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Other Gods, Other Powers: Numinous Horror in American Literature

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Dedication

To my parents and sisters, with profound respect and appreciation for their boundless love, patience, and good humor.

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Abstract

Other Gods, Other Powers: Numinous Horror in American Literature

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The Gothic has literary criticism in an interpretive stranglehold. Despite their wide cultural and temporal sweep, studies of the Gothic mode depend almost uniformly on suspicious reading practices, frequently overlooking the supernatural ideas that initially animated the Gothic and other, lesser-known modes of horror. At the same time, the Gothic mode—especially in its American context—is entwined with Judeo-Christian moral positions and political-historical anxieties, ensuring a human-centered ontological outlook that maintains narrow parameters for what sorts of dark fiction are considered worthy of academic consideration. My dissertation, “Other Gods, Other Powers,” broadens the scholarly conversation about the literary macabre by mapping the evolution of numinous horror, a strain of American supernatural horror writing that imagines the divine in non-anthropocentric and non-anthropomorphic ways, prioritizing pessimism, entropy, and negation over conventionally accepted, Judeo-Christian-influenced understandings of the divine. The numinous, a term denoting the experience of the divine as awesome or terrifying, is the aesthetic category that unifies the transhistorical scope of my dissertation, which runs from 1798 through 1988, covering works by Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Ben Hecht, Fred Chappell, and Thomas

Ligotti. An alternative, markedly pessimistic tradition comes to the fore across these readings, contradicting popular understandings of American literature's supposedly inherent optimism and humanism. Numinous horror narratives depict gods as malevolent, inscrutable, and alien; they re-imagine godhood as a state of omnipotent idiocy only accessible to people at the cost of their humanity. The horror in these works comes from the divine's absolute inscrutability; the narration of each text must contend with an irremediable lack of knowledge, clarity, and certainty. My dissertation models a kind of reading that approaches a text's underlying supernatural and metaphysical premises on their own terms, instead of reading them allegorically, symptomatically, or otherwise superstitiously. Pulling from philosophical, theological, and new materialist theoretical conversations, "Other Gods, Other Powers" opens up an oft-overlooked, philosophically rich body of writing to interdisciplinary inquiry by contributing to current conversations about alternative reading practices and genre fiction's place in literary scholarship.

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Introduction: Beware of God(s)

In 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson told his readers that they were “guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark” (133). His clarion call from “Self-Reliance” exemplifies the self-perceived mission statement of American literature: to bring light to dark places. But the brighter a light burns, the darker its surrounding shadows become. There is an alternate strand of American literature that promises no humanist validation or enlightenment, that categorically denies the reassuringly coherent and proactive image of an “Almighty effort.” Instead, this body of writing extends the reach of “Chaos and the Dark” to domains of ontology and epistemology many believe impervious to such metaphysical doubts and fears. The core question animating this tradition is discomfiting in its simplicity and wide-reaching implications: what happens in literature when the idea of god embodies nothing but monstrosity and unknowable terror? The key to answering this question can be found, I argue, in American horror fiction, by reframing how literary criticism approaches and understands horror. What follows envisions a revised academic understanding of horror writing wrought from an interrogation of how a series of writers, major and minor, have rendered the figure of god monstrous across American literary history.

The roots of this shadowy alternative literature predate Emerson’s optimistic dictum, stretching at least as far back as 1798, with the publication of *Wieland; Or, the Transformation*, by Charles Brockden Brown. A forefather of the American Gothic, Brown explored many early American anxieties in his works, including clashes with indigenous populations (*Edgar Huntly*) and the miasmatic chaos of urban life (*Arthur Mervyn*). His debut novel is something of an outlier in his catalogue, telling the

revolutionary-era story of the eponymous Wieland clan, focusing on that of narrator Clara and her brother Theodore. Hearing voices thanks to the ministrations of a menacing ventriloquist named Carwin, Theodore eventually goes mad and butchers his wife and children. The tribulations of Clara and Theodore's generation of the Wieland family are not as strikingly curious as the fate that befalls their father only two chapters into the novel. Praying to an unknown entity in a makeshift temple of his own design, Clara and Theodore's father is severely burned by a mysterious explosion and left rotting alive.

For a novel by a Quaker known for his dedication to Enlightenment ideals, *Wieland* opens on a surprisingly steady note of irrational terror. Omissions and indefinite implications mark the unnamed Wieland patriarch's brief tenure in the novel. It begins with a quick precis of his early life in Germany and then London, working as an indentured servant. By chance, the elder Wieland discovers an obscure tome on the doctrines of the Camissard sect of French Protestantism. Inspired, he commences a serious study of the Cathars and other schismatic Christian sects. Clara tells us that "the formation of his creed was rapid" (Brown 10). Her father's autodidactic beginnings, though not unconventional by early American standards, are not without their problems. When it comes to the elder Wieland's independent studies of the Bible, we are told that "Every thing [sic] was viewed in a disconnected position" and "His constructions of the text were hasty, and formed on a narrow scale," because they were "isolated from the implications of other readings" (Brown 10; Barnard and Shapiro 10n1). Nothing outré has yet occurred, but Brown carefully establishes an aura of anticipatory menace associated with the elder Wieland's self-education in spiritual matters.

After his indentured servitude, the elder Wieland cashes out and moves to America with the goal of converting the American Indians to a religion of his own making. Finding success in the New World, he raises a family at his farm on the

Schuylkill River, outside of Philadelphia. His exact creed is never detailed, but it seems to be a syncretic concoction of the various dissenting sects that informed his early Bible study. That said, his doctrine—from the little that readers learn of it—does not appear to have much in common with the Judeo-Christian faiths prominent in America at the time. Brown leaves Clara’s narration conspicuously imprecise as hints of the supernatural begin to appear in her descriptions of her father’s religious strivings. Soon, it will become patently clear that there is nothing standard about this novel’s depiction of the spiritual and the supernatural, especially in relation to the elder Wieland’s strange creed. Clara’s father is “alternately agitated by fear and by ecstasy,” and “imagine[s] himself beset by the snares of a spiritual foe” (10). It appears that his belief system, though formed in isolation, is not without its demons. Whether they are literal or figurative is unclear, at first.

Solitude is apparently a major tenet of his belief system, since “Social worship... found no place in his creed” (12). He consecrates a small, spartan temple to his faith on the grounds of the property. “This,” Clara tells readers, “was the temple of his Deity,” where he would pray twice daily, “unaccompanied by any human being” (12). Yet, to make matters more mysterious, Clara claims that her father settled on this idiosyncratic belief system “because it had been expressly *prescribed to him*” (13, my emphasis). For the founder and practitioner of a literally singular faith, the elder Wieland has a questionable level of spiritual agency. The major Judeo-Christian faiths appear to share a similar origin point with his obscure creed: a non-human entity contacts a human prophet and outlines a faith or covenant that said prophet’s followers must obey. But, if Clara’s father is a prophet, he is not modeled after Abraham or Muhammad. It seems his faith is not engineered to spread, as he seeks no followers and lacks the traditional patriarchal authority that these figures were given, despite his earlier declared mission to proselytize

the native tribes. Clara's father is not so much entrusted, or even burdened, with knowledge of the divine as he is isolated and punished by it, further distancing his practices and beliefs from the Judeo-Christian realm.

Brown continues to layer the early portion of *Wieland* with spectral implications about the elder Wieland's enigmatic belief system. Readers eventually learn that Clara's father has transgressed and will be punished for his sin, building on his earlier mystical sufferings and paranoia about an otherworldly tormentor. Brown withholds any definite information about the nature of the character's mistake. Clara reports that her father was "fraught with an incurable persuasion that his death was at hand" and that "He was likewise haunted by the belief that the kind of death that awaited him was strange and terrible" (14). Pressed for details by his family, Clara's father provides nothing meaningful, "predict[ing] evils, but profess[ing] himself ignorant of what nature they were" (16). His god's doings and sense of justice are beyond his ability to comprehend, let alone articulate to others. Because it bears repeating, we should note that, if Clara's father is indeed a prophet, he is not cast in any prophetic mold familiar to Brown's contemporary audience. Readers know as little as Clara does about her father's faith. Brown staunchly refuses to provide readers with a clear picture of, or name for, whatever is happening here. He instead establishes an ominous tension between Clara's measured retrospective narration and the suspicious gaps in her father's knowledge about his own religion.

His torments worsen as the days progress. Stricken with fits, Clara's father claims that "his brain was scorched to cinders" (15). Unbeknownst to first-time readers, this complaint doubles as a moment of frightful prophecy; Clara's father's unwitting prediction of his death compounds the supernatural quality of his unique theology. Clara's mother, understandably perturbed, tries to keep her ailing husband from his

twice-daily prayers. The elder Wieland rebukes his wife, saying, “You can help me nothing. Look to your own condition, and pray to *God* to strengthen you under the calamities that await you” (15, my emphasis). Throughout the elder Wieland’s two-chapter appearance in the novel, this line marks the only apparent invocation of Yahweh. Both he and Clara consistently refer to his creed’s god as “the Deity” or by similarly indistinct titles; such a rhetorical choice—leaving the entity nameless—implicitly distances his beliefs (and demiurge) from known religious doctrines, even the unconventional strains of Christianity that set him on this spiritual path (as well as his wife’s Moravian faith). When he leaves the comparative safety of the house for midnight orisons in his temple, Clara remarks, “He was going to a place whither *no power on earth* could induce him to suffer an attendant” (16, my emphasis). Without ever making it overt, Brown continues to portray Clara’s father’s one-man religion as a somehow *non-solitary* practice, by way of an implied, inexplicable, non-human presence.

When the price is finally paid, the details in the elder Wieland’s case remain as eerie as they are scarce. The scene of his demise features “gleams which had diffused themselves far and wide” through his temple’s pillars and “a loud report, like the explosion of a mine;” his temple is “filled with rays” and “piercing shrieks ... uttered without intermission” (16). Though frightening and unnatural, these details prove inexplicable. Her maternal uncle, a medical man with strong empirical leanings, witnesses the event from a distance; Clara’s narration paints his testimony with a dubious brush: “He... *imagined* what he saw to be fire” (17, my emphasis). Brown’s invocation of imagination in the context of Clara’s uncle’s testimony adds to readerly skepticism that these circumstances are natural in origin. The preternatural quality of what her uncle saw (“a cloud impregnated with light... [that] had the brightness of flame... a few feet above the floor”) continues to make the possibility that it was merely fire unlikely, at best (17).

Her father expires not long after the incident, plagued by a post-traumatic “state of insensibility” and a stranger symptom: a “crawling putrefaction” on his arm that emanates a noxious stench (17, 18). The severity of this wound is more redolent of deific punishments both biblical and mythological than the typical symptoms of burn victims; Brown’s choice of “crawling” to describe the infection almost endows Wieland’s wound with an extra-somatic agency.

The narration of this segment remains cryptic, mixing wending phrasing with vaguely minacious overtones. Clara’s secondhand report of her father’s recollection of the incident is worth quoting at length:

By his *imperfect* account, it *appeared*, that while engaged in silent orisons, with *thoughts full of confusion and anxiety*, a faint gleam suddenly shot athwart the apartment. *His fancy immediately pictured to itself*, a person bearing a lamp. It *seemed* to come from behind. He was in the act of turning to examine the visitant, when his right arm received a blow from a heavy club. At the same instant, a very bright spark *was seen* to light upon his clothes. In a moment, the whole was reduced to ashes. (18, my emphases)

Wieland’s “imperfect” memory and his cognition of the event are unable to be verified. The oddly reflexive and passive phrasing Clara uses to describe her father’s thought process leads readers to surmise that this extranormal occurrence is something that speech cannot translate or encapsulate. Her father appears entirely removed from his own cognitive processes, as if imagination were not a function of his mind, but an abstract operation over which he had no control. Brown stultifies Wieland, the only witness to this paranormal event, with Clara’s continuously arcane narration, thus foiling diegetic and extradiegetic comprehension of what has actually transpired.

Regarding the circumstances of Wieland's death, frustrated or dubious reasoning appears inescapable. At one point, Clara flatly states, "The incident was inexplicable" (17). Her uncle is merely "inclined to believe that half the truth had been suppressed" (18). Clara persists and catalogs the uncanny details of her father's death, to no avail, asking: "what is the inference to be drawn from these facts? Their truth cannot be doubted" (18). Rationality fails Clara. Her exhaustive listing of the details illuminates nothing yet ends by emphasizing their veracity. Moreover, she draws an implicit line between the *truth* of the facts and what can be *inferred* from the case. It is as though she subconsciously recognizes that something about her father's spectacular death surpasses the horizons of empirical observation and rational thought. Readers are left at the same deductive impasse, faced with multiple questions about this strange occurrence and no available path to answer them. As the chapter closes, Clara asks herself as much as her readers:

Was this the penalty of disobedience? This the stroke of a vindictive and invisible hand? Is it a fresh proof that the *Divine Ruler* interferes in human affairs, meditates an end, selects, and commissions his agents, and enforces, by unequivocal sanctions, submission to his will? Or, was it merely the irregular expansion of the fluid that imparts warmth to our heart and our blood, caused by the fatigue of the preceding day, or flowing, by established laws, from the condition of his thoughts? (18-19, my emphasis)

She does not seem to give much credence to the idea that her father was punished by a recognizable deity for his supposedly heretical practices; just as Yahweh appears absent from *Wieland's* storyworld, there is nothing markedly Satanic about the elder Wieland's fate. Noticeably, Clara continues to use vague titles ("Divine Ruler") to describe the entity, rather than the traditional capital-G God normally used by American Christians to

refer to Yahweh. Readers of *Wieland*—as well as Clara and her family—have entered territory well outside the bounds of commonplace Judeo-Christian understandings of what constitutes the non-human divine and how the faithful can interact with it.

Brown withholds any clear explanation from readers and he frustratingly closes the chapter with a footnote referencing a widely circulated account of an Italian priest's spontaneous combustion. Extant criticism on *Wieland* overlooks or dismisses the supernatural implications of this bizarre occurrence.¹ The possibility of Wieland falling victim to the wrath of an unknown god sits right next to an ostensibly scientific explanation: spontaneous combustion. Both possibilities are horrifying. After all, unequivocal divine sanctions are hardly comforting when they can lead to sudden, fiery death for unexplained reasons. Alternatively, the very idea of thinking oneself into such a spectacular death seems, in some ways, the hideous moral lesson of the Enlightenment: there are right and wrong ways for humanity to use the gift of cognition. Whatever the truth may be, no definitive solution ever appears. Readers are only left with unanswered questions. Why were the elder Wieland's clothes and body burnt? Who or what did he mistake for a stranger with a lantern? Where did the lights and explosive noise in the temple come from? Rather than furthering the investigation, *Wieland* commences its third chapter by shifting its focus to events in the early lives of Clara and her brother, with only a glancing reference to their father's hauntingly inexplicable death, leaving readers with a lingering uncertainty about what has transpired and what it implies for the world that Brown's characters inhabit.

Although the scene is never reconsidered in the novel, its generic significance should not be understated: for a book commonly classified as an example of the

¹ For examples, see Christopherson, Joshi (*Unutterable*), Kafer, Lloyd-Smith, and Weinstock (*Brown*).

American Gothic, a mode known for its hefty spiritual inheritance from the Puritans, *Wieland* challenges the conventional Judeo-Christian understanding of the divine as an intelligible and beneficent force of existential authority. Wieland's death hinders the capacity of language or rationality to produce meaningful explanations of supernatural events, defying commonplace assumptions about the explanatory function of religion and the cautionary and cathartic functions of the tale of terror. His gruesome punishment lacks anything resembling a discernible rationale, perverting the concept of divine judgment. As readers, we simply do not know enough to determine whether he deserves so fatal a penalty thanks to Brown's enigmatic approach to narration. Furthermore, the scene's central deity or supernatural force remains as abstract and inscrutable as the religion worshipping it. Thanks in no small part to *Wieland's* originary example, we return to the core question of *Other Gods*: what happens in American horror writing when deific or demonic entities retain their power but eschew the moralistic, human-centered associations of conventional religious thought and practice?

The above cavalcade of questions by no means helps to solve the diegetic mystery of Wieland's gruesome fate. That remains as far beyond the reach of readers as it is beyond Clara's. But considering such queries can provide us with a productive inroad to reading texts that cover similar supernatural ground. In other words, by reading *with* this novel's metaphysical premises, we can reframe *Wieland* as a heretical text in American literature, one that begins on an unprecedented note of existential pessimism. Regardless of narratorial obscurity and a confusion so profound it surpasses the boundaries of diegesis, one thing is clear: Brown is suggesting that the patriarch of the Wieland family is under the sway of an agential and unearthly entity, one that demands submission and self-imposed solitude, provides little in the way of spiritual knowledge in return, and exacts fatal penalties for disobedience. *Wieland*, then, is one of the earliest known

American horror texts that disregards readerly expectations for an ordered narrative reflecting an ordered image of the universe, and instead portrays a god as a hostile, inscrutable, and monstrous figure. *Wieland* does not buy into Enlightenment-era, Judeo-Christian narratives about a spiritual economy of earthly suffering justified by eternal rewards. Instead, the novel dares to posit a much grimmer outlook on humanity's place in the great chain of being: we have no pre-ordained station and exist only at the mercy of unknown powers. Wieland's god, whatever it may be, is a source of horror, but this is not the familiar, faith-affirming fright elicited by Jonathan Edwards's angry Protestant god. Rather, it is a *numinous* horror.

The numinous, a term denoting the experience of the divine as awesome or terrifying, is the aesthetic category that unifies the archive of *Other Gods, Other Powers: Numinous Horror in American Literature*. Numinous horror is the literature built upon the fear of unrecognizable, potentially malevolent gods or godlike powers and the disquieting existential implications of such forces. Despite their varied lengths, generic contexts, and emergence at different moments in American history, these works share a fascination with darker visions of divinity that openly contradict the human-centered impulses of mainstream Judeo-Christian thought and the Gothic literary tradition. The horror of all the texts in this dissertation comes from the divine's absolute inscrutability; the narration of each story must contend with an irremediable lack of knowledge, clarity, and certainty that often proves extradiegetically disruptive to the reading experience. I examine the various incarnations of numinous horror in American literature written between the years 1798 and 1988, including Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, Edgar Allan Poe's "Metzengerstein" (1832) and "The Conqueror Worm" (1843), two variants of Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916/1969), Ben Hecht's *Fantazius Mallare*:

A Mysterious Oath (1922) and *The Kingdom of Evil* (1924), Fred Chappell's *Dagon* (1968), and Thomas Ligotti's "The Sect of the Idiot" (1988).

Numinous horror narratives manifest their commonly pessimistic philosophical bent in a number of ways. The narratorial rhetoric employed by these authors focuses intently on the limits and inadequacies of human modes of cognition and communication. Most importantly, each work outlines a monstrous and non-anthropomorphic vision of godhood characterized by omnipotent idiocy. (Idiocy, as I define it here, is not mental incapacity, but cognitive difference so incalculable it approaches total incomprehensibility.) Numinous horror discards the God-Devil binary informing American Judeo-Christian religious and Gothic imaginaries. In the storyworlds of numinous horror, there is not a cosmic balance of good and evil with recognizable spiritual stakes and clearly drawn paths for human involvement in this universal struggle. In fact, I consciously avoid using the term "evil" when characterizing the divine in numinous horror precisely because of its moralistic and Judeo-Christian associations. Gone are the archetypal scenes of appealing to God for aid in times of crisis or legalistic battles of wit with Satan, because both categories accord humanity a level of agency and involvement in the realm of the spiritual that simply does not exist in these texts. The divine powers at work in numinous horror instead present an existential threat to humanity, one as potent as it is ineffable.

Each text, in varying intensities, mobilizes an altered sublime aesthetic predicated on rupture and fear when characters are faced with the numinous horror of the divine. Numinous horror's conscious, repeated malformations of the traditional sublime aesthetic are part and parcel of this mode's denial of the Enlightenment-influenced currents of mainstream American politics and spirituality that prize the individual intellect as transcendently capable of effecting positive advancement and change. Granted, I am

hardly the first person to write about permutations of the sublime, even in this offbeat generic context. The version of the sublime that I trace in these disparate texts is defined in Jack G. Voller's work in *The Supernatural Sublime* (1994). In his study of canonical Gothic and Romantic fictions, Voller posits a radical, supernatural variant of the sublime that starts

with the traditional sublime experience—'the motions of the soul' are frozen in their confrontation with the suprarational or suprahuman—but the object embodying the extranatural is, if not unmasked as natural, invested with daemonic potency. In the space of helplessness sublimity opens, such objects call forth only horror and a sense of *numinous* dread. Thus the supernatural sublime, at least in its radical mode, questions or denies the possibility of spiritual consolation. (19, my emphasis)

Voller posits that stories of the supernatural abbreviate the internal logic of the sublime as a process, freezing it in its initial state of extreme terror. I would also be remiss not to invoke H. Porter Abbott's concepts of the cognitive sublime ("textually induced experiences of noncomprehension that occur when the mind is directed toward an unimaginable unknown") and neural sport ("a deliberate jamming of our mental circuitry whereby we are cut adrift from deeply embedded ways of knowing and enter states of syntactical and narrative impossibility that abide only in our transaction with the text") (65). In keeping with Voller's and Abbott's examples, sublimity here is neither the Burkean idea of the delightful pain of viewing something terrible, nor is it the Kantian territory of invigorating intellectual affirmation. Again, the absolute limit of rational thought is a crucial part of numinous horror. In numinous horror, the sublime subjects human characters (and readers) to a profound ontological and epistemological reorientation and reduction, in which conventional religious imaginaries or post-

Enlightenment conceptions of the modern liberal subject's mentality are stripped of salvific potential.

The deific entities and powers of numinous horror frustrate prevalent notions of agency and action by merely existing. Agency—the capacity to exert power and influence—is generally thought to be inherently meaningful and therefore interpretable, to some degree. “Meaning,” Latour writes, “is a property of all agents in as much as they keep having agency ... existence and meaning are synonymous. *As long as they act, agents have meaning*” (12, emphasis original). The divinities of numinous horror differ. Like the malign presence that burns the elder Wieland and leaves him putrefying alive, the godlike powers in these texts diegetically exist and are demonstrably (and monstrously) agential; however, these entities often use arcane ways and means that defy historically mediated definitions of action as an exchange involving one or more parties that proceeds in a readily perceptible and logically consistent fashion. That is, they *can* and often *do* act as the entity does in *Wieland*; but, their influence is just as powerful and corruptive, though nowhere near as perceptible, as we shall see in later texts. In all cases, regardless of how clearly or imperceptibly these powers act, their actions defy our capacity to discern meaning. The human characters in these narratives are all profoundly affected (if not outright *altered*) by deific presences in ways that resist rational explanation. Readers cannot hope to understand such godhood. The Satanic vocabulary common to traditional American religious imaginaries has no place here, as moral questions of good and evil are irrelevant. Despite their best efforts, narrators (human and otherwise) struggle to articulate numinous horror's model of godhood. To achieve godhood is literally unspeakable, and when such transcendence occurs in numinous horror narratives, the story ends. The numinous horror archive's focus on entities that

regularly defy description or explanation dictates my formal focus on narration and negation.²

My methodological approach is decidedly and purposefully heterodox. Given the divine subject matter of these works, *Other Gods* responds to the exigency posed by Joanna Brooks, whose study of American literary-religious genealogies urges scholars to reject “the old teleological, developmental narrative that runs from orthodoxy to secularization and, instead, learn to look for fractal paths of revelatory discontinuities and creative heterodoxies” (449). Strange as it may sound, America’s rich history of supernatural horror is perfect material for the kind of scholarship that Brooks wants to see. Whether canonical or marginal, the lengthy legacy of the American macabre can enrich the post-secular and posthuman conversations already happening in our field. Each text studied here engages, whether explicitly or implicitly, with theodicy, the branch of theology dedicated to vindicating the idea of an omnibenevolent God despite the existence of worldly evil. Numinous horror’s stylistic dependence upon obscurantist narratorial practices (shifting perspectives, deliberately unresolved inconsistencies of plot, etc.), combined with its overtly religious subject matter, has led me to pull from ideas central to negative—or *apophatic*—theology, wherein the divine is only knowable and describable in negative terms.³

² My use of “negation” here is informed by Maire Kurrik’s excellent *Literature and Negation* (1979), wherein she writes: “the West has long made affirmation primary, associating it with a whole series of positive, originating forces: God, being, life, presence, reality, actuality, unity, totality, oneness, stasis. ...negation comes, unavoidably, to be associated with the remaining negative polarities, with the devil, with death, nothingness, nonbeing, annihilation, with the nongodly or the merely human. ...These clusters of associations with affirmation and negation are some of the most basic and recurrent ones. They provide the kind of affective basis from which we may judge a desire for death or nonbeing as abnormal or deviant” (1). The affective basis that renders negation distasteful (if not unacceptable) to the post-Enlightenment western independent subject is of crucial importance to my approach to reading supernatural horror.

³ For the origins of negative theology, see Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. For a briefer run-through of negative theology, see Thacker, *Starry* 62-100 and *Tentacles* 126-131.

To better navigate the existentially ominous happenings of these texts, *Other Gods* is also informed by ideas associated with negative schools of philosophy, namely pessimism and nihilism.⁴ Here, I appeal to Ray Brassier’s interpretation of nihilism as a guiding force. He defines it as the inevitable result of the realist conviction that a mind-independent reality exists and that said mind-independent reality is consummately “indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable” (Brassier xi). This dissertation has also been influenced by the enduringly provocative school of antinatalism, the philosophical position that assigns a negative value to consciousness and upholds the cessation of human procreation as an admirable (though admittedly unattainable) goal. The two leading tracts of antinatalist thought—which, at times, read like a sort of horror *non-fiction*—are David Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006) and Thomas Ligotti’s *Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (2010). These books have provided me with a useful overarching philosophical perspective—that human existence has an inextricably negative quality—through which I pursue the dour premises and history of equally dour religious reflections implied by the dark gods of numinous horror.

While horror is still a profoundly under-studied part of American literature, recent works of new materialism and speculative realism have begun to engage with macabre works that are richly deserving of increased critical attention, namely Graham Harman’s *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012).⁵ Harman’s thoroughgoing study of the oeuvre of early twentieth-century horror luminary Howard Phillips Lovecraft, especially

⁴ Of oblique but undeniable inspirational importance are the aphoristic works of Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran, especially *The Trouble with Being Born* (1973).

⁵ For a more general overview of ideas central to speculative realism, see Harman’s *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (2009).

his oft-maligned and misunderstood prose,⁶ provides a valuable example for this dissertation's study of horror's literary dimensions. Eugene Thacker, another thinker of foundational importance to this approach, uses the genre of supernatural horror to think through the disciplinary limits of philosophy. His three-volume *Horror of Philosophy* series theorizes horror as a secular way of dealing with theological concerns. Drawing from countless supernatural horror texts, Thacker lays out epistemological models describing humanity's relationship to Earth. There is the world-for-us, one "that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to, the world that we relate to or feel alienated from, the world that we are at once a part of and that is also separate from the human" (Thacker, *Dust* 4). This epistemology dominates much of the Gothic criticism I will discuss below. Thinking through the more frightening traits of philosophy, specifically the field's continuous but futile attempts to outline a non-anthropomorphic, essentially unknowable world, brings Thacker to a more provocative model: the world-without-us, which "is antagonistic to ... [any] attempt to put things in human terms, in the terms of the world-for-us" (*Dust* 5). Like Brassier, he settles on the persistent hiddenness of our world, which, "regardless of how much knowledge we produce about it, always retains some remainder that lies beyond the scope of our capacity to reveal" (Thacker, *Dust* 53). He questions the ability of philosophy to divine alterity and make the experience of life meaningful, since the discipline itself is a human—and therefore limited—invention. He eventually turns his focus away from philosophy and towards horror fiction. He likens horror writing to his world-without-us model, stating: "Horror is not the overflowing,

⁶ Such derision varies from the utterly dismissive to the more affectionate. A prime example of the former can be found in Edmund Wilson's infamous Lovecraft-centered screed, "Tales of the Marvelous and the Ridiculous," wherein he flatly states, "The only real horror in most of [Lovecraft's] fictions is the horror of bad taste and bad art" (288). Of the latter variety, one might consider *Washington Post* critic Lloyd Rose's playful description of Lovecraft's mythos as "yuckiness... in which foul entities mass around our petty earthly reality like some malignant Oort cloud. Once, they were the dominant race here, and they're itching to take over again. Nothing personal, just the business of biological continuation."

psychological continuum of experience, but the vacuity of any correlation between subject and object, between self and world” (Thacker, *Tentacles* 121). Contemporary philosophy (specifically Thacker’s pessimistic-nihilistic leanings) allows readers of horror to widen their critical gaze from the boundaries of the self, instead figuring humanity as a diminished category of identity, an intellectual move of constitutive significance to my study of numinous horror. Every numinous horror text prominently features and engages with encounters and experiences that surpass the limits of rational thought; Thacker provides a standard for interrogating such texts from a literary vantage.

Some texts covered here are the subject of robust bodies of criticism; others are virtually unknown in academic circles. Such a disparity in critical attention has made it a priority for me to focus intently on the texts and allow them to speak for themselves whenever possible, rather than depending upon extensive theoretical mediation. To achieve this, I rely primarily on the most fundamental technique available to literary scholars: close reading. This is not to say there is nothing novel about the methodology practiced here, however. Using these texts as test cases, I model a sort of speculative reading, one that approaches supernatural horror not by explaining it away, but by fully embracing it as a basic diegetic condition of the texts being analyzed. Recent works from the speculative critical turn, especially Matthew A. Taylor’s *Universes without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (2013), inspired my choice to read *with* the basic metaphysical premises of these texts. By rooting my analysis in the idea of pervasive non-human/divine alterity, I work against the dominant suspicious reading styles that translate, politically recuperate, or otherwise reduce the supernatural, and instead accept it as a constitutive component of these texts and their storyworlds.

Before attending to this dissertation’s overarching examination of these storyworlds and their implications, a much simpler and more direct question must be

answered: why horror? I focus on horror because it is ignored by most literary criticism and history, except for canonized figures who are generally treated as though they have somehow “transcended” their genre. Here, I am thinking of writers like Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, Edgar Allan Poe, and—to a lesser degree—H.P. Lovecraft and Shirley Jackson, all authors who are regularly subjected to a false binary that forcibly juxtaposes the undeniable quality of their works with the generic contexts that inspired them.⁷ I think the reason horror goes overlooked in literary studies is because it frequently resists a leftist-humanist critique.⁸ So often in literary criticism, students are expected to find and critique problematic structures and relations (e.g. heteropatriarchy, hegemonic capitalism) in favor of more liberal and egalitarian ways of thinking. Such work is both admirable and necessary. However, it excludes many morbid texts from academic consideration because a lot of horror writing (including, I contend, numinous horror) engages readers with a negativity that runs deeper than our sociopolitical ills.

The pessimism at work in much of horror fiction is existential, rather than being rooted in historical and social inequalities. I do not dismiss the political valences and relations of these works as irrelevant, nor do I discourage studies focusing on these elements. However, such historicist analysis tends to stamp out the philosophical and intellectual possibilities suggested by these texts’ supernatural aspects. In the numinous strain of horror comprising my archive, these inequalities are often insuperable because they are based in questions of raw ontological difference and perspectives that can best be described as agential, oftentimes ancient, and malevolently non-human. The pessimism of the macabre texts I take up is predicated upon confronting extreme inequalities, not at

⁷ The scholastic-critical phenomenon of “genre transcendence” is hardly limited to the world of horror fiction. Just ask fans of Raymond Chandler and Octavia Butler, among countless others.

⁸ That said, much of horror actively operates from a leftist-humanist political position, as seen in novels like *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and films like *Get Out* (2017).

the level of the intelligibly political, but at the level of competing ontologies. It is difficult—if not outright impossible—to read a coherent politics into the hazy actions of fictional entities that are, by definition, incoherent by all human standards of logic and intellect. In this respect, *Other Gods* sidesteps the secular and post-secular organization of conversations about literature and spirituality by suggesting that American horror, since the days of Charles Brockden Brown, has been skeptical of politics as usually understood. Whether dealing with mindless powers ravaging for sacrifice or the human mind and body in freakishly transcendent upheaval, the *horror* in numinous horror comes from non-anthropomorphic, non-human beings whose very perspectives and presences threaten the structural integrity of human narrative logic.

One might assume that the Gothic is a literary domain where such frightening images and concepts might have already been conjured and productively explored. Scholars have argued for years about the centrality of horror to American literature, especially in its Gothic form.⁹ Distinct cultural pressures, they have tended to argue, led American writers (including Brown) to use the Gothic mode to express anxieties about the frontier (its solitude, its potential as a breeding ground for violence), race (slavery, displacement and genocide of indigenous peoples), the then-burgeoning democratic experiment, the relative absence of “polite society,” and the evolution and inevitable fallout of Puritanism (Lloyd-Smith 6). The Gothic mode, according to Cathy N. Davidson, provided its American readers with a hermeneutics of suspicion to apply to the new republic’s liberal ideology of individuality. Informative as they are, these studies demonstrate a myopic fixation on the Gothic mode as a therapeutic remediation of America’s cultural and political fears; this myopia is based in a focus on human agency,

⁹ In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), for instance, Leslie Fiedler famously asserted that “our classic literature is a literature of horror for boys” (29).

despite the many non-human actors and supernatural powers present in the Gothic mode, not to mention the other extant variants of horror. A great deal of the American Gothic's anthropocentrism comes from its generic investment in a teleological understanding of history centered on human progress.

