

The Possibility of Secularity and the Material History of Fiction

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Abstract: In the years before the American Civil War, there was a rapid expansion of the amount of fiction published. It caused some concern, as people saw the practice of fiction reading transforming the human conscious. This paper argues that, in an important way, that was correct. Fiction reading is a practice that produces the social imaginary necessary to secularity, as described by Charles Taylor and Peter Berger. It shapes the conditions for belief. The emergence of secularity can be grounded in the material history of fiction and the structure of this secularity can be understood by examining reading practices.

Keywords: Secularity, fiction, book history, unbelief, Charles Taylor

In the years before the Civil War, Virginia clergyman Charles Wesley Andrews was worried about America. Things were falling apart. Christian truths were being abandoned, communities broken. People were being changed, radically, on the level of consciousness, without even being aware of what was happening.

What brought this scourge upon the land? This pestilence?
Fiction.

“Our stores,” Andrews wrote, “railroad cars, offices, shops, counting rooms, parlors, nurseries, nay, our very bedchambers, were infested with books, magazines and papers of every form filled with tales, tales, interminable tales.”¹ He wasn’t alone in his horror. Though many devout conservative Christians of the time loved

¹ Charles Wesley Andrews, *Religious Novels: An argument Against Their Use* (New York: A.D.F. Randolph, 1856), 8

novels, especially Sir Walter Scott's, there were those who, like this Southern clergyman, were appalled.²

From his position, the world was being remade by novels, and not in a good way. The practice of reading fiction opened up within the reader what we might call a life of fantasy, a life that people preferred to the "plain, well-defined, and pointed doctrinal teaching" that Andrews believed undergirded Christianity's firm grasp on reality.³ A devotional author, summarizing this argument, claimed the definitions of "fiction" and "Christian" made the two mutually exclusive: "If it's Christian," he said, "it's true; if it's fiction, it's false."⁴ Andrews observed two effects of fiction reading. First, it changed people's relationships with reality. Through engagements with fiction, readers found they preferred imagination, preferred entertaining romantic realities and enrapturing experiences of suspended disbelief. Second, through their engagement with fiction, readers were detached from their surrounding community. Opening this inner life, fiction isolated individuals, and they experienced themselves as discrete selves. They were, in a way, disembedded by the experience, to use philosopher Charles Taylor's terminology, and buffered.⁵ Fiction turned people into readers, and, it was observed, readers "shrink away up in a corner of the room," where they cry "rivers of sentimental tears, and caverns full of isolated sighs."⁶ This

² Charles Wesley Andrews, *Hymns and Devotional Poetry* (New York: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1858), 4

³ Charles Wesley Andrews, *An Apology: The Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge: Its Origin, Constitution, Tendencies and Work* (New York: John Gray, 1854), 30

⁴ A.W. Tozer, quoted in Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 49-67; Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37-42

⁶ Quoted in Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 97

was far from ideal, as the burgeoning field of evangelical antebellum instructional literature on reading repeatedly pointed out. The right way to read, as recommended, for example, in the nineteenth-century classic, *How to Read a Book in the Best Way*, was aloud.⁷ One should read in community, in ways that furthered connections to reality.

As America was flooded with fiction in the mid-1800s, Andrews was possessed by a fear of fiction, of fiction readers, and what it would mean to live in a world of consciousnesses thus formed. It's easy enough to laugh, but the case can be made that, in an important way, he was right. Fiction reading did remake the world. There's a connection between the emergence of fiction reading as a common, popular practice and new conceptions of self and others. Andrews was right about the cultural dominance of novels and the practice of reading fiction opening up of the possibility of what can be called the condition of secularity.

I. Understanding Secularity

There is a notable similarity between Andrews' ideas of the change in consciousness wrought by these "interminable tales" and scholars' developing descriptions of the phenomenological experience of secularity. Following sociologist Peter Berger's turn away from the secularization thesis, a theory about religion's decline in modern societies, there has emerged a set of questions around the subject of the conditions of belief. By the early 1970s, for example, Berger was asking how it is that people maintain the experience of the supernatural as a meaningful reality in modern societies where they are "cognitive minorities," and that knowledge of a

⁷ George P. Philes, *How to Read a Book in the Best Way* (New York: George P. Philes, 1873), 23

transcendent reality is, in sociological terms, deviant.⁸ More recently, the developing discussion has centered around the work of Charles Taylor, who asks in the opening sentences of his landmark 2007 work, “What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?”⁹ This is, in some sense, a historical question. It is a question regarding a social imaginary that emerged in a historical moment, and a question of how perceptions of the self and perceptions of the cosmos changed.

