Reve's work, is the theme of homosexuality. As, for instance, Gerard Raat has shown in his article "Van Frits van Egters tot Hugo Treger," homosexuality has been a crucial theme throughout Reve's entire oeuvre; it was latently present in his work during Reve's First (1946-1956) and Second Period (1957-1962), i.e., ever since his debut novel *De avonden* (1947), and it was manifestly present in it during the Third (1963-1971) and Fourth Period (1972-1998), i.e., ever since his collection of epistles *Op weg naar het einde* (1963) (Raat 15). As at the time, as we already saw in the introduction to this chapter, the editorial staff of such a widely read and mainstream weekly as *Elseviers Weekblad* apparently did not consider it improper to write that homosexuality represented an ailment that might best be qualified as being contrary to human nature (Maas 2: 133); as one who dared to treat the theme of homosexuality in literature could, because of this, end up meeting fierce opposition even from MPs and senators—and not just from those that were of an orthodox religious disposition—as we also saw in the introduction to this chapter; and, finally, as even at such a meeting as the International Writer's Conference, that was held in Edinburgh from August 20 to August 24, 1962, and that Reve also attended as an invitee, one could find authors who openly spoke and wrote about being homosexual receiving reactions of disapproval and even disgust for doing so from colleagues,<sup>69</sup> one could certainly say that Reve's thematizing of homosexuality represented an act of emancipation.

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Maas 1: 696-9.



It appears, thus, as if the question that asks whether the “ideological signature” of Reve’s work is “the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects” (McClure, *PF* 3) could very well be answered affirmatively. Indeed, one might even argue that in connecting religion with homosexuality in the way that Reve does, he not only rearticulates, but also further weakens his already dramatically weakened Catholicism, and, moreover, that the particular linkage that he effects, doubly strengthens—or at least attempts to do so—his secular progressive project of homosexual emancipation—I would argue that to present, in the way that Reve does, a (N.B. male) God to be willing to engage in sexual intercourse with a homosexual man is to at once undermine Catholic orthodoxy and underpin the cause of homo equality in more than one way.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

Let me recall the question that this chapter began with: If one would adhere to the definition of post-secular fiction which McClure provides in his *PF*, and thus take post-secular fiction to be signifying the kind of fiction that “tells [stories that] trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (3); of which the “ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real” (3); and of which the “ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects” (3), could one then, after having examined the works of Reve’s that have passed in review in this chapter, conclude that it would be justified to state that they represented works of post-secular fiction?

As we saw in section 4.1., the narrative that Reve’s 1980 novel *Moeder en Zoon* presents certainly traces the turn that a secular-minded character makes towards the religious,

as it describes the road that leads from communism to a quite particularly articulated Roman Catholicism that main character Gerard Reve travels. And although, as I attempted to demonstrate, there is ground for questioning the sincerity of Reve's religiosity, there is firmer ground for arguing that it is sincere: Reve seems to be a genuine "seeker," as John McClure calls it, for it seems to be beyond dispute that two major motifs, if not: *the* major motifs, of *Moeder en Zoon* are the search of a character to "satisfy a restless spirituality" (McClure, *PF* 8) and the determination of a character to "develop [its] own religious alternative[. . .] to secularism" (McClure, *PF* 7). What I also tried to make evident is that the religious alternative to secularism that main character Reve can be seen to be developing in the narrative—an alternative which N.B. can be taken to be representative of the way in which religiosity takes shape in the entire oeuvre of Reve's—bears strong resemblances to the description that McClure gives of the "weakened Catholicism" of Gianni Vattimo, the philosopher that the American scholar regards as one of the pioneers of post-secularism.

As I contended in section 4.2., the forementioned novel *Moeder en Zoon*, as well as many other, and perhaps even all other, works in Reve's oeuvre, can be found to be undermining secular (ontologico-)epistemological positions through the employment of a number of strategies, among which are the strategies that McClure labels the strategy of "perhaps" and the strategy of "overt qualification."

As I remarked in section 4.3., finally, one might discern that homosexuality has been a crucial theme throughout Reve's entire oeuvre; it is latently present in his works of the First (1946-1956) and Second Period (1957-1962), and manifestly present in the works of the Third (1963-1971) and Fourth Period (1972-1998). Since I had already maintained in section 4.1. that Reve's entire oeuvre can be seen to be characterized by a deep religious coloration, and since I believe that one might certainly take the act of thematizing homosexuality during the

1940s, '50s and '60s as representing an act of emancipation, as I tried to make apparent in section 4.3., it seems to me that one might very well argue that the “ideological signature” of Reve’s work is “the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects.”

It appears, thus, that there is enough ground to state that the works of Reve’s that have passed in review in chapter four represent works of post-secular fiction, in the McClurean sense of the word, that is; indeed, it seems to me that perhaps the entire oeuvre of Reve’s might justifiably be labeled post-secular, when one would use the term in the same way as McClure does. There are, however, a few comments that I need to give on his signification of the term; these comments I will present in the conclusion to this thesis, which will follow next.