As a field, Gothic studies tends to turn away from the supernatural ideas that initially animated it.¹⁰ After all, "interpretation" has been called "the essential activity of the Gothic protagonist" (DeLamotte 24). To prize interpretation is to prize human agency and rationality; a great deal of work in Gothic studies does just that. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), J. Jack (then Judith) Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), and Sian Silyn Roberts's *Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790-1861* (2014) all share a left-political stance that puts a premium on human agency and applies a symptomatic or otherwise skeptical heuristic to works of supernatural horror fiction. These scholars, among many others, have established the importance of the Gothic mode's formal tendency towards complex narration, a trait that is a major component of my introductory reading of *Wieland*. But Gothic scholarship bases this stylistic move in interpersonal tensions, rather than considering the philosophical challenges of narrating supernatural and otherwise-inexplicable events. Narratologically speaking, Gothic fiction "resists ending" because—whether its events end up being supernatural or explicably fantastical—rationality can never restore safety

¹⁰ Some near-exceptions include Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Insistence of Horror: Aspects of the Supernatural in Eighteenth Century Poetry* (1962), Margaret L. Carter's *Specter or Delusion?: The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction* (1987), and Robert F. Geary's *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction: Horror, Belief, and Literary Change* (1992). Spacks's book tackles the aesthetic and emotional functions of the supernatural in the poetry of an era characterized by increasing rationalism. Carter reads eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothics as a space "for speculation without demanding a positive act of either acceptance or rejection" of the reality of the supernatural (3). Geary's historical survey of the Gothic links "ambivalent uses of the supernatural by Gothic novelists ... to the theological uncertainties and spiritual upheaval of the age" (Frank 39).

or certainty to its protagonists or its readers (Davidson 225). While I agree with Davidson about the importance of destabilized rationality to the Gothic, I contend that it is a core trait of *all* horror writing—not just the Gothic mode—to destabilize rationality. The Gothic’s renditions of the numinous and the supernatural tend to be rooted in politicized structures, like the Catholic Church, rather than being subjects of sustained inquiry. Overall, the Gothic mode focalizes the human and therefore allows critics to exclude other varieties of horror that do not share the mode’s human-centered preoccupations with the burden of interpretation and the boundaries of the self.

It is here that my dissertation makes its meta-critical intervention. *Other Gods, Other Powers* questions the dominance of the term “Gothic” in literary studies of horror. An entire range of new interpretive possibilities opens once we contextualize the Gothic as a politically salient, historically entrenched subcategory of the much broader spectrum of horror writing. The word “Gothic” is an aesthetic shorthand that some authors use to provoke emotional or intellectual responses from readers; texts like *Wieland* then manipulate these responses for non-Gothic purposes, eliciting fright without rehashing the Gothic’s obsessions with the self and its repressions and oppressions. The Gothic’s fixations on guilt, sin, expiation, and revenge map easily onto the human-centered, Judeo-Christian worldviews that informed most canonical Gothic works, like the rampant fear of Catholicism in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). S.T. Joshi, a prolific scholar, editor, and anthologist of horror, has commented on the Gothic’s human-centered outlook: “the resolute anthropocentrism of even the most imaginative of Gothic scenarios should be noted. Everything revolves around the human characters on stage. There are, strikingly, no genuine ‘monsters’ in Gothic fiction: even Frankenstein’s creature is merely a humanoid creature made up of disparate human body parts” (107). The preface to the *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002) agrees that the

“longings and anxieties of modern western civilization are brought out in the Gothic as in no other fictional medium” (Hogle xv). The Gothic mode is steadfastly anthropocentric in its concerns; it is suffused with an undeniably Judeo-Christian sense of moral conservatism. Even when divorced from more explicit shows of its historical allegiance to these traditional systems of meaning-making, its enthusiasm for the human—namely, the darker corners of the psyche—is apparent, given the preponderance of psychoanalytic theory in Gothic studies.¹¹ Just as the Gothic keeps its monsters and thematics recognizably humanoid, it figures divine powers as intelligible agents invested in human affairs, as exemplified by the Satanic (and bone-crushingly literal) fall of Ambrosio at the end of *The Monk* (1796). The Gothic ultimately has little to do with my archive, which comprises another subcategory of horror, this one concerned with simulating and exploring the limits of rational thought, as well as what could dwell beyond them.

My stance against the Gothic’s prevalence is unusual, since most literary criticism presumes the coherence of the “Gothic.” Often, literary critics go so far as to use the terms “horror” and “Gothic” interchangeably, despite the former term’s affective, contextually nonspecific definition and the latter’s heavy investment in European cultural history. I contend that these terms should not be so readily conflated. Horror should not be thought of as a creepy compendium of easily-mobilized tropes, but a daringly negative affective mode, a spectrum of writing as broad as it is dark. (I cannot posit horror’s broad range without pausing to acknowledge that *Other Gods* studies a uniformly white male archive. The relative sociopolitical security enjoyed by these white male authors throughout American history is most likely what gave rise to their exploration of more abstract and philosophical terrors. Still, I contend that numinous horror’s departure from

¹¹ For a brief rundown on the affinity between these “cognate historical strands,” see Massé (309). For an example of psychoanalysis in Gothic studies, see Williams.

American religious and cultural commonplaces—namely our persistent and sometimes toxic optimism—makes it worthy of study.) Aesthetically, the texts I read in this dissertation are informed by a variety of canonical and non-canonical trends, ranging from Brown’s and Poe’s supposedly American Gothic works to later texts pulled from the niche worlds of Southern literature and the late twentieth-century paperback horror boom.¹² These aesthetic-contextual distinctions are not as important as the fact that these texts are all American and are therefore bound up in the weighty legacy of our foundational religious anxieties. What makes these varied texts worthy of study as a cohesive archive is the set of beliefs that they push back against with varying degrees of violence: that the universe is an ordered place; that whatever is behind it—if anything—is somehow comprehensible or even recognizable; and that our existence as a species is inherently meaningful on a cosmic scale.

This litany of threatened beliefs coalesces most clearly in the writing and lasting influence of H.P. Lovecraft. Indeed, Lovecraft would seem a shoo-in for *Other Gods*, given that his now-famous brand of cosmic horror is thematically focused on existential pessimism and diegetically occupied by aggressively anti-human godlike powers. However, my point here is not simply to say that Lovecraft resembles my archive or vice-versa. In fact, this outward resemblance is precisely where numinous horror veers from its cosmic cousin. Nearly all of Lovecraft’s corpus is dependent upon the same figure(s), whether central or peripheral: “a full-fledged cosmic consciousness, without any overt religious dimension” (St. Armand 32). Where Lovecraft supported the emergent scientism of the early twentieth century with his fiction’s documentarian tendencies and “posited the extermination of the human race in purely secular terms,” these works of

¹² See Hendrix for a comprehensive (and entertaining) study of the explosion in horror fiction that overtook American paperback book publishing during the 1970s and 1980s.

numinous horror—each developing in different contexts—*consistently* endow their themes and plots with manifestly religious dimensions (Hendrix 179).

The numinous horror archive studied here is not necessarily a conscious generic tradition with the same, structured through-lines of a conventional genre. I have arranged these works in a chronological constellation. To put it another way, these texts—when taken together—embody a sort of multi-generational zeitgeist centered around the fructuous idea of god(s) being inscrutable and monstrous. These novels, short stories, and poems build upon each other thematically. They often pick up threads laid down by their predecessors, complicating and advancing them without necessarily engaging in direct exchange, influential or otherwise. In other words, this is a monograph about how generations of American writers (inside and outside of the canon, consciously or unconsciously manipulating horror tropes and pessimistic concepts) imagine the idea of god in ways that threaten to destabilize more conventional, culturally sanctioned takes on the divine. Numinous horror texts make clever use of the uncertainty prompted by their plots' supernatural occurrences to destabilize common presuppositions about reading, making the very act of consuming literature unsettling. As my chapters show, as the literary undercurrent of numinous horror has progressed, its model of godhood has slowly (and dreadfully) evolved from a purely impenetrable phenomenon to a permeable, bizarrely transcendental state.

While *Wieland* may be the metaphorical starting gun for numinous horror, its first standard-bearer, Edgar Allan Poe, is the subject of Chapter One, "Poe, Pantheism, and the Roots of Numinous Horror." This chapter begins by questioning Poe's now-rote Gothic canonical legacy, directing critical attention to some of the understudied texts from his copious catalogue. Where Emerson and his Transcendentalist cohort rhapsodized about a natural world in mental and spiritual harmony with humanity, Poe saw in it only the

pessimistic potential for chaos, insanity, and annihilation. He defied the popular pantheism of his day by equating divinity with cosmic-scale animality. With “Metzengerstein,” Poe manipulates standard Gothic set pieces—specifically crumbling castles and aristocratic feuds—to posit an image of the natural world as something inimically agential and impenetrable to human reasoning. He then turns his eye from the Gothic towards the sacred in “The Conqueror Worm,” detailing the failure of Christian figures of power (i.e. God, angels) to provide succor or comfort in the face of ineluctable death.

Well beyond the once-authoritative reach of the American Renaissance’s representative men, Mark Twain is possibly the strangest bedfellow for the other writers in this dissertation. Chapter Two, “The *Deus Stultum* in Mark Twain’s *Mysterious Stranger* Variations,” engages with questions of authorship, narration, and theodicy in two versions of Twain’s novella: its more famous 1916 bowdlerization and its scholastically sanctioned 1969 version. Advancing from Poe’s inchoate images of a hostile divine, Twain brings all of his trademark humor to bear on the insoluble tension between the assumed existence of a beneficent god and the empirical existence of worldly evil and suffering. Though the two versions of this novella are substantially different, they comically build to an almost-identical ending that is as grim as it is confounding: a god exists, but humanity never has. The two variants of Twain’s story foreclose any claim to ontological primacy or significance that would traditionally be associated with humanity; this foreclosure is predicated upon an aporia that is integral to the narrative structures of the variants. The shared negativity of Poe’s and Twain’s works illustrates the ongoing tendency of numinous horror to construct versions of godhood that are discrete from or even actively opposed to the predominantly anthropocentric Judeo-Christian models informing American literary culture.

Perspective, narration, and their attendant anxieties take on maddeningly shifting valences in Chapter Three, “Fantazius Mallare and the War on Interpretation.” Where the previous chapter’s metatextual concerns came from two different versions of the same story, Ben Hecht’s two novels, *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* and *The Kingdom of Evil*, appear to compete with each other, built to neutralize most conventional interpretive schema. Together, their patchwork plot struggles to chronicle a misanthrope’s war with reason, beginning with harrowing images of psychological torture and ending with the construction and grotesque dissolution of an artificial tumor-god. The consummately heterodox Hecht preserves the sense of endemic epistemological and ontological confusion that is integral to numinous horror across these two novels. This dyad animates a variety of narratological problems that are the product of Hecht’s generic manipulations: namely, he hybridizes literary decadence with high modernism and uses eruptions of terror to keep these two pronounced (and markedly different) influences in irremediable tension.

Up to this point, the divide between human and divine subjectivities has been hard and categorical. Neither Twain nor Hecht, despite their para-deific narrators, ever fully reckons with the potential for such a transition. My fourth and final chapter, “Deranging Lovecraft in *Dagon* and ‘The Sect of the Idiot,’” studies texts by Fred Chappell and Thomas Ligotti that take the plunge and chronicle the narratological phenomenon of unspeakable transcendence, wherein human narrators struggle to chronicle their transformations into godlike beings. They refract their respective religious and philosophical fixations through the undeniable influence of H.P. Lovecraft, whose notorious pantheon of god-like monstrosities make oblique appearances in Chappell’s novel and Ligotti’s short story. Though profoundly felt in both works, his influence is further tempered by the authors’ respective generic agendas: Chappell being an inheritor

of the Southern Gothic tradition and Ligotti being a horror author working in Lovecraft's shadow during the heyday of postmodernism. In *Dagon* and "The Sect of the Idiot," Chappell and Ligotti base their models of theodicy on the diegetic premise that humanity's existence is *definitively* painful and/or meaningless.

Taken together, these chapters form a deliberate, multi-pronged provocation, one that indicts literary criticism's narrow generic and political scopes while endeavoring to highlight but one of many productive critical inroads for the study of horror writing. Our discipline's humanist politics *do* have a place in the world, but not in the worlds of numinous horror. We must make more shelf space for texts once thought too morbid, pessimistic, or bizarre. To read *with* the supernatural in horror texts like these is to accept the absolute deprivation of rationality's comforts. If we think of horror as an intellectually potent spectrum of writing—of which numinous horror is merely a single facet, with unique philosophical (rather than political) goals—then the implications we can uncover will prove as illuminating and enriching as the stories are dark and frightening. Whether they admit it or not, the human characters—and authors—of numinous horror are the perverse descendants of medieval mystics like Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, or Angela of Foligno, beleaguered messengers struggling against the currents of academic humanism, mainstream Judeo-Christian beliefs, and rote American optimism to articulate "the darkness of the divine, of something that is 'nothing' because it so far surpasses anything" known or knowable (Thacker, *Starry* 29). In sum, to return briefly to Emerson's maxim from "Self-Reliance," *Other Gods, Other Powers* reveals that we do not need to advance on Chaos and the Dark. Indeed, we cannot. Chaos and the Dark have been advancing on us the whole time.

Chapter One: Poe, Pantheism, and the Roots of Numinous Horror

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

—Emily Dickinson
“What mystery pervades a well!” (543)

Charles Brockden Brown provided an initial spark of inspiration with the fiery episode that opened *Wieland* (1798), but it is Edgar Allan Poe who shaped the outlook of numinous horror. Poe is undeniably the founding father of American horror writing. His prose and poetry regularly blur the boundaries of Gothic horror’s Judeo-Christian, historicist fixations and numinous horror’s existential pessimism. It is the three-fold goal of this chapter to interrogate how Poe’s works demonstrate philosophical continuities and dissonances with then-contemporary pantheist thought; to complicate his commonplace association with the Gothic mode; and to establish the foundational importance of his more obscure works to numinous horror.

Poe’s career overlapped with the heyday of pantheism, which ran from the 1830s through the 1870s, a period known as the American Renaissance, when the more puritanical strains of American Christianity gave way to heterodox views of humanity and the metaphysical. Concerned with the young nation’s emergent intellectual and spiritual identities, the American Renaissance was awash in pantheistic thought that emphasized the exchange between humanity and the natural world. “Nature,” Richard Hardack explains, “emerges in the American Renaissance as a once denied but suddenly irrepressible facet of god” (18). Pantheist thought sacralizes “the inhuman laws and forces of the universe—rather than their creator—leaving god the origin and sum of

personalities, but without the possession of any” (Hardack 41). In short, pantheism deifies an impersonal yet sentient nature that is both omnipresent and omnipotent.

As the revolutionary metaphysical doctrine of the American Renaissance, pantheism needed a prophet. It found one in Ralph Waldo Emerson. His work best represents the dominant metaphysical thinking that informed the American Renaissance. Throughout his career, he waxed philosophical on humanity’s immanent link to nature. The mind’s entwinement with the natural world recurs in essays like “Nature” (1836), “Intellect” (1841), “Circles” (1841), “The Transcendentalist” (1842), and even the somber “Experience” (1844). Emerson’s bold, epigrammatic declaration from “Circles” that “Everything looks permanent until its secret is known” speaks to his confidence in, and appreciation for, the adaptable and penetrative qualities of human cognition (253). The Transcendentalist school of pantheism fetishized the interconnection between the physical environment and the human mind as something inherently natural and effectively divine in its own right. This is hardly a Poe-ish sentiment.

Emerson’s dismissal of Poe as “the jingle man,” an insult that still resounds in English classrooms today, best exemplifies the antipathy between Poe and the “representative men” of the American Renaissance. The derision was mutual, as Poe once wrote, “Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson belongs to a class of gentlemen with whom we have no patience whatsoever—the mystics for mysticism’s sake” (qtd. in Versluis 78). Their enmity has outlived them, informing scholarly understandings of their works. F.O. Matthiessen calls Poe “bitterly hostile to democracy,” claiming that he would work best as “a revelatory contrast” to the Transcendentalist or para-Transcendentalist writers enshrined in *American Renaissance* (1941), his now-canonical study (xii n3).¹ In *Love*

¹ See Erkkila for a discerning and spirited response to Matthiessen’s notable exclusion of Poe.

and Death in the American Novel, Poe's catalogue is a reservoir of young America's despair, discontent, and fear. The lasting weight of such deprecations and characterizations is emblemized by these writers' popular legacies: Emerson, the eminently American thinker and Poe, the doomed Gothic drunk.

Though it needs no defenders today, Poe's legacy was at first shaped by his detractors. Aside from Emerson's barbs and Rufus Wilmot Griswold's posthumous machinations, an important but oft-overlooked critique of Poe came from T.S. Eliot. In his 1949 essay, "From Poe to Valéry," he implies that Poe's work lacked a core metaphysics: "The variety and ardour of [Poe's] curiosity delight and dazzle; yet in the end the eccentricity and lack of coherence in his interests tire. There is just that lacking which gives dignity to the mature man: a consistent view of life" (Eliot 212-213). Though he puts it in less dismissive terms, Arthur Versluis comments on Poe's perceived lack of a distinct relationship to the metaphysical: "Poe draws on esoteric themes, but it is oftentimes, and perhaps almost always, to undermine their meanings by supplanting transcendence or even esoteric meanings with mere terror" (78). Versluis is not writing from a hostile position, but the phrase *mere terror* channels the prevalent academic-humanist tendency to deem macabre fictions like Poe's somehow inherently lacking in terms of metaphysical and philosophical import. Versluis's critique is undergirded by an unspoken assumption that the metaphysical can only promise transcendence, that it has no relation to terror. But terror does have profound metaphysical dimensions, and Poe's works are nigh-incomparable when it comes to articulating them.

However, the question of metaphysics in Poe is overshadowed by a preponderance of discussions about a single text. In the academy, certain partisans uphold

Eureka as the metaphysical crown jewel of Poe's catalogue,² but the debate over that peculiar prose poem is far from finished.³ *Eureka*, with its accretive vision of a universe dominated by coldly rational scientific principles, will not be discussed in this chapter. Ultimately, Poe's own beliefs, whether documented or surmised, are less relevant here than *what Poe does* with the metaphysics and philosophical implications of his horror works. These moves, sharply visible in his more obscure pieces, affected the diversifying of American horror writing in its infancy.

While Poe may be exiled from the pantheistic arbors of the American Renaissance, he is regularly linked with the Gothic mode. His lasting Gothic association is a product of his obsessive aestheticism and taste for ominous ambiguity. To be fair, Poe himself is partially to blame, given the hyper-detailed, "scarcely credible" vivisection to which he subjects "The Raven" (1845) in 1849's "The Philosophy of Composition" (Hurh 81). Poe's predilection for meticulous structure and sharp-eyed dedication to aesthetics have solidified his Gothic reputation, whether scholars like it or not. In a 1959 lecture at the Library of Congress, Richard Wilbur maligns critics that "have regarded [Poe's] tales as nothing more than complicated machines for saying 'boo'" (255). In his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (1992), editor Chris Baldick deems Poe, the consummate stylist, fundamental to the form of the Gothic story: "Poe's deliberate

² See Lyttle, Dayan, and Matthew A. Taylor for readings of *Eureka* as the key to Poe's metaphysics.

³ There exists a critical tradition of reading *Eureka* skeptically. Though he rejects the classification, David N. Stamos makes the point that several of Poe's contemporaries called *Eureka* a hoax (172). He even quotes multiple contemporary reviews to that effect: "The mocking smile of the hoaxer is seen behind his [Poe's] grave mask... If Mr. Poe is not a philosopher he is the most adroit of mimics... [*Eureka* is] a scientific hoax of the higher order which few men are capable of executing more cleverly" (qtd. in Stamos 172). In a 1969 *Poe Newsletter* article, Harriet R. Holman investigates the possibility that *Eureka* was written at least partially in jest, calling it an "encyclopedic satire" (54). In 2006's *Sins against Science*, Lynda Walsh does not explicitly call *Eureka* a hoax, but suggests that Poe's prose poem *did* make use of the mechanics of hoaxing (215). Jennifer Rae Greeson's contribution to *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture* (2012) sees *Eureka* as "a satire... firmly grounded in the political turmoil of [Poe's] day" (123).

dedication to economy and consistency of effect in his writings produced... a remarkably crystallized pattern for the future evolution of Gothic fiction” (xviii). The mechanical image of Poe’s fiction and its Gothic association persist. On thematic grounds, scholars of the Gothic generally agree with Benjamin F. Fisher’s claim that “Poe’s greatest literary achievement was his renovation of the terror tale from what had been its principal intent, to entertain by means of ‘curdling the blood’... into what have been recognized as some of the most sophisticated creations in psychological fiction in the English language” (“Gothic” 78). Paul Hurh has called the Gothic “a genre in which literary fear can be read allegorically” (4). At the junction of Franklin’s and Hurh’s points lies the prevailing “psychoanalytic school of reading Poe[, which] has by and large privileged an approach that reads his work as highly symbolic and has rejected literal readings even among its own ranks” (Boggs 114). Poe’s narratorial style features an idiosyncratic focus on the psychological; the lasting influence of his style helped to establish ambiguity’s constitutive importance to horror—Gothic, numinous, or otherwise.

Poe maintains ambiguity in this chapter’s primary texts by putting cognition, animality, and their associated anxieties at the center of a profound epistemological and ontological disquiet—the realm of numinous horror. I agree with the importance of the psyche and ambiguity when framing Poe’s contribution to horror, and to American letters overall. But Poe’s trademark cognitive focus and narratorial ambiguity should by no means isolate him in a Gothic classification or as the subject of purely suspicious hermeneutics, as I will demonstrate in my readings. This chapter focuses upon two of Poe’s less-celebrated works of horror: “Metzengerstein” (1832) and “The Conqueror Worm” (1843). My methodology is simple. I take the supernatural elements of Poe’s works as basic conditions of their storyworlds instead of reading them as allegorical or symbolic puzzles to be decoded. This metaphysically focused approach yields a

reappraisal of these texts, whose supernatural elements have gone relatively understudied. Both “Metzengerstein” and “The Conqueror Worm” predate *Eureka*, dealing less with “the oblitative conjunction of self and world” and more with the creation of an insuperable division between the human and non-human, rooted in the persistence of humanity’s mental inadequacies (Taylor, *Universes* 38). Poe’s visions of the divine and supernatural in these texts pose a direct challenge to pantheist *and* traditional Judeo-Christian worldviews, denying humanity any existential significance while maintaining the existence of godlike metaphysical forces.

Metaphysically speaking, the worlds of horror that Poe builds in these texts are somewhat pantheistic, but it is a *warped* pantheism. Conventional pantheism merges the human mind and the natural world into an indivisible celestial continuum. Colin Dayan has already observed that Poe, like Jonathan Edwards before him, could never “accept the comfort of any abstract or general language of nature and mind” (6). Poe’s primary conceptual inheritance from pantheism, then, is its staunch refusal of “anthropomorphism, a system that assumes a Christian maker” with recognizably humanoid aspects and, more importantly, logical (or at least intelligible) thought processes (Hardack 17). Poe’s numinous approach to horror distorts pantheism’s accretive impulse, uniting everything in existence *against* the human, locking our species out of an animalized divinity and leaving us to ceaseless, fruitless, and increasingly agonizing contemplations.

Thought, in Poe’s worlds of horror, is not redemptive, but damning. For example, “Berenice” (1835) is told *ex post facto* by Egeus, a narrator aware of his own profound mental disturbances. With Egeus’s monomania and penchant for impromptu dental surgery, it is easy to perceive his “startled and ardent eye” as the dark reflection of Emerson’s famed transparent eyeball (Poe, “Berenice” 226). “[E]very Poe plot,”

according to Dayan, “is about knowledge and its limits” (14). Hurh extends Dayan’s assertion into explicitly negative territory, writing, “Attempts to know... are doomed in Poe’s fiction” (27). The mental mechanisms that Emerson (and later Whitman) would have us use to recognize our supposedly august place in the cosmos are, for Poe, gateways to annihilation.

I contend that Poe’s negative portrayal of human intellect in these horror texts anticipates a precept popular in philosophical pessimism today: we, as a species, are something separate from nature because we have evolved far enough cognitively to *recognize* this now-irrevocable difference.⁴ Such a philosophical position relies upon a perception of humanity as aberrant and, in certain ways, abhorrent. In his storyworlds, Poe’s negative takes on cosmology and cognition override any possibility of transcendence or a pantheistic communion with the supernatural. As later chapters will show, the endemic abstraction of the divine and the fundamental failure of human intelligence are of paramount thematic importance to the mode of numinous horror.

“Metzengerstein” and “The Conqueror Worm” repudiate anthropomorphism in favor of a pessimistic cosmology that denigrates ideas of human cognitive exceptionalism, a polestar of the anthropocentrism shared by pantheism, Judeo-Christian ontologies, and the Gothic mode. At first glance, “Metzengerstein” and “The Conqueror Worm” appear to be odd bedfellows. Their forms differ, for one. “Metzengerstein” tells a

⁴ Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe is a major voice in philosophical pessimism. His relative obscurity in the American academy speaks to the overpowering desolation of his message: “An evolutionary wild card, *Homo sapiens* is possessed of a brain too large, a mental and spiritual dimension that sets us apart from all other life... [O]ur belief in order is only a comforting illusion” (Reed & Rothenburg 38). Suffering and tragedy, as far as Zapffe is concerned, are unavoidable byproducts of our sentience. Contemporary horror writer and Zapffe disciple Thomas Ligotti succinctly sums up today’s pessimist understanding of human sentience: “No other life forms know they are alive, and neither do they know they will die. This is our curse alone... Simply put: *we are not from here*. If we vanished tomorrow, no organism on this planet would miss us. Nothing in nature needs us... We are crazed mimics of the natural prowling about for a peace that will never be ours” (*Conspiracy* 221-222, emphasis original).

tale of aristocratic rivalry and a menacing, ghostly horse. “The Conqueror Worm” is a chaotic, versified romp of monstrous and divine imagery, one that ultimately enthrones Death as the only true deific force in existence. “Metzengerstein” is commonly perceived as a “seemingly straightforward Gothic story” (Fisher, “American” 23).⁵ If critics address them at all,⁶ readings of supernatural elements in “Metzengerstein” focus primarily on metempsychosis.⁷ “The Conqueror Worm” is macabre but lacks its companion’s fixed generic association, leading to varied interpretations.⁸ Neither text is particularly popular in academic circles.

When it comes to the popularity of Poe’s works, neither the phantom horse in “Metzengerstein” nor “The Conqueror Worm” itself can hold a candle to their author’s immortal raven, his black cat, or even the murderous orangutan of the Rue Morgue. The raven of Poe’s iconic poem has enjoyed a lengthy tenure as a subject of primarily aesthetic criticism. Since their respective debuts in print, the hirsute killer in “The

⁵ Travis Montgomery places “Metzengerstein” in a long line of fictional fusions of the Gothic mode with Orientalized imagery or themes, including Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) and Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya* (1806). G.R. Thompson also calls it “Poe’s first Gothic tale,” but focuses on elements of word-play in the story and makes the claim that its Poe-ish themes (“...ultimate annihilation... hostile and deceptive fortune... human fear and perversity... [and] the absurdity of human experience”) are all laid out “in a deceptive burlesque form similar to that of his obvious satires” (39).

⁶ See Lee for a reading of “Metzengerstein” as an anti-abolitionist story.

⁷ Metempsychosis *does* appear in other Poe stories, including “Morella” (1835) and “The Oval Portrait” (1842). Benjamin F. Fisher does not stray from the Gothicized metempsychotic reading of “Metzengerstein,” parenthetically insisting that “(the animal is the reincarnation of old Berlifitzing)” (“American” 22). DeNuccio claims that “Poe’s strategy hinges on the *dual* metempsychosis that occurs in the tale;” one such exchange occurs diegetically between Berlifitzing and the horse, while another happens between the narrator and the reader, in which the narrator’s continued attempts at asserting narratorial authority strain the credibility of the narrative (71, emphasis original).

⁸ D.H. Lawrence called it “the American equivalent for a William Blake poem” (73). Donald Swanson is mostly preoccupied with the poem’s theatrical setting in his 1960 *Explicator* piece. In the Spring 1982 issue of *The Explicator*, Burton R. Pollin is skeptical of Swanson’s reading of “The Conqueror Worm” that sees the angels weeping over man’s fruitless pursuit of immortality. He instead focuses on the poem’s allusive relationship to Shakespeare, specifically *Macbeth*. Jerome McGann has called the poem “a critical reflection on ... the nineteenth century’s secular translation of Christian redemption” (140). See Studniarz for a reading of the poem’s musicality. See Savoye for a study of a manuscript of “The Conqueror Worm” discovered in the summer of 2013.

Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and, to a lesser extent, Poe’s eponymous black cat have long sat at the nexus of legalistic, animal studies, and critical race theory approaches to his work.⁹ Why, then, do the worm and the horse take precedence over Poe’s more famous animals in this chapter? To answer this question, I must return to my earlier assertion that thought is frequently damning in Poe’s works. His Dupin stories are admittedly a different case, as they revolve around highly improbable yet intelligible events, rather than the supernatural and outright impossible. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the desperate attempts of Madame L’Espanaye’s neighbors to deduce the “language” they overheard during the murder is an ostensibly fruitless debate, until it leads Dupin to surmise that the culprit is not human. Even when it is ostensibly of no use, a rational system like language—by dint of its very absence and irrelevance to the case—leads to Dupin’s success. Shifting attention from the improbable to the impossible moves more acclaimed stories like “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Black Cat” out of the spotlight.

No systems of thought or logic exist into which the spectral horse or the repulsive worm can be assimilated and rationalized. In “Metzengerstein” and “The Conqueror Worm,” Poe struggles with a vision of animality that is reducible neither to atmospheric Gothic furniture nor the posthuman sense of the animal as a figure for “inquir[ing] anew into the relationships between verbal representation and subjectivity with all their ethical and legal repercussions” (Boggs 115). There is nothing legalistic or ethical to consider about animality here. Both texts are important because they figure their central animals as somehow divine or metaphysical; in turn, these animalistic renditions of the divine are

⁹ See Boggs for a discussion of animal subjectivity, culpability, and legal agency in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Black Cat.” For instance, she cleverly reads “The Black Cat” as a vital witness to the narrator’s murder of his wife (Boggs 120). See Peterson for an unconventional reading of the racial questions present in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”

defined by an apophatic sense of apprehension. Judeo-Christian mores and Emerson's mystical-humanist vision alike see humanity and the natural world as reflections of unimpeachable universal laws. Poe's melding of totemic animality with menacing paranormal forces unifies his divergent texts against these more palatable metaphysical traditions, treating readers to a new, horrific vision of divinity that is formless and vast.

RULE OF THE BEAST: "METZENGERSTEIN" AND THE NETWORKED NON-HUMAN

In "Metzengerstein," Poe contributes to the tradition of numinous horror by subverting a conventional revenge narrative. He deprives readers of a centralized antagonist in favor of a networked, diffuse portrayal of the non-human supernatural. "Metzengerstein" fundamentally disturbs the humanity-nature connection endorsed by the pantheists in two ways. First, the story establishes the natural world, represented here by Poe's spectral horse(s), as inscrutable and hostile. Second, the narrative's focus on revenge—a thematic hallmark partially responsible for Poe's canonization as a father of the Gothic mode—becomes subsumed by larger questions about the human-animal divide. To be clear, it is not my intention to argue that "Metzengerstein" is *not* a Gothic story, but rather to shift analytical focus from the Gothic conventions that Poe implements (e.g. a feudal society, ruined castles) to his outré treatments of animality, narration, and cognition.

In Poe's story, a centuries-long enmity, complete with its own portentous prophecy, exists between the Metzengerstein and Berlifitzing families, lords of contiguous estates in Hungary. (Both Poe and Mark Twain—as shall be seen in chapter two—seem to pull from a similar imaginary of Europe as a dark place of lingering Old-World magic.) Baron Frederick Metzengerstein, barely of age at the time of his parents' death, inherits their property and begins terrorizing his serfs and vassals. Late one night, a

freak fire consumes the prized stables of the venerable Count Wilhelm Berlifitzing. Meanwhile, Frederick contemplates an old tapestry depicting a battle between his ancestors and those of the Berlifitzings. One of the figures stands out in the tapestry: a Saracen warrior (and Berlifitzing forebear) astride a frighteningly unnatural horse. At first, the woven horse appears to move and later disappears from the tapestry altogether. Wilhelm Berlifitzing dies trying to put out the fire in his stables. Taking a walk to avoid any further disturbance, Frederick comes upon a horse being restrained by his servants. The horse is massive, fiery colored, and almost intelligent. Despite having Wilhelm's initials (WVB) branded into its forehead, the horse, Frederick's servants claim, is unknown to the stable boys at the Berlifitzing manor. Everyone assumes Frederick is guilty of the destruction, though Poe's narrator never comments decisively on the matter. Frederick takes to the animal and eventually becomes a recluse, shunning the company of fellow nobles to take long, isolated rides astride the beast. Eventually, Castle Metzengerstein is consumed in a massive fire. Frederick returns from one of his rides *upon* the horse, but *not* in control of it. The creature leaps the castle's moat and carries Frederick into the fire, thereby ending the Metzengerstein line. Onlookers witness a massive cloud above the burning castle in the shape of a horse.

"Metzengerstein" opens with an epigraph attributed to Martin Luther, "Pestis eram vivus—moriens tua mors ero;" from the Latin, it translates into "Living, I was your plague—dying, I shall be your death" (Poe 134). Revenge, it appears, is the order of the day, even before readers know about the story's feuding families. Unlike the better-known Gothic reprisals of Poe's catalogue—for instance, Fortunato's grisly entombment in "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846)—vengeance in "Metzengerstein" is chaotically esoteric, lacking the deliberation and intentionality generally expected from a tale of revenge. Neither a convenient explanation nor a clear, retribution-oriented motivation are

provided to readers in search of these Gothic hallmarks. Instead, readers will be faced with more questions and points of confusion as the narrative progresses.

The presence of the supernatural in “Metzengerstein” is undeniable, but its indeterminacy is what merits this story’s serious reconsideration in light of the pantheism of Poe’s day, especially since that indeterminacy is reflected in the story’s narration. “Metzengerstein,” Poe’s first fiction publication, already demonstrates hints of the frantic, self-interruptive narratorial style that would be immortalized in later fictions like “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843). The first two lines read, “Horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages. Why then give a date to the story I have to tell?” (Poe, “Metzengerstein” 134). These lines confirm numinous horror’s functional dependence on narratorial ambiguity. With the narrative’s source of terror not yet apparent, Poe’s speaker establishes the effective universality of fear and death, as well as a sense of resignation or even despair, enough that it briefly threatens to derail the story before it begins.