Taylor defines “secularity” as buffered selves in an imminent frame.¹⁰ The “buffered self,” in contrast with the “porous self,” is the self that conceives itself as only contingently, incidentally social, as self-sufficient in essential individuality.¹¹ These buffered selves are, further, understood to relate to each other in space imagined as empty and open homogeneity. In this “radical horizontality,” there is neither hierarchy of individuals nor hierarchy of being—and thus no transcendent frame where human activity is understandable only in reference to ultimate reality.¹² Instead, there is an imminent frame, where things come to make sense only in human terms of flourishing, only in reference to observable reality and utilitarian good.¹³ As summarized by Berger, “All questions that do not correspond to this reality are ruled inadmissible.”¹⁴ It’s important to not miss the subtlety, however. Secularity does not determine directly what can or cannot be believed but

⁸ Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Middlesex, Penguin, 1971), 18

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 300

¹¹ *Ibid*, 27, 37-42, and 300-307

¹² *Ibid*, 20. See also how Taylor describes the “public sphere” as homogeneous and horizontal space, 210, 187-193.

¹³ *Ibid*, 718-19

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 96

rather changes what it means to believe, the justifiable grounds on which one takes oneself to be able or not able to believe.

Secularity does not mean an end to beliefs in supernatural reality, nor, that belief in a Platonic, non-anthropocentric “good” will be impossible. It does mean those beliefs grow implausible to an increasing number of people. Naïve belief is no longer possible, supernatural reality is no longer “given,” and a theistic construal of the universe and of human life comes to need supportive arguments in order to be believed. Those arguments, to be believable, increasingly have to be based in these conceptions of what it means to be an individual and how the proposed proposition benefits humans and human life. Taylor argues—and it is implicit in Andrews—that there’s a change in human consciousness, which makes unbelief widely available and changes the specific contours of what “belief” is taken to be.

The critical question is what it means to “believe” or not. What must someone do to be understood as “believing”? What is the cultural content of “unbelief”? These questions are about the social imaginary, which Taylor describes as “that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have.”¹⁵ This is the distinction being made among “secularity,” a condition or ideological context, “secularization,” referring to a process of religion’s declining influence, and “secularism,” an epistemology or ethics *sans* supernatural grounds or

¹⁵ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25. There’s a distinction being made between “worldview” and some of the less precise, less theoretical uses of “ideology.” Though descriptions and terminology vary, similar conceptions of the social imaginary can be found in the work of a variety of theorists. For example, see Jürgen Habermas and William Rehg, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Boston: MIT Press, 1998), 22, 322; Jürgen Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 85-88 and Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 36.

goals. The move is towards an examination of the conceptual structures underlying the actions, utterances, and practices of “belief” and “unbelief,” a condition that can at least provisionally be called secularity. On the suspicion Andrews’ might have been right in detecting the change he detected and that there’s a connection between what Andrews was describing and what Taylor describes as the secular age, I propose two theses: First, the emergence of the condition of secularity can be grounded in the material history of fiction. Second, the structure of this secularity can be elucidated by examining the practice of fiction reading.

II. The Problem of Social Change

The scholarship on the history of social changes resulting from the condition of secularity has generally been focused on changes in ideas. This is true of Taylor’s work, but Taylor is not alone in this. In an early example of the scholarship of secularity, James Turner’s *Without God, Without Creed* examines changes in the thought of Protestant clergy in the early American republic. In a more recent example, Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation: How A Religious Revolution Secularized Society* takes up the task of explicating the consequences of the logic of Protestant theology. While understanding ideas, and ideas’ effects, is valuable work, what’s been mostly ignored is the question of how these ideas are real in common people’s lives. There has been too little attention paid to the material conditions, the forms of life and everyday acts and practices that shape the common social imaginary. Ideas are not detached from the real conditions of existence, and the history of secularity can be very usefully grounded in material history. Without

lapsing into senseless materialism, it seems worthwhile to explore the importance of cultural practices in the formation of the conditions of belief.

