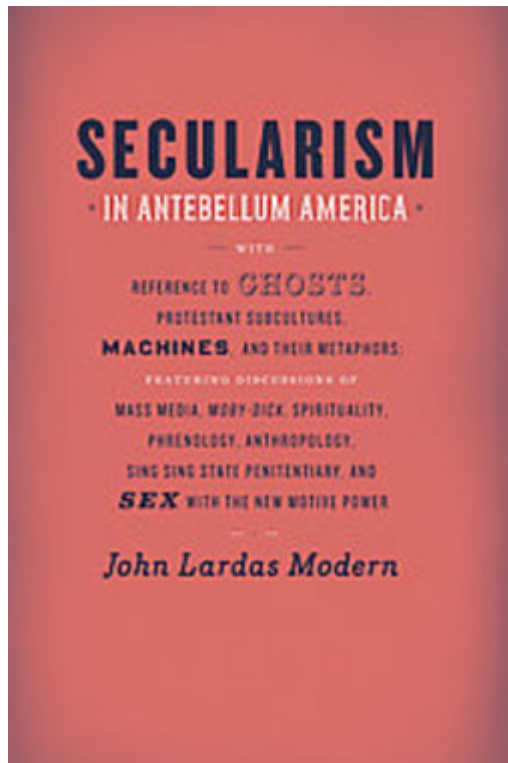


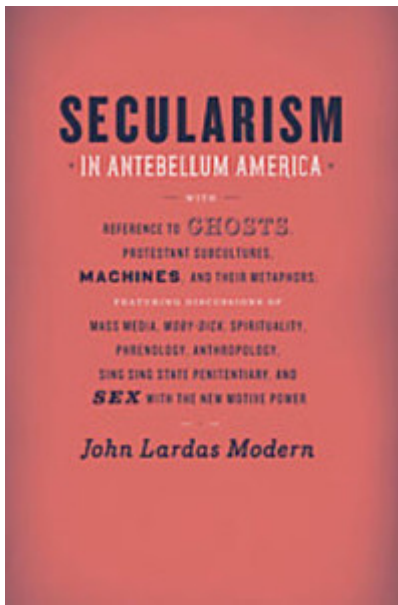
# Comfortable in our Unbelief?



Perhaps the most famous words ever recorded about Herman Melville's relation to faith were written by Nathaniel Hawthorne after Melville's visit to him in Liverpool in 1856. In his journal, Hawthorne opined that Melville "can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief." Though he does not directly cite this Hawthorne remark, John Lardas Modern could easily have used Hawthorne's description of a suspended relation to belief in his book *Secularism in Antebellum America*, a luminous study of the discursive terrain and affective engagements of secularism in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In this historically rich and analytically keen interpretation of secularism in the antebellum United States, Modern presents not a diachronic narrative of the emergence of secular society but a synchronous argument about the 1840s and 1850s. He locates in these decades the emergence of a secular culture that consolidated variant, and often opposing, philosophical, religious, and scientific discourses. How we define the various terms "secular," "secularization," and "secularism" has become a prominent debate in recent years, and Modern's book engages this debate. Modern draws on new theories of secularism—most particularly on the work of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and, in American studies, Tracy Fessenden—that redefine it not as a teleological process in which religion retreats in the face of science and rationality but as an age in which "religion" became newly transformed, classified, and embedded in the practices and institutions of modernity. When invoking the "secular" and exploring its resonances in the antebellum era, Modern, therefore, continually affirms how it contains and exemplifies such religious

traditions as evangelical Protestantism rather than being forged in opposition to them.



John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 352 pp., \$40.

*Secularism in Antebellum America* focuses on the process by which the secular both solidifies its claims to be “natural” and “real” and, simultaneously, exceeds these claims in its moods and expressions. Antebellum secularism, according to Modern’s argument, is the product of the absorption and reconfiguration of Scottish Common Sense philosophy and republican principles of government by both Protestant and post-Protestant (Modern’s term) subcultures. Though these traditions reach back to eighteenth-century philosophical precedents, Modern privileges the antebellum era as pivotal, when secularism’s claims to be “natural” and “commonsensical” became ubiquitous and relentless. He locates the antebellum period as the moment in which “the metaphysics of secularism,” growing out of its eighteenth-century legacy, “assumed a ponderous and formidable materiality” (45). As Modern argues, this process remade religion in ways evident throughout United States society and culture to this day.

Throughout the book, Modern seeks a difficult balance: he simultaneously looks to explain the methods, meanings, and effects of secularism in the antebellum United States and to assert that its discursive presence could never achieve its own universalizing goals. Modern’s dedication to examining the slippery nature of the “secular”—the moods and subjectivities it calls into being, including certain types of religious subjectivities—allows him to demonstrate how antebellum secularism “was neither totalizing nor utterly determinative. It did, however, possess a kind of agency, defined, barely, as the threshold reflexivity of feedback operations” (46). His inexact phrase—a “kind of agency”—expresses just this attention to the limits of secularism even as he continually recurs to its centripetal force. This very consideration of all that surrounds the powerful energy of secularism, physically and

metaphysically, is the great strength of the argument. Modern is most interested in the affective, metaphysical, and subjective senses of antebellum secularism. He locates them in the haunting excesses of the culture's obsessions with spirituality, ghosts, phrenology, and Native American culture, among other sites.