The origin of the Metzengerstein-Berlifitzing feud is said to be an esoteric prophecy: “A lofty name shall have a fearful fall when, as the rider over his horse, the mortality of Metzengerstein shall triumph over the immortality of Berlifitzing” (Poe 134). Frederick is clearly the “lofty name” in question, given both his aristocratic standing and ignoble, violent end as the rider of an uncontrollable horse. The “immortality of Berlifitzing” seems to indicate that there is something otherworldly about the Berlifitzings, as shall be seen in the tapestry that so captivates Frederick later on. A fleeting reference to immortality gives rise to the idea that there is some connection between Berlifitzing and the spectral horse that kills his young enemy, but, beyond introductory references to metempsychosis, the situation—along with Metzengerstein’s supposed “triumph”—is never decisively explained. If metempsychosis is indeed at work

in “Metzengerstein,” later scenes will demonstrate that this is not simply a case of an errant human consciousness inhabiting different forms.

As readers, we are faced with a speaker who seems determined to undermine his primary narratorial function in favor of rationalizing that which evades the grasp of reason. Such a narratorial move is equally popular in Gothic (e.g. Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* [1820]) and non-Gothic (e.g. Fitz James O’Brien’s “What Was It?” [1859], H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” [1928]) horror texts. Here, the narrator makes an odd intercession immediately after recounting the local prophecy: “To be sure the words themselves had little or no meaning” (Poe, “Metzengerstein” 134). Toward the end of the same paragraph, the narrator skeptically interrupts his own description of the prophecy’s implications: “...if it implied anything” (Poe, “Metzengerstein” 135). The opening salvo “To be sure” smacks of a retrospective and rationalist dismissal of the prophecy, in keeping with the story’s initial tone of suspicion or even derision when referencing “a settled although hidden belief in the doctrines of the Metempsychosis” in its Hungarian setting (Poe, “Metzengerstein” 134). Such rationalist vacillation (“Of the doctrines themselves—that is, of their falsity, or of their probability—I say nothing.”) is downplayed by the impenetrable yet undeniably paranormal happenings in the story (Poe, “Metzengerstein” 134). In one of Poe’s trademark Francophile flourishes, the narrator adds, “I assert, however, that much of our incredulity (as La Bruyere says of all our unhappiness) ‘*vient de ne pouvoir etre seuls*’” (“Metzengerstein” 134). This is not Poe’s only citation of French philosopher Jean de La Bruyere; the quotation, also used in “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), translates roughly into the “great misfortune, of not being able to be alone.” The common doubts about metempsychosis that the narrator cites here are not a product of the doctrine’s metaphysical qualities, but rather a socially derived anxiety about appearing primitive or

superstitious. The expression of such an anxiety in “Metzengerstein” speaks both to Poe’s distaste for democracy (à la Matthiessen) *and* the misanthropic tendencies that made him the forefather of the profoundly negative mode of horror writing. Taken together, these introductory moments of narratorial auto-commentary diminish the power of the rational human mind that the Transcendentalists cherished as an existential panacea.

“Metzengerstein” proceeds from its early narratorial oddities and frustrated gestures to Gothicized vengeance, leading us to a moment that—as later chapters will show—is typical of numinous horror: the workings of the sublime become subverted. At night, in the castle, young Frederick gazes upon the tapestry depicting his family’s military history and feud with the Berlifitzings. In the lead-up to his sublime subversions, Poe’s narrator uses conspicuously passive constructions to describe Frederick’s encounter with the tapestry. We are told that “his eyes *were turned unwittingly* to the figure of an enormous, and unnaturally colored horse” and that Frederick only eventually “became aware of the direction his glance had, *without his consciousness*, assumed” (Poe, “Metzengerstein” 136, my emphases). Frederick’s passivity within his own body leads readers to surmise that the human subject is not as tightly coherent and perfectly ordered a figure as the pantheistic Transcendentalists (and, really, the majority of western post-Enlightenment thinkers) believed.

The sublime-ekphrastic moment in “Metzengerstein” sees the clarity of Frederick’s cognition threaten to fail: “he could by no means account for the overwhelming anxiety which appeared falling like a pall upon his senses. It was with difficulty that he reconciled his dreamy and incoherent feelings with the certainty of being awake. The longer he gazed, *the more absorbing became the spell*” (Poe 136-137, my emphasis). This is typical of Poe: what appears to be metaphorical—or can only be explained metaphorically—becomes functionally concrete. Here, the sublime reaction—

an inherently abstract and interior moment of aesthetic contemplation—is called a spell. Rather than the word “spell” metaphorizing Frederick’s rapt state, it takes on a literally magical tenor when the horse in the tapestry moves and then vanishes. Later in the story, the woven horse’s disappearance gets confirmed diegetically by one of Frederick’s servants. The tapestry is an art object meant to impart the lessons and implicit grandeur of an aristocratic human history. Despite Poe’s well-known arguments about beauty’s supernal qualities, there is no edification or enlightenment to be found in this tapestry, only a supernatural threat. Still, it overwhelms Frederick as any sublime object would. The key to numinous horror’s subversion of the sublime, then, is that Frederick simply *remains* trapped in the initial, overwhelmed state that normally heralds a sublime encounter. The latter stage, in which a rapt viewer eventually redefines the sublime object in reference to his or her own superlative human intellect, is never reached. Something about the tapestry distorts Frederick’s ability to understand his surroundings. It appears that thought, in Frederick’s case, is not the “pious reception” that Emerson promised (“Intellect” 264). Transfixed by the object before him, he begins to lose his sense of time and reality. As with the opening notes of narratorial reticence, we see Poe illustrating a world where there are indistinct but threatening powers at work, and human characters lack the cognitive capacity to discern the nature of these powers, let alone engage with them.

There are scenes in “Metzengerstein” that endow the mysterious horse with a frightening semblance of sentience made all the more portentous because Frederick struggles to maintain control over his mental faculties throughout the story. Poe mentions that Frederick “had no particular *name* for the animal, although the rest in his collection were distinguished by characteristic appellations” (“Metzengerstein” 140). The horse’s treatment is marked by a strange degree of individuality. Despite being a prized

possession of the young noble, it is not immediately subject to a name chosen by its supposed master. The brand on the horse's forehead implies that it is the animal revenant of Count Wilhelm Berlifitzing. The brand is never again acknowledged beyond its initial mention and the horse's disavowal by the Berlifitzing grooms. Subsequent lines detailing servants' fearful reactions to "the deep and impressive *meaning* of his [the horse's] terrible stamp... [and] the rapid and *searching expression* of his *earnest* and human-looking eye" engage readers with a fierce, non-human subjectivity, one that is noticeable to human onlookers, but impervious to their analysis (Poe, "Metzengerstein" 141, my emphases). The language in this scene is riddled with words that connote or denote cognition and communication, but the vehicle for these impressions is purely non-verbal. Its eye is deemed "human-looking" *because* of the meaning sensed in its gestures *by* human onlookers; such perceived meaning leads them to assume mistakenly that the animal has an affinity with humanity. Whatever meaning exists in the horse's eye or stamp—if any—has nothing to do with its imagined humanity: the horse inspires fear or an addictive attachment in those who encounter it but reveals nothing to them. Readers never discover for certain if the horse is a metempsychotic revenant, the ghost of the horse from the Metzengerstein family tapestry, some mix of the two, or an entirely unrelated manifestation of an evil nature spirit. The horse in "Metzengerstein" remains a cipher, illegible and menacing to onlookers whose anthropocentric preconceptions struggle to interpret or rationalize that which inherently defies logic.

In keeping with the prevalence of his frustrated or subverted attempts at cognition, which are inversely proportional to the surfeit of meaning and intentionality credited to the mysterious horse, Poe deprives Frederick of any last words during his climactic death scene: "no sound, save a solitary shriek, escaped from his lacerated lips, which were bitten through and through in the intensity of terror" ("Metzengerstein" 142).

Frederick's end is not replete with the eerie enlightenments of a Monsieur Valdemar. He is deprived of speech utterly, left with only sheer fright as he succumbs to the deadly designs of the very beast over which he believed he held dominion. After the screaming noble is dragged into the castle, we are told "a cloud of smoke settled heavily over the battlements in the distinct colossal figure of—a horse" (Poe, "Metzengerstein" 142). No solution is certain, despite early references to metempsychosis, the suggestive initials branded into the horse's forehead, and the presence of a horse in the ominous prophecy about the Metzengerstein heir's fate. The prophecy seems to have been fulfilled, so far as Frederick has died a terrible death. But the Berlifitzing line appears to have expired with the elderly Wilhelm, so any victory here is pyrrhic at best. Then again, even applying strategy-dependent, success-based concepts like victory, pyrrhic or otherwise, to the actions of the horse presupposes an anthropomorphic psychology and agenda, one that is never substantiated. Again, should metempsychosis be cited as the solution to this story's paranormal mystery, I would contend that we are witnessing a distorted form of it, wherein Wilhelm Von Berlifitzing has joined a diffuse network of deific power, one that eschews his former humanity and the attendant senses of individuality and pride generally motivating the impulse to revenge. This is not the traditional metempsychosis of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* (1836), where the human consciousness retains its relative unity while traveling through other bodies. This transcendence, if we can call it that, is unspeakable, and will not be fruitfully explored again in numinous horror until the twentieth century.

I contend that "Metzengerstein" is clad in the tropes of a Gothic revenge narrative, but ultimately frustrates readerly expectations for a centralized antagonist, reliable narrative perspective, and Gothic explication. Instead, Poe creates a sense of extreme menace by networking or de-centralizing the potentially metempsychotic threat

at the narrative's heart, making it manifest in various non-human guises. The diffuse depiction of this metempsychotic menace suggests a passage from H. Porter Abbott's *Real Mysteries* (2013):

The unity of the human being... as it is displayed in its visual and aural presence, is an evolutionary necessity that we depend upon in the ethical, legal, mercantile, and other social relations of everyday intercourse. Among other important things, it maintains our sanity. And by and large, we rely on the same illusion when we read. (60)

Wilhelm Von Berlifitzing, the supposedly aggrieved party, lacks the coherence expected from such a figure in the traditional revenge plot. He is only ever encountered in hearsay or historical references. He lives as he dies, off of the page, beyond any diegetic exchange with Frederick as well as direct readerly access. Again, it must be emphasized that the only diegetic grounds for the familial enmity in "Metzengerstein" are an ancient prophecy, rather than the actions of either involved party. So, right off the bat, the revenge narrative is frustrated by a lack of any distinct cause, unlike the more mundane inciting insults in a tale like "Hop-Frog" (1849). Frederick's first encounter with anything related to his family's historical rivalry is embodied by the bizarre figure of the horse on the tapestry. It appears to move and then disappears after Frederick encounters the mysteriously branded horse that becomes both the subject of his obsession and the engine of his destruction. This spectral entity, first appearing in the text as part of an inanimate tapestry, then as an animal, makes its final appearance as the cloud over Castle Metzengerstein. It somehow remains coherent and interpretably visible *as* an equine presence, composed of the smoke billowing from the fire that would have supposedly destroyed its physical form. The persistence of this equine presence, especially in forms that would not normally be ascribed sentience—rather than the supposedly human

consciousness inhabiting them—marks Poe’s version of nature as something much more hermetic and sinister than the sylvan imaginary of his Transcendentalist contemporaries.

In the world of “Metzengerstein,” then, the natural world is irrevocably cut off from us; its incomprehensibility grounds its perpetual inimicality, in direct violation of pantheistic principles. Nature, in the forms of living horse and smoke cloud, conspires with the artificial inanimate (the woven beast on the tapestry) to destroy Frederick for reasons at which readers can only guess. To invoke Abbott again, “The interpreting mind, like nature, abhors a vacuum” (115). Rather than the *mere* terror Versluis described, Poe has systematically engineered a *formless* terror; by formless terror, I mean to say a polymorphic presence capable of surrounding human characters (and readers) at every turn, endlessly establishing the diegetic dominance of the non-human and the relative triviality of pantheism’s anthropocentric cognitive concerns. The curtain falls on “Metzengerstein” as illegible supernatural animality reigns triumphant, not isolated in any one shape or identity, but seemingly omnipresent in various non-human aspects, whether animal, inanimate, or even elemental. In the next text, the stage is set for an ominously similar image.

SUPPOSED TO ROT: CONSUMING CHRISTIAN COMFORT IN “THE CONQUEROR WORM”

Poe treats readers to an unsettling piece of theatre in “The Conqueror Worm.” The poem describes an audience of angels that watches a play performed by multiple human mimes, clad in the guise of God and chasing an elusive Phantom. The onstage antics are controlled by menacingly vague shapes looming behind the scenes. Finally, a monstrous entity emerges and consumes the mimes as the angelic onlookers weep. The curtain drops, signaling an end to the farcical “tragedy” whose focus is humanity and whose “hero” is Death, the eponymous worm. Being the sole poem in a dissertation about horror

fiction, the presence of “The Conqueror Worm” will likely raise a few eyebrows. But this poem merits special consideration because of its metaphysics—a deliberate and detailed malformation of conventional Judeo-Christian perceptions of the divine.

“The Conqueror Worm” dethrones Judeo-Christian thought’s ontological primacy by establishing an idea of immense importance to the numinous horror archive: god—whether animal, automaton, or something else—is an idiot, an entity that exists and operates beyond anything resembling rationality. The poem’s introduction of the troubling, even heretical possibility of deific idiocy forms a conceptual bridge between the godlike animality of “Metzengerstein” and the non-humanoid divinities of H.P. Lovecraft, who cited Poe as a primary influence and remains, in his own right, a titanic influence on today’s writers of the macabre. By portraying the traditional Judeo-Christian divine as something clownish and making the titular supernatural force as senseless as it is powerful, Poe flouts Emerson’s cognitively focused epistemology and Judeo-Christian thought’s anthropocentrism by making intellect—human or divine—categorically irrelevant to the powers behind existence.

Along with a passive “angel throng” that sits watching the show, the first figures that readers encounter in the poem are

Mimes, in the form of God on high,...

Mere puppets... who come and go

At bidding of vast formless things

That shift the scenery to and fro

Flapping from out their Condor wings

Invisible Wo! (“Worm” 78.12-16)

Within the first two stanzas, Poe has deprived celestial characters (angels, God) of their traditional solemnity and power. The angels here are neither humanity’s guardians nor

stewards of the almighty. Instead, they are an audience, pacified by the show and captive to its emotional twists and turns. The capital-G “God” that Poe mentions (presumably Yahweh) is portrayed by multiple mummers who “mutter and mumble low” (“Worm” 78.10). The bashful, clumsy image of mimes playing God briefly fosters a sense of comedy. It is as if Poe is thumbing his nose at the biblical bromide of humanity being made in a divine creator’s image, saying that humanity is not fashioned in the image of Jehovah, but that He is instead a theatrical illusion that humans clumsily cooperate to maintain. Levity disappears as quickly as it comes, however, with Poe’s apophatic introduction of the “vast formless things” controlling the show right down to its scenery. These non-human, non-anthropomorphic figures inhabit a position of power one would expect a more conventional image of god to fill. But, that conventional image is already busy being mocked. Otherwise, no such ideation of divine power can be found in the poem; readers instead witness a proliferation of recognizable and foreign divine agencies—angels, the worm, the vast and formless things—that appear to be operating in the absence of a conventional and unitary Judeo-Christian God. The fleeting description of their “Condor wings” contributes to the non-anthropomorphic image of the divine and—since condors are carrion eaters—amplifies themes of death and decay that Poe builds throughout the poem. Even discounting this continuing animalization, the deliberately vague quality of these sinister shapes echoes Poe’s earlier mentions of similarly mysterious “Vast forms” in “The Haunted Palace” (1839) and “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), again highlighting his propensity for imagining the divine and supernatural in ways that clashed with both Judeo-Christian and pantheist metaphysical imaginaries (“Palace” 77.43; “Usher” 327).¹⁰

¹⁰ Despite his predominantly sonic and formal focus on the poem, Studniarz reads these presences as “beings that are not part of [Yahweh’s] creation, possibly beings that are even opposed to God” (67).

In his third stanza, Poe winks at readers, ensuring us that the
motley drama...

shall not be forgot!

...its Phantom chased for evermore,

By a crowd that *seize* it not. (“Worm” 78.17-20, my emphasis)

Where Emerson touts the human mind’s ability to “accept the clangor and jangle of contradictory tendencies,” Poe exhibits no such faith in an audience (“Experience” 315). He instead manages to fit his disdain for the plebeian perceptions of the general audience into the poem with his *seize-sees* pun. This pun grammatically troubles the singular-plural status of the word “crowd;” a singular, collective crowd “sees,” while only plural crowds can “seize.” This pun, a manifest exhibition of the mechanical prowess for which Poe is still highly regarded in literary circles, resonates with the ongoing diffusion of identity integral to his contribution to numinous horror. The mimes onstage constantly give chase without ever apprehending the Phantom; the angelic crowd, overburdened by their emotions, simply looks on without fully comprehending the events they witness. Human cognition and, by extension, angelic cognition (an idea itself dependent upon the popular anthropomorphic conception of angels) are further derogated here. Both the humans and the sobbing seraphs inhabit positions of passivity, the former being witless clowns and the latter being an overwhelmed audience.

The variegated (“motley”) events onstage implicitly mirror the random chains of unrelated events constituting all human life:

...a circle that ever returneth in

To the self-same spot,

And much of Madness, and more of Sin,

And horror the soul of the plot. (Poe, “Worm” 78.21-24)

With this looping image, Poe denounces the Judeo-Christian ontological narrative's core insistence that existence is ordered and purposeful. What is most striking about Poe's subversion is not the replacement of order with chaos, but with the creeping realization that this order is itself a horrific "circle that ever returneth," deprived of meaning or driving purpose. His dismal image of human life establishes a sort of anti-theodicy predicated upon the idiocy of the Conqueror Worm, rather than the divine plan promised by Yahweh. Human suffering, like every other element of life in the world of "The Conqueror Worm," has no greater purpose. Taking on an almost Hobbesian essence, Poe's rendition of existence is simply circuitous, frightening, and meaningless.

Any remaining pretense to comedy vanishes by the fourth stanza, wherein the domain of the divine is slowly but surely animalized. "A blood-red thing... writhes" onto the stage and "with mortal pangs/ The mimes become its food" (Poe, "Worm" 78.27-28). Onlooking "seraphs sob at vermin fangs/ In human gore imbued" (Poe, "Worm" 78.30-32). The figure of God, already a subject of ridicule in the poem's stage play, is now just another part of the food chain, vulnerable to thoughtless predation. Both the mortals and immortals present in the scene are wracked by emotions and tortured, ineffective cognition, but the worm just writhes and eats. Poe does not impute a shred or semblance of purposive thought to the worm. Poe's identification of the gore (and therefore the mimes) as human sets the groundwork for the revelation of Death's universal supremacy at the end of the poem. This grotesque, carnivorous image continues to darkly burlesque the idea of humanity being created in God's image. (Twain differently inverts this biblical commonplace in *The Mysterious Stranger*, twice.) Rather than humans crafted in the divine progenitor's image, Yahweh remains a theatrical invention of humanity.

The poem ends in its fifth stanza with a brief litany of cosmologically grim affirmations. The play that is the poem's subject depicts human life in the abstract. Its

hero is death, embodied by the titular maggot. The poem closes with a final depiction of its “pallid and wan” angels who, “Uprising, unveiling, affirm/ That the play is the tragedy, ‘Man,’/ And its hero the Conqueror Worm” (Poe, “Worm” 79.38-40). Just as Poe downplayed pantheist valorizations of cognition by concretizing metaphor in “Metzengerstein,” the angels of his poem *unveil* the allegory at the heart of “The Conqueror Worm.” Yet, even with a diegetic explication of the poem’s allegory, no happy, interpretive release is afforded. How can there be, when Death is the hero of the story? Separated from the clownish human mimes by both theatrical bounds and their veils, the Judeo-Christian promise of transcendent understanding after death is flaunted but denied. Normally hallowed in Judeo-Christian faiths as counselors and protectors, Poe’s angels remain an impotent audience, unable to do anything but assert the bleak truth facing humanity: meat is meat and nothing but. Decay is all there is.

PRIMORDIAL MALIGNITY; OR, WHERE AND WHAT POE LEAVES US

“Metzengerstein” saw Poe play with Gothic tropes and formulas for some decidedly non-Gothic thematic ends, downplaying the traditionally human-centered revenge plot for a lingering notion of divine animality that challenges pantheist perceptions of nature as “thoroughly mediate... [and] made to serve” (Emerson, “Nature” 21). Generic concerns take a backseat to an apocalyptically flippant depiction of Judeo-Christian powers when Poe ups the ante in “The Conqueror Worm,” positing an entropic universe ruled by rot. In “Metzengerstein,” the networked non-human divine appears to have a hostile agenda, however obscure. But, in “The Conqueror Worm,” agendas are purely irrelevant to Death, a mindlessly rapacious force of godlike power for which we are nothing but food.

“The Conqueror Worm” sees Poe belittle the cultural dominion of Christianity, with his eponymous creature devouring images of Christian comfort. As Klaus Lubbers wrote in 1967, “the eschatology [of the poem] is Poe’s, not the Bible’s... [Humans] are lumped together as pitiable pantomimists in a farce, all equal and unspecified” (378). With his poem, Poe implies that the Christian faith will survive only as long as its mortal (and therefore doomed) faithful. The once-deific are powerless and clownish—objects of ridicule beholden to much greater powers that remain undetected and indiscernible (“vast formless things”). In these texts, Poe denigrates common perceptions of the sacred, replacing its cosmic reassurance with an indefinable but foreboding idea of how the universe works, justifying Paul Hurl’s statement that “we rarely feel terror *for* the characters of Poe’s stories... but rather shudder at the particular worldview that Poe constructs through them” (7, emphasis original). Given Hurl’s point and the metaphysical trench between Poe and his canonical pantheist contemporaries, I claim that the academy has generally overlooked these texts *because* of how inextricable their thematic pessimism is from their diegetic supernatural elements. “Metzengerstein” and “The Conqueror Worm” lay the groundwork not only for Lovecraft’s highly influential oeuvre, but also for the remainder of the works covered in this dissertation. Though numinous horror will continue to evolve as these chapters advance, the deific powers they discuss will remain non-anthropomorphic, impenetrable, and malign.

Chapter Two: The *Deus Stultum* in Mark Twain's *Mysterious Stranger* Variations

“You can't make a world without inviting inferences as to what kind of an entity You are.”

—H. Porter Abbott
Real Mysteries: Narrative & the Unknowable (31)

“Multifarious” is as good a word as any to begin describing Mark Twain. He was a brother, a husband, a father, a printer's apprentice, a riverboat pilot, a miner, a journalist, a satirist, a lecturer, a failed investor, a world-renowned celebrity, and—according to William Faulkner—“the father of American literature” (Jelliffe 88). What he was *not*, say many Twain scholars and literary critics, was a pessimist. Yet, in an 1897 letter to William Dean Howells, Mark Twain expressed an unmistakably vituperative goal for the story he was working on at the time:

I believe I can make [the story] tell what I think of Man, & how he is constructed, & what a shabby poor ridiculous thing he is, & how mistaken he is in his estimate of his character & powers & qualities & his place among the animals.

...I hope it will ... turn out to be the right vessel to contain all the ordure I am planning to dump into it. (*Letters* 698-699)

That story was *The Mysterious Stranger*; and, if this letter is to be believed, that story was to be a metaphorical chamber pot, brimming with Twain's late-in-life negativity and scorn for humanity. Twain's excremental metaphor is apt. High-toned scatological humor coming from a literary luminary is a perfect snapshot of the patchwork legacy of *The Mysterious Stranger*. Its manuscript history is a mess. The canonical status of the story's four variants is still a contentious subject for academics, given that every one of its four extant variants was published posthumously. And despite evidence like the letter cited above, the only real critical consensus about *The Mysterious Stranger* is a resistance or

reticence regarding its unmistakable pessimism and existential negativity. Twain's leavings, unpleasant as they may sometimes be, are the focus of this chapter.

In *Reverse Tradition: Postmodern Fiction and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1993), Robert Kiely writes, "...there is no 'text' of *The Mysterious Stranger*, no original with a date or a beginning and end of a primary authoritative nature" (105). John S. Tuckey's 1963 book, *Mark Twain and Little Satan: The Writing of The Mysterious Stranger*, exposed readers and critics to the history of Twain's tale, retrospectively twisted not in its telling, but by its already-extensive distribution history at the time of his book's publication. Twain's most critically embattled text was born of ceaseless revision, with "at least four versions of the story, which survive in three manuscripts" (Gibson 2). *The Mysterious Stranger* began its life as an incomplete tale of mischievous boys in eighteenth-century Austria called *The Chronicle of Young Satan*, took on an American setting and characters in the unfinished *Schoolhouse Hill*, and changed to a medieval European location in its (debatably) complete form, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*.¹ I say *debatably* complete because, according to Chad Rohman, "...none of the three surviving manuscripts was completed in [Twain's] lifetime" (73). The same goes for the fourth, final, and most academically reviled version of Twain's enduring tale. Issued posthumously in 1916 under the title *The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance*,² this last version has been roundly denounced by critics as "a spurious version" and "an editorial fraud" engineered by Twain's literary executor, Albert Bigelow Paine, and Frederick A. Duneka, an employee of the Harper & Brothers publishing concern (Gibson 1). According to Gibson's breakdown of the manuscripts, Paine and Duneka "grafted the final chapter of the third manuscript to the broken-off first manuscript version [*The*

¹ Hereafter referred to/cited as *No. 44*.

² Hereafter referred to/cited as *TMS 1916*.

Chronicle of Young Satan] by cutting half a chapter, composing a paragraph of bridgework, and altering characters' names" (2-3). To put things delicately, this salmagundi of manuscript emendations and alterations has been a cause of headaches for generations of book historians and Twain scholars.

Of the four variants, the two that are the focus of this chapter—*No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* and 1916's *The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance*—are competitors in a canonicity cold war. Sholom J. Kahn endeavored to “get rid of the accepted notion that all the texts in the *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* are variant versions of a single story,” calling it a “false idea” (15-16). Nonetheless, I purposefully use the term “variant” throughout this chapter to describe the stories, because they are undeniably gathered under the same narrative-conceptual umbrella, cosmetic differences aside: they all tell the story of a boy who encounters a mystical being—either an angel or another supernatural entity—that uses its powers first for comedic hijinks and finally to reveal stark truths about the nature of reality. Compared to the other, more authoritative versions of the text, the critically castigated 1916 version has enjoyed just over a century of exposure and accessibility to the global reading public. (In fact, my very first encounter with *The Mysterious Stranger* was in high school, when the 1916 version was required reading for my junior year English class.) Still, *No. 44* has accrued its own canonical weight in the years since Gibson's 1969 publication of *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*. For instance, the Library of America's editions of Twain's fiction include *No. 44* and no other version of *The Mysterious Stranger*, stressing the academic community's efforts to canonize their chosen edition (Gribben 246). Too much of the scholarship on *The Mysterious Stranger* variants focuses on now-routine questions of textual authority, almost unwilling to accept the work for what it is: the product of “the inchoate mass of material [Twain] left behind” (Lowry 148).

Before proceeding with my argument, I will sketch the plots of Twain's two finished versions of the novella, for clarity's sake. Though they diverge in many respects, they conform to the same basic structure of a journey from innocence and ignorance towards a greater, bleaker understanding of existence. *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* is narrated by August Fendler, the apprentice of a curiously anachronistic print shop located in 1490 Austria. August dwells in a decrepit castle with his fellow printers, their master and his family, a local magician, and assorted servants. One wintry night, a boy named Forty-Four appears, willing to trade his labor for room and board. Forty-Four's presence is sharply divisive. August, Heinrich the master printer, and Katrina the domestic all take a liking to Forty-Four; in contrast, the remaining residents heap mountains of abuse and suspicion upon the boy, in spite of his seemingly innocent, benevolent nature. August eventually befriends Forty-Four, kicking off a chain of madcap adventures involving a hypocritical priest, a witch hunt, a disingenuous wizard, romantic mix-ups involving clones, distinctly American anachronisms, the transformation of a servant girl into a talking cat, a march of skeletons, and even time travel, among other bizarrerie. The fun and games grind to a halt at the story's end, when Forty-Four abruptly vanishes after revealing that "*Life itself is only a vision, a dream*" and that August is "the only existent Thought... inextinguishable, indestructible" in an otherwise empty cosmos where nothing and no one else exists (*No. 44* 404, emphasis original).

1916's *The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance* replaces August and the dwellers in the castle with Theodor Fischer and his friends Nickolaus Bauman and Seppi Wohlmeyer, a Tom-and-Huck-esque trio of locals in a 1590s Austrian village called Eseldorf. Instead of the mysterious Forty-Four, the boys befriend an angel named Satan, an amiable nephew of the biblical Devil. Young Satan plays a variety of metaphysical games with the boys, demonstrating an underlying cognitive difference between himself

and his playmates exhibited by his lack of the Moral Sense, which he derides as the engine behind all thoughtless human cruelty. He tells the boys of various misfortunes that will befall their friends; when they beg him to intercede, he often does so to the potential victim's greater detriment. Like his predecessor, Satan suddenly departs at the end of the story, leaving Theodor with the same revelation of cosmic solipsism that Forty-Four left August with at the end of *No. 44*, nearly word for word.

I want to sidestep questions of the variants' canonicity or authority by reading *No. 44* and *TMS 1916* side-by-side because they build to a shared pessimistic ending, unlike their incomplete fellows.³ This confusing shared finale has plagued Twain scholars for years with its resistance to a decisive reading or critique. With her crucial and provocative insistence that "it is not the act of creation but multiple acts of reiteration that enable literature to hold its value," Meredith McGill has inspired my choice to pair academia's accepted edition of Twain's novella with its 1916 bowdlerization (3). The shared conclusion of these variants gives us an unprecedented opportunity to study how these different narratives build to the same numinous figuration of godhood as self-deluded solipsistic idiocy on a cosmic scale.

Reading *with* the supernatural elements of the story—that is to say, reading the story critically while accepting the core metaphysical premises of its storyworld—allows me to explore an idea present in the text, but one that has only ever been glancingly referenced in extant criticism of *The Mysterious Stranger*: August/Theodor and Forty-

³ While it is not one of the primary texts of this chapter, it should be noted that *The Chronicle of Young Satan* features a scene in its ninth chapter that hints at a different ending than *No. 44* and *TMS 1916*. A now-aged Theodor, narrating the story, mentions proto-Borgesian, self-writing volumes filled with each other's lives and futures that he and Seppi *still* use to communicate with each other, demonstrating the inherence of metatextual themes to *The Mysterious Stranger* variants, even when the narrative's cosmological set-up is arguably different (Twain, *Chronicle* 147). See Kiely for an extended discussion of Borges and Twain.

Four/Satan are aspects of the same self-deluded, godlike Thought in a void.⁴ Any apparent differences between the characters are merely indicative that these Thought-fragments are operating at different levels of self-awareness.

By taking the metaphysical premises of both variants into account, we run headlong into the frustrating paradox—what I call the aporetic loop—at the heart of the narrative, which I will now endeavor to explain as plainly as possible. In *The Mysterious Stranger*'s storyworlds, the witless demiurge (what Twain calls the Thought) that was once August/Theodor created the whole of existence. Both Forty-Four/Satan and the problems they bemoan in their respective texts—namely, the cyclical stupidity, cruelty, and suffering constituting human existence—are part of the illusory existence unknowingly crafted by this ageless, deific Thought. For no discernible reason, prior to both narratives, the Thought somehow hides the truths of its solitary existence *and* the illusory world from itself. A state of deific ignorance or unconsciousness of these truths, then, props up both narratives... until the Thought reveals these truths to itself during the

⁴ Stanley Brodwin suggests the possibility that August Fendler is some type of god, but then refutes it on the spot, citing the story's divide between the mortal and immortal mind: "Man does not enjoy *true* creativity" (227, emphasis original). Sholom J. Kanh chimes in on the subject, unable to account for "the 'nothingness' out of which August is said to have made the stranger;" he claims such a creation *ex nihilo* "could only make sense if the narrator were thought to have godlike powers," but relents and deems August "merely an adolescent Austrian printer's apprentice" (187). Nancy Von Rosk says that *TMS 1916* hinges upon Theodor discovering that Satan is "his own vision, his own creation," but then asserts that the boy "recognizes his role in the cruelty of the world and seems more aware, more sensitive, indeed more enlightened," which the text itself does not seem to corroborate, given that this supposed moral realization occurs at the end of the story with no further comment about Theodor (86). Derek Parker Royal admits that Forty-Four is a projection of August's mind. He calls August's imagination "an unsteady power... [that] can both enlighten and emancipate as well as bind and manipulate" (Royal 54). But, Royal ultimately refuses to answer his own question: "What is No. 44?" (50). James S. Leonard reaches a conceptual event horizon not unlike Royal's. He says that August created Forty-Four, but it is unclear who or what is *thinking* August into being (Leonard 160). Bennett Kravitz keeps humanity at the center of his reading of Twain's perplexing conclusion in *TMS 1916*, claiming that Theodor "release[s] himself from the 'illusion' of heaven, hell, God and the devil in order to dream existential dreams, whereby only human initiative gives order to the universe," in spite of the text's explicit identification of Theodor as "the only existent thought," not the sole existent *human* (65; *TMS 1916* 120). Bill Scalia plainly states that "the ending [of *No. 44*] is truly solipsistic," but hesitates when it comes to a decisive identification of August post-revelation: "August is no longer human—is this a paradox, or dilemma, or trick?" (76).

shared ending of the variants. Much like the initial occlusion of these truths, their final revelation happens for no apparent reason because, as the ending approaches, Forty-Four/Satan urges August/Theodor to return to the dream-state of ignorance the Thought just escaped with their help. No guiding wisdom or principle behind these occlusions and revelations ever comes to light.

In other words, the problem of these variants is not their manuscript history. What my research has made clear is that the problem instead inheres in the confounding contents and fragmentary forms of these texts. Twain's novellas are generically indeterminate, deeply pessimistic fantasies of spiritual plurality and mind-body dualism ending in the crushing realization that all is for naught because godhood is neither a merciful nor meaning-generative enterprise; it is massively idiotic and solipsistic. Though I draw attention to the aporetic loop upon which the plot is based, I do *not* mean to solve it. In keeping with the texts' prevalent negativity, I am not convinced that solving such a conundrum is even possible. By embracing the aporetic loop of *The Mysterious Stranger*, I directly engage with Twain's pessimism and existential negativity, rather than reading around them as many of my predecessors have.