Taylor, however, offers a theory of social change that only vaguely involves the masses. There was, he writes, an “anthropocentric shift” that transformed the social imaginary, but he is less clear on how. Taylor holds that the social imaginary becomes social practices, but only as instantiations of ideas. They are effects, having no efficacy of their own. Taylor, like many in this field, does not cite a single instance of changing social practices or forms of life that produce this specific unarticulated, background conceptualization. His account is, rather, that the ideas of secularity “gradually infiltrate[d] and transform[ed] our social imaginary.”¹⁶ They simply “penetrated” common people’s minds. How this happens isn’t clear, and he offers no explanation for how this restructuring of consciousness might have emerged as the unthought-of context of thought.¹⁷

This criticism has been raised before, and Taylor rejects it, although unconvincingly.¹⁸ Taylor argues his account isn’t idealist because it’s not about “ideas as impinging from nowhere.” That’s not the definition of historical idealism, though, and certainly not the charge I am making. Rather, he’s an idealist in that only ideas seem especially real to him, only ideas cause change. For Taylor, moreover, practices are only sensible as ideas since “because human practices are the kind of thing that makes sense, certain ideas are internal to them; one cannot

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 18, 28 and 29

¹⁷ For the most trenchant criticism of Taylor’s work on secularity, see *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010).

¹⁸ See Wendy Brown, “The Sacred, the Secular, and the Profane: Charles Taylor and Karl Marx,” in *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age*, 83-104.

distinguish between the two.”¹⁹ Distinction, however, is necessary to understanding. The point of a materialist grounding is not to completely separate the two—that is, ideas and forms of life—but to get at the connections and better understand the structure of this social imaginary by considering how it is constructed in human consciousness in a specific historical moment.

While one would not want to make the epiphenomenalist’s mistake of “vulgar” Marxism, dismissing an idea altogether, practices both delimit ideas and produce the possibility of ideas by giving them validity, weight, and shape.²⁰ This may be especially true when it comes to questions about how the self is comprehended and how social space is implicitly understood.

III. Book History and Social Change

Of the many potential social changes to consider, the material development of books seems promising. There’s significant work on the history of how developments in printing technology contributed to changes in the social imaginary. Three thinkers, Jürgen Habermas, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, and Walter J. Ong, have made important contributions to this discussion. A brief review of their work serves to demonstrate how changes in books can be connected in important ways to changes in individuals’ experiences of themselves and their world.

Jürgen Habermas demonstrates that the bourgeois public sphere, the basis for the post-metaphysical discourse necessary to pluralist democracies, emerged out of economic developments and new uses of printed texts. New capitalist economies of the sixteenth century necessitated traffic in commodities, which

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 216

²⁰ See Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale, 2011), 128-159.

necessitated traffic in news.²¹ Habermas writes that “This stratum of the ‘bourgeois’ was the real carrier of the public, which from the outset was the reading public,” and that a “political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which, in opposition to absolute sovereignty, articulated the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws and which ultimately came to assert itself (i.e., public opinion) as the only legitimate source of this law.”²² Those involved in these exchanges re-conceptualized both themselves and their social space.

Elizabeth L. Eisenstein argues that the Reformation was shaped by the growth of print markets. Not that that was the only possible result, but, rather, “the advent of printing did, at the very least, rule out the possibility of perpetuating the status quo.”²³ The sixteenth-century printing boom changed the milieu of debates, incentivized controversy, and created new conceptions of social alignments, “textual communities.”²⁴ The Reformation was in fact concurrent with a boom of printed materials. Just in Low German, the number of printed books tripled and then quadrupled in a few decades. There were 70 printed in the first ten years of the sixteenth century, 284 in the 1520s, and 244 in the 1530s.²⁵ While some of this growth is explained by the Reformation-created demand, the causal explanation also goes in the other direction: as the printer-produced supply made the demand

²¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 15

²² *Ibid*, 23, 54

²³ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 208

²⁴ *Ibid*, 197. Some recent work has attempted to understand this through the frame of current media environments, examining “social networks” and how certain texts “go viral.” See “How Luther went viral,” *The Economist*, Dec. 17, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21541719>.