## 5. Conclusion: Coetzee, Reve, and the Post-Secular

Let me start winding up this thesis by returning to the main question that it set out to answer: To what extent is McClure's notion of post-secular fiction apt for characterizing (some of) the respective works of J. M. Coetzee and Gerard Reve?

As I attempted to demonstrate in chapters three and four, both Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and perhaps his later work in general, and many, if not, all works of Reve's might be characterized as works of post-secular fiction, if one adheres to McClure's circumscription of the term. It seems that these works can neither justifiably be subsumed under the category of secular fiction, nor under that of religious fiction; indeed, these works, as I hoped to have made apparent in the forementioned chapters, deconstruct the binary opposition between these two forms of fiction. While critics of *Disgrace* have generally ignored the religious dimensions of this work, or *a priori* assumed that the work is of a thoroughly secular nature, and while critics of the works of Reve's that have passed in review commonly relegate these works to either side of the religious/secular fiction divide, all of these works seem in fact to belong—sociologically, epistemologically, ontologically, and ethically—to the no man's land between the territories that these two categories of fiction occupy.

McClure's notion of post-secular fiction thus seems to be an indispensable notion for those who want to validly critique the way in which the forementioned works deal with the religious and the secular. However, it seems to me that McClure's circumscription of the meaning of this notion is in need of some revision. McClure appears to be right in claiming that post-secular fiction reflects a modern sociological phenomenon—namely, the phenomenon that might be termed “the post-secular turn”—that it is epistemologically

humble, ethically/politically progressive, and ontologically neither entirely secular, nor fully religious. Yet, it seems to me that McClure allots a too prominent place in his theory of post-secular fiction to conversion narration; to what he terms “crasser supernaturalism”; and to the kind of politics that he refers to as “preterite spiritual” communalism and “neo-monasticism.” In McClure’s view, these form distinguishing features of post-secular fiction, but if one examines Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the works of Reve’s that have passed in review in chapter four, and might take these works as representing works of post-secular fiction, i.e., according to the definition that McClure himself provides in his major 2007 study of post-secular fiction *Partial Faiths*—and, as I argued, it appears that one might take them thus—then one might observe that, although *Disgrace* presents its readers with a conversion narrative and might even be seen to be championing a certain form of “neo-monastic” politics, it certainly does not present its public with a narrative that is characterized by a “crasser supernaturalism.” Furthermore, one might find that, although Reve’s *Moeder en Zoon* presents us with a conversion narrative, many of the works that have been discussed in chapter four do not, and that neither the former work, nor the latter ones champion(s) either a “crasser supernaturalism” or a “preterite spiritual” communalism/ “neo-monastic” politics.

It seems to me that McClure in formulating his theory of post-secular fiction has perhaps been letting himself be guided by the works of fiction that are generally being referred to with the qualifier “postmodern” just a bit too much, and that because of this, his ostensibly universal literary theoretical concept risks becoming the (faulty) signifier for a particular literary genre. One had thus better take conversion narration, “crasser supernaturalism,” and “preterite spiritual” communalism/“neo-monasticism” as representing possible features of post-secular fiction, not distinguishing ones, I would suggest. Furthermore, I would argue that if the works of Coetzee’s and Reve’s that have been scrutinized in chapters three and four might be held to represent works of post-secular fiction,

one ought to add “weak(er) supernaturalism”—as an analogy to the “weak religion” of Vattimo that McClure celebrates—or a notion that carries a similar import, to the list of possible features of this kind of fiction, for as I hope to have demonstrated, the supernaturalist inclinations that the forementioned works of Coetzee’s and Reve’s display are certainly of the weaker kind.

Despite that McClure’s theory of post-secular fiction arguably has its shortcomings, I would contend that, not just from a literary theoretical and critical perspective, the gist of it is essential: Firstly, because it unequivocally makes apparent that so-called postmodern literature is not necessarily secular—contrary to what such noteworthy theoreticians of postmodernism/postmodern literature such as Brian McHale, Frederic Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, and others can be found to be claiming<sup>70</sup>—and that (post)modern literature that is categorized otherwise is not inevitably secular either; unambiguously it makes clear that certain (post)modern literature is ethically, politically, and ontologically outspokenly *post-secular*. McClure’s theory does not aspire to replace all established theories of postmodernism/postmodern literature, however; it merely aims at qualifying these theories, and claiming a place alongside of them.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, because the sociologically and (politico-) philosophically thoroughly legitimized notion it introduces could instigate the breaking of new, and important, theoretical and critical ground.

By examining some of the works of J. M. Coetzee and Gerard Reve, I have tried to make a contribution—which, because of the vast, vast corpus of texts that I naturally had to leave untouched, inevitably is a very modest one—to the effort that McClure has begun, and I hope that with this contribution I have managed to make apparent that there is a profound connection between Coetzee and Reve, respectively, and the post-secular.

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. McClure, “Postmodern” 141-2.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. McClure, “Postmodern” 148.

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