Still, since this is a monograph on horror, the presence of Mark Twain might be confusing to some. My previous chapter details work by Poe, a much more conventional choice for a study of literary horror. Poe and Twain, in the works covered here, both maintain a rigid ontological separation between humans and the divine. They just go about it in different ways. Poe's spectral-animalistic forces and Twain's oneiric, intangible Thought both resist the anthropomorphism inherent to conventional Judeo-Christian imaginings of the divine. Poe maintains his separation between humans and the divine by keeping humans weak, confused, and terrified—the prey of monstrous powers. I would argue that Twain's division is even starker, as his thematic twists and formal

turns effectively abolish humanity altogether by the story's end, turning our supposedly unique species into the poorly thought-out invention of a stupid and lonely god.

In keeping with the sharp ontological divides chronicled in Twain's variants, I contend that *No. 44* and *TMS 1916* fall into a *sui generis* formal category, both in Twain's oeuvre and in American literature. The negativity of these variants, embodied perfectly in each text's thematic and formal breakdowns, merits their paired inclusion in my project. The bumbling antics of each version's plot end with a startling realization, undermining the lighter elements by abruptly throwing them into stark philosophical relief. They feel noticeably *unfinished*, despite their ending—whose premise is fearsome in its numinous implications: god does not care about us because we are simply figments of its stunted imagination, dreamed up only to suffer at its unwitting pleasure.

I therefore propose to read *No. 44* and *TMS 1916* not as conventional horror stories in the mold of Poe, but as *essays* in Montaigne's original sense of the word: "...act[s] of provocative incompleteness" that present to readers a world of numinous horror (Abbott 10). "Provocative incompleteness" perfectly describes these texts because, as we shall see, they revolve on an aporetic axis—one that stubbornly resists conventional diegetical boundaries and readerly attempts to discern and satisfactorily explain the workings of its metaphysical premises. This inexplicable metaphysics nonetheless remains critical to a reading of the text that does not dismiss its endemic pessimism out of hand or attempt to explain it away allegorically, biographically, or otherwise. The staunch refusal of the ending to truly resolve the story's disparate dimensions is a big part of what has made *The Mysterious Stranger*—regardless of variant—so enduringly seductive to literary critics.

Some earlier critics have labeled these texts pessimistic, but they tend to use this label to discount the work as being somehow sub-par, even an indication of "artistic

senility” (Michelson, “Deus” 47). For the sake of context, it should be noted that *The Mysterious Stranger* variants came from an odd point late in Twain’s career that many critics have regarded as weak when compared to his earlier output.⁵ To be fair, many biographical factors support this narrative of creative decline: Twain’s business failures (most famously the ill-fated Paige typesetter), his subsequent bankruptcy and debt, his arduous global lecture tour, as well as illnesses and deaths in the Twain family, are all roughly contemporaneous with the time of *The Mysterious Stranger*’s composition. John S. Tuckey has even theorized that Twain composed the story’s vexing conclusion around the time Olivia Clemens, his beloved wife, died of heart failure in Florence, Italy, during the worldwide lecture tour that was supposed to have returned their family to solvency (63). The pessimistic sense of determinism that Twain espoused late in his life, to varying degrees of fervency and logical consistency, has widely been decried “as the neurotic floundering of an untutored mind” or framed as an “attempt to create an antidote to the claims of his troubled conscience” (Harris 6; Quirk 217).⁶ It is remarkable that pessimism, a philosophical school of thought, transforms into a marker of quality (or a distinct lack thereof) when in the hands of certain literary critics. My objection to this critical tendency is simple: reading the texts’ pessimism and endemic, existentially negative attitude as an indicator of “artistic senility” denies the philosophical import of these stories.

⁵ Van Wyck Brooks “saw Mark Twain as a potentially great satirist who became a mere humorist” with the perceived failure of *The Mysterious Stranger* (Kanh 4). Henry Nash Smith, one-time curator of the Mark Twain Papers at UC Berkeley, wrote a famously withering appraisal of the pessimistic conclusion of *TMS 1916*: “Satan’s destruction of the mimic world he has created is the symbolic gesture of a writer who can no longer find any meaning in man or society” (188).

⁶ See Quirk and *The Oxford Companion to Mark Twain* for efficient summations of the roots, features, inconsistencies, and critical afterlife of Twain’s determinism. Sherwood Cummings provides an astute syllogism that thoroughly summarizes Twain’s deterministic stance (205-207).

There are still others who nuance or twist the pessimism in these variants for more positive and recuperative readings of Twain's work. In 1942, Paine's successor Bernard DeVoto claimed that Twain had, by finishing *The Mysterious Stranger*, "[returned] from the edge of insanity, and found as much peace as any man may find in his last years, and brought his talent into fruition and made it whole again" (130). In *The Reverend Mark Twain*, Joe B. Fulton reads *The Mysterious Stranger* as a jeremiad. Harold K. Bush and Bennett Kravitz broadly concur, the former classifying Twain's novella as spiritual (rather than political) reform literature and the latter framing it as an optimistic, proto-existentialist screed urging its readers towards an Emersonian sense of intellectual independence.⁷

An abundance of the criticism downplays the pessimism question to read *The Mysterious Stranger* in a variety of contexts. Some who discount *The Mysterious Stranger* variants do so because of a perceived change in Twain's trademark style.⁸ Meta-psychological takes on *The Mysterious Stranger* abound.⁹ Meta-compositional readings,¹⁰

⁷ See Hauck for a more Camus-influenced existentialist approach to *TMS 1916*. Roger B. Salomon has deemed Twain's vacillations about the futility of life in *The Mysterious Stranger* prophetic of Camus's enduring conception of absurdity; he goes so far as to say that "Twain had arrived close to the modern existentialist position" in *TMS 1916* (179, 180).

⁸ Alan Gribben describes this change, writing that Twain "had almost completely abandoned the detailed settings that had earlier identified him as one of the chief regionalists within the American Realism movement" (240). Kahn describes the change as "the characteristic zany style of Mark Twain's last decade—mixing wit, fancy, slang, and the grotesque in a freewheeling way" (162). One of Twain's most ardent defenders, Kahn's effusive description of the new style gives us some insight into the chaotic themes and approaches for which Twain abandoned his idiosyncratic realist-regionalism—to his own detriment, in the eyes of a sizable contingent of Twain critics. The irony of citing Alan Gribben, (in)famous for his expurgated, slur-free editions of *Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, on the subject of stylistic variation in Twain texts is not lost on me. Given the importance of the Paine and Duneka variant to this chapter, Gribben's inclusion seems merited, if only for the sake of emphasizing the extra-authorial manipulation to which Twain's works seem uniquely vulnerable, even in the twenty-first century.

⁹ See Bird, Susan K. Harris, Knoper, and Simmons. It should be noted that Harris endorses a pessimistic understanding of Twain. In *Mark Twain's Escape from Time*, she says "the manuscripts, the finished works, and the notebooks of [Twain's final] years all... point to a profound loss of faith in human potential" (Harris 36n5). Her approach, however, differs from mine in its focus on Twain the man, specifically his guilt and relationship to time, rather than the metaphysical pessimism of the latter variants.

as well as those that place Twain's work in the context of his contemporaries,¹¹ also crop up in the criticism. Other scholars have tackled Twain's whirlpool of genres and character types in *The Mysterious Stranger* variants. Despite these various approaches, all seem unified in their goal to read something positive and life-affirming into this admittedly confusing and markedly pessimistic story.

Relatively few critical approaches actively engage with the metaphysical dimensions of Twain's novella. When it comes to Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger*, and questions of godhood (or religion, more generally) three critics outshine the rest: James S. Leonard, Bruce Michelson, and Dwayne Eutsey. Yet even as they read against the grain of those who critique Twain's later period, they remain entrenched in the popular critical endeavor of rescuing Twain's reputation from the spotty quality of his later works. Leonard argues that Forty-Four, as a character, seems to operate outside of time, echoing the extra-temporal properties of God and the angels in *Paradise Lost* (167). Leonard, of the three, comes closest to an outright pessimistic reading with his claim that *No. 44* is "a novel about the essential unreadability of the signs that the universe provides for human perusal" (172). Bruce Michelson has conceded that *The Mysterious Stranger* is not a structural triumph because it is haunted by the irresolvable tension between the playful nature and grim message of its titular paranormal lead. He asserts that *The Mysterious Stranger*'s composition was fueled by the question of "how to balance [Twain's] rejection of theological theism with an affirmation, however dim, of the

¹⁰ See Michelson's "Motions" for a meta-perspective on Twain's creative process, exploring what happens if we try to read the steps and stages of *No. 44*'s composition as a unified narrative about how a work of imaginative fiction comes into being, framing the process as "an intermittent imaginative journey from a condition of alienation towards a condition of intimacy" (219, 223). See Lowry for a detailed consideration of Twain's self-construction as an author.

¹¹ For a book-length reading of the later Twain (including *No. 44*, *The Mysterious Stranger*) in the context of William James's work and their acquaintance, see Horn. For a study of Twain's readings in science, see Cummings.

possibility of something greater than the limited, man-conceived, theistic God” (Michelson, “Deus” 52). He uses the figure of the *deus ludens*, “a childlike, playful god” to make his case, explaining how Twain’s story derogates the theistic God as absurd (Michelson, “Deus” 46).¹² He follows his statement on the absurdity of the Judeo-Christian God with a shift in attention towards the quality (rather than the content) of Twain’s work, claiming that, “...through play, a vital, enduring hopeful festivity and life have been restored to Mark Twain's fiction” (Michelson, “Deus” 56). Between 2005 and 2016, Dwayne Eutsey published work focused on the theological and religio-historical dimensions of *No. 44*. Overall, he champions an optimistic, syncretic reading of *No. 44*, factoring in “an ambiguously hopeful transcendence found in Eastern religions and the mystical traditions of the West” (Eutsey, “Message” 60). “Twain,” according to Eutsey, “was actively engaged with positive elements of Hindu religion as he was writing *No. 44* between 1902 and 1908” (“Devil-Lore” 109). Given the globally accretive approach of Advaitic Vedanta,¹³ the branch of Hinduism that Eutsey purports to have inspired Twain, he contends that Forty-Four begins the novella “as an ironic human Jesus figure before evolving into a divine trickster like Krishna” (“Devil-Lore” 190). Admirably daring in their readings and detailed in their research, these arguments prioritize discussions of the

¹² Another conception to which I am similarly indebted is Hilton Obenziger’s brief but helpful mention of what he calls “the bad-boy deity[, which] is not necessarily vicious or evil, at least not self-consciously; he is beyond moral bounds” (77). Like the *deus ludens* of Michelson, this marks one of the few critical endeavors that seriously considers the dimensions of godhood in *The Mysterious Stranger*. Ultimately, however, Obenziger situates his critique of *The Mysterious Stranger* (and Twain, more broadly) in relation to America’s nineteenth-century imperialist projects. He, too, is rooted in the critical tendency to protect Twain’s legacy from this heterodox text, calling *No. 44* “an extended meditation on the powers of the imagination in fiction” (Obenziger 181).

¹³ Advaitic Vedanta, a “non-dualistic religion derived from ancient Hindu scriptures called the *Upanishads*,” accepts all world religions as expressions of Brahman, “Hinduism’s Supreme Godhead... which is the formless and impersonal source of Ultimate Reality” (Eutsey, “Devil-Lore” 106 & “Hinduism” 68).

provenance of the variants' supernatural trickster figure, but shy away from wholesale-negative approaches to the text.

Thus far, no one has reckoned fully with the shockingly bleak, shared ending of *No. 44* and *TMS 1916*. This critical lacuna exists because the aporetic loop at work in these variants leaves readers without any sense of diegetic or extradiegetic certainty. Diegetic certainty, or simple comprehension of plot, is out of the question because the story's conclusion leaves us with more questions than answers; extradiegetic certainty, meaning a sense of readerly satisfaction at the cohesion of plot and thematic content, is also at peril because of the web of generic elements present in the story.¹⁴ In keeping with their Montaigne-esque essay form, the horror of these variants is indeed generic in that the text refuses to conform to the architecture of any single known genre, keeping its readers in the dark as to what sort of narrative they are consuming, setting the stage for later writers of numinous horror to further manipulate the godlike position an author holds in relation to readers.

I want to challenge Michelson and others' figuration of the divine being at the heart of Twain's challenging narrative web. *The Mysterious Stranger* variants covered in this chapter are works of numinous horror. Their cosmology is undeniably pessimistic. Godhood, in *No. 44* and *TMS 1916*, is a form of omnipotent idiocy. Where Roger B. Salomon saw Twain trying to escape the tribulations of both his own life and those of American history through "severance of the direct relationship between the mind and the world," I instead read the opposite: in *No. 44* and *TMS 1916*, the mind and the world are

¹⁴ On the generic front, Alan Gribben notes the presence of "autobiography, realism, naturalism, determinism, revolt against the village, romantic love and courtship, biblical parable, fable, science fiction, magic show, history lesson, philosophical treatise, theological musing, and dream therapy" in *No. 44* (241). Derek Parker Royal details an impressive list of the character types that Forty-Four inhabits over the progress of the novella: "...an impish prankster, a satanic figure, a benevolent fatalist, a childlike innocent, a philosophical pragmatist, a social determinist, a showman and performer, dream substance, and, perhaps most important, an artist and creator" (44).

one and the same, in that both are of no true consequence (179). Where other critics have seen an impish *deus ludens* capriciously pulling the story's strings, I read a *deus stultum* coiled into an aporetic loop—a cosmically isolated Thought, perpetually senseless of the needless suffering it causes when dreaming up a world to unconsciously manipulate, a world inhabited by its imaginary outgrowths: the “shabby poor ridiculous things” that call themselves Man.

METAPHYSICAL DISASTER: THE SHARED ENDING OF *THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER*'S LATTER VARIANTS

Following the text's stubborn resistance to logic and other narrative conventions, I will begin my reading of *The Mysterious Stranger*'s latter variants by focusing on the curious conclusion they share. Their gloomy ending emphasizes the divine's omnipotence, simultaneously undercutting any epistemological or ontological authority normally associated with the divine in Twain's predominantly western religious context. The god in *The Mysterious Stranger* is not a masterful engineer in the Judeo-Christian sense; it is instead an “inextinguishable, indestructible” Thought that has “existed, companionless, through all the eternities” (*No. 44* 404 & *TMS 1916* 120). Claiming to August/Theodor that “*Nothing exists save empty space—and you!*,” Forty-Four/Satan reveals that the “universe and its contents were only dreams, visions, fictions!” (*No. 44* 404 & *TMS 1916* 120, 121, emphasis original). In keeping with the maelstrom of confusion at the narrative's finale, Forty-Four/Satan remarks, “...I, your poor servant, have *revealed you to yourself* and set you free!” (*No. 44* 404 & *TMS 1916* 120, my emphasis). The idiocy inherent to Twain's representation of the divine in both variants culminates just after this line, in Forty-Four/Satan's final exhortation to August/Theodor: “Dream other dreams, and better!” (*No. 44* 404 & *TMS 1916* 120). Shortly after this

mandate, Forty-Four/Satan vanishes, leaving an “appalled” August/Theodor in “an empty and soundless world” to “[realize] that all he said was true” (*No. 44* 405, 403 & *TMS 1916* 121). After tireless puffery about his inherent moral and cognitive superiority to humanity, Forty-Four/Satan’s final advice to our unwittingly deific narrator is simply to perpetuate his creation of worlds now proven to be meaningless and illusory. It appears that there is no transcendence, even for beings of divine scope and power, in the storyworld of *The Mysterious Stranger*.

My intention in pairing these texts revolves around reading them in the context of the pessimistic narrative terminus they share, thanks to *No. 44*’s relative incompleteness and *TMS 1916*’s being the product of extra-authorial emendation.¹⁵ Roger B. Salomon said it best: “It is... debatable whether the ending of *The Mysterious Stranger* works out in intellectual terms” (180). Hilton Obenziger most colorfully describes the critical consternation over Twain’s maddening ending, summing it up as “an afterthought or simply an easy exit for the narrative via philosophical trap door” (174). The disjunction between the text and its ending did not stop editors from using Twain’s conclusion in *TMS 1916*. In both versions of Twain’s storyworld, then, recursive self-delusion is inescapable. The core flaw of humanity may indeed be thoughtless cruelty, but that failing is itself a product of the *deus stultum*’s titanic incompetence. Everything constructed by the Thought does not make sense, and yet aporia is all readers are left with.

¹⁵ Sholom J. Kanh, in his influential *Mark Twain’s Mysterious Stranger: A Study of the Manuscript Texts* (1978), states in no uncertain terms that *No. 44* “is the text for which the ending was expressly written” (8). While *No. 44* has an ending, the experience of reading the story makes the ending’s awkward fit abundantly clear. Stanley Brodwin explains the chronology of this now-infamous conclusion thusly: “This passage was written four years after Twain had stopped work on [*The Chronicle of Young Satan*] and six years after ‘Schoolhouse Hill.’ Yet it was written four years before the scene of the historical pageant ‘44’ shows August and then dissolves, leaving an ‘empty & soundless world’” (224). Gibson opines “None of the three [manuscripts] is a finished work, although Twain did draft a ‘Conclusion of the book’ for the third manuscript with the intent—*never fulfilled*—of completing this last version” (2, my emphasis).

To be clear, I am not arguing that the aporetic loop was a deliberate invention of Twain's. Making such a claim would play directly into narratives of heroic authorship, specifically the critical search for a perfected Twain, which has motivated the current scholarly disregard for the negativity endemic to *The Mysterious Stranger* variants—a popular critical sentiment to which this chapter responds. Instead, I contend that we must divorce (or, at the very least, estrange) ourselves from the idea of Twain as the purely authoritative engineer of these texts, given that one of the variants studied here is the Frankensteinian product of posthumous, extra-authorial manipulation. The aporetic loop unveiled by these variants' frustrating shared conclusion is inextricable from the Montaigne-esque provocative incompleteness of their form. By virtue of a shared-but-stunted ending, a humanity-denigrating model of theodicy, violations of conventional diegesis, and a polymorphic approach to form, the two complete variants of *The Mysterious Stranger* operate as numinous horror texts, providing a difficult and unsettled (some might say *unsettling*) reading experience about a senseless world constructed by a witless god.

AVE EXITIUM: THEODICY AND THE NULLIFICATION OF HUMAN IDENTITY

Twain's abrogative approach to theodicy is a primary facet of *The Mysterious Stranger's* perplexing mode of godhood. Writ large, the theodicies at work in Judeo-Christian faiths are based on an anthropocentric principle: a comprehensible godhead exists and our species has a privileged relationship with it. No such logic applies to the theodicy of *No. 44* and *TMS 1916*, especially not the deferred kind upon which Christianity's system of earthy struggle and afterlife rewards entirely depends. Instead of conforming to an orderly scheme of reasons and rewards, theodicy—in the storyworlds of these variants—takes on the relative formlessness of dreams and play, speaking to the

omnipotent idiocy of the Thought revealed at the end of each story. Just as dreams are integral to the texts' constructions of godhood, so is play. Bruce Michelson has already made the case that Twain is the principle writer of play-experiences in American literature ("Deus" 46). The act of play is of paramount importance to *No. 44* and *TMS 1916*, given that their plots at first revolve around the boyish antics shared by Forty-Four/Satan and August/Theodor. Dreams and play are ruled by an inherent lack of logic; likewise, Twain's model of theodicy in *The Mysterious Stranger* variants runs on the imaginative whimsy of play and the free-associating disorder of dreams.

The scenes covered in this section illustrate the workings of Twain's half-dream, half-play theodicy, which is inextricable from his abolishment of humanity as an unexampled, inimitable category of identity. Both variants open with oneiric language. It appears in the second paragraph of both versions: "...Austria was far from the world, and *asleep*, and our village was in the middle of that *sleep*, being in the middle of Austria. It *drowsed* in peace in the deep privacy of a hilly and woodsy solitude where news from the world hardly ever came to *disturb its dream*, and was infinitely content" (*No. 44* 221 & *TMS 1916* 56, my emphases). Twain's drowsy description does a great deal of conventional work, establishing another of his characteristic sleepy little towns while also setting the thematic stage for his satirical excoriations of organized religions, which will be detailed later in this section. Sleep and dreaming take on a greater, more sinister importance, given the cyclicity of both dreaming and the model of deific idiocy established by the stories' communal ending.

Humanity's existential singularity is contradicted by prominent scenes based around artificial lifeforms, purposefully crafted to resemble humanity. Early in *TMS 1916*, Satan uses clay to fashion "a crowd of little men and women the size of *your*

finger” (60-61, my emphasis).¹⁶ Theodor’s moment of deictic comparison (“the size of *your* finger”) suits his boyishly casual speech, but also quietly lays groundwork for likening us to the clay people in more disturbing ways later. The roots for Twain’s aporetic vision of godhood also appear in this deictic line of direct readerly address. We initially liken ourselves to Theodor in the scene, given that Satan’s power is quite beyond any normal reader’s capacity and that the clay people are, again, little larger than any of *our* fingers. But, upon finishing the story, we learn that we cannot liken ourselves to Theodor—that we are not his fellows, but merely the stuff of the *deus stultum*’s unwitting dreams. Here, Twain’s theodicy of dream-play starts to take shape, hearkening back to his promise to Howells about correcting humanity’s delusions of existential grandeur. Satan sets the clay people to work building a castle, which they do at an impressive speed. Satan catches a tiny falling woman and replaces her on the scaffolding to continue her work, remarking casually, “She is an idiot to step backward like that and not notice what she is about” (*TMS 1916* 61). The scene appears comic and whimsical yet is shot through with undercurrents of numinous disquiet. Readers witness, in this scene, an act of kneejerk deific compassion, only for the creator to bemoan the stupidity of his creations. In the storyworld of *TMS 1916*, divine mercy is indeed tempered, not with ire or judgment, but with childish impatience.

The Judeo-Christian existential bromide of humanity being lovingly crafted in the creator’s image becomes the byproduct of a children’s game. Theodor notes the behavior of the clay women, who carry mortar to the clay men, “just as our work-women have

¹⁶ This scene (among others, including ambulant clay dogs and squirrels) parallels Christ’s own creation of living beasts from clay in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. The similarity of these scenes to biblical apocrypha is deliberate. Gladys Bellamy has established that Twain read the Apocryphal New Testament, citing his mention of it in an 1867 letter (352). In his *Alta California* letters, Twain sketched out a similar scene involving a young Christ granting life to clay animals, even using the title “Apocryphal New Testament” (Michelson, “Deus” 45-46).

always done” (*TMS 1916* 61). He is thoroughly taken with the magic he witnesses; but, reading the scene in the context of the work’s distressing conclusion highlights how early the theodicy of Twain’s nightmarishly childish god starts to surface in the 1916 variant. Just as Theodor was taught by the Church that he was made in God’s image, the clay people he and his friends helped Satan to make are crafted in *their* image. The shocking similarity Theodor notices between the clay women and his female neighbors in Eseldorf belittles humanity’s supposedly exceptional nature.

The understandable sense of wonder that Theodor tries to express in light of what he is watching quickly (but abortively) enters the territory of the sublime:

I should not be able to make anyone understand how exciting it all was. *You* know that kind of quiver that trembles around through *you* when *you* are seeing something so strange and enchanting and wonderful that it is just a fearful joy to be alive and look at it; and *you* know how *you* gaze, and *your* lips turn dry and *your* breath comes short, but *you* wouldn’t be anywhere but there, not for the world. (*TMS 1916* 61, my emphases)

As with other tales of numinous horror, this scene inverts the conventional sublime moment. Gone is the standard disparity of scale typified in traditional examples of the sublime, like Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Instead, Theodor towers over that which fills him with inarticulate wonder, implicitly highlighting the unconscious power he wields over his environment in his true form as a godlike Thought. Considering the mechanics of narratorial language, Theodor continues to directly address readers, even though his final realization obliterates the validity of this diegetic audience—remember, Theodor is the Thought/*deus stultum* that has created the entirety of existence while dreaming in a cosmic void. Who, then, could he possibly be addressing, other than himself? The childlike clumsiness of this sentence and its ceaseless

repetition of “you” render the very word almost meaningless. Theodor’s explication of the physiology of the sublime encounter is useless because readers familiar with the story know that there is no true division between him, Satan, or his diegetic audience. Theodor’s feeling of sublimity can never affirm the power of his intellect in the Kantian-transcendental fashion of the sublime because there is *nothing* outside of his mind to be redefined and circumscribed.

Readers are pulled back into the little world of Satan’s clay people before we can contemplate the implications of Theodor’s incoherent sublime reaction. A brawl erupts between two clay workmen who, “in buzzing little bumblebee voices... were cursing and swearing at each other; now came blows and blood; then they locked themselves together in a life-and-death struggle” (*TMS 1916 62*). Before any of their clay fellows can intervene, Satan “crushe[s] the life out of them with his fingers,” casually throws them away, wipes their blood from his hands, and continues talking about the moral superiority of his angelic breed: “We cannot do wrong; neither have we any disposition to do it, for we do not know what it is” (*TMS 1916 62*). The irony here is bold, broad, and undeniably funny. Read considering the story’s conclusion, however, the scene takes on a ghastly philosophical resonance. The clay fighters are likened to insects, undoubtedly to play on the nigh-universal childhood behavior of unwitting cruelty to bugs—a crime Theodor silently deems “wanton murder” (*TMS 1916 62*). The irony persists here, given that Theodor is as much a perpetrator of this murder as Satan is, since he, Satan, and the clay people are all generated by the unconscious, deific Thought.

When the clay people’s clamorous mourning for their crushed fellows gets on Satan’s nerves, the theodistic rampage intensifies. He smashes the entire community of clay people without even considering the suffering he causes, much to the boys’ horror. Here, Twain treats us to a slapstick apocalypse-in-miniature, depriving it of the pomp

expected from the Book of Revelation and replacing the deafening trumps and fiery swords with a simple wooden board used to mash the mourners thoughtlessly. The remaining clay people are subject to what Theodor describes as “a fiendish massacre” when Satan, tired of his and the boys’ ambulant creations, herds the clay survivors into the very castle they built and destroys it with a small, fiery storm that he summons from nowhere (*TMS 1916 64*). This incident better suits the character’s biblical associations and readerly expectations for an apocalyptic scenario. But, it also indicates Twain’s cartoonish approach to eschatology, further downplaying the solemnity of the Judeo-Christian imagery and plot elements of these latter variants. The world’s end is neither foreordained nor is it a punishment meted out by a divine authority—it is an act of puerile annoyance.

The apocalypse has become the stuff of play. The supposedly exceptional human image has proven itself to be effortlessly replicable. Now, conventional religious belief (and its inherent anthropocentrism) is diminished during Satan’s dalliance with clay. Among these doomed homonculi is “a priest... with his hands crossed upon his breast” (*TMS 1916 62*). The presence of this priest suggests that the clay people are practicing unmistakably Christian (or, at the very least, Christian-analogous) rituals. Such a realization compounds the belittling effect of the little clay women that astonished Theodor earlier in the text. Once again, the idea of living beings fashioned in the form of their creator is divested of any religious significance. The fruitless prayers of the clay priest reveal that Satan’s clay creations resemble humanity not just physically, but *epistemologically* as well.

No. 44 implements the same unreasoning approach to theodicy by diminishing the significance of human identity, but then takes the extra step of atomizing identity through the often-confusing presence of Duplicates and Dream-Selves that interact with the

characters, emphasizing dreams rather than play. Confusion is the operative word in describing most dreams; it readily applies to the presence of the Duplicates and/or the Dream-Selves in *No. 44*, as well. Admittedly, the interplay of these figures is confusing and hard to track throughout the novella, another sign of the text's provocative incompleteness. In short, Forty-Four magically crafts the Duplicates (ambulant, seemingly sentient clones of the printers, including August!) to counter an attempted strike by the workers protesting Heinrich's sponsorship of Forty-Four as a new apprentice. The Dream-Selves are harder to explain, but it appears that they are spiritual forces pulled by Forty-Four from the ether to power his Duplicates; despite this fantastical origin, they *also* somehow seem to be outgrowths of every person, the halves of us that live and play while our Workaday-Selves, "clogged and hindered" by inescapable flesh, sleep (*No. 44* 315). The contradictions of their origins are never addressed or solved. Confusion continues to reign supreme in *No. 44*.

Imagination, a hallmark of sentience, is no longer a uniquely human trait, according to one of Forty-Four's sharper proclamations: "...a man's mind cannot *create*—a god's can, and my race can. That is the difference" (*No. 44* 333, emphasis original). This line is one of the few explicit references in *No. 44* to the eponymous character's identity, which is never decisively clarified. We never learn the difference between "a god" and Forty-Four's "race." Nor do we even learn what that "race" is. Ultimately, this hypothetical race is just that—a hypothetical. Despite the tantalizing hint at a solution to the mystery of Forty-Four's identity, we must remember that this enigma is a falsehood, because Forty-Four and August are fragments of the same Thought.

Continuing to deny any special link between humanity and the capacity to imagine, Forty-Four calls the Duplicates "a capable lot, with their measureless imaginations! If they imagine there is a mystical clog upon them and it takes them a

couple of hours to set a couple of lines [in the print shop], that is what happens; but on the contrary, if they imagine it takes them but half a second to set a whole galleyful of matter, *that* is what happens!” (*No. 44* 316, emphasis original). The immense capacity and capability of the Duplicates’ imaginations beggar those of August and his human neighbors. The Duplicates’ reality is entirely dictated by the conditions dreamt up in their artificial imaginations. Reality and its rules have become purely subjective in the castle, thanks to the powerful non-human imaginations at work within its walls.

Duplicates and Dream-Selves alike demonstrate how arbitrary human existence is in the storyworld of *No. 44*. Towards the middle of the narrative, August finds himself in competition for the affections of Marget, master Heinrich’s comely niece. The rub is that his competitor is Emil Schwarz, his own Duplicate, who is not in love with the same waking Marget that August adores, but with *her* Dream-Self, named Lisbet. Adding to the confusion, Emil’s feelings for Lisbet are fickle and transitory, and neither Marget nor Lisbet are aware of each other’s existence! In an argument with August about this metaphysical romantic entanglement, Forty-Four declaims, “Human beings aren’t of any particular consequence; there’s plenty more, plenty” (*No. 44* 358). Carried away with the passion of the moment, and his amorous distraction, August does not remark on Forty-Four’s casual disregard for the existential significance traditionally assigned to humanity. As far as his supernatural friend is concerned, Marget is just as good as Lisbet, Emil is just as good as August, and vice-versa in both cases. There is no unitary or foundational identity for any of these characters because such ontological certainty is unachievable in the storyworld of *No. 44*.

In another argument with August, Emil derides the “odious flesh” in which Forty-Four has entombed him, claiming he was originally “a spirit of air, habitant of the august Empire of Dreams” (*No. 44* 370). His distaste for physical, tangible being is most

apparent in his description of his original existence as a dream-sprite before he was harnessed into a Duplicate body of August: “We have no character, no *one* character, we have *all* characters; we are honest in one dream, dishonest in the next; we fight in one battle and flee from the next” (*No. 44* 370, emphases original). To Emil and his oneiric brethren, tangible existence as physical matter is something to be derided, a state of imprisonment amid heavy chains of rules and logic. Even August is moved, despite his anthropocentrism, betraying a heretofore-unknown sympathy with the idea that human life may not be the pinnacle of all existence. Emil’s repeated use of the word “character” reeks of the metafictional as much as the metaphysical. The fluidity of Emil’s and other dream-sprites’ aspects and behaviors supports my notion that different fragments of the originary Thought operate at different levels of diegesis and self-awareness. His disclosure of this fluidity to August marks yet another curious moment in the text where it appears as though the Thought is trying to wake itself up by pointing out the inconsistencies in the world it has fashioned to less self-aware aspects like August.

Emil later compounds this ontological reduction of humanity, telling our narrator of the inhabitants of “solar systems not known to men” that he has met in his travels; he details the anatomies of aliens “from comets where nobody was comfortable except when white-hot,” “some from invisible black planets... where the people have no eyes, nor any use for them,” and even some not based on any one planet, but “from *general space*—that sea of ether which has no shores, and stretches on” (*No. 44* 377, emphasis original). For a character from a story set in the Middle Ages, Twain pours noticeably Darwinian ideas from the mouth of the otherwise-fantastical Emil. Considering this semi-scientific argot, it is worth noting that Twain’s generation was the first to have access to telescopes functional enough to give them a somewhat clear idea of the immensity of space, as well as the dawning realization that “human beings must live with... the relative minuteness

of their individual lives, surrounded as they are by the moral vacuum of an incomprehensibly expanded universe” (Gribben 248). What appears to be a throwaway line of Emil’s meant to impress August is another iteration of generic rupture in an already unstable text overflowing with bizarre tonal shifts and strange anachronisms: here, science fiction erupts in what has thus far appeared to be a comic medieval fantasy.

In another of the novella’s inexhaustibly whimsical episodes, Forty-Four magically transforms a young servant girl named Mary into a cat. Her full name (“Mary Florence Fortescue Baker G. Nightingale”) is as silly as Twain gets, comically drawn out to elicit readerly amusement while contributing to the text’s storm of anachronistic references (*No. 44* 375). She takes to her new form surprisingly well, as seen in her exchange with Forty-Four:

‘...Don’t change me back, leave me as I am. Christians go—I know where they go; some to the one place some to the other; but I think cats—where do you think cats go?’

‘Nowhere. After they die.’

‘Leave me as I am, then; don’t change me back...’ (*No. 44* 360-361)

Mary prefers life *and death* as a cat. This preference is unexpected, given that she is, like the rest of the characters, someone presumably raised with a Christian epistemology based entirely upon an anthropocentric cosmology. The rewards of the afterlife, according to Mary’s religious background, are exclusively promised to humanity. But she deliberately chooses to forego them, extolling the virtues of life in her new feline form and language, which both Forty-Four and August magically comprehend. Two traits thought to be specific to humanity—intelligible, complex speech and a central position in Judeo-Christian cosmology—are undermined in this scene, seemingly to no consequence.

When the friendly feline refers to August as “dear Duplicate,” her throwaway comment is easy for readers to overlook (*No. 44* 375). It goes completely unacknowledged by August and Forty-Four, but it continues to erode the stability of human identity in the text. After all, August is neither a human boy, a Duplicate, nor a spirit being like Emil—he is, like everyone else in the story, just one of innumerable aspects of the godlike, void-dwelling Thought revealed at the end of the novella. If any discernible theodicy is at work in the storyworld of *No. 44*, it does not accord with conventional Judeo-Christian belief systems.