²⁵ Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800* (London: Verso, 2010), 291

possible, practices such as buying and reading these books became important social acts of self-identification.²⁶

Walter J. Ong makes the case that printed texts produced new reading practices, which were interiorized by readers, resulting in the “development of the sense of personal privacy that marks modern society.”²⁷ Print meant books were easier to read and read faster; books were consumed, not contemplated.²⁸ Since publishers made more money by selling more books, they did what they could to encourage this trend—regularizing lines, justifying text, printing smaller, more portable volumes, replacing pilcrows with empty space, and so on. As these changes were received and normalized, they were internalized, and people began to think of themselves using the metaphor of the printed book, an external, physical object which contained ideas (beliefs, propositions, stories, etc). In this, Ong argues, there was a direct connection between the rise of print and the Modernist conception of “mind”—think of Locke’s *tabula rasa* and Descartes’ *ego*—that intuitively made sense and seemed right because this analogy to the era’s defining technology was well established by the seventeenth century. Reading became an individual affair, which meant a reconceptualization of individuals and a contradistinction of private and public space.

²⁶ For more on supply-side explanations of religious change, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 527, Religion in the Nineties (May 1993), 27-39; and Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Sept. 1994), 230-252.

²⁷ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1988), 128

²⁸ *Ibid*, 120

IV. Secularity and Book History

These changes, brought by the advent and developments of printing, directly connect to the key ideas of the social imaginary of secularity that Charles Taylor posits. They connect also to Charles Wesley Andrews' fears. His concern wasn't about print *per se*, though, but about the transformation print was undergoing in his time, which resulted in the novel's cultural dominance. Those changes are especially important to the structure of secularity, to the social imaginary that today determines what is and isn't taken as "belief."

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of dramatic social change in American printing. Stereotyping in 1812, steam-power printing in 1823, machine-produced paper in the '20s, cloth bindings in the '30s, the improvement of the American railway system from the 1830s to the '50s, and more, transformed the book market. Production was faster and cheaper than ever before, and books were churned out in rapidly increasing quantities. The market grew by about 500 percent, until, in the 1850s, book sales reached \$12.5 million annually.²⁹ Much of that growth was in fiction. At the beginning of the century, novels accounted for maybe .13 percent of the market. By 1855, more than half of new books were novels.³⁰ There were clear economic incentives for this, as a fiction reader will read more books than a non-fiction reader, and the audience for fiction was broader. It was this in context of economics-created social change that Andrews described fiction as an infestation.

²⁹ Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 47

³⁰ *Ibid*, 51

The timing is notable, because it marks the moment that unbelief, in its current sense, becomes widely possible. American historian James Turner writes, “Before the middle of the nineteenth century, atheism or agnosticism seemed almost palpably absurd; shortly afterward unbelief emerged as an option fully available.”³¹ This happened suddenly, almost as an outbreak of agnostics. Not that there was no unbelief before—America probably had its first actual atheist with the poet and ambassador Joel Barlow in the 1790s.³² For most, though, that kind of unbelief had been impossible. Even for adamant religious skeptics, the assumption of some sort of God or transcendental order was necessary to guarantee the order of the cosmos and the possibility of knowledge.³³ It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that “the supernatural as meaningful reality [was] absent or remote from the horizons.”³⁴ That was the historical moment when Americans no longer “lived naïvely within a theistic construal.”³⁵

That agnosticism emerges in the mid-1800s testifies to a cultural shift, a change in the social imaginary, at the moment of this change in the material history. There were undeniably other changes: pre-Civil War theological disputes, developments of capitalism, the first Marxists, publication of *On the Origin of Species*, and so on. The popularity of fiction is a shift among many. Of the changes that could legitimately serve to ground the change in the social imaginary, however, the rapid rise in novel reading seems particularly important as the kind of social practice that

³¹ James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1985), xii

³² For more on Barlow, see Richard Buel, Jr.'s biography, *Joel Barlow: American Citizen in a Revolutionary World* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2011).