The book's attention to *weird* antebellum secular culture (to put it glibly) is what makes its argument such a crucial contribution to ongoing discussion of how we define "secular" in different moments of American history. In other words, Modern does not obscure the peculiarities of the age to pursue his thesis; instead, spiritualist séances, phrenological readings, and copulation with machines exemplify the era's heady mix of religious subjectivities and secular insistences, and they become, in his rendering, more than ancillary, outré topics. Modern's chapters overlay onto one another to represent the "surplus of secularism" through "the resonance of its component parts" (10). These parts include the entanglement of print and evangelical piety to create a category of "true religion" (chapter one); the rise of "spirituality" as a way to describe one's orientation to religion and the championing of this term in the Unitarian theology of William Ellery Channing and the phrenology of Fowlers and Wells (chapter two); the conflation of spirituality and anthropology in the career of Lewis Henry Morgan (chapter three); Spiritualism, penitentiary reform, and the transposition of Providence into human scales and projects (chapter four); and finally an epilogue that constellates the goals of the book through the spiritual uses of machines.

To list these chapters, though, is to provide a narrative—that is, to flatten into a chronological sequence. Modern's compilation of a synchronous archive resists such narrative force and offers the reader instead an overload of suggestive associations across registers too often isolated from one another. In his most original and compelling chapter on the emergence of "spirituality" as a meaningful category, Modern displays best his associative method. He aligns Channing's Unitarian appeals for "a focused interiority" as the basis of "public virtue" (133) with the invention of an organ of "spirituality" in 1842 by New York phrenologists Orson and Lorenzo Fowler and Samuel Wells. Spirituality thus exemplifies how secularism delineates religious orientations—and how it disciplines them. For in the discourse of spirituality propounded by both liberal Protestants and phrenologists, secularism offers a new category: the "human capacity for religion." This capacity for spirituality, in turn, becomes a way to set what constitutes "being religious" apart from "institutions, traditions, and mere human mandate" (121). Spirituality, in other words, imparts a way of being religious that cannot impinge on secular institutions.

Modern's subtitle is a broader hint to the overarching theoretical and methodological aims of the book—"with reference to ghosts, Protestant subcultures, Machines, and their Metaphors: Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, *Moby-Dick*, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power." With this inviting and

humorous subtitle, *Secularism in Antebellum America* displays its own preoccupation with excess. It points, in other words, to style as an important subtheme of the book. Modern continually returns to "style" as a crucial category for what he attempts to recover about antebellum secularism. He explores in his chapters "the feelings, styles, and ambitions that characterize the discursive practices of secularism" (131), the "style of reasoning," for instance, of conservative Protestants (66), or the "style of piety" pursued by liberal Protestants and given scientific sanction through phrenology (137). To expand upon the religious styles inherent to antebellum secularism, Modern turns to Herman Melville. Indeed, Melville operates as the most prominent continuity throughout *Secularism in Antebellum America*. He embodies for Modern, as he did for Hawthorne, struggles with and against the demands of secularism and modernity. Suggestive readings of *Moby-Dick*, *Typee*, and *The Confidence Man* recreate the stylistic resonances Modern pursues in other aspects of the culture, allowing Melville's words to enliven the discourses under consideration.

Melville's role in *Secularism in Antebellum America* also makes visible one of the argument's broader disjunctions. On the one hand, Modern positions Melville as the most acute antebellum reader of secularism, both attentive to its attractions and yet positioned outside its full control. On the other hand, Melville often eludes Modern's critical eye and becomes somehow impossibly positioned as an escape hatch out of the disciplinary logic of secularism. In this way, Modern's attention to style is at times dissonant with his overarching argument. Although he claims in various places that style, affect, aesthetics, and mood are his foci, he nonetheless spends much of the book in the more popular mode of critique, with special interest in the rise of disciplinary mechanisms. His attention to the resonances and hauntings within secularism—that is, the incomplete and suggestive styles through which secularism announces itself—are often obscured by the driving, disciplinary function of his discursive analysis. This is not to say that Modern ascribes to the much-derided distinction between content and style, with style operating as the frivolous decoration to textual substance. Instead, Modern's argument demonstrates how difficult it remains to speak of style in a way that recognizes its intrinsic relation to and potential disruption of the discursive terrain of a text.

This disjunction in the argument of *Secularism in Antebellum America* does not overwhelm its great attractions as a contribution to current scholarship on secularism in American studies. It is a welcome addition, moreover, to antebellum literary study for its methodological model, how it seeks to elucidate the ephemeral affects and styles surrounding a major historical force. In all, Modern's book expands critical methods for approaching style no less than it provides an enlightening and frankly engrossing articulation of the elusive but powerful force that is secularism in United States culture, past and present.

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