This is not to say that real-world Judeo-Christian systems of belief have *no* place in the text. Despite their relative homelessness in the regimented world of Twain studies, these two variants of *The Mysterious Stranger* veritably crackle with the author’s signature distaste for the many pitfalls, hypocrisies, and shortcomings of organized religion. Rather than just operating as exemplars of Twain’s trademark humor and skepticism, however, jokes made at the expense of Catholicism and Christian Science in the variants serve a critical thematic function: to ridicule and tear down accepted theodistic models, old and new, for their fundamental assumptions that humanity matters to the power behind the universe, and that this power could even be apprehensible, let alone interested in human affairs.

A major target of Twain’s irreligious ire is, of course, the Catholic Church,¹⁷ which holds spiritual (and political) sway over the setting of these variants. Early in *TMS 1916*, Theodor tells us of the Catholic Church’s control over local education: “Knowledge was not good for the common people, and could make them discontented with the lot which God had appointed for them, and God would not endure

¹⁷ See Durocher for an extended discussion of Twain’s relationship to Catholicism.

discontentment with His plans” (56). Such a disclosure comes a mere line after we learn that the story is set in the town of Eseldorf—Assville, roughly translated. The conjunction of the town’s name with this less-than-shining appraisal of the Church’s involvement in local education speaks volumes about the intellectual atmosphere in which August and Theodor dwell, again reflecting the *deus stultum* at the heart of the narrative. The gap between the human and the divine here is simultaneously non-existent and insuperable; the Thought dreaming everything into existence is irrevocably insensate and stupid, just like its unwitting creations. They allow themselves to be ruled by the Catholic Church, a massively powerful institution that openly enforces the suppression of knowledge, despite said institution’s *raison d’être*: to provide humanity with a sense of transcendent meaning through the Gospels.

TMS 1916 would not be a story critical of Catholicism without the invocation of heresy. Theodor tells us of the benevolent local priest, Father Peter, and his rather unorthodox beliefs:

Some people charged him with talking around in conversation that God was all goodness and would find a way to save all his poor human children. It was a horrible thing to say, but there was never any absolute proof that Father Peter said it; and it was out of character for him to say it, too, for he was always good and gentle and truthful. (*TMS 1916 57*)

The notion of an omnimerciful deity, arguably one of the pillars of Christ’s message in the New Testament, becomes heresy in *TMS 1916*, thanks to the Church’s ministrations. In both variants, poor Father Peter is suspended from the clergy for espousing such beliefs. Even considered outside of the fact that the ending that flagrantly contradicts Christian cosmology with its collapse of all existence into a deluded deific dream, these

scenes establish the image of a Catholic Church concerned more with power and politics than its fundamental doctrines of mercy, love, and charity.

Just as heresy is a go-to for anyone seeking to pillory Catholicism's historical failings, so are the novellas' scenes of witch-hunting. Thanks to his shenanigans with the Duplicates, Forty-Four is actually burned at the stake late in *No. 44*; he reappears soon afterward, unharmed and even amused by the fiery vindication of his complaints about humanity's relentless cruelty and stupidity. Early in *TMS 1916*, Satan supports the impoverished family of the unpopular Father Peter, supplying them with a cat that magically provides Father Peter, his niece Marget, and their domestic Ursula with any material goods they need. The villainous Father Adolf (himself responsible for Father Peter's suspension) and the townsfolk spy upon their home because their recent change in fortunes (thanks to young Satan's magical cat) has started a witch panic. The lack of intellectual rigor in Father Adolf's deliberations demonstrates the lunacy of the supposed logic of witch-hunting: "No apparitions, no incantations, no thunder. That settled it. This was witchcraft. And not only that but of a new kind—a kind never dreamed of before" (*TMS 1916* 86). The irony here is that the human mind is too limited to explain occurrences beyond its ken in any other way than a hostile reaction to supposed witchcraft, one that is proved by its very *lack* of evidence.¹⁸ Such dependence upon so-called negative evidence, combined with the fruitless prayers of the clay priest, Father Peter's mercy-oriented heresy, and Theodor's early mention of restrictions on local education, paints the Catholic Church—the setting's locus of epistemological knowledge and theodistic certainty—into a very dark corner, aligning it with the unending idiocy of the Thought dreaming this storyworld into existence.

¹⁸ See Rohman for a discussion of negative evidence and epistemological uncertainty in *No. 44*.

Fearful of his neighbors' reactions after resident bully Ernest Wasserman reveals August's friendship with the unpopular Forty-Four, our narrator laments his own prayers: "I needed more powerful prayers than my own—prayers of the pure and the holy—prayers of the consecrated—prayers certain to be heard, whereas mine might not be" (*No. 44* 260). At this early point in *No. 44*, the premise of a god with selective hearing (or, more specifically, one that prioritizes certain prayers) has been established, much in the same way that *TMS 1916*'s slapstick apocalypse of the clay people cements the conceptual through-line that the notion of an omnimerciful god is laughable. The only solution to August's problem appears to be a nearby order of nuns, the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Their name is well-earned: "...there were no intervals, night or day: when two of the Sisters rose from before the altar two others knelt at once in their place and the supplications went on unbroken" (*No. 44* 261). It turns out that their prayers "could be had for 50 silver groschen" (*No. 44* 260). Just as the Church's hierarchy deems the idea of absolute deific mercy heretical, Catholicism's doctrinal adherence to poverty has been replaced by a nunnery that doubles as a wholesale prayer factory, and a lucrative one at that. August's desperate desire for prayers "more powerful" than his own, finally, is risible, given that all of the prayers in the storyworld of *No. 44* must be his own, according to the text's final supernatural revelation.

Lest we forget, Catholicism was but one religion on the receiving end of Twain's skepticism and satire. Christian Science, the faith healing movement that experienced a surge of popularity in nineteenth-century America, is another primary target of Twain's in *No. 44*.¹⁹ In *Christian Science* (1907), his two-volume tome of articles ridiculing the

¹⁹ As it was with Catholicism, Twain was less concerned with the principles of Christian Science than he was with the people running the movement. According to *The Oxford Companion to Mark Twain*, he was primarily focused on Mary Baker "Eddy's paranoia and megalomania, believing in her power as a master player of confidence games" ("Christian Science (1907)" 89). Twain's daughter Clara eventually subscribed to Christian Science (Draper, "Christian Science" 143).

movement, Twain “opposes the wailing of a cat to the philosophizing of a resolute healer” (Draper, “*Christian Science*” 144). As established above, the once-human feline Mary was a figure of fun for Twain. So is one of the historical figures that inspired her lengthy name: Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. She comes under fire when Forty-Four discourses at length on the failures of human attempts at prophetic interpretation. He quotes the entirety of a 1905 telegram in which Eddy urges her followers to cease praying for the cessation of hostilities in the then-ongoing Russo-Japanese War and redirect their spiritual attentions to smaller, more localized concerns. Or, as Forty-Four sarcastically puts it, “take hold of something nearer our size, such as strikes and insurrections” (*No. 44* 383). Much like August’s foolish desire for the supposedly top-of-the-line prayers of the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, this scene uses Christian Science, a contemporary spiritual movement, to continue ridiculing the anthropocentrism inherent to Judeo-Christian theodicies. This sequence reflects the message of scenes featuring Catholicism in *TMS 1916*: prayer is not an inherently meaningful spiritual action; it is simply wasted effort. Forty-Four continues struggling to divine Eddy’s telegram: “It seems to mean that He [meaning God] does not listen to our prayers any more [sic] because we pester Him too much... the praying must be stopped—which is clear and definite; the reason for the stoppage is—well, uncertain” (*No. 44* 384). His idea of the Christian deity being annoyed with the constant appeals of his beleaguered human followers recalls the cartoonish eschaton young Satan visited upon his mourning clay creations with a wooden board, once again bringing us back to the recurrent figure at the center of these texts: the *deus stultum*—a childish, omnipotent idiot with no responsibility to the world it has dreamed into existence.

Satan’s extirpation of the clay community, the philosophical conundrums of Forty-Four’s Dream-Selves and Duplicates, Twain’s embittered burlesques of the

theodicies of Catholicism and Christian Science, and even Mary the talking cat all illustrate the senseless dream-play theodicy of *The Mysterious Stranger*'s latter two variants. Suffering and worldly evil do not exist in accordance with a divine plan beyond man's reckoning. No such divine plan exists because it would be predicated upon incalculable disparities of cognition that cannot exist in the storyworlds of these variants since each narrative is the sole product of the Thought. The Thought's visitations of suffering on its creations do not enforce any intelligible cosmic law, modeling the chaos that undergirds numinous horror as a mode. Evil and pain instead exist because god is little more than a child entertaining itself with human strife and, tiring of the spectacle, terminates it thoughtlessly. Suffering exists in these storyworlds because life itself is a dream in *The Mysterious Stranger*, an act of cosmic play entirely ungoverned by reason.

THERE ARE NO LIMITS: FORTY-FOUR, SATAN, AND VIOLATIONS OF DIEGESIS

Though it is more prevalent in *No. 44*, both versions of the story exhibit a thematic preoccupation with the metatextual and the bounds of diegesis.²⁰ Specifically, it often appears as though Forty-Four/Satan somehow exists beyond the diegetic levels of a story that a character should normally inhabit. In his book, Robert Kiely poses a valuable question: if Satan has been a liar the whole time, how do we know if his final revelation to Theodor is actually true? (118). He maintains that *The Mysterious Stranger* has a postmodern edge to it because "the text proclaims its various levels of fraudulence without seeming to be able to reveal an authentic alternative" (Kiely 121). Our disagreement is a simple point of methodological difference: I accept the metaphysical

²⁰ Bruce Michelson has previously commented on this phenomenon in *No. 44*: "...the niceties of storytelling, of plot and structure, seem to be subordinated to [Forty-Four's] whims" ("Motions" 229-230). Yet, he frames this structural curiosity in a way that is redemptive of Twain as an author, explaining that Forty-Four's narratorial interference "is a better representation of the kind of free, ecstatic creativity that one might expect, or hope for, in a complete, all-powerful, yet imaginably human consciousness" (Michelson, "Motions" 230).

premises of the stories as fundamental to my reading, while Kiely does not. Nonetheless, his postmodern skepticism remains salient because Twain's latter variants continually frustrate conventional expectations and understandings of the limits of diegesis.

Some dialogue spoken by characters in *No. 44* initially appears to contradict the story's metaphysical foundation: that the entirety of reality is the dream of a godlike, void-dwelling Thought. Given the fragmentary composition of each version, such disjunction is to be expected. But, these moments of structural instability actually suit the jarring, shared conclusion of the variants. In *No. 44*, August silently laments not standing up for his unpopular new friend, but Forty-Four telepathically picks up on the thought and replies, "Why do you reproach yourself? You did not make yourself; how then are you to blame?" (250). This question is a cruel joke, at best, considering the story's ending, which reveals August and Forty-Four to be projections of the same entity, just with differing degrees of self-awareness. The Thought seems to be toying with itself here, Socratically interrogating the inconsistencies of the world it has created and the beings within it; this marks one of many such moments of deific cognitive dissonance in the text. Later, faced with the unbelievable sight of a wagon being loaded by unknown magic, August insists to readers that it happened, despite its impossibility: "We were awake, and not dreaming" (*No. 44* 293). How can we reconcile these lines with the end of the novella, which thoroughly disproves them? The answer is disappointing in its simplicity: we cannot. Neither line's implications are resolved. Instead, these pieces of dialogue linger like unexpected traffic cones on the particularly tangled stretches of narrative road Twain has left us, recalling Stanley Brodwin and William M. Gibson's insistence that there remains a vital breach between the conclusion affixed to *No. 44* and *TMS 1916* and the remainders of their narratives. In turn, the breach between Twain's provisional ending and the narratives themselves concretizes the Montaigne-esque, provocative incompleteness

of these variants. Each tale suggests much in its dour depiction of an imaginary universe, but finally declares little.

Just as extradiegetic cohesion is in short supply, standard rules governing intra-narrative communication do not seem to apply to the eponymous strangers of *No. 44* or *TMS 1916*. The telepathy that both Forty-Four and Satan exhibit in their respective variants is a major manifestation of their bizarre ability to violate the bounds of diegesis.²¹ During the first of many late-night chats, Forty-Four reveals his ability to read August's thoughts. Our narrator is unsure of how to begin a conversation with his newfound friend:

...I thought I would throw out an observation—anything that came into my head; but nothing came but the weather, so I was dumb. He said,

‘Do you care for it?’

‘Care for what?’

‘The weather.’

I was puzzled again; in fact astonished; and said to myself ‘This is uncanny; I'm afraid of him.’

He said cheerfully, ‘Oh, you needn't be. Don't you be uneasy on my account.’

(*No. 44* 247)

Twain frames the scene comedically, a magic trick performed by one boy to impress another. Forty-Four's demonstration of telepathy wins August over and begins their friendship. The in-story mechanics of Forty-Four's mind-reading power demonstrate the importance of the metatextual to *No. 44*. He replies, directly and verbally, to thoughts that

²¹ Despite Twain's fraught relationships with his own Presbyterianism and religion at large, he did believe in the possibilities of telepathy (what he called “telegraphy”) and the ability of the mind to control/heal the ills of the body (Harris 148-149). Twain even published two articles on the subject in *Harper's*, one in 1891 and another in 1895 (Horn 161).

only August should be able to access diegetically and text that readers access extradiegetically. In other words, Forty-Four can read August's thoughts just as easily as we can. He has access to the very same text we do as readers, but then responds to this text as a participant *inside* Twain's storyworld, rather than as a passive consumer of the narrative.

Forty-Four's access to the text of August's thoughts is not his only diegesis-defying stunt. Forty-Four later reveals another dimension of his power to August when the latter is worried about whether or not he will ever have to explain Forty-Four's frequently outlandish behavior and abilities to their neighbors in the castle:

'Ah, you couldn't if you tried!'

'Couldn't what?'

'Tell what happened last night.'

'Couldn't I?'

'No. Because I don't wish it. What I don't wish, doesn't happen. I'm going to tell you various secrets by and by, one of these days. You'll keep them.'

'I'm sure I'll try to.'

'Oh, tell them if you think you *can!* Mind, I don't say you shan't, I only say you can't.' (*No. 44* 250, emphasis original)

First and foremost, the scene shows off Twain's skill in depicting boyhood camaraderie, in spite of this work's stylistic shift away from the regionalist realism for which he is celebrated. Yet, the subtext of the conversation is ominous: Forty-Four, already having demonstrated an ability to *read* August's thoughts, claims he can *control* the boy's speech, quietly indicating their unitary source: the *deus stultum*, for whom intention is entirely irrelevant. When Forty-Four clarifies his powers to August ('Mind, I don't say

you shan't, I only say you can't.”), he implies that he cannot control August's intentions, only his speech.

Attempts to address religion with Forty-Four are also stymied by these powers: “...no religious conversation, for whenever I began to frame a remark of that color *he saw it in my mind* and squelched it with that curious power of his whereby *he barred from utterance any thought of mine* it happened to suit him to bar” (*No. 44* 301, my emphases). I bring up this moment to draw special attention to August's phrasing. Here, Twain diegetically confirms that Forty-Four sees thoughts in August's mind as we might see text upon a page. A continuum of authority and utterance exists between August and Forty-Four. The end of the novella establishes the former as a deific yet unconscious Thought wielding godlike power over reality and the latter as a mere servant of the *deus stultum*. Despite his servile position, Forty-Four exercises control over August's speech and has pervasive access to August's thoughts. It seems Forty-Four, the servant that eventually awakens its creator and master, has this control over August because he is aware of their true nature as projections of the same unconscious demiurge.

Still, the aporetic loop in *The Mysterious Stranger* constitutes a problem: August's speech comprises the entire story; after all, he *is* our narrator. Forty-Four promises to tell August secrets, and first-time readers thrill at the possibility, unaware that the final truth of this story renders the very idea of secrets oxymoronic. What secrets could possibly be had (let alone be shared or kept) when August and Forty-Four are mere projections among countless others in an illusory world? Why is the Thought even concealing its cosmic solitude from itself? The entire narrative, complete with these moments of deictic narratorial speech, is a disclosure made in a void from nothing to no one, ending on a note of desolate futility.

August remains inexplicably charmed by Forty-Four's telepathy. When he earnestly attempts to defend his new friend from the jeers of Ernest Wasserman, August finds he cannot speak at all. He tells himself "Maybe it's because 44 disapproves;" on his way to continue his chores, Forty-Four looks at August over his shoulder and says, "Yes, that's it" (*No. 44* 250-251). The scene continues as August reflects on the strange situation:

These things were dreadfully uncanny, but interesting. I went musing away, saying to myself, "he [sic] must have read my thoughts when I was minded to ask him if I might tell what happened last night." He called back from far up the stairs,

'I did!' (*No. 44* 251)

Like the earlier scenes of telepathy, their exchange is apparently played for laughs. Expressions of confusion or doubt at omniscience followed quickly with its confirmation by a source removed from the immediate action remains a staple in comedy across visual media today. While the scene is undoubtedly amusing, it also highlights the fact that Forty-Four shares our access to August's thoughts in tandem with his ability to control their expression, even when he is not physically involved in the scene at hand. Forty-Four's inescapable access to August's thoughts advances my assertion that he and August are fragments of the same being working at different levels of diegesis and self-awareness.

Forty-Four's power over speech and access to thoughts stretches to characters in *No.44* other than August. Questioning the Duplicate Emil Schwarz about his maker, August looks on as his clone sputters: "We knew he was a ... we knew he was a ... a ... a ... how curious!—my tongue won't *say* it!" (*No. 44* 380, emphasis original). In another mystifying moment of direct address to the audience, August notes: "Yes, you see, 44

wouldn't let him say it—and I so near to getting that secret at last!” (*No. 44* 380). August's address to readers remains oxymoronic, given the truth of his situation, but its placement next to this scene of frustrated revelation is vital because it highlights the knowledge gap between him and Forty-Four, who will close that gap and, with it, the story. He controls the flow of information and deliberately withholds any concerning his identity. Forty-Four, then, is a character *within* a narrative whose outcomes and turns he can effectively manipulate through his readerly access to the thoughts of and night-editorial control over the speech of the characters around him.

Late in *No. 44*, this bizarre variant of telepathy wreaks a visual effect on the text itself. When the eponymous mischief-maker forces time to run backwards, the text mirrors his temporal tampering and repeats an earlier block of Forty-Four's dialogue, entirely in reverse (with the exception of August's forward-running, parenthetical commentary). Hilton Obenziger has commented upon the scene's “purely tactile, practical joke quality that a typesetter would enjoy” (179). It is exactly this “practical joke quality” that typifies the text's essay-like experimentation and overall structural instability. *No. 44*'s very form mirrors the figuration of godhood undergirding its narrative: god—if such a being could be said to exist—is either unconscious of or entirely foolish and arbitrary in its actions, returning us to the profoundly negative theodicy of the work. Time can run backwards or forwards; it makes no difference to the entity controlling the clock.

Just as the Duplicates and Dream-Selves make a compelling case for doubting humanity's supposed cosmic significance, they often bump up against the bounds of diegesis just as sharply as their mischievous maker, Forty-Four. Explaining their presence to August, Forty-Four remarks, “...the Duplicates are not real, they are fictions” (*No. 44* 315). He further comments that they are made of “fictitious flesh and bone” (*No. 44* 315).

His consistent invocations of fiction to describe these artificial lifeforms seem especially self-conscious, bordering on the metafictional. As the creator of these “fictions,” Forty-Four effectively frames himself as an author, playing further into the proto-metafictional conceit of *No. 44*’s experimental tampering with diegetic constraints. Forty-Four’s pseudo-authorship speaks again to his role as the most self-aware aspect of the *deus stultum*. He exists and works on a different level of diegesis than everyone else, speaking truer than we readers initially know.

Even independent of Forty-Four, an exchange August has with Emil illuminates just how nonsensical the plot of *No. 44* is. Emil’s speech is said to resemble dream-logic’s “skipping and disconnected fashion” (*No. 44* 376). The world of dreams is a model that dictates the workings of August’s world, despite his once-firm sense of reality’s rules. August tells us that “Past and Future were human terms and not comprehensible [sic] by [Emil], past and future being all one thing to a dream-sprite, and not distinguishable the one from the other” (*No. 44* 377). Though the tone of pity in August’s voice implies that he still privileges his supposedly human ontology over that of his clone (having once described the Duplicate’s speech as “this frantic chaos of unimaginable incomprehensibilities”), his burgeoning compassion for Emil reveals a new shakiness in that once-unquestioned perception of existence (*No. 44* 368).

Like his telepathic predecessor in *No. 44*, young Satan exhibits the same ability to read thoughts and manipulate speech in the 1916 variant. At one point, Theodor wants to correct a seemingly inconsequential lie that Satan has told Ursula, Father Peter’s domestic, about the magical cat he has given them. The boy opens his mouth to speak: “But the words did not come, because they couldn’t. Satan smiled upon me, and I understood” (*TMS 1916* 77). The story bustles forward and Theodor expresses no real concern over how effortlessly Satan controls his speech. The boy’s lack of reflection

establishes the circuitous idiocy of the *deus stultum*. It is as though an explanation is not needed, given that Satan and Theodor are extensions of the same void-dwelling consciousness; yet, the entire story—up until its jarring ending—takes the conventional form of a recounted series of anecdotes, highlighting the aporetic loop at work in the text. Satan is just a mythologized, externalized representation of Theodor’s own godlike power. Like Forty-Four, Satan’s access to Theodor’s mind is totally unfettered. No sooner than when Theodor idly wonders about the interior of the town jail, Satan teleports them there, having “overheard the thought” (*TMS 1916 78*). This innocuous reference to Satan’s telepathy shows us how circuitous and wasted such power is. The supposed miracle of Satan and Theodor’s teleportation is just one facet of the void-dwelling Thought reacting to another, less-sentient element’s curiosity about an aspect of the fictive world it has concocted for itself.

In sum, *anything* spoken by Satan functions as performative utterance. “To me no place is far away; distance does not exist for me,” he remarks, “I have but to think the journey, and it is accomplished” (*TMS 1916 96*). Amused by Satan’s power, Theodor stretches out an empty hand, saying, “The light lies upon it; think it into a glass of wine, Satan” (*TMS 1916 96*). In no uncertain terms, Theodor’s very next lines confirm Satan’s power: “He did it. I drank the wine” (*TMS 1916 96*). Neither the wine’s miraculous appearance nor Theodor’s reaction are described in any detail. Instead, we move from Theodor’s demand for Satan to transmogrify thought into matter to a direct confirmation of that matter’s existence when Theodor consumes it. When Satan tells Theodor “I will put you to bed,” the boy’s very next line is “Said and done,” confirming once more the performative utterance-like nature of Satan’s magic powers by enacting his own power as a narrator—confirming the act instead of describing it (*TMS 1916 96*). Though Satan is a character within *TMS 1916*, his speech exerts power over it equal to that of Theodor’s,

which narrates the novella. The point here being that Satan's powers of absolute performative utterance are effectively dumb shows when considered in the context of the story's ending. The entire storyworld has been one giant act of performative utterance, spoken to no one and then perfunctorily destroyed by an isolated god that once believed it was an innocent Austrian village child. The Great Chain of Being is now a tangled skein of ontological and diegetic uncertainties, with all threads leading back to the *deus stultum*—the unconscious, originary Thought.

THRONE OF LUNACY: HOW TWAIN NEGATES GOD AND HUMANITY

Whether you chalk up *The Mysterious Stranger's* interpretive intransigence to a twisted textual history, its muddled metaphysics, or other factors, the novella remains staunchly opaque. While it has not been the focus of this chapter, the text's lack of a unitary, finalized form *does* contribute significantly to this opacity and has dominated much of the text's tenure as a subject of criticism. To review, academia has deemed the textual-editorial labor of John S. Tuckey and William M. Gibson corrective, upholding *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* as the one variant worthy of study and representative of Twain as a canonical author. But, if we consider the blunt yet effective metric of time—specifically duration of public exposure—the story's best-known version remains *The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance*, Paine and Duneka's posthumous 1916 reassembly of the text from the fragments that Twain left behind.

History, or some larger invisible agency, then, has left us with competing versions of the story. The contention of these variants formally captures the narrative's abdication of authorial authority, embodying the text's resistance to readerly desires for conceptual coherence. The Moral Sense that Forty-Four/Satan so frequently derides in both variants maps onto the real-world critical desire for formal or political lucidity in Twain's

problematic and posthumous publication. The problem with this ongoing search for lucidity is the form of the variants themselves. Regardless of variant, this is a story that *cannot* work. Their plots do not cohere. Their genre is a motley, to say the least. Their ending is mystifying, inspiring way more questions than it answers. Numerous anachronisms and contradictions seem to actively resist traditional exegetical efforts.

My primary goal in this chapter has been to bring *No. 44* and *TMS 1916*, Twain's latter variants of *The Mysterious Stranger*, under the rubric of numinous horror, a mode predicated on endemic cosmological pessimism and frighteningly alien figurations of the divine. Of paramount importance to this heterodoxical effort is my recovery of Twain's pessimism as a meaningful and constitutive influence in the text. I have deliberately bypassed customary critical debates over authorship and textual integrity, focusing instead on the thematic manifestations of Twain's pessimism and the fragmented formal realities of these variants. Engaging these texts as essays in the spirit of Montaigne—incomplete, experimental works whose goal is to provoke rather than provide a sense of definitive cohesion—is my solution to reconciling the variants' numerous and flagrant contradictions and inconsistencies.

By reading *with* these inconsistencies and the text's arcane metaphysics, I have elucidated a profoundly negative theodicy in these variants, one that unifies their wanton incongruities of plot, form, genre, and theme. This theodicy does not resemble standard Judeo-Christian cosmologies. Instead, it is rooted in two ideas that perfectly match the existentially negative worldview of numinous horror. First, god is a self-deluded, omnipotent Thought with no distinguishable concern for humanity; second, humanity's frequently unjust and painful existence is a product of this *deus stultum*'s indulgence in dreamlike play. In closing, we ought to remember Twain's letter to Howells declaring his goals for *The Mysterious Stranger*: to demonstrate “what a shabby poor ridiculous thing”

humanity is. The numinous horror of these variants rests upon Twain's success in this endeavor, a success he achieved not by simply denigrating humanity, but by equating us with a god that is just as shabby, poor, and ridiculous as we are.

Chapter Three: Fantazius Mallare and the War on Interpretation

“There was no longer any point in practising [sic] self-analysis, paying attention to presentiments or taking preventive measures: the psychology of mysticism was non-existent. Things happened because they happened, and that was the end of it.”

—Joris-Karl Huysmans
Against Nature (75)

Covering Ben Hecht’s novel *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* (1922) in the pages of *The Psychoanalytic Review*, M. Gorlick writes, “We feel instinctively that it has an underlying, logical sequence, however unmotivated some incidents may appear in consciousness” (237). About its 1924 sequel, *The Kingdom of Evil*, an unnamed *Washington Post* staffer comments, “I can’t quite make out what the book was about. Honestly, I can’t.” Even Hecht biographer Doug Fetherling calls these two novels “porno-fantasies,” deeming *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* “a rather formless, repetitious babble of intricate and stylized prose, full of copulation and perversion both physical and mental, real and imagined” (6, 53). Centered on the bizarre exploits of misanthropic artist Fantazius Mallare, Hecht’s dyad of deliberately outrageous novels was penned to provoke two prominent cultural watchdog groups: New York’s Society for the Suppression of Vice and Boston’s Watch and Ward Society. The latter group banned his earlier novel, *Gargoyles* (1922), about a lecherous young lawyer in Chicago who becomes a hypocritical champion of public morals (Weir 180). In fact, the publication of *Fantazius Mallare* resulted in Hecht and illustrator Wallace Smith’s arrests for obscenity, as well as Hecht losing his job as a reporter at the *Chicago Daily News*.

Despite a widely acknowledged inability to make heads or tails of what they were reading, critics, biographers, and censors were incensed by Hecht’s idiosyncratic pair of novels. What, exactly, is it about these novels that scandalizes readers? Fragments like these might provide the beginnings of an answer:

Ah, the penis of this dwarf is repellent because that which Mallare so fondly called his own—his desires—is revealed to him as grotesquely promiscuous. Yes, the penis is the democratic tabernacle of Life. Under its little Moorish roof, the senses of the race kneel in common prayer. (Hecht, *Fantazius Mallare* 176)

‘He desired this—to be free of life, to crawl out of the mystery which held him. And here it is—this crude and capricious mirage we inhabit—here is the little sexual nightmare man calls his soul. Here are its phallic mansions, its skies of semen, its fever rotted music and lecherous mirrors.’ (Hecht, *Kingdom of Evil* 170)¹

It might seem calculatedly sensational to introduce these two quotes without any context, but lines like these appear throughout in Hecht’s dyad. *Fantazius Mallare* tells the story of its eponymous character, a misanthrope who procures Goliath, a black dwarf with a hunchback, and Rita, a mentally disabled Romani woman, and keeps them in his home. There, he endeavors to reach an ascetic state of vaguely defined godhood by dominating his new roommates and demanding that they worship him as a god. When the attentions of Rita prove too much for him, Mallare, tormented by his own lust, murders a beggar and spirals into madness. *The Kingdom of Evil* sees Mallare awaken on a mysterious island ruled by the enigmatic Doctor Sebastien. Mallare watches fellow abductees create Synthemus, a monstrous artificial god. Mallare struggles with the possibility that the entire affair might be nothing more than a hallucination. The novels are further complicated by the fact that their narration is split between Mallare’s own journal entries (sometimes written in the third person, to make matters more confounding) and unnamed

¹ For the sake of efficiency, *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* and *The Kingdom of Evil* will be parenthetically cited *FM* and *KoE*, respectively.

speakers whose commentaries on Mallare's doings are refreshingly diagnostic and—perhaps because of these voices' comparatively conventional veneer—hard for readers to entirely trust. Hecht was not one for respecting taboos of sex or aesthetics, nor was he in the business of crafting easy-to-digest stories.² Instead, he is an unrecognized but veritable master of the cognitive sublime, regularly shifting narratorial voices to disorient readers with “textually induced experiences of noncomprehension that occur when the mind is directed toward an unimaginable unknown” (Abbott 65).

The one-two punch of the Mallare dyad's narratorial delirium and mad visions of artificial godhood frame Hecht as an innovator-cum-rebel. As Hecht writes and publishes these novels, the sententious forces of western cultural authority are effectively weaponizing interpretation. His duology constitutes an artistic attack launched at an establishment whose burgeoning regime of psychoanalytic interpretation sought to dictate moralistic, conservative attitudes by pathologizing any form of cultural resistance. He sets out to provoke these forces with two shocking texts that are structurally resistant to standard means of interpretation. Hecht achieves this built-in resistance to interpretation with the formal and thematic help of two well-known literary movements: decadence and modernism.

Decadence is hard to define or summarize,³ primarily because it is “a general or all-purpose antonym,” defined in its instantiations in opposition to something else (Weir

² There is an undeniable irony to the last part of this statement, since Hecht was a prolific screenwriter in the early days of Hollywood, when the burgeoning popular success of film did not garner it much critical acclaim or respect as an artform. He even won the first-ever Academy Award for Original Screenplay for the 1927 gangster movie *Underworld*. He wrote two films for Alfred Hitchcock (*Spellbound* and *Notorious*) and worked as a script doctor on Hollywood classics like *Gone with the Wind*, *Stagecoach*, and *The Thing from Another World*. Hecht had his own reservations about the heterodox nature of his career; in a notable show of restraint, he once wrote, “I can understand the literary critic's shyness toward me. It is difficult to praise a novelist or a thinker who keeps popping up as the author of innumerable movie melodramas. It is like writing about the virtues of a preacher who keeps carelessly getting himself arrested in bordellos” (qtd. in Schmuhl 1).

³ See Gilman and Bernheimer for exhaustive treatments of the many definitions of decadence.

10, 13). Over the years, the word's very resistance to simple definition has endowed it with "valuable subversive agency" in literary and cultural studies (Bernheimer 5). Historically speaking, decadence was a predominantly French arts movement at the fin-de-siècle, characterized by "aesthetic idealism, taunting self-display, uncommon sexuality, and degeneracy" (Denisoff 31). All these traits are apparent in the Fantazius Mallare novels. Turn-of-the-century shibboleths like the idealized structure of the middle-class family and the assumption that there exist moral foundations to life and beauty were the primary targets of the consummately oppositional decadents. Mallare's desperate actions and obsessions recall the depravity detailed in the French moral tales of Leon Bloy and Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, as well as the novels of Belgian author J.K. Huysmans, an acknowledged favorite of Hecht's.⁴ But, however degenerate or debauched the subject matter becomes, Hecht melds the belletristic tendencies of his Franco-Belgian predecessors with a more experimental approach to narration, pulling him—somewhat—into a modernist orbit.

Unlike decadence's hard-to-pin-down meaning, modernism is comfortably defined in literary studies as an artistic movement animated by a core "challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience" (Fisher 11-12). Hecht and the high modernists shared more than a revolutionary leaning and a time period. They also shared a publisher. Boni and Liveright, an "upstart Jewish firm that would publish work by various ethnic groups along with modernist Anglophone and European writers of any ethnicity" published his novel *Gargoyles* the same year that the house published T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*; it went on to publish other paragons of literary modernism, like H.D., Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner (Bornstein 169).

⁴ Hecht's fascination with literary decadence is a matter of record. Early in his career, he even considered using Joris Karl—a tip of the hat to Huysmans's pen name—as a pseudonym (MacAdams 68).

Despite their shared publisher and formal affinities with the always-experimental Hecht, the canonical modernists were hardly his comrades-in-creative-arms. For example, in 1958, Hecht publicly dismissed the work of Ernest Hemingway, deeming Hemingway's famously clipped prose "baby talk" and his literary output as lifelessly technical "[n]ovels that were beautifully reported by a camera" (Hecht, *Show* 154). D.H. Lawrence, though a fellow victim of censorship, heaped execrations upon *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath*, claiming that Hecht's writing "reveal[s] the state of mind of a man who has never had any sincere vital experience in sex" (qtd. in Taylor & Frugoli xvii). Ironically, the few women in the Mallare dyad operate in a fashion like those of Lawrence's better-known female characters—their primality creates narrative conditions wherein a man sits at the center of things. Hecht's affinity for Lawrence's gender paradigm evokes Rita Felski's notion of modernity being predicated upon "a long-standing aesthetic tradition which has sought transcendence through a denial and erasure of the female body" (114). Hecht's tendency to "represent action as it appears to a participant in the action, and not to an outside observer," a product of both his journalistic training and his exposure to German expressionism, indicates a stylistic leaning towards modernism, one thrown into stark relief when considered alongside his dyad's decadent thematics (Weir 184).