³³ Turner, 35-72

³⁴ Berger, 18

³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 14

produces new conceptions of the self, new ways in which to experience an individuals' relationship to reality. The practice of reading fiction serves to bridge, within an individual, what Marx called the *Basis* and *Überbau*.³⁶ Examining the reading process shows how the social imaginary can be understood to be determined—given shape—by the material reality of a social practice, which itself arises, in part at least, because of economic developments.³⁷ As Wolfgang Iser described it in his phenomenological account of reading, fiction “leads the real to the imaginary and the imaginary to the real, and thus conditions the extent to which a given world is to be transcoded, a non-given world is to be conceived, and the reshuffled worlds are to be made accessible to the reader’s experience.”³⁸ The reshuffling is the product of a social practice, which, for material reasons, increased at a particular period in American history. That can serve to ground an explanation for how the change in the social imaginary came about.

V. Reading and Secularity

Two significant results of novel reading are characteristic of the condition of secularity. Reading novels restructures or orients the self-apparentness of self-conceptions and the conceptions of the implied cosmos behind that. That is, the process of engaging fiction constructs and reinforces a reflexive but mostly unthought-of understanding of the self as buffered. The reading subject is conceived

³⁶ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005), 34, 38

³⁷ See Althusser: “The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production,” 7, and, “the ‘ideas’ of a human subject exist in his actions...these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, with the material existence of an ideological apparatus” (emphasis in the original), 42.

³⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1993), 4

in the reading process, and “becomes what it is through its particular acts.”³⁹ For a Marxist such as Louis Althusser, this happens in “interpellation,” as the text “hails” the subject, and the subject becomes the subject in the self-recognition of that hailing. It can be thought of as an awakening of or to or in self, the self as subject being, then, “given.”⁴⁰ For a Phenomenologist such as Iser, what fiction does is “actualize” the reader, “mobilizes the reader’s imagination” in “a kind of transformation.”⁴¹

The critical characteristic, here, whether or not one accepts the specifics of Marxist or Phenomenological accounts of the process, is that the reading subject is, in the practice, primarily engaged in entertaining beliefs and suspending disbeliefs. Readers “try out” realities in a kind of play, a game “of not-quite-belief.”⁴² This is true whether the fiction is fantastical, or realistic, adhering to reality’s rules. This is because, whatever rules the novel’s reality follows, they’re not “given,” in the philosophical sense of being impossible not to think. Rather, “The incorporated ‘real’ world is placed in brackets to indicate this is not something given but merely to be understood as if it were given.”⁴³ This means the self, as it conceives itself in the fiction-reading, is most basically, reflexively understood as buffered, ever “aware of the possibility of disengagement.”⁴⁴

In terms of secularity, in terms of the contemporary conditions in which belief makes sense, the critical turn here is towards individuality. It is in the private

³⁹ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford, 2000), 108

⁴⁰ Althusser, 46

⁴¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1974), 39, 30

⁴² James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Picado, 2000), xxi

⁴³ Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 12-13

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 42

space of individual engagement with a text that a reader decides whether or not a fiction is “believable.” The reader, in fact, goes back and forth between believing and not, disbelieving and not, as the novel is picked up and put down. There’s no possibility here, anymore, of believing “just because,” as no social position or context is strong enough to preclude the possibility of not believing, or preclude the necessity of making this decision for oneself. Here, then, it is visible how this aspect of the condition of secularity is formed: believing or not is a personal act, performed by the sort of self who is thrown into the imperative freedom of choice. The final court, in a sense, is the judgment of an individual. Conceived in this way, unbelief does truly become widely available, and belief of the non-naïve sort is enacted, tried on, and experienced. At the same time, belief, to the extent that it is possible in a pluralist world where one could always imagine oneself believing something different, is possible precisely here, where one is always in the position of potentially being a cognitive minority. As Peter Berger describes it, reading fiction is one of the possible “rituals of detachment” that allows believers to insulate or buffer themselves against the massive challenge of pluralist-induced doubt. At the same time, the detachment achieved from reading fiction is what makes such a doubt possible.⁴⁵