Genre remains an ideal entry point for my inquiry in this chapter. Both decadence and modernism champion the individual and reject the tyranny of tradition—ideals that typify Mallare's tumultuous philosophy. Hecht is manipulating the constitutive oppositionality of the decadent movement in conjunction with the make-it-new ethos of modernism throughout his peculiar duology. Both novels refuse narratorial clarity on aesthetic-political grounds, following the modernist formal trends of unreliable narration, interior monologue, and structural fragmentation while maintaining a complex of decadent themes, namely Huysmans-like fixations with man rejecting nature and with the

tension between the natural and the artificial. What results is that decadence and modernism are the two dominant aesthetic modes in these texts, but neither one is dominant *enough*, because Hecht is using elements of horror to keep decadence and modernism in a state of irremediable conflict, yielding the dyad's frustratingly persistent narrative opacity.

The moments of numinous horror in *Fantazius Mallare* and *The Kingdom of Evil* are not mere mobilizations of generic or religious tropes designed to satiate audience expectations. Mysticism, the base of this chapter's investigation of numinous horror, is a kind of religiosity that has shaped the world's spiritual traditions; it focalizes an internal quest that involves stilling the conceptual and emotional processes of the mind to achieve a heightened, possibly ecstatic state of awareness or oneness with the divine or the otherwise-transcendent (Jones, *Curing* 241). Mystical experiences require a temporary retreat from quotidian life for the advancement of spiritual knowledge; such advancement comes from turning one's attentions inward and stilling all normal cognitive and emotional activities (Jones, *Mysticism* 1). Upon reassuming standard consciousness, the mystic can bring this heightened spiritual knowledge to bear upon life's day-to-day struggles.

Here's the rub: Mallare's mysticism is not a temporary retreat. It is a permanent replacement of normative experiential reality with a phantasmagoric one entirely made up of his own fragmentary consciousness in multiple guises. In his quest for a form of godhood that is extolled but never fully articulated, Mallare does not access an ineffable ultimate reality, as would a mystic operating in a conventional tradition. Nonetheless, Mallare's hermitical tendencies and curious hierarchy of ways of knowing have an undeniably mystic argot, as do his visionary fantasies, to which readers are subjected

without any indication of their diegetic validity or lack thereof, thanks to the narratorial polyphony Hecht maintains throughout both novels.

Mallare practices a *schizoid* mysticism. Rather than unifying itself with the transcendent, identity becomes increasingly fractional and diffuse. Instead of operating as a wellspring of epistemological knowledge and general intellectual expansion, this inescapable mystical state renders interpretation highly ineffective, if not outright impossible. The further Mallare pursues his deific agenda, the more unstable his identity becomes, giving rise to ambulant elements of his own psyche and diminishing potentially real interlocutors to the stuff of daydreams. The numinous horror of Mallare's schizoid mysticism is rooted in the substitution of enlightenment with the amplification of doubt and confusion—diegetically for Mallare and extradiegetically for readers. *Fantazius Mallare* chronicles the apparent failure of its eponymous misanthrope's attempts to defy and replace reality. *The Kingdom of Evil* details the semblant success and eventual collapse of such a replacement. In a reversal of what we saw with Twain's variants of *The Mysterious Stranger*, the novels of Hecht's dyad seem to compete with and frustrate each other's mystical visions of godhood, offering readers two accounts of Mallare's failures to attain it.

Given the competitive relationship between these obscure texts, I must return to the bewildered critical reactions that opened this chapter. A disdain for vanguardism and mid-century pearl-clutching aside, I admit to a certain sympathy for readers perplexed by these discordant books. Like *Don Quixote* (one of many influences Hecht touts within the novels), these texts flout conventional expectations for coherence of plot, narration, or character, preferring decadently salacious subject matter and a chaotic modernist approach to narration. But my sympathy is stunted, truncated by a question Gorlick earnestly asks in his review: "In what way does this fantasy connect with real life *as we*

know it?" (237, my emphasis). Viewed through the lens of numinous horror, the answer to Gorlick's question seems obvious: it doesn't. Mimesis is simply not a priority in *Fantazius Mallare* and *The Kingdom of Evil*.

Such a pronounced dearth of mimetic intention puts Hecht's readers in the unenviable position of interpreting a range of increasingly deranged semi-mystical phantasmagoria. Indeed, interpretation—and its failure—appear to be thematic pillars of these novels. Where Twain collapsed all subjectivity into a single being of titanic self-delusion, Hecht endeavors not to create a new form of godhood, but to unravel the very idea of god; he toys with the author's godlike position to defy all readerly expectations for the explanatory power authors are traditionally expected to exercise. Readers instinctively feel an explanation is owed, but Hecht doggedly refuses to provide one, expressing a splenetic disgust for these expectations in his experimental fashion. Through sheer narratorial impenetrability, itself a product of his forced marriage of decadent oppositionality with modernist formal tics, Hecht creates a schizoid-mystic vision of numinous horror in his Mallare dyad, one wherein the omniscience and omnipotence traditionally expected from godhood do nothing but utterly destabilize narrative cohesion across two novels.

MAKESHIFT OMNIPOTENCE: DUELING NARRATORS IN *FANTAZIUS MALLARE: A MYSTERIOUS OATH*

The conflicting narrative voices of *Fantazius Mallare* give readers only enough information to know that Mallare's interpretations of his reality and destiny are wrong. "Indifference is the wisdom of god," Mallare proclaims in a journal entry (Hecht, *FM* 98). This epigrammatic line epitomizes Hecht's *laissez-faire* approach to narration. He precariously balances a third-person omniscient narrator with Mallare's frantic journal

entries in a way that undercuts the authority of both voices. The para-mysticism Mallare practices in this novel takes the shape of sensory abnegation, a refusal of common epistemological and ontological categories. Mallare predicates his desired state of godhood upon a level of indifference he can never achieve, given his enduring dedication to aesthetics and stubborn inability to define his own guiding principles as a mystic. The tension between his godly aspirations and his persistently critical eye result in a disintegration of his human identity and an interpretive quandary for readers.

Accordingly, this novel is difficult to summarize: Fantazius Mallare embarks on a self-declared war with reason, openly repudiating humanity, interpretability, and the sexual impulse in pursuit of a state of godhood whose ever-elusive definition encompasses varying states of madness, idiocy, and indifference. He buys a deformed black dwarf, whom he cruelly nicknames Goliath, from a sideshow and brings the man home as a servant. Later, Mallare purchases Rita, a mentally disabled young woman from her itinerant Romani family, and brings her into his home, hoping she will devote herself to his supposed omnipotence by worshipping him as a god. Mallare sequesters Rita in an opulently appointed room, alternatively studying and tormenting her. Meanwhile, Goliath evinces a potentially sexual interest in Rita, whose own amorous attentions center on Mallare. He vehemently denies any such feelings on his part, but his increasingly unhinged, abusive actions belie his aesthetic asceticism. Mallare fails to resist his baser urges in favor of his desired state of detached and aesthetically-fixated dominance. When Rita starts reciprocating his passions, his tenuous grip on reality is lost. He eventually murders a beggar, believing the man to be Rita. Upon returning home to find a still-living Rita, Mallare rejoices, concluding she must be merely an illusion of his own making. The remainder of the novel confusingly details Mallare's apparently guilt-ridden break with reality (a word I use in this context with the greatest possible caution). He is plagued by

contradictory visions of Rita and ghostly presences that appear to be externalized manifestations of his own psyche and senses. Rita abandons Mallare after having sex with Goliath in front of him. The novel ends on a strangely biblical and inconclusive note, with a desolate, defeated Mallare quoting the last words Christ spoke on the cross.

The litany of imprecations making up the dedication that opens *Fantazius Mallare* is the textual equivalent of an antechamber in Hecht's own literary inferno: abandon hopes for clarity, Judeo-Christian morality, and good taste all ye who enter here. Paradoxically, this wending apostrophe to the critics and censors Hecht despises is arguably the clearest part of the book, at least in its palpable disgust for those it addresses. Composed in the style of a Baudelairean prose poem, this section declares that *Fantazius Mallare* is "affectionately dedicated to [Hecht's] enemies... the moral ones... who... offer their mutilations to the idiot God they have invented" (19-20). As far as Hecht is concerned, God is a scapegoat manufactured by humans to absolve themselves of cosmic and existential responsibility. In his own voice, Hecht continues in the vein of a manifesto that is as anti-religion as it is anti-psychoanalysis, ridiculing "the anointed ones who identify their paranoiac symptoms as virtues, who build altars upon complexes... the Freudian dervishes who masturbate with Purity Leagues" in the same paragraph as this piquant rhetorical question: "(Ah, what is God but a despairing refutation of Man?)" (*FM* 20-21). The then-emergent regulating forces of early twentieth-century psychoanalysis are, to Hecht, simply the new shape of the same God Nietzsche declared dead. At no point in either novel is Hecht's Nietzschean repudiation of God ever reconciled with Mallare's godly ambitions. The push-and-pull established between blaming God and blaming psychoanalysis for humanity's many failings sets the stage for Mallare's confusing deific desires, as well as Hecht's own skepticism about the efficacy of large-scale interpretive regimes, be they therapeutic or theological.

What does it mean for Hecht to acknowledge that he has written an “inhospitable book” as he closes his dedication? (*FM* 27). The word “inhospitable” aptly describes the narratorial shifts and overall esoteric quality of the Mallare dyad. When paired with his earlier execrations of critics, the prudish faithful, and the early twentieth-century psychoanalytic craze, however, his invocation of the inhospitable again marks the dedication as this novel’s major moment of clarity. By the end of the dedication, readers are well aware of the many parties for whom this novel was *not* written. The question remains, however: for whom was this curious book intended? No answer is apparent. With his venomous dedication, Hecht performs an authorial refusal to conform to readerly expectations, one that predicts Mallare’s polemical rejection of humanity and its cognitive trappings.

A nameless omniscient narrator shares storytelling duties with Mallare’s journal entries, hemming readers in between two equally dubious sources of information throughout the novel. The introduction of Goliath demonstrates this narratorial tug-of-war. The unnamed narrator describes Goliath as “one of the first symptoms of Mallare’s madness” (Hecht, *FM* 34). Here, readers are only a page into the first chapter of the novel; already, the narrator’s listing of symptoms aligns him with the analysts and pathologists that Hecht decries. Upon meeting Goliath and inviting him to his home, Mallare says, “I will call you Goliath for no reason at all, since I am at war with reason” (Hecht, *FM* 35). His declaration of a war against reason is immediately undermined by the eye-rolling irony of the nickname he applies to his diminutive disabled servant. Mallare may indeed be a novel character and a creative force, but he is neither responsible for nor ignorant of the concept of irony. Just as the narrator demonstrates a predilection for the symptomatic heuristic that Hecht despises, Mallare evinces little ability to back up his rather heady opposition to reason, leaving readers adrift.

Mallare keeps an infrequent journal filled with random observations of no apparent importance. Sharing the collection of “innocuous informations” with a colleague, Mallare continues performing his rejection of rationality (Hecht, *FM* 36). Because of Mallare’s artistic leanings, this acquaintance (hazily sketched but presumably a fellow bohemian) tries to read the journal as a text with interpretable weight. “These are, no doubt, symbols. A psychological code into which you have translated great inner moments,” the man opines in the psychoanalytic-interpretive vernacular that Hecht and Mallare despise (*FM* 36). The confidence of Mallare’s associate antedates a 1958 comment by Hecht about the conservative failings of critics: “the seeming smugness, the certainty that always knows what’s what; the certainty that always sits in judgement and never questions itself” (*Show* 158). Mallare’s snappy rejoinder—“On the contrary. They are the only thoughts I have had in which I could detect no reason”—reaffirms his performative commitment to the nonsensical (Hecht, *FM* 36-37). The text structurally echoes Mallare’s commitment because his interlocutor simply disappears from the text. Readers are left to imagine any reaction to Mallare’s open rejection of the intelligible, as the text itself simply continues to detail his negative opinions of humanity and intelligibility. This exchange comes second only to the dedication in terms of modelling a real-world exchange between Hecht and his readers and critics: we are offered fleeting moments, we impose significance on them, and then Hecht (or Mallare, acting here as his stand-in) flagrantly denies the validity of our interpretations, upholding the sanctity of his own work as being purposefully *without* meaning.

Nonetheless, after this conversation, the narrative steering wheel is returned to our nameless narrator, who notices an *interpretable* trend in Mallare’s journal: the evolution of his madness. Of the journal, he writes, “There are two empty pages that stare significantly. The empty pages are a lapse. It was during this lapse that Mallare smiled

with interest at the spectacle of his disintegration” (Hecht, *FM* 38). What follows this passage is a return to Mallare’s diatribes about humanity, sanity, and madness. (These latter two words receive definitions that regularly shift as the book continues; in one particularly circuitous moment, Mallare boldly declares, “I am too clever to go mad. To go mad is to succumb to the sanity of others”) (Hecht, *FM* 52). But what makes this moment so critical is that the omniscient narrator interprets a lacuna in Mallare’s journal. Not content to color and modify readerly understanding of Mallare’s scribbles, this narrator extends his authority to the journal pages that Mallare, in his crusade against rationality, has deliberately left blank, destabilizing any sense of narratorial coherence. In other words, readers get to choose between a meticulously arcane protagonist and an unknown omniscient voice with a tendency to overreach.

As if his journal’s resistance to interpretation was not enough, Mallare’s explanation of his decadent aversion to the natural is self-contradictory. Our unknown narrator upholds another excerpt from Mallare’s journal as “concrete evidence of [Mallare’s] loathing for life that was to result in its own annihilation”:

Most of all I like the trees when they are empty of leaves. Their wooden grimaces must aggravate the precisely featured houses of the town. People who see my work for the first time grow indignant and *call me sick and artificial*. (Bilious critics!) But *so are these trees*.

People think of art in terms of symmetry. With a most amazing conceit they have decided upon the contours of their bodies as the standards of beauty. Therefore I am pleased to look at trees or at anything that grows, unhandicapped by the mediocritizing force of reason, and note how contorted such things are. (Hecht, *FM* 42, my emphases)

Mallare bemoans the instinct of aesthetes to value the anthropomorphic over the non-anthropomorphic. By prizing the uneven shapes of leafless trees, Mallare is taking a stand against the dominant aesthetic trends of his time, as well as echoing the fascination with the artificial that haunted Jean des Esseintes, the protagonist of Huysmans's decadent novel *Against Nature* (1884). Yet his very description of the trees as artificial (and therefore unnatural) demonstrates his unspoken allegiance to bilateral symmetry and other biological hallmarks of the human form he claims to despise. Though he wishes, in the decadent fashion, to upend banalities of aesthetic perception by valuing the contortion of trees, Mallare cannot escape the intellectual trap set by such evaluative language: the tree is only contorted and artificial because a human observer with implicit aesthetic biases and values deems it so.

Ever the artist, he envisions godhood as the zenith of creative capacity. In a moment resonant with the clay people scenes from Twain's *Mysterious Stranger* variants, Mallare derides his species in the same breath that he expresses his desire for godhood:

Art has become for me a tedious decoration of my impotence. It is clear I should have been a God. Then I could have had my way with people. To shriek at them obliquely, to curse at them through the medium of clay figures, is a preposterous waste of time. A wounded man groans. I, impaled by life, emit statues.

As a God, however, I would have found a diversion worthy of my contempt. I would have made the bodies of people like their thoughts—crooked, twisted, bulbous. I would have given them faces resembling their emotions and converted the diseases of their souls into outline. (Hecht, *FM* 43)

Indifference is the crowning trait of the godhood Mallare wants, but he predicates his deific agenda on a polemical artistic expression of his misanthropy. Granted, this deeply

negative desire is a reason for including Hecht in the numinous horror tradition; however, Mallare's pronounced aesthetic desires contradict the recondite alienation that distinguishes his conception of godhood. Multiple thematic veins intersect in this passage. For one, Mallare perfectly models the disdain and ennui typical of a decadent hero, again calling to mind the example set by Hecht's beloved Huysmanian protagonists. Hecht aligns art with impotence; such a pairing that hints at Mallare's renunciation of sexuality will be a stumbling block to his godhood, a state he nonetheless frames in creative terms, maintaining the ongoing tension between his deific aspirations and his cognitive and physical limitations. His rejection of sexuality and his artistic impression of godhood persist throughout *Fantazius Mallare*. Finally, though this novel lacks a strong supernatural component, Mallare's conception of human bodies warped and distended to match what he sees as their profoundly negative mental dimensions foreshadows an image of crucial importance to *The Kingdom of Evil*: the human mind as an emergent monstrosity that is inhibited by the vestigial human body.

Humanity, to Mallare, is sensually and intellectually under-developed. His choice of companions, two subjects marginalized by society for their mental disabilities and/or non-normative bodies, supports his existential confirmation bias against humanity. He sees himself as somehow above these cognitive and sensory failings, *now* defining sanity as "the determined blindness which keeps us from seeing one another... which keeps us from seeing ourselves" (Hecht, *FM* 45). What it is that sanity keeps us from seeing in each other is never made explicit. Paradoxically, Mallare is at the same time cautious of endowing himself with too much epistemological authority. He exhorts himself to "beware of falling to sleep in explanations" (Hecht, *FM* 45). The verbal act of making definitive meaning is narcotic, sharply contrasting Mallare's stance from the explanatory impulse dominating the passages of the novel narrated by the unknown omniscient voice.

The entirety of human intellectual achievement is self-delusion to Mallare, a search for non-existent control.

His rejection of conventional intellectual pursuits takes on a decidedly mystical shape. Embarking on his ill-fated quest for godhood, Mallare “retire[s] within himself, dragging his senses after him” (Hecht, *FM* 58). The image of Mallare being in control of his senses is crucial, as it does not last and is, in fact, contradicted by later happenings in both novels. It is worth noting Mallare’s description of the para-mystical state he embraces:

Life grimaces vaguely on the edges of my madness. I can no longer see or understand. The world is a memory that expires under my thought. I am alone. Yet how much of me must still be in the world! My dearest phantoms are, after all, no more than distorted reminiscences. I fear, alas, this is the truth. Yet it is pleasant to be alone with one’s senses, to feel an independence. (Hecht, *FM* 59)

Like any good mystic in pursuit of an esoteric goal, Mallare withdraws from the world; that is where the similarity ends. His quest for ersatz godhood is described as “an annihilation,” colored by a pronounced solipsism and a diminishment of his sanity and sensory apparatus (Hecht, *FM* 58). “Mystics,” according to Richard H. Jones, “often arrange ways of knowing in a hierarchy” (*Mysticism* 4). In this scene, Mallare implicitly establishes a teleological layout for his mystical advancement, drawing a line between his ongoing experience of quotidian life as a memory of the past and his annihilative madness as the present (and, one guesses, the future). His so-called phantoms, Goliath and Rita, are still very much alive in his home but he relegates them to their supposedly ghostly status, little more than memories he can somehow continue to interact with. Yet, in the same segment that supposedly divides his human past from his mystic present, Mallare wonders aloud at “how much” of him is still involved in the concrete world of

day-to-day experience. Once again, Mallare's speech—riddled with vague pronouns and terms that either lack definition or sport multiple definitions (in the cases of madness and sanity)—contradicts itself. The misanthropic semi-mystic might not actually attain godhood, but here, as at other points in the duology, he enacts the deific idiocy of numinous horror, turning his back on humanity for a divine existence he cannot even articulate.

As mentioned earlier, a crucial component of Mallare's mystical attempts at ascending to godhood is his disavowal of sex. Rita, the young Romani woman, is Mallare's unwitting pseudo-concubine, an object of his aesthetic and half-suppressed sexual obsessions. The omniscient voice that splits narration with Mallare assures readers that she leads an autonomous, if perilous, existence as an independent subject, detailing her desires and perceptions. Yet, when Mallare interacts with her, he sees "a phantom—a something which has stepped out of my madness to divert it" (Hecht, *FM* 66). Imprecise language remains the order of the day. Mallare's madness is supposedly generative of fictive images, created for its own amusement; this marks one of many points in the novel that Mallare's self-perceived madness is animated, endowed with an autonomy that he finds alternatively enlightening and threatening. When Rita shows sexual interest in her bizarre "benefactor," Mallare reviles the idea: "desires for the infinite sate themselves in the feeble trickle of orgasm. Cerberus seduced from his Godhood by a dog biscuit!" (Hecht, *FM* 68). Of all the entities populating the pantheon of Greek mythology, Hecht's choice of Cerberus—the three-headed hound of Hades—is especially salient, both for Mallare's implicit self-animalization *and* how the three-headed image foreshadows Mallare's imminent schizoid break. Sex, supposedly the culmination of romantic love (according to the conventional moralists Hecht so despised) is anti-climactic for Mallare.

All the ineffable qualities of human romantic and sexual interaction amount to nothing more meaningful than animal procreation, a mere satisfying of appetite.

In one of the novel's most bizarre sequences, Mallare refuses sex with Rita in favor of aesthetically contemplating her beauty as an ersatz kind of domination: "I look within. Thus I possess you and my senses without leaving themselves, enter the infinity of my mind" (Hecht, *FM* 69). He shuns sexual interaction and endeavors to channel his lust into aesthetic contemplation of her beauty. The term "possession" is never satisfactorily defined, putting it in the company of the novel's other abused terms: sanity and madness. It is never clearly explained how or why such a behavior would result in Mallare's ascension to godhood. So fervid a stance against sex cannot line up with the transcendent indifference defining Mallare's idea of godhood, yet he persists.

While Mallare may be convinced that he can divorce himself from his sensual appetites, the omniscient narrator cuts in through his diatribe with descriptions of those appetites in other characters. This voice informs readers that "Warm tongues spoke within [Rita's] body" and that Goliath "stared over her closed eyes" after Mallare takes his leave of them (Hecht, *FM* 70-71). Mallare insists that his mystical sensory negation takes ontological precedence over the world around him. But the omniscient narrator summons details that contradict Mallare's vision—in this case, the expression of Rita's and Goliath's independent sexual desires. While these moments of interiority (or, at least, demonstrated subjectivity) do nothing to eclipse the egregiously ableist, misogynist, and racist depictions of these characters, they still work to keep readers at an interpretive standstill.

Finally, the aestheticized chastity that is a stepping stone to godhood proves too much for Mallare. One night, roaming the streets, he encounters a beggar and, in a fit of mania, mistakes the man for Rita and strangles him to death. In the wake of this crime,

which he almost immediately forgets, Mallare believes Rita to be a phantom, initially a product of his mind, now ambulant and independent. Mallare, threatened by her supposedly ghostly return, beats Rita and flees his home. Trying to reconcile the physical evidence of his abuse with his certainty that Rita is an illusion, Mallare begins his final descent into the madness that overtakes the remainder of the novel:

To my senses she was real, and it was necessary therefore to destroy her realistically. It was easy for my mind to ignore this Thought. I was never its victim. I merely created it. My senses that belong to life and not to me, however, became victimized.

...I surrendered adroitly to my idiotic senses. Therefore for that hour I was completely mad. What happened in the room? Ah, what a grotesque memory it makes.

...But what is memory? The soul of dead illusion. Since it withholds itself, I will create a memory. (Hecht, *FM* 134-135)

Sanity, madness, sensuality, and memory all blur together in the above passage, whose depiction of confusion and inner torment could sit—despite its conspicuously decadent prose stylings—alongside more famous modernist scenes of epistemic turmoil, like Quentin Compson’s suicidal contemplations in *The Sound and the Fury*. This sequence is a master class in Hecht’s deft narratorial dissolution. Ostensibly narrated by the omniscient non-Mallare voice, this entire chapter is a maddening monologue peppered with ill-defined terms, indistinct questions, and even more vague pronouns. Somehow, Mallare divides himself from his senses. Though he initially “dragged” his senses along into his annihilative mystical state, he now blames them for his inability to correlate the physical evidence of the very real beating he gave Rita with his deranged perception of her (and others) as illusory.

Hecht channels the now-archetypal moments of hideous revelation from Poe's stories (as well as the many French decadent works Poe influenced). Discovering blood on his hands, Mallare cries out, "She was alive! ...My phantom lived. It was I who was the phantom. And she—alive!" (Hecht, *FM* 150). This realization provides little clarity for readers. The word "phantom" is used twice in rapid succession, first referring to Rita, and then to Mallare. The use of past tense to describe the still-living Rita is just as confusing, until readers remember the nameless, now-dead beggar Mallare continues to mix up with Rita—a realization that contributes little to parsing this scene. Mallare's revelatory moment does not parallel the conventional mystic's enlightened emergence from the meditative state; instead, he just flips his irremediable binary: for Rita to exist, Mallare—seemingly trapped in his own annihilative mystical state—must cease to exist. He is subdivided between himself and his unruly senses. His world can only consist of one "real" individual; Mallare and Rita cannot co-exist as independent subjects.

The novel descends into moments of psychological horror that continually tangle Mallare's mystical conception of godhood and fracture his identity, once again thwarting even the most basic attempts at interpretation. In a chapter taken from Mallare's journals, he begins: "I am the Knowing One. There is nothing I do not know. ...I have triumphed over five worlds. ...There are five Mallares—five sullen looking madmen" (Hecht, *FM* 153). These first two lines are almost too egregious to be held up as examples of dramatic irony, since the actual murder victim (the beggar) is neither remembered nor ever identified. Yet again, an over-used term—in this case, the senses—takes on a new form for Mallare. No longer a trait over which he exercises total control, Mallare now perceives his five senses as independent organisms assuming the shape of their former master. Each sense is now assigned the madness that Mallare has alternately accepted, celebrated, and refused throughout the novel. Such a profound fracturing of identity adds

weight to this novel's already-pronounced rejection of interpretation. Now, Mallare cannot even depend upon the simplest unit of interpretation—*me* versus *not-me*. Waxing further on the five presences that haunt him, Mallare asks, “And I, what can I call myself—pure reason? No, a disgusting title. Rather, Unreason, since I am after all the Indifferent One... I am God. I am that which men have worshipped, the aloof one, the pitiless and amused one” (Hecht, *FM* 154). Mallare elevates himself to a godhood he has not attained, defined by traits he lacks and behaviors he does not perform. The only consistent aspects of Mallare's version of godhood are its much-touted indifference and its commitment to irrationality. Indifference eludes Mallare, who continues to alternate between anguish and bravado. He has achieved his desired state of irrationality, given both the presence of the other Mallares and the confusing narration; still, this irrationality lacks the purposive quality of the war on reason he declared at the beginning of the narrative. It appears that this very irrationality actively prevents him from achieving the enlightened indifference he seeks.

Narratorial confusion reaches yet another peak as a new presence makes itself known: Mallare's animated and externalized guilt, in the guise of yet another Mallare clone, wracked by perpetual sobs. This shape invokes the blood that Mallare found on his hands, to which Mallare replies, “You are an interesting quirk... My senses that fancy they have killed a woman have given birth to an illusion of guilt. And you are that illusion. My madness dresses itself in logic like a fishwife hanging rhinestones in her hair” (Hecht, *FM* 156). Hecht is literalizing the modernist trope of internal dialogue with this exchange, just as Poe concretized his magical metaphors in “Metzengerstein.” His figurations of his senses, guilt, and ever-present madness are inconsistent with previous descriptions by both Mallare and his omniscient co-narrator. This violates the epistemological hierarchies of mysticism, exchanging that time-honored tradition for

what appears to be a constellation of regularly re-defined terms: logic, sense, madness, and sanity among them.

Not content to leave Mallare to his externalized selves, Hecht reintroduces Rita to the narrative. She threatens Mallare in her native language, but he looks on, musing:

God does not invent languages but He understands them since it is unnecessary for Him to know, in His indifference, what they are saying. And the language my phantom spoke, although foreign to me, was nevertheless an integral part of my thought—another of the manifestations with which God naively astounds Himself. It is His only diversion. (Hecht, *FM* 164)

Hecht illustrates Mallare's continuing narratorial fragmentation in this pseudo-academic passage. Language, the basic vehicle of communication and interpretation, is irrelevant but still inexplicably under Mallare's self-perceived deific purview. Readers, even at their most confused, can recognize Mallare's fallacious dependence on the very force of reason that he first claimed to scorn. No longer equating "God" with "I," he issues an academic treatment of the irrelevance of language to God without drawing a hard barrier between the divine and the language that supposedly does not matter to it. The limits of Mallare's identity continue to meld and warp in this scene, as he implicitly refuses to acknowledge Rita's independent rage or his failure to understand her. Instead, using his dubious narratorial authority, Mallare tries to absorb her as a plaything with which the god—that, at this point, may or may not be Mallare—diverts itself. When Rita takes a different tack and begins to undress, Mallare narrates his own confusion at this new mode of rebellion:

The *consistency* which I have hitherto admired in my madness seems rather *dubious*... The *melodrama* of illusions grows too *improbable*. This *fine tragedy* crumbles into the *ludicrous*. She forgets her hate. She is again Rita, the infatuated

one. A lightning change that smacks of *inferior vaudeville*... A poorly written business. (Hecht, *FM* 167, my emphases)

The failure of the academic gives way to a resurgence of the aesthetic. Hecht unleashes a veritable cavalcade of aesthetically evaluative terms here, as Mallare rehearses his own perceptions of Rita's actions. Not content to live up to the titanic indifference he used to characterize himself mere pages before, Mallare reflexively assumes a critical position, evaluating diegetic reality as performance.

Mallare's mania reaches new heights when it becomes clear that Rita is undressing to have sex with Goliath in front of him as her final rebuke for his aloof cruelty. Hecht writes, "I am no more than an idea in the head of God. But the head of God is but an idea that encircles me. I am a phantom within a phantom" (*FM* 174-175). Terms like "God" and "phantom" are, at this point, beyond the conciliatory reach of any stable definition. Mallare's ontology has become ouroboric. There is no ontological middle ground: any character who is not Mallare is either an illusion or external manifestation of his fragmentary consciousness. Ridiculously, he tries to take credit for the scene unraveling before him: "I am too Supreme to grasp Myself. There are still unexplored crevices in My infinity, and out of these continue to issue surprises that divert Me" (Hecht, *FM* 175). The prose of this line, right down to its capitalizations, is positively Whitmanian. At first one man, then six (counting his externalized senses), then seven (counting his externalized guilt), Mallare now identifies as a deific infinity. But the intellectual depth he lays claim to is little more than another fluctuation in the chain of schizoid breaks with reality that make up the end of *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath*.

After witnessing their scandalous fornication, Mallare passively watches Rita leave and succumbs to his mania. In a stunning shift from self-deluded aesthete to

lovesick fool, Mallare exhorts the absent Rita: “my vanished one, come back to me. It is I who ask. Not the Cold One, not the Indifferent One, not Mallare. But I... I” (Hecht, *FM* 191). He rejects the indifference he previously laid claim to and reiterates: “I am not Mallare. He is gone” (Hecht, *FM* 191). Who, then, are we dealing with? Hecht stubbornly refuses to provide an answer. The journal, in its final two pages, lapses into an aimless dialogue bereft of any true interlocutors: “Mallare... are you Mallare? No, you are this. You are a babble of words that stands on its nose” (Hecht, *FM* 192-193). At his most self-consciously metafictional, Mallare dismisses himself as a being composed of nonsensical speech and comes closest to acknowledging the extradiegetic reality of Hecht’s novel: it ends without even a shred of narratorial coherence.

The last words of *Fantazius Mallare* are written out in Hebrew, but translate into the fateful cry from Matthew 27:46: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” or “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Hecht, *FM* 193; *New Oxford Annotated Bible*). At the heart of the modernist epistemic breakdown that closes out the novel, *Fantazius Mallare* maintains its core generic tension by demonstrating its debt to the decadents in a moment of bizarre horror. Followed immediately by a Wallace Smith rendering of a grotesquely emaciated, naked Mallare mimicking Christ on the cross, this last biblical ejaculation recalls Barbey d’Aurevilly’s review of Huysmans’s *Against Nature*: “After such a book, the only choice left open to the author is between the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the cross” (qtd. in Dirda 226). Mallare has failed in his esoteric efforts to attain godhood, but remains in the grip of his self-induced mystical state, unable to differentiate others from himself.

The true numinous horror of the first installment in the Mallare dyad is not the scattershot portrait of new godhood that its protagonist fails to paint; it is that the grip of the Judeo-Christian idea of godhood is too strong to allow any true spiritual deviance or

invention, a horrific prospect for both oppositional decadence and innovative modernism. Mallare, with his veritable armory of self-contradictory visions of mad godhood, can do nothing but succumb to Rita's loss by summoning the image of the spiritual imaginary he has spent the novel trying to tear down. *Fantazius Mallare* was the confusing chronicle of a man who fancied himself a god. Mallare tried and failed to escape his humanity's animalistic roots—namely, the need to breed—by ascending to a state of godhood defined by an indifference he could never hope to achieve.

WRETCHED SPAWN: *THE KINGDOM OF EVIL* AND THE MISE-EN-ABYME OF IDENTITY

The Kingdom of Evil, unlike its predecessor, features no shortage of suggested interpretations from various diegetic voices. Mallare's journal entries dominate this novel, prominently featuring reported dialogue from the novel's odd cast of phantasmal characters, as well as Mallare's own irascible musings. Another narrator's voice book-ends the novel, filling the first two chapters as well as the final one with explanations that contradict the validity of what Mallare chronicles in his journal. The relationship between narrators is fundamentally different from that in the first novel. Now, instead of a combative tension between an omniscient narrator and an increasingly mad Mallare, readers are faced with an explicitly exegetical relationship, indexing the sequel's turn from the psychological depths of decadence towards modernism's textual-epistemic obsessions. Where the first novel was content to leave readers with only the certainty that Mallare's interpretation of reality was wrong, *The Kingdom of Evil* endeavors to cast doubt on both of its narrators through repeated demonstrations of interpretation's futility and an unceasing collapse of ontological and epistemological categories.

Much like its predecessor, however, *The Kingdom of Evil* defies easy summation. The first two chapters are narrated by an unknown speaker who attempts an exegesis of

Mallare's impenetrable journal entries. Then, the journal begins. After surviving an apocalypse of world-consuming fog, Mallare awakens in a cave on a nameless island. There, under the orders of an enigmatic man called Doctor Sebastien, the survivors—all experts in fields as disparate as warfare, philosophy, chemistry, and poetics—use arcane alchemical means to build the titular kingdom, a massive floral temple, and a hideous god called Synthemus. Their toil is all to please Kora, Sebastien's mysterious concubine. The poet Julian, another abductee, doggedly tries to convince Mallare that the whole narrative is just Mallare's own hallucination. Meanwhile, Synthemus grows from a tumorous monolith into a semi-human reflection of Mallare himself. The island descends into fractious warfare after Synthemus's death and gruesome dissolution. All the while, Mallare struggles with the possibility that everything around him might be illusory. Without definitively concluding the island-bound plot, the book's narration abruptly returns to the voice of the unknown speaker from the first two chapters who tells us that unidentified parties recently discovered Mallare's corpse, along with other human and animal carcasses, rotting in his riverfront apartment after a seven-year absence. The origins of these additional bodies are never guessed at, let alone explained, as the novel ends.

The opening chapters of *The Kingdom of Evil* are a feat of literary legerdemain, performing purely obfuscatory exegesis and setting the tone for another self-contradictory dive into Mallare's madness. A narrator tells readers that Mallare has been missing for seven years. He first claims that "Nothing is known of [Mallare] during the seven years but what he has written," only to follow up with the point that "It is no longer possible to determine in reading the Journal of Mallare which parts of it are a record of reality" and which are "the babblings of unedited mania" (Hecht, *KoE* 1-2). Like the omniscient voice from *Fantazius Mallare*, readers never learn the identity of this narrator. This voice's

lack of omniscience and deference to Mallare's text would lead one to surmise that it is indeed a different speaker, but again, any certainty about narratorial identity in non-journal chapters is impossible to attain. Regardless of potential identities, this speaker weakens his own authority by pathologizing Mallare. In the two chapters preceding Mallare's entries, the narrator succeeds only in demonstrating his leaning towards the same diagnostic hermeneutic applied by the unnamed narrator of the first Mallare novel. Yet he lacks that speaker's omniscience, ending the second chapter with the bluntly deferential statement that "all this is conjecture. There is nothing known but what Mallare himself has written" (Hecht, *KoE* 4). Two diegetic layers, then, are at odds with each other throughout the novel: the first is dominated by the self-conscious unknown speaker, whose explanatory efforts are undermined by the second layer, Mallare's rampantly strange journals, loaded with inexplicable sights and exploits. The unknown commentator notes the difficulties of reading the journal: "There is no reference to the past. A highly developed verbigeration marks the paragraphs. Ideas make futile and stereotyped circles as if language had grown foreign to them. Lucid sentences appear at intervals" (Hecht, *KoE* 5). While this narrator still competes with Mallare, his role is much closer to that of readers, as both parties are simply trying to interpret Mallare's circuitous and abstract disclosures. Here, Hecht improves on the diegesis-bending quality of the first Mallare novel by having the unknown commentator acknowledge the dyad's formal oddities and modernism-inflected fixation on the limitations of language.

The third chapter (the first in this novel to be narrated from Mallare's perspective) prominently features horror tableaux in a way that already surpasses the more decadence-oriented, psychological bent of *Fantazius Mallare*. These sequences are characterized by deliberate narratorial obscurantism and an obsession with the failure of language and writing to make meaning in an apocalyptic context. As a fog sweeps over Mallare's

unnamed city, he witnesses frightening shapes in the street: “Figures moved grotesquely in the mist. One could not see their faces. They moved without heads, without arms, without legs—their monotonous bodies mutilated into strange and pleasing shapes by the fog” (Hecht, *KoE* 7). Mallare’s half-disgusted, half-appreciative reaction to these ominous shapes recalls his self-contradictory embrace of contorted images and non-normative bodies in the first novel, amplifying them for a more conventional moment of horror that confirms Mallare’s morbidity while calling the veracity of his narrative into question. If nothing else, Hecht makes sure that Mallare’s narration is *consistently* inconsistent.

As the fog spreads, Mallare notes that “the buildings became a vague tracery of pencil lines. Slowly the pencil lines vanished. There were no longer buildings” (Hecht, *KoE* 8). These images swiftly call attention to the novel’s fictionality; *Fantazius Mallare* only played with such imagery towards its conclusion. Even though his surroundings are disappearing, Mallare does not articulate any details about what replaces them. His city becomes “an island without sky or contours,” and the devouring fog is “a monster of space, a thing without size or content” (Hecht, *KoE* 9, 10). So much of this early horror sequence is dominated by the idea of a language of nihilism. Hecht is channeling numinous horror’s tendency to describe fictional monstrosities in apophatic terms. Mallare continues, “I write now when nothing can be seen. I still feel the paper under my hand. But there is nothing. Outside my window—nothing. There is no window, no world” (Hecht, *KoE* 10). Only language is left to Mallare, but it is ineffective, lacking in specificity. It appears that an author, like a god, can just as easily destroy a world as create it. Gone is the callous indifference that consumed Mallare in *Fantazius Mallare*; in its place is a steadily growing terror of the inability to make meaning.

His linguistic concerns are subsumed when Mallare gets the chance to diminish human intellectual pursuits as he did in the earlier book. Upon first arriving in the mysterious titular kingdom, Mallare and hundreds of other abductees and survivors of the foggy apocalypse are trapped in a cave. He details their conversations and disparate fields of expertise, all with his trademark sneering cynicism. Under Mallare's pen, a learned professor becomes a "venerable magician," marking the first of many instances in *The Kingdom of Evil* that science is likened to magic (Hecht, *KoE* 17). Mallare goes on to mock the captured, calling them "A *rabble* of savants... a collection of *monomaniacs*... *wizards* of chemistry... the high *priests* of progress... [and] a congress of *frustrated saviors*" (Hecht, *KoE* 17-18, my emphases). Such disdain for these men of learning demonstrates the lasting influence of decadence on Mallare's characterization. His repeated equations of science with magic are part of a larger trend in the novel: the melding of once-hard categorical divisions of knowledge and being.

The book's treatment of emotions and sentiments exemplifies its sustained disintegration of epistemological categories. The traditional language of emoting is flipped; emotions and sentiments are frequently portrayed as active, while the emoters themselves are passive. Upon first meeting Doctor Sebastien, the apparent ruler of the island, Mallare muses, "A sense of puniness overcomes us" (Hecht, *KoE* 21). This grammatical construction is not passive, but the feeling of diminishment that Mallare and his kidnapped cohort experiences is at the center of the scene. All of these men whose distinguished careers involve knowledge production are laid low by the same sensation: fear. After Piltendorff, one of the abductees and a former general, refuses Sebastien's orders and pursues him alone after a failed attempt at fomenting rebellion, Mallare writes, "A terror holds me as I think of him moving in the darkness" (Hecht, *KoE* 31). Once more, the grammar of this line is not conventionally passive, yet Hecht's choice to place

emotion before emoter matches the contexts of the perpetually vague, indistinct descriptions of the setting, as well as the foggy apocalypse that absorbed and obscured life without leaving anything in its place.

In Hecht's titular kingdom, elements of interpretation as basic as emotion and language are no longer driven by human agency. This subversion of standard affective faculties is a highlight not only of this novel's ongoing collapse of epistemological and ontological categories, but also of its perversion of mysticism: instead of the mystic stilling all emotional activities to achieve enlightenment, these sentiments threaten to overwhelm and control the mystic. When Mallare meets Kora, Sebastien's concubine, he writes, "I could feel her mind crawling with angers. A lascivious fear excited me" (Hecht, *KoE* 70). First, it must be acknowledged that Mallare's relationship with Kora is a sharp opposite of his relationship with Rita in *Fantazius Mallare*. Now, he is her slave; instead of regularly imposing his own fallacious interpretations and imperious will upon an illegible and victimized Rita, Mallare can apparently sense Kora's emotions, which overcome him. This high-telepathic exchange does not result in greater empathy from our deranged protagonist; instead, the blurring of mental borders sees Kora's rage rendered invasive, insect-like, and disorderly, with no apparent center. The chaos of Kora's mentality has a deleterious, contagious effect on Mallare. Just as she is the vehicle for sentiments that appear to operate on their own instincts, he is subject to an inescapable impulse that hybridizes the sexual impulse with fright, two of the feelings that most sickened him in *Fantazius Mallare*.

Hecht's 'unchaining' of emotions and sentiments sets the stage for a crucially important image in the Mallare duology: the mind-as-monster. Arguing with another abductee, the inscrutable poet Julian, Mallare praises Doctor Sebastien's plan to engineer a new breed of human. This exchange is the first of multiple points in *The Kingdom of*

Evil when Mallare unleashes vitriolic tirades about the human body, deeming it vestigial. He decries “Our clumsy and ineffectual bodies” as what hold humanity back from its true form: “a mind—a phantom stumbling about on incongruous ape legs” (Hecht, *KoE* 45). Renouncing the body in this fashion emphasizes Mallare’s ongoing mystical leanings, strabismic as they may be. The core difference here is the evolutionary cant of Sebastien’s designs. The mystical turning-inward and rejection of animality in the name of mental advancement from *Fantazius Mallare* persists, but it is no longer a solitary, Nietzschean affair; it is now an evolutionary agenda. Mallare’s ideational shift towards scientism and away from tortured spirituality reflects this novel’s preference for the teleological outlook of the modernists, rather than the cynical atemporality of the decadents.

Mallare uses language and imagery that hybridizes biblical and evolutionary discourses, again subverting interpretation by melding once-distinct epistemological categories. Mallare scorns “that theological quibble you call the soul” and “that lingering ruin you call humanity” (Hecht, *KoE* 46). While Hecht may be shifting Mallare’s intellectual bedrock from the aesthetic to the scientific in *The Kingdom of Evil*, his bile for humanity remains unchanged. Defying Julian’s protests, Mallare proclaims, “A new Genesis will unfold itself within these stone hills!” (Hecht, *KoE* 46). Unlike the descent into Judeo-Christian imagery that denotes his failure at the end of the first novel, Mallare’s mention of the Bible is a springboard for Hecht to begin the collapse of another staid category of interpretation: gender. The biblical callbacks continue as Mallare tries to convince Julian: “We have been selected to assist at the accouchement in the garden,” evoking Edenic imagery and subverting it in the same breath with the image of male midwives (Hecht, *KoE* 47).

Gender subversion is amplified by brief but evocative images of male pregnancy as Mallare rants to Julian about “man, frightened of this phantom *taking birth in him*” and “The new life that *writhes within the shell of man*” (Hecht, *KoE* 47, my emphases). The pregnancy metaphors intensify when Mallare, already aflame with the idea of the mind-as-monster, returns to one of his favorite topics from the first novel: madness. The monstrous mind “Denied the logic of birth ... is beginning to amuse itself with protests” (Hecht, *KoE* 48). Still shunning the diagnostic language of psychoanalysis, Hecht gives Mallare the use of male pregnancy and evolutionary metaphors to reframe madness—a term already exhausted with competing definitions in *Fantazius Mallare*—as the mind’s revolt against the vestigial human body. Mallare once refused to identify as fully mad, but now he turns to embrace madness as an evolutionary balm for stunted humanity.

In Mallare’s new philosophy, the mind is a creature unto itself. And like all creatures, it generates progeny: “Its clipped and broken wings... tumble [man] into schizophrenic postures.... His thoughts denied life, turn into hammers that drive nails into his head, turn into saws whose teeth rip at his arteries, turn into witches that suck his blood, that tear at his organs until screaming with agonies, life ejaculates out of his veins” (Hecht, *KoE* 48, 49). This sequence continues the novel’s trend of collapsing categories. In this case, Hecht mixes graphic images of almost-medieval torture, creatures of mythological horror, and psychoanalytic terminology to paint a picture of how Mallare perceives humanity: stunted by a refusal to pursue the godlike state that eluded him in *Fantazius Mallare*. On a broader thematic level, Hecht embraces the existential pessimism that is endemic to numinous horror. These images of thoughts as the monstrous mind’s torturous progeny anticipate current antinatalist laments about human consciousness: “one of the greatest disadvantages of consciousness... is that it exacerbates necessary sufferings and creates unnecessary ones” (Ligotti 169). Mallare

still wants to escape the ontological trap of humanity, but this escape is now framed in terms of evolutionary exigency, rather than a purely aesthetic revolution.

Not to be outdone by the identity fragmentation at the end of the first novel, *The Kingdom of Evil* steadily builds upon its ideas of interpretive failure and monstrous mentalities to produce a *mise-en-abyme* of identity. To be clear, Hecht provides no confirmation of whether this novel is meant to take place entirely within Mallare's mind or if something supernatural is afoot; even if the story shares the psychological horror bent of its predecessor, the schizoid-mystic reality at work in *The Kingdom of Evil* has an oddly deific structure. All the characters appear to be part of a pantheon, aspects of the demiurge Mallare, whose schizoid mysticism is constitutive of either an extended hallucination or a reality beyond normal earthly life. Many elements of the phantasmagoric mystical state comprising the novel put Mallare at the center of things in either case, seemingly generating every bizarre entity he meets in the kingdom.

Early hints at this schizoid truth abound, such as when Mallare uneasily notes that Julian "mimics me well. At times he even steals my words and talks in such a manner that I stare at him confused by his similarity" (Hecht, *KoE* 82). Mallare is not the only character experiencing potentially slipshod identity. In one encounter, Kora derides Mallare and expresses her lust for Julian. As she beats Mallare with her girdle, he is transfixed: "for a moment it seemed not that Kora but the malevolent figure of Sebastien was towering over me" (Hecht, *KoE* 76). When Kora flickers into Sebastien, the scene recalls the earlier gendered subversions with which Mallare attempted to convert Julian to belief in the kingdom's evolutionary agenda. Now, he is on the receiving end of a literal, if brief, collapsing of once-discrete identity categories. Kora's violent dominance and Mallare's sexualized subservience typify the degeneracy that was the thematic lifeblood of *fin-de-siècle* literary decadence.

But just when decadence threatens to rear its head, Julian appears to reinstate the dyad's interpretive and generic tensions. When Mallare jealously threatens Julian over Kora, the poet chastises him: "You, Mallare, who have been too proud to lower your lips to virgins.... You are content to... let her foul your body with the blows of her girdle. So this is your mission in this fine Kingdom—to be a slave whimpering at the feet of a sexual paroxysm" (Hecht, *KoE* 79). Whether he is a fellow abductee or an externalized facet of Mallare's own fragmentary consciousness, Julian—the Virgil to Mallare's Dante—takes it upon himself to call out Mallare's inconsistencies. The bile Julian expresses features a hint of the diagnostic-psychoanalytic language that Hecht derided in the first book, but what should pique readerly interest here is Julian's obliquely metafictional reference to Mallare's behaviors and philosophical beliefs in *Fantazius Mallare*, information to which he should not have access. Sex might have been effectively taboo in the first novel, but it appears unavoidable in *The Kingdom of Evil*.

Their argument reaches a fever pitch when Julian issues an outburst as clarifying as it is confounding:

'There is no Mallare,' he whispered. 'I am Mallare. I whom you call Julian and who follows you like a shadow, I am all that lives. Everything else in this Kingdom, including you, is a phantasmagoria I tolerate and at which I have smiled too long. It is in my power to blot out this lewd mist. All the horrors and monstrosities at which you are beginning to tremble, I have only to wave my hand and command them and they will crawl back into my mind again, dragging you after them.' (Hecht, *KoE* 81)

Julian's takedown of Mallare reads like a more bilious rendition of the aporetic ending of Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*. His claim to Mallare's own identity is rooted in an implicit accusation of hypocrisy. Mallare believes the human mind is a jumping-off point

for unprecedented evolutionary advancement. Now, Julian seems to have surpassed Mallare's rebelliousness, dismissing the pervasive sexuality that captivates Mallare as nothing more than "mist." After this explosion, Julian simply shrugs and walks away. Dismissively, Mallare muses, "I understand this crazed and babbling poet now. He fancies he is a superior version of me" (Hecht, *KoE* 81). The tension here is that Mallare narrates the entirety of Julian's rebuke. So, after such a clear statement of epistemological and ontological authority, readers are still left grasping at straws. Should we believe Julian's outburst or do we remain, like the narrator who opened the novel, deferential to the dubious authority of Mallare's reportage?

The perfumed and scarlet-robed Kora, a vision of decadence if there ever was one in American literature, discloses the truth of her ennui to an abashed Mallare. "I am jealous of the illusions I inspire in your head," she says, continuing, "To you I am a world unknown, a hypnotic altar before which you abase yourself... I am jealous, I tell you, of the dream I inspire in you" (Hecht, *KoE* 95). Her envy of Mallare's idealized version of her is a heady concept to navigate. After all, Julian's earlier outburst is the closest Hecht has come to taking a decisive stance on whether or not the plot of this novel is merely Mallare's fantasy. If this is the case, then Kora's address of a whole and complete Mallare persona is perplexing, given that he is somehow simultaneously imagining a world entirely peopled by reflections of himself while inhabiting it *as* himself.

Identity in *The Kingdom of Evil* continues its recursive spiral when Kora and Julian accompany Mallare into the garden where Sebastien and the scientists pursue their experiments. In another show of eerie similarity to the aesthetics-addicted Mallare of the first book, Julian bemoans the hideousness of the garden, exclaiming, "How the devil can one enjoy a garden that teeters and spirals in front of one's eyes?" (Hecht, *KoE* 112). The floral forge of Sebastien's artificial deific creations is not meant for human eyes. Like des

Esseintes and the other decadent heroes who inspired this dyad, Julian makes sense of the world through aesthetics, and thus laments a garden that exists for any purpose other than aesthetic pleasure.

Amid the disgusting scenery, Mallare notices “horrificing human fragments—the arm of a man, the perfect breasts of a woman; human eyes staring out of putrescent and formless growths... a convulsive debris of faces, limbs and fetal distortions moving like foul bags of life” (Hecht, *KoE* 114). In another point of contrast from the first novel, Mallare—who once explicitly desired godhood in order to warp the human form—is repulsed by these human body parts placed in radically new contexts. Hecht doubles down on the genre-dividing, interpretation-frustrating horror of the moment:

Julian fled. I stood unable to move until one of them, tall as a man, its bulbous head rising out of a discolored sack of flesh, turned its face toward me. For the moment I looked at it a horror contracted my skin. I saw stamped upon this hideous growth and half-hidden by a cowl of skin a face I knew—a face with melancholy eyes and a wide brooding mouth; a man’s face, perfect and thinking, its hair falling in a black slant across its brow.

‘My face!’ I screamed. (*KoE* 117)

A major emblem of the Freudian uncanny is the detached limb, but this sequence deviates from its potentially psychoanalytic association; rather than a disassembled body shown to its possessor, a copy is witnessed by the original, whose own originality is suspect. Here, Hecht is using the graphic biological horror of this moment to preserve the novel’s constitutive tension between decadence and modernism. What Kora, Julian, and Mallare witness as Julian launches into a prototypically decadent-aesthetic diatribe, is montage, the height of modernist artistic technique, *literalized* in flesh. Humanity in the kingdom is

no longer a fixed ontological category. Identity is both replicable and, to a stomach-churning degree, malleable.

The Kingdom of Evil's nightmarish and circuitous treatments of identity and interpretation continue with the birth and evolution of Synthemus, the artificial god. His shape is evocative of the plant kingdom as well as the giants of folklore. But the clearest analogue for Synthemus is neither animal nor vegetable: the god-beast is “no more than an intricate mechanism of flesh and cells—a growth whose single impulse was to increase” (Hecht, *KoE* 130-131). Hecht's iconoclastic take on god best resembles a tumor. The logic of metastasis accompanies Synthemus. Jacobi, the scientist responsible for Synthemus and the other fleshy miscreations wandering the island, “has become almost as strange as the monsters he brings into the world. His body has withered. Blood seems to have gone out of him” (Hecht, *KoE* 119). Jacobi's toil on the island is the inversion of a creation myth. Unlike humanity's biblical creation *ex nihilo*, the teratogenesis of Synthemus comes at a price: the destruction of humanity as a discrete category of biological identity, evinced by both Jacobi's “emaciated, witch-like” decay and the nightmarish living montages of flesh Mallare encountered earlier (Hecht, *KoE* 128). This likening of a prominent scientist to a witch continues Hecht's through-line of collapsed epistemological categories in *The Kingdom of Evil*.

As if being modeled on the biology of a tumor were not a nightmarish enough existence, it is revealed that the god-creature is a perversion of normal standards of biology *and* godhood: “What you call soul is the disease that eats the tissues of man. Synthemus is immortal. There are no thoughts in Him to carbonize His organs, no senses to wear out His membranes. He can neither see nor hear, smell nor feel, yet He lives” (Hecht, *KoE* 127). The soul, earlier deemed a “theological quibble,” is now nothing more than a countdown clock, a living body's genetic awareness of inevitable death. Numinous

horror comes again to the fore as readers learn that Synthemus is, above all else, a god of senselessness. In a grim reversal of godhood as an omniscient state of existential authority, Synthemus has zero sensory apparatus. With no senses (or, indeed, sense) to retard the continued growth of his tissues, Synthemus's immortality is entwined with his tumorous and senseless qualities—a being capable of nothing but indifference.

The debate and consternation that Synthemus engenders among the island's dwellers contribute further to the already-confounding *mise-en-abyme* of identities that Hecht weaves throughout the novel. Jacobi's attempt at an explanation is disturbing: "Yes, Sebastien calls Him God... But He is nothing more than a piece of tissue in the form of a man. ...Each fraction of Him lives by itself and grows. There is no center—no brain. It is not an animal nor a man, but a compositum of tissues" (Hecht, *KoE* 129). This artificial idiot-god is a monument to plurality. When Mallare pushes Jacobi for a more concise explanation, the withering scientist offers, "He is a plant"; in reply, Kora merely repeats, "He is God" (Hecht, *KoE* 129). Synthemus is the apotheosis of the generic, thematic, and stylistic tensions that Hecht layers throughout *The Kingdom of Evil*. Simultaneously a plant, a tumor, and a deity, Synthemus frustrates every definition or explanation it is assigned, leaving authorities like Jacobi to sit forlornly "whispering questions that bristle with Greek and Latin words," recalling Hecht's interpretive intransigence, Mallare's denigrations of human intellectual pursuits, and the hopelessness of language to make meaning (*KoE* 133).

When Kora drags an unwilling Mallare into the temple to witness Synthemus up close, they make a startling discovery. "Staring out of the sack-like growth" of the god's head, Mallare writes, "I had seen my face" (Hecht, *KoE* 138). The realization that Synthemus wears Mallare's face does nothing to confirm the protagonist's fulfillment of godhood. It only unravels his sense of self further: "A Mallare so enormous had gazed

down on me that I had vanished in the comparison” (Hecht, *KoE* 141). As it has in earlier works of numinous horror, the conventional literary sublime is no longer a gateway to greater understanding of the self or the world. Hecht transforms sublimity into a sensation of profound self-negation, amplifying the delirious effect of Mallare’s earlier encounter with his face on a sack of ambulant flesh and adding another tier to the novel’s mind-boggling mise-en-abyme of identity.

Awareness, of a kind, begins to take shape in Synthemus. Though it was crafted to be mute and insensate, the god begins to evolve: “Bestial and hideous, the roars increased. ...They had created Him to grow like a plant of flesh, bloodless and inviolable. But a voice had taken form in Him. A voice had come from nowhere and was crying now in the night filling the island with a tumult of despair and ecstasy” (Hecht, *KoE* 144). It turns out that the reports of Synthemus’s soullessness and senselessness were exaggerated. Forecasting antinatalist portrayals of consciousness as something inherently negative, Hecht out-Frankensteins *Frankenstein* here, carefully detailing the excruciating emergence of sentience in a creature never intended to be sensible. Synthemus was first defined by his tumorous immortality. Now, however, the artificial god is a being whose only means of communication is an aberrant glossolalia, divine speech that is intellectually and spiritually vacuous but still demonstrative of pain and suffering on a nigh-incalculable scale. Mallare’s model of truly indifferent godhood appears to elude even those creatures expressly built for it.

The climactic conversation between the poet Julian and Kora, the muse and de facto queen of the eponymous kingdom, is crucial to understanding the central ideological tension of Hecht’s Mallare duology. Referencing “the hideous secret of [Kora’s] existence,” Julian makes the following disclosure:

You are the lust that lives in Mallare and to which his madness has given a body. Like an allegorical figure of Passion you occupy the pantomime of his mania. And I, too, who am awake—I stumble through the cruel dream with which he surrounds himself. ...And I tell you again, it is all mist, all shadow. There is no island, no kingdom. There is only the broken and glittering mind of Mallare. ...The dream has grown too intricate. ...My eyes and hands do not distinguish between you or me. You whom I know for a shadow seem made of the same substance as I. (Hecht, *KoE* 158)

It appears that Mallare's previously obsessive aestheticism is now excised and ambulant in the form of Julian, just as Kora is an inverse of Mallare's fantasy of Rita, now domineering and cruel where her inspiration was fawning and tractable. Speaking in aesthetic-evaluative terms, Julian carefully dissects his patently absurd existence; his speech here bears a distressing resemblance to the many confounding diatribes Mallare delivered to Rita (and himself) during the latter part of *Fantazius Mallare*. Poetic as his revelation may be, the crux of his argument is awash in modernist skepticism. Never one for placid acceptance, Kora argues, "What does it matter if we are real or not? Who is there to judge but ourselves? Why must you question? Here is night and the odor of flowers. And if I am beautiful to your eyes why must you distort me with meanings?" (Hecht, *KoE* 158). Kora's litany of questions bespeaks decadence's resistance to totalization and categorization. Their debate animates the core generic tension of *The Kingdom of Evil*: an unending struggle between the aesthetics-for-aesthetics'-sake approach of decadence with the relentless ontological and epistemological skepticisms of modernism.

This scene also provides readers with one of the clearest images of the novel's mise-en-abyme of identity: a supposedly coherent and integrated individual Mallare—the

one writing the journal entries that make up most of the novel—watches Julian and Kora argue about identity and reality after having already witnessed his face on the body of Synthemus *and* on another of the tumorous creations roaming the kingdom. Where does one Mallare end and another begin? Just as it was during the ending of the previous novel, Mallare is faced with the dire existential prospect that he cannot trust even the most basic unit of interpretation: self and other. Faced with mounting evidence that, dream or otherwise, the island he inhabits is a creation of his own, he returns to the ontological tailspin he experienced at the end of *Fantazius Mallare*. As the kingdom descends into chaos and open rebellion, Mallare thinks, “if I die there will be a Mallare without Mallare to know him. ...now I am no longer Mallare, but a likeness of Mallare that survives in a dream. The dreamer will continue. ...I am not I. I am somewhere else” (Hecht, *KoE* 178-179). His babblings sound like the fractured version of what Richard H. Jones calls a depth-mystical experience, wherein there is “an implosion of reality at the end of the path... usually accompanied by a sense of certainty and finality” (*Mysticism* 3). Even with the novel winding down, readers are left uncertain as to whether Mallare’s journal chronicles the experience of a mystical reality or if it is merely the “unedited mania” that the other narrator called it at the beginning of the novel.

As the novel comes to a close, readers are faced with what, I contend, is one of the most abrupt and frustrating conclusions in twentieth-century American literature. The narrator cuts into the flow of action with a supposedly authentic report of what became of Mallare. The entire text of this final chapter reads:

In his room above the river front surrounded with hideous objects, with the dead bodies of animals and humans piled in the corners, Fantazius Mallare was found after an absence of seven years. Wasted and stiffened he was discovered crouching at the feet of a dead woman. (Hecht, *KoE* 211)

Considering the florid, decadent language that dominates preceding chapters, this declarative outburst initially reads like a non-sequitur, despite the fact that it *supposedly* clarifies what has become of the novel's main narrator. Its telegraphic prose recalls that of modernist titan Ernest Hemingway, whose writing left Hecht famously unimpressed. In spite of its two flatly declarative sentences, this ending does nothing to answer the countless questions it provokes: who is the dead woman? Why is her body in a prominent position, while the others are simply piled together? Is Mallare responsible for the piles of carcasses in his apartment? For what purpose were these bodies gathered here? What caused Mallare's death? How long has he been dead? What, if anything, became of the kingdom? If it was a hallucination, how does it correspond to this grisly scene? With this concluding chapter, Hecht slams a door shut in readers' faces. Readers of *The Kingdom of Evil* have been unwittingly subjected to what H. Porter Abbott calls neural sport, "a deliberate jamming of our mental circuitry whereby we are cut adrift from deeply embedded ways of knowing and enter states of syntactical and narrative impossibility that abide only in our transaction with the text" (65). Cleverly leveraging his narrator's exegetic voice to put readers in a state of unremitting confusion, Hecht leaves us unable to access the transcendence promised by conventional mystical experience, to navigate instead the failure of readerly interpretation amid a tableau of grisly horror. *The Kingdom of Evil* flipped the script on its precursor, placing readers in a reality controlled by a demiurge that thought itself a man. *The Kingdom of Evil* inserts Mallare (and, by extension, readers) into this ersatz godhood, but keeps him blithely unaware of his endlessly generative capacity; whether this godhood is diegetic and literal (Mallare unknowingly generating reality) or extradiegetic and metaphorical (Hecht capriciously manipulating narratorial authority) is, finally, irrelevant. This is neither a revelation, nor a

moral, nor even an example—just a betrayal that cannot even be confidently read as a betrayal.

THE CHAOS TRANCE: THE AFTERMATH OF HECHT'S WAR ON INTERPRETATION

Twain's mysterious variants ended, as we saw, on a note of solipsistic certainty. Hecht is more devious. First, he withholds godhood from his increasingly desperate and deranged protagonist. Then, he endows Mallare with godhood, but leaves him unaware of his own power, which may be nothing more than a dream. God, traditionally conceived as the ultimate existential authority, and mysticism, arguably one of humanity's oldest methods of knowledge production, are rendered equally meaningless by the Mallare duology. Readers, despite the maelstrom of narratorial equivocations and ambiguities, can never retreat into the mystical fantasies depicted in either of the novels, thanks to the narrators' constant careening among generic registers. After all, genre—whether decadent, modernist, or horrific—is yet another form of preventive interpretation, thanks to tropes and audience expectations; in his ongoing battle against the fustian forces of good taste and cultural authority, Hecht keeps the dyad's motley generic elements in constant competition with each other by way of the novels' jockeying narrators.

Hecht's speakers have little regard for clarity, precision, or consistency, instead favoring prose that mixes sumptuously decadent stylings with the high modernists' penchant for ontological and epistemological obscurantism. His narrative sticking points, digressions, shifts, and other ties perfectly model deific idiocy when mobilized by an author, rendering narrative reality entirely mutable and subject to the whims of obscure narrators. If the author inhabits a godlike position in relation to readers, then Hecht's deific-narratorial persona is close to that of Twain's *deus stultum*, only more conscious of the power he holds over his audience and more vituperative in how he uses it. The feeling

of reading the Mallare dyad simulates the experience of living under the control of a capricious god. If godhood in the 1920s was not yet a readily permeable state in the numinous horror tradition, it was no longer categorically closed off from mortal access, thanks to Hecht's formal and generic ministrations. Gods can be built, but—like the mystic states that enable such divine fabrications—they collapse under the slightest interpretive pressure.

Chapter Four: Deranging Lovecraft in *Dagon* and “The Sect of the Idiot”

“Cthulhu still lives, too, I suppose, again in that chasm of stone which has shielded him since the sun was young. His accursed city is sunken once more, for the *Vigilant* sailed over the spot after the April storm; but his ministers on earth still bellow and prance and slay around idol-capped monoliths in lonely places. He must have been trapped by the sinking whilst within his black abyss, or the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy. Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come—but I must not and cannot think! Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye.”

—Howard Phillips Lovecraft
“The Call of Cthulhu” (169)

With these lines, narrator Francis Wayland Thurston ends “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), a chronicle of his investigation into the ancient cult responsible for his uncle’s mysterious death. The story begins with a skeptical Thurston probing the link between disparate documents about cults and a monstrous-looking sculpture found amid his uncle’s effects. Thurston’s curiosity outweighs his incredulity as the tale progresses, eventually blooming into obsession, as indicated by his desperate tone in the lines above. His shift from doubt to belief comes with the understanding that his late uncle’s bizarre figurine is a physically accurate representation (in miniature) of what still waits dreaming on the ocean floor: Cthulhu, an ancient extraterrestrial being whose cult remains dangerously active. Reflecting on the gravity of his discovery, he writes, “I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me” (Lovecraft, “Call” 169). It is remarkable that such despondent lines come from Thurston, who has not even seen Cthulhu in the flesh but merely interviewed a traumatized sailor who survived his own encounter with the creature. The very knowledge of Cthulhu’s existence is overpowering,

as evinced by the story's iconic opening line: "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents" (Lovecraft, "Call" 139). Mere awareness of Cthulhu's existence constitutes a mammoth realignment of perception regarding humanity's supposed existential primacy. Thurston's ontological problem—the factual knowledge that humanity inhabits an indifferent universe and is profoundly vulnerable to the depredations of unimaginable powers—is crucial to "The Call of Cthulhu" and the countless imitations it has inspired over the years.

With "The Call of Cthulhu" and subsequent works, Howard Phillips Lovecraft established and popularized cosmic horror, a still-thriving category of horror fiction that is analogous to numinous horror but eschews spiritual considerations for a scientism-influenced take on existential pessimism. Noted Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi outlines the basic plot devices that constitute a cosmic horror story: "A fictional New England topography ... A growing library of imaginary 'forbidden' books ... A diverse array of extraterrestrial 'gods' or entities ... A sense of cosmicism ... [and a] scholarly narrator or protagonist" (*Rise* 17-19). These elements, in fluctuating intensities, have come to define the still-growing collection of narratives commonly called the Cthulhu Mythos.¹ Cosmic horror, of which the Lovecraft and Cthulhu Mythoi are prominent examples, is especially popular among genre aficionados for its monsters, whose grotesque anatomies and ancient agendas defy human understanding. Cthulhu and other such entities operate on geological or even cosmological scales of time that are incomprehensible to humans. Such cosmic bizarrerie are to be thanked (or blamed) for the myriad Lovecraft followers whose works have filled the horror sections of bookstores and all forms of popular media

¹ In *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2015), S.T. Joshi differentiates between the Lovecraft Mythos and the Cthulhu Mythos. The former denotes the inter-connected cycle of cosmic horror stories composed by Lovecraft himself, while the latter comprises the myriad imitators, good and bad, of Lovecraft's characters, entities, forbidden texts, locales, style, and general themes.

in the generations since Lovecraft's death in 1937.² However, it is Lovecraft's cosmicism—his pessimistic-materialist view of existence—more than his trademark monsters or tomes, that truly defines cosmic horror. Lovecraft himself said as much in a letter laying out “the fundamental premise” of his enduring mythos: “common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the cosmos-at-large” (qtd. in Joshi, *Rise* 17). Humanity, in Lovecraft's cosmic horror canon, is forever insignificant when compared to the powers lurking in the outer reaches of space and the dark corners of the Earth.

In short, H.P. Lovecraft is the writer who finally got American horror to shift its focus towards the existentially pessimistic concerns that numinous horror had already been exploring since the early days of the American republic. His writings forecast a sea change in popular American horror fiction away from the reigning Judeo-Christian epistemologies of the Gothic and toward more non-anthropocentric, posthuman outlooks.³ A *sui generis* anti-humanism suffuses his early twentieth-century catalogue, informed by the increasing public awareness of materialist philosophies and advancements in sciences like astronomy. A “key characteristic” of the Lovecraft

² See Sederholm and Weinstock's introduction to *The Age of Lovecraft* (2016) for an exhaustive survey of examples of Lovecraft's continuing influence on popular culture.

³ To be clear, Lovecraft's own work cannot be categorized as posthuman without deliberately overlooking his legacy of undeniably poisonous race hatred. See Weinstock (“Afterword”) for an interview with SF author China Miéville about the place of Lovecraft's well-documented racism in ongoing studies of Lovecraft and his work. Much has been written about the history and (often racial) politics informing the creation of the Lovecraft Mythos, such as the rise of fascism and the overall turbulent atmosphere of America's interwar period. Lovecraft was, at least initially, an early proponent of fascism. Joshi cites an “acutely embarrassing” 1933 letter wherein Lovecraft's “qualified support of Hitler and his corresponding suspicion of Jewish influence in America” come to the fore: “I repeat that there is a great & pressing need behind every one of the major planks of Hitlerism— racial-cultural continuity, conservative cultural ideals, & an escape from the absurdities of Versailles... I know he's a clown, but by God, I *like* the boy!” (qtd. in *Visionary* 360). Many Lovecraft proponents will rush to mention his support of Roosevelt's New Deal and other political conversions he experienced later in life; while these facts are true, they should not overshadow Lovecraft's more retrograde and repugnant views, especially in the context of the misanthropy pervading his fiction.

Mythos—and cosmic horror, more generally speaking—is perspectival, according to Lovecraft scholar David E. Schultz; these stories “look out and not in. The events they chronicle have significance not to isolated individuals but to all mankind” (206). These panoramic presentations of horror and monstrosity speak again to the growing public fascination with the sciences and all things empirical that characterized Lovecraft’s native early twentieth century.⁴ His contribution to horror sees an increased interest in looking *outward*, sacrificing concerns about subjectivity for an obsession with disparities of cosmic scale.

Numinous horror similarly deals with the cosmic scope and existentially pessimistic concerns covered in cosmic horror, but never divests its supernatural elements and antagonists of their religious valences. More importantly, subjectivities human and otherwise remain centrally important to numinous horror, especially in the texts discussed below. This chapter focuses on two late twentieth-century works of numinous horror penned in the inescapable shadow of H.P. Lovecraft. These texts, both contributions to the Cthulhu Mythos, dramatically reinterpret Lovecraft’s thematic hallmarks by altering his sense of scale and refusing cosmic horror’s characteristic scientism and outward perspectival turn. Fred Chappell and Thomas Ligotti do not make the standard cosmic horror move of highlighting humanity’s insignificance at a macro level. Chappell and Ligotti instead invert the Lovecraftian outward perspective, thinking through the ramifications of existentially horrifying circumstances in the lives of their hapless characters. They do so through a textual phenomenon I call unspeakable transcendence, wherein human narrators undergo transformations into godlike beings and struggle to chronicle the experience. Unspeakable transcendence blurs formerly impenetrable

⁴ For a brief contextual overview of science (and pseudoscience) in Lovecraft’s time, see Colavito 29-48.

divisions between the human and the divine—a categorical difference upheld not only by Lovecraftian cosmic horror, but also by earlier works of numinous horror. Tampering aggressively with scale and perspective in their stories allows Chappell and Ligotti leeway to reinterpret Lovecraft for a shared artistic end: exploring how the perspectival transformations of unspeakable transcendence interfere with narrative construction and closure.

Chappell and Ligotti, in differing ways, write in line with what is purported to be Lovecraft’s “aesthetic agenda—the conveyance of terror at the thought of human insignificance in a boundless cosmos” (Joshi, *Rise* 19). When we unquestioningly view Chappell and Ligotti as direct descendants of Lovecraft, though, we ignore their stronger connection to earlier writers of numinous horror, whose mystical anti-humanism predates Lovecraft’s more empirical, historically specific anti-humanism. Though much of post-Lovecraft cosmic horror borders on pastiche, Chappell and Ligotti’s numinous derangements of its core tropes are measured and innovative—including their drastic revisions of the standard cosmic horror story conclusion. They stay true to the narratorial demands of numinous horror by consciously modeling their conclusions to enact absolute denials of order and rationality. They compound the disturbing effect of cosmic horror’s existential implications by endowing their renditions of the supernatural with explicitly religious dimensions rather than depending on the grim empirical neutrality of Lovecraft’s scientism-inflected narrative discourse. Both texts at the center of this chapter construct universes wherein the divine is malign, unintelligible, and omnipresent. These stories are stylistically and thematically invested in modeling universes where our existence is, to borrow Ligotti’s phrase, “malignantly useless” (*Conspiracy* 227). But, unlike the master from Providence, each author takes the pervasive alterity embodied by their dark divinities and renders godhood accessible to certain humans through

unspeakable transcendence. Upon his final discovery in “The Call of Cthulhu,” Thurston “realizes he has assumed a kind of responsibility to his fellow human beings” (Schultz 210). Hopeless as his case may be, he becomes a gatekeeper of forbidden knowledge, preserving the status quo out of a sense of responsibility to the rest of humanity. On Thurston’s fateful choice, Massimo Berruti writes, “Lovecraft seems in effect to outline *ignorance* as a condition of desirable peace and safety for mankind” (373, emphasis original). Thurston’s perceived obligation to preserve quotidian ontology never occurs to the metamorphosing protagonists of the Chappell and Ligotti narratives; they shed not only that responsibility, but also the paltry moral consolation such a sense of duty brings with it. Their experiences of unspeakable transcendence instead continue down the mystical path Ben Hecht explored in his Mallare novels. Upon attaining godhood, their perspectives remain detached, focusing inward rather than outward, privileging the abstract and numinous over materialist and empirical concerns.

Chappell and Ligotti refuse ignorance as a survival strategy and grant readers access to godlike vantages to avoid any possibility of confusion regarding humanity’s pitiful place in the universe. These texts, like their numinous predecessors, do not depend on the human-centered Judeo-Christian theodicy dominating much of American horror fiction. These writers do not fall in lockstep with Lovecraft and much of cosmic horror fiction by downplaying the numinous dimensions of the supernatural in favor of a documentarian, empirical pessimism. Rather, building on the early numinous ideas outlined by Poe, they explore the possibilities of a perverse, anti-Emersonian transcendence, sacrificing humanity for the chaos and darkness of a godlike mode of being. Chappell and Ligotti deprive readers of the consolations of anthropocentrism, scientific-materialist resignation, and standard narrative closure when detailing

transformations from human to god, imparting a new, dark theodicy for a cosmos ruled by powers of absolute alterity.

CRYPTIC ASCENSION: SACRALIZED SUFFERING IN *DAGON*

The dedication in Fred Chappell's *Dagon* (1968), "to the George Garretts and to the Peter Taylors and to the memory of Richard McKenna," could be read as a paratextual paean to white Southern men of letters, relics pushed aside by "the secularization of the modern world" and "the displacement of spiritual values" that characterized the tumultuous 1960s (Chappell v; Lang 44). Rather than history, however, genre remains the most productive inroad for my reading of Chappell's novel. Floating somewhere between the ageless terrors of Lovecraft and the dilapidated splendor of Faulkner's South, Chappell's *Dagon* grafts the gritty realism of the Southern Gothic onto Lovecraftian motifs in a pairing of generic bedfellows that is as captivating as Hecht's generic manipulations were challenging. Chappell primarily focuses his energy on refracting the religious concerns of the Southern Gothic mode through the lens of Lovecraft's cosmology, resulting in an idiosyncratic numinous horror novel that balances the fraught Christianity of the American South with cosmic horror's galactic-scale perspective.

Dagon tells the story of Peter Leland, a preacher who goes to his ancestral Appalachian farm with his wife Sheila. Peter plans to spend the summer finishing his book, *Remnant Pagan Forces in American Puritanism*, a section of which covers the heathen god Dagon. Soon after arriving, he discovers many strange things around the old farmhouse, including bloodied chains in the attic and nonsensical letters loaded with nigh-unpronounceable words. None of these discoveries are stranger than the Morgans, the tenant family residing in a shack on the Leland family property. Peter is taken with

Mina, the strangely fish-like daughter of this moonshine-brewing clan. Spending less time on his book and more wandering the house and acreage, Peter feels himself overtaken by an intense sexual desire for Mina and a growing disdain for his wife that approaches loathing. After murdering Sheila, he takes up with Mina and becomes almost entirely dependent on her domineering sexual attentions and the moonshine that her family brews. Falling into an alcoholic stupor, he becomes a bedridden shell of a man, unable even to pray, suffering through increasingly surreal nightmares and obsessively watching Mina participate in weird rituals with the locals. Eventually, Mina and her young beau, Coke Rymer, take an impotent and delirious Peter on a road trip through the rural South. Their journey ends in the coastal town of Gordon, where they forcibly tattoo a now-slavish Peter with hideous images of the god Dagon. Finally, Peter is taken to meet Dagon in the shed behind the house in Gordon, only to discover that the creature is “Merely a ruptured stubby idiot reptile” that can nonetheless defy the laws of time, space, and matter (Chappell 178). Mina sacrifices a willing Peter to Dagon by slitting his throat. He then transcends death and lives on in a monstrous godlike form, reflecting on humanity’s place in a limitless and indifferent universe.

Chappell’s meticulous reinterpretation of staid religious imagery—most importantly Peter’s journey from stultified preacher to indescribable, godlike beast—highlights one of the many ways in which numinous horror generates new forms of theodicy that can be explored from monstrously non-human perspectives. In a moment of intertextual play, *Dagon* begins with an unattributed epigraph that famously originated in “The Call of Cthulhu.” The quote, “Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn,” translates into English as: “In his house at R’lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming” (Chappell vii; Lovecraft, “Call” 150). This epigraph is one of *Dagon*’s more remarkable manipulations of generic tropes (in this case, cosmic horror’s obsession with ancient

texts) because its ontological implications preemptively eclipse the novel's human elements. By invoking Lovecraftian "scripture" at its outset, *Dagon* frames its human-populated narrative in the context of non- or even anti-human concerns operating on the backdrop of deep time that the presence of Cthulhu and its ilk suggests. Citing such a prophecy also presages the novel's focus on numinous themes, even though the belief system being foregrounded here is decidedly non-Abrahamic. Chappell refuses the staid resolutions of Judeo-Christian theodicies in favor of the implication that the human element of his narrative is entirely subject to agendas as inscrutable as *Dagon's* Lovecraftian epigraph. This epigraph registers the extradiegetic weight of literary influence upon *Dagon*, specifically demonstrating the generic leaning towards anti-humanism shared by horror's cosmic and numinous variants.

In the same way that the epigraphic prophecy comes to bear on the narrative, the weight of the past comes down on Peter in the first chapter of *Dagon*. As he explores the property, Peter recounts childhood impressions of the farmhouse, settling upon a disturbing thought whose gravity will only intensify as the novel advances:

Never before had he realized so acutely the invalidity of his desires, how they could be so easily canceled, simply marked out, by the *impersonal presence of something, a place, an object, anything vehemently and uncaringly itself...* But the pastness which these two rooms ... enclosed was *not simply the impersonal weight of dead personality* but a willful belligerence, active hostility. (Chappell 12, my emphases)

Ascribing malevolence as a form of agency to Peter's ancestral farmhouse is not out of the ordinary for a horror text, Gothic or otherwise. Yet, it is implied that the presence haunting Peter is not exactly human, given that it is not associated with a "dead personality." The haunting's source is more complex than any single lingering presence

or memory, like that of *Absalom*, *Absalom*'s Thomas Sutpen. By granting this malevolence innate priority over Peter's desires, Chappell echoes the effect of his epigraph by implying a sense of disproportionate scale between that which is haunted and that which *haunts*. Focalizing the source of the haunting in two inanimate rooms and describing it as being rooted in a vague "pastness" deprives the haunting of its traditionally memory-oriented Gothic framing. Such a move instead emphasizes the gap between Peter and the indistinct but "willful belligerence" he senses. From the beginning of *Dagon*, it is clear to readers (especially the genre-savvy) that this is not a typical haunted house story.

The question of genre in *Dagon* is not the only tangled skein that Chappell presents to his readers. Suffering, a hallmark of Christianity, is integral to the narrative's Lovecraft-inflected numinous reimagining of the Southern Gothic's religious preoccupations. In one of his sermons, Peter proposes that "faith doesn't drop as the gentle rain from heaven but is formed in continual intellectual and spiritual agony" (Chappell 36). Chappell's allusion to Portia's speech from *The Merchant of Venice* here implies that Christian faith, unlike mercy, *is* strained and unnatural. Faith being a constant struggle and the faithful being inherently unworthy sounds puritanical, but Peter's impending transformation from preacher to creature demonstrates the devotional importance of suffering to a distinctly non-Christian tradition: the Dagon cult. To Peter, "Dagon was symbol of both fertility and infertility; he represented the fault in mankind to act without reflecting, to *do* without knowing why, to go, without knowing where" (Chappell 40, emphasis original). Idiocy is Dagon's main trait, and its impulsive nature supposedly reflects humanity's own. In his sermons and research, Peter prioritizes self-knowledge as a major Christian virtue for which one must strive and suffer. As the story progresses, knowledge and suffering intertwine in a strikingly non-Christian way. The

more Peter suffers amid the Dagon cultists, the more he learns of his own epistemic idiocy, that the systems of knowledge he bases his life on are utterly inadequate, not for their inability to divine the true nature of his world, but because of their flawed assumption that the true nature of the world *can* be comprehended or intuited by humanity.

Inherited guilt plays a subdued but noticeable role in *Dagon*, foregrounding Peter's diegetic connection to the cult of the eponymous god and the novel's thematic inheritances from the atavism-obsessed Lovecraft. Peter's elusive self-knowledge only increases his suffering as he digs through his ancestral home for hints of his family's spiritual history, coming to the conclusion that "It was not all just soured Puritanism, it was something even darker, if that were possible" (Chappell 47). Peter finds aged sheaves of correspondence featuring "transliterations from some exotic tongue, ancient Pnakotic perhaps: 'Nephreu,' 'Yogg Sothoth,' 'Ka nai Hadoth,' 'Cthulhu'" (Chappell 47). Just as Peter is burdened by familial history and faith, this scene is weighed down by its generic influences: the Southern Gothic (itself haunted by Poe) and Lovecraft. George Hovis has likened Peter to Roderick Usher, "haunted by a familial past that... he cannot escape" and counts him among the "Appalachian Quentin Compsons" populating Chappell's first four novels (32). Apart from its use of multiple Lovecraftian buzzwords, this moment echoes a prototypical scene from the Lovecraft and Cthulhu Mythoi: the discovery of (often textual) evidence of outlandish non-human entities that implies an ancestral involvement with said entities, dooming the contemporary narrator.⁵ The dark

⁵ Lovecraft's major thematic preoccupation with atavism is best exemplified by "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family" (1921), "The Rats in the Walls" (1924), and "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (1936), and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1941), all of which end with their narrators discovering—or even devolving into—the inhuman ancestral horrors they have been investigating. For studies of how anxieties about self-knowledge and race play into Lovecraft's atavistic themes, see Burleson and Lovett-Graff.

familial secret, a definitive trope of the Southern Gothic mode, is vested with a hideous, cosmic significance through the invocation of Lovecraft's pantheon, echoing the ingenious re-orienting effect of the novel's epigraph. Whenever a scene in *Dagon* includes a trope common to the Southern Gothic or one with a Judeo-Christian valence, Chappell evokes Lovecraftian horror, complicating accepted ideas about generic expectations and humanity's existential significance.

Peter's path to faith in *Dagon* is marred by his unrelenting and unconscious dependence on Christian ideology, specifically the image of the Edenic serpent. With sustained ophidian allusions, Chappell signals both Peter's degradation and his impending unspeakable transcendence in a moment of failed preaching. Before the biblical snake is explicitly evoked, Peter already takes on its image; readers are told he "squirmed on the floor but made no progress" and "the sibilance of his whisper was echoed in the sibilance of his clothing as it rasped on the boards of the porch" of Mina's home (Chappell 125). Well into his alcoholic stupor, Peter begins "prophesying in a loud voice, heedless," on what he believes to be her teachings (Chappell 125). His whole sermon is even suffused with a build-up of consonant S sounds, mimicking the hiss of a serpent:

Mina's right about the snake. We live as serpents, sucking in the dust, sucking it up. The stuff we were formed of, and we ought to inhabit it. We ought to struggle to make ourselves secret and detestable, we *should* cultivate our sicknesses and bruise our own heads with our own heels. Where's the profit in claiming to walk upright? There's no poisonous animal that walks upright, a desecration. It's better to *show* your true *shape*, always. It's better to s— (Chappell 125, my emphases)

The sermon ends abruptly when he starts gnawing uncontrollably at a wooden post. Peter's humiliation highlights his failure to grasp *Dagon's* doctrine, as well as his steadily

escalating dehumanization. Instead of speaking in tongues, a practice common in the South's Pentecostal churches, Peter's attempt at preaching Mina's serpentine gospel renders him unable to speak. He tries and fails to use the religiously cathected figure of the serpent to denigrate humanity, insisting that we are somehow as base or low as the serpent is in Christian doctrine. Crucially, though, Peter refuses to cede the metaphorical high ground when he contradicts himself, using the bizarre image of humans bruising their own heads with their own heels. This moment is reminiscent of Yahweh's rebuke to the Edenic serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Genesis 3:15). Here, Peter successfully (though perhaps not willfully) assumes a snake-like physicality and manages to corrupt the words of Genesis by eschewing the passage's gendered dimensions and addressing humanity as a monolith. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that—despite his animalistic actions and speech—his language is still much too biblical in its patterns and derivation.

When it comes to humanity, Peter is clearly still not thinking in small enough terms. A "fine-edged clarity possessed him," we are told, only as he renounces speech and mindlessly chews the wood (Chappell 125). The conspicuously passive construction of the phrase sees Peter *possessed by* clarity, emphasizing how integral negation is to his newfound spiritual path. He only approaches something resembling enlightenment or divine inspiration when he instinctively forgoes speech in favor of mindless consumption. (This line's grammatical construction also recalls how Hecht privileged emotions over emoters in *The Kingdom of Evil*.) Rather than ingesting the metaphorical flesh of his deity to achieve transcendence, Peter's consumption of raw, nutritionless matter sees him invaded by a newfound understanding of himself as "a queer experimental animal" that Mina uses "to try and gauge through him the fiber of the whole species" (Chappell 126).

Peter and Mina both seem dehumanized by this line, but only Peter is debased by this dehumanization. Mina, on the other hand, exists outside the bounds of human identity. Peter's status as an "experimental animal" stresses the established intellectual gap between him and Mina, but reverses its dynamic. Rather than playing on the Southern Gothic pairing of the preacher with the bumpkin, Chappell pulls from his Lovecraftian generic inheritance to depict Mina as a curious entity whose sex-and-alcohol-soaked torments are merely tests of Peter's—really, humanity's—cognitive limits.

After a drunken road trip to the coastal town of Gordon, during which Peter suffers through an increasingly surreal series of dreams and hallucinations, Mina and her followers hold nightly meetings, tattooing the beleaguered preacher with outlandish images and designs. Though the once-depraved Coke falters upon witnessing Peter's continuing agony, Mina does not, torturing Peter for an audience of strange men who come to the house to witness the tattooing sessions. Peter drunkenly meditates on his disfigurement, gazing down at his remaining unmarked flesh:

His legs were still naked, untouched by the needle, but they were no longer his, no longer even supported his body. They looked irrelevant and alien, detachable. The remainder of his body was obliterated; it had been absorbed entirely into another manner of existence, a lurid placeless universe where all order was enlarged bitter parody... His body was now a river, was flowing away... There was nothing left in his body. (Chappell 174-175)

Peter's tattooing is a harbinger of his impending transformation from man to god *and* a reinterpretation of the mark of Cain through the lens of numinous horror. Though he does not understand the ritual significance of his tattoos, Peter inhabits a ceremonially important role for Dagon's acolytes: he is a sacrifice, a gift to their god. Cain's mark caused him to suffer a pariah's loneliness, but Peter's tattoos effect a more profound

negation. He seems more confused by his as-yet-unmarked flesh than by his tattoos. The tattoos do not estrange him from humanity writ large, in the senses of community and belonging implied by the word. Instead, the tattoos estrange Peter from *his own* dwindling human identity. Community appears entirely irrelevant in *Dagon*, given that Mina's nameless acolytes are never characterized as individuals. Chappell, in a moment of grim humor, puns on Peter's dehumanization and isolation amid the Dagon cultists: "He had *no body*" (175, my emphasis). The tattooing scene reads like a numinous inversion of 1 Samuel 5:4, wherein "the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*). In the biblical scene, the ichthyoid god of the Philistines is divested of limbs and thereby made a fitting symbolic meal for Yahweh. In *Dagon*, Peter's sense of detachment from his own body gestures again to his dehumanization and increasing readiness for sacrifice. Like its scriptural predecessor, Peter's body—the biological locus of his human identity—is being stripped down in preparation for its sacrifice and subsequent unspeakable transcendence.

The ontological disparity between sacrifice and god comes into sharp focus during Peter's fateful encounter with Dagon. Coke and Mina take Peter to be ritualistically killed in the shed behind the decrepit house in Gordon. Inside, Peter regains a measure of clarity, realizing it is "There the god permitted his being at times to obtrude into perception" (Chappell 175). This curious line calls back to Peter's dread at the beginning of the novel, his premonitory awareness of his own insignificance compared to "the impersonal presence of something... anything vehemently and uncaringly itself" (Chappell 12). Everything, whether nebulous as a preacher's sense of self-worth or incontrovertible as the laws of physics, is equally susceptible to the corruptive force of Dagon's presence. When Peter tries to breathe in the darkness of the shed, "The galaxies

[pour] down his throat, thick tasteless dust he could not spit out, could not vomit” (Chappell 177). Scale and perspective are no longer reliable or fixed categories of reference. As the chamber darkens, Peter somehow looks “into his body, look[s] through it: wide clots of dust, a thin winking membrane where the nebulae were being born” (Chappell 177). Peter’s body now paradoxically contains meaningless multitudes he cannot reject, nebulae and entire galaxies—an oddly inclusive image for a Cthulhu Mythos story, given Lovecraft’s normally exclusive, belittling view of humanity on an astronomical scale. Unlike his predecessor, Chappell does not use these astral bodies to dwarf or belittle Peter, but instead to constitute his new deific form. Size, shape, and all dimensions of matter are irrelevant in Dagon’s shed. Instead of realizing humanity’s pathetically infinitesimal standing in the universe and becoming irrevocably embittered, Peter recognizes the sheer triviality of *all* celestial bodies. From his incipiently divine vantage, they are nothing but aggregations of dust, floating in space, parts of his own body, no longer bound by physics or faith. Quietly rejecting Lovecraft’s more misanthropic depiction of humanity’s cosmic isolation, Chappell illustrates a deific apathy that comes with Peter’s unspeakable transcendence.

This godlike indifference manifests not only in Peter’s rapidly expanding perceptions, but in the physical appearance of Dagon as well. “Imposing” does not accurately describe Dagon’s mien. “Legless” and “less than three feet long,” the god Dagon, “was immobile; there was no way for it to move upon the earth” (Chappell 177-178). Dagon is the apotheosis of deific, non-human otherness. Unlike Yahweh or Christ, it requires no meaningful connection to its faithful or to the world they inhabit; Dagon exercises limitless power over them, but remains senseless, inaccessible, and unintelligible. Gazing upon Dagon, Peter realizes it is “An idiot. The god was omnipotent but did not possess intelligence. Dagon embodied a naked will uncontrollable. The

omnipotent god was merely stupid,” yet its presence “displaced time, as a stone displaces water in a dish” (Chappell 178). Dagon is not a creature subject to the laws of physics. It is instead an unyielding, time-disrupting *fact* with nothing resembling intellect, let alone morality. Chappell’s beautifully simple simile of the stone in the dish emphasizes the contrast between Dagon’s deific idiocy and the prized, complex systems of human knowledge (temporality, physics, etc.) that its very presence destabilizes. We are told that Peter, after witnessing the appearance and dematerialization of such a living contradiction, “Happily... bared his throat for the knife” Mina carries (Chappell 178). Not yet a god and no longer a rational independent subject, Peter Leland becomes a willing sacrifice. His encounter with Dagon and subsequent para-suicide literalize Georges Bataille’s statement that “sacrifice is nothing other than the production of sacred things” (119).

Peter’s throat is slit at the chapter break. The next and final chapter bears witness to his new form, ignoring whatever might have happened to his human body. By chronicling the experience of Peter’s unspeakable transcendence, Chappell delivers on Lovecraft’s generic commitment to “eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order” (“Call” 167). Peter achieves “a new mode of existence” outside of time, where he has “no properly physical form apart from metaphor” (Chappell 179-180). Upon watching his life “unfold itself again and again,” Peter “laugh[s], without rancor or regret,” recalling his earlier perception of inhabiting “a lurid, placeless universe where all order was enlarged bitter parody” (Chappell 179, 174). While sentience of a sort remains for Peter, he is no longer invested in his life or in humanity at large. His laughter at the illusion of time heralds neither madness nor a break with reality, but a new understanding of it.

Chappell treats readers to an elegiac take on the theodistic question of suffering from Peter's now-godlike vantage:

In an almost totally insentient cosmos only human feeling is interesting or relevant to what the soul searches for. There is nothing else salient in the whole tract of limitless time, and suffering is simply one means of carving a design upon an area of time, of charging with human meaning each separate moment of time. Suffering is the most expensive of human feelings, but it is the most intense and most precious of them, because suffering most efficiently humanizes the unfeeling universe. (180)

Though the majority of *Dagon* sees the Southern Gothic oppressed by the shared existential pessimism of horror's cosmic and numinous variants, this moment resists that modal tendency. The language here is gentler and more lyrical than the standard horror denouement. Peter's insight is not conventionally redemptive. An "almost totally insentient cosmos" seemingly affirms humanity's cosmic solitude. The act of suffering may create meaning or significance, but these ideas are ephemeral, limited to the intellectual context of humanity's pointless terrestrial existence. Chappell nonetheless tries to recuperate some value for suffering as a spiritual principle. Instead of framing it within the spiritual economics of Christianity, wherein one suffers after the example of Christ only to be stymied by ineluctable human imperfection, suffering in *Dagon* becomes a basic condition of human existence within linear time. Peter knows that it is "Not merely the shape of his own life" that led him to this conclusion, "but the history of all lives," since he can now view "with a dispassionate humor the whole of human destiny" (Chappell 180). Suffering is the only contribution that humanity can make to a cosmos confirmed to be lacking in feeling, morality, and transcendental truth. In the universe of *Dagon*, then, the theodistic function of suffering is truncated. Suffering is not

a path to enlightenment or transcendence—it is the only thing sentient beings have to create meaning.

Just as *Dagon*'s epigraph set its human story in the context of ancient prophecies and incomprehensible gods, its ending sees our protagonist relinquish his conflicted human mortality for deific animality on a massive scale, returning us to Poe's visions of non-human godhood by way of Lovecraft's more direct influence on the narrative. Now "a kind of catalogue of physical existence of the gods," Peter chooses to become a "Leviathan... the great fish... some scores of light-years in length" as the novel ends (Chappell 180). Such a figuration of godhood confirms the novel's Lovecraft-inflected repurposing of the Southern Gothic's Christian elements. Some would argue that Peter's divine form, the Leviathan, is undeniably biblical, suggestive of the beast mentioned in Isaiah 27:1's promise that Yahweh "with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent... and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*). Ostensibly biblical as his newfound shape may be, Peter's choice of form does not redeem the Judeo-Christian conception of a human-focused universe. It vindicates *Dagon*'s numinous repudiation of such anthropocentrism. In the novel's last line, the now-titanic god-creature that used to be Peter Leland "wallow[s] and sport[s] upon the rich darkness that flows between the stars," with nary a divine attacker in sight (Chappell 181).

OMNIPOTENT CRAWLING CHAOS: DETERIORATING BODIES AND LANGUAGE IN "THE SECT OF THE IDIOT"

In "The Sect of the Idiot" (1988), Thomas Ligotti makes a nightmarish art out of imprecision. To an extent, *Dagon* deals with a known commodity, since Chappell's version of the deity has a biblical precedent in the Old Testament; it is also the

(debatably) eponymous focus of an early Lovecraft story.⁶ Ligotti, on the other hand, bases his tale on Azathoth, a Lovecraft creature that “never actually appears in any Lovecraft story,” but is generally described as an idiot god *par excellence*, a “mindless entity... rul[ing] all time and space from a curiously envired black throne at the center of Chaos” (Joshi, *Rise* 134; Lovecraft, “Witch” 319). Ligotti reflects Azathoth’s indescribable nature in the very form of his story, frustrating readerly attempts to envisage the story’s gruesome sights by engaging in postmodern, at-times metafictional play with narration and closure, challenging Lovecraft’s (and many of his followers’) dependence on macro-perspectives and science-tinged materialist discourse. With *Dagon*, Chappell injected the sexual and psychological realism of the Southern Gothic into a Lovecraftian story. “The Sect of the Idiot” takes a more inward approach to numinous horror, forsaking the influence of other genres for an exploratory focus on one of Lovecraft’s major tropes: the indescribable nature of his godlike entities. Ligotti predicates his narrative, the story of a cult dedicated to an idiot god, on the idea of the ineffable. By revolving his story around that which literally defies description or communication, Ligotti furthers numinous horror’s commitment to the idea that language is a human system that cannot adequately encapsulate the divine.⁷ This cognitive-linguistic disparity is exemplified by Ligotti’s efforts to distance readers from the narrator through his idiosyncratically taciturn writing style and the retrospectively mystifying effect that unspeakable transcendence has on readerly perceptions of the narrative and its narrator.

⁶ S.T. Joshi does not comment conclusively on the creature featured in “Dagon” (1917), surmising that the beast could be either a god itself “or merely the worshipper of a god that was the prototype of the historical Dagon” (*Rise* 46-47).

⁷ Such an idea seems redolent of Wittgenstein’s statement that “what lies on the other side of the limit [of thought] will be simply nonsense” (27). However, as Ligotti’s story will show, there is nothing *simple* about Azathoth’s divinely idiotic nonsense.

Just as Azathoth remains obscure and unreachable, “The Sect of the Idiot” is—like many of its numinous predecessors—difficult to summarize, because it does not feature much in the way of narrative action. Much of it deals with dreams and their horrific effects on waking life. The narrator begins by ruminating on the nature of the extraordinary in the present tense before regaling readers with the past-tense tale of his encounter with the inhuman cult of Azathoth. Our nameless storyteller details his reveries while gazing over the rooftops of his nameless town. The night after a seemingly accidental visit from an old man, the narrator dreams of a high room somewhere in town, inhabited by a coterie of beings whose very existence somehow belittles his own. The only thing more frightening than their shrouded physiques and tentacular appendages is the intimation that they are the servants of a power too awesomely mindless to understand. During his wanderings the next day, our narrator discovers that the high room and its freakish inhabitants are real, as is their mindless demiurge. He runs a hand over one of their peculiar thrones and turns to leave, repulsed by the seat’s unnatural fluidity, only to be surprised by the old man, now revealed to be a servant of Azathoth’s faithful. The narrator rushes home to find that one of his hands is changing, starting to resemble the tentacular appendages of the cloaked abominations in the high room. A section break returns us to the present tense of the story’s opening passage, flagging the telos of the text’s meta-compositional timeline. Having told his tale, the narrator declares that he must return to the room where the monsters dwell. “The Sect of the Idiot” concludes as the narrator implies he is transforming into one of them and must abandon humanity entirely.

Ligotti, like Chappell, ostensibly fits the bill for historically inflected analysis, despite the scarcity of critical work on his oeuvre. “The Sect of the Idiot” was published in the waning days of the Cold War and the Reagan presidency. The all-encompassing

divine in this story can easily be read to stand in for the then-existential threat presented by the forces of communism, as well as the impending hazards of religious and ethno-nationalist terrorism. Such readings do little to engage with how Ligotti depicts the divine, however; genre remains the ideal basis for a non-suspicious reading of Ligotti's engagement with the numinous. Like most Lovecraftian stories (including *Dagon*), "The Sect of the Idiot" opens with an ominous epigraph: "The primal chaos, Lord of All... the blind idiot god—Azathoth" (200). This quote is attributed to the Necronomicon, the premier exemplar of Lovecraft's forbidden text trope, being a compendium of "cosmic secrets too dangerous ... for profane eyes" (Joshi, *Rise* 18). In keeping with Ligotti's elusive approach to his subject matter, this epigraph marks the only time in "The Sect of the Idiot" when Azathoth is mentioned by name. Aside from Ligotti's citation of the Necronomicon, the lack of direct invocations of Azathoth sets the story apart from the many more explicit tales of the Cthulhu Mythos, promptly establishing the text's overall narratorial reticence—before we even meet its narrator.

The story's opening screed places a wedge of uncertainty between readers and a speaker whose allegiances, agenda, and ontological status are as unclear as his approach to narration. Ligotti immediately establishes the text's ruminative mood: "The extraordinary is the province of the solitary soul. Lost the very moment the crowd comes into view, it remains within the great hollows of dreams, an infinitely secluded place