This means that for this self, the novel is an experience of what it’s like in an immanent frame. This is the second aspect of the condition of secularity, in Taylor’s account.⁴⁶ The novel is engaged by the reader in such a way that the experience constructs and confirms this sense of homogeneous, empty space, and as delimiting

⁴⁵ Berger, 19, 20

⁴⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542-57

the scope of reality. The absence of the author contributes to this effect. As stated by the “intentional fallacy,” “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”⁴⁷ This is a description of a “disenchanted” world, the foreclosure of the transcendently real. It’s what Berger describes as the secular condition: “All questions that do not correspond to this reality are ruled inadmissible.”⁴⁸

Readers, in a sense, are on their own in engaging with the text. There’s no “in breaking,” no special revelation equally available to all readers, no final answer to the questions of meaning presented in the text. In this spirit, György Lukács calls the novel “the epic of a world forsaken by God.”⁴⁹ In novels, “the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given.”⁵⁰ The experience of the fiction reader is thus exactly the experience of a space in which the “naïve belief” of a “transcendental guarantee” is no longer tenable. Meaning is no longer certain, as there’s no ultimate or final reader, but rather a radical horizontality where all have equal access to the text, and, “From the given material...[they] must construct [their] own conception.”⁵¹

This, too, is basic to the terms of secularity. The change in the social imaginary that Taylor pinpoints that can be seen here is the way in which observable reality, that which is freely available as knowledge to everyone, becomes the only acceptable grounds for argumentation. That which is beyond the scope of universal human access cannot be invoked, cannot be treated as a legitimate

⁴⁷ William K Wimsatt and C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3-18

⁴⁸ Berger, 96

⁴⁹ Quoted in Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel* (London: Continuum, 2010), 10.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Graham Good, “Lukács’ Theory of the Novel,” *A Forum of Fiction*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter 1973), 175- 185.

⁵¹ Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 40

answer. Questions of “is it right?” and “is it good?” are only answerable from an anthropocentric position, from a position analogous to a reader’s rather than an author’s. The result of this is that it’s always possible to be wrong, and every statement is, in an important sense, provisional. It may be the case that one still chooses to hold to “ultimate” realities and “absolute” truths. The condition of secularity as elucidated by the practice of fiction reading doesn’t preclude that—one can, after, be very insistent that there’s a right interpretation of the text. What’s precluded, rather, is that right answer being “given,” being the sort of thing about which it is impossible to be wrong. Answers, in this context, in this condition, are not *ex cathedra*, are not indubitable or infallible, but require an apologetics.

In novel reading, then, what’s visible is the structure of what it means to believe or not. The reader is in the condition that can be called the condition of secularity, where the readers conceive of themselves and experience themselves as disembedded selves in an immanent frame. The reader experiences belief and unbelief in exactly the ways, on exactly the terms that have come to be dominant in the contemporary Western world. This is the contemporary condition we can call the condition of secularity. It’s no accident that this social imaginary, which has been so successfully articulated and explicated by intellectual histories, emerges in America at exactly the time that material developments in print markets produce and make dominant the cultural practice of novel reading.

VI. Conclusion

Secularity does not, as Taylor rightly says, “impinge from nowhere.” Though one can trace the changing conceptions of the social imaginary in intellectual

history, and that is valuable, it's also important and useful to examine the social practices that served to construct that imaginary, served to shape people's conceptions of themselves and their cosmos. As the anxious Charles Wesley Andrews might have said, surveying the change happening in antebellum America, secularity is in our "counting rooms, parlors, nurseries, nay, our very bedchambers."⁵²

Andrews might have been misguided, but he wasn't wrong. The world was changed by fiction reading, changed precisely in the sense of what it means to believe or not, and who the subject is who believes. Fiction made "unbelief" possible; it makes "belief" possible still. Understanding the social change that produced the possibility of secularity allows for a better conception of the condition of secularity both in its abstract structure and in its material history.

⁵² Andrews, *Religious Novels: An Argument Against Their Use*, 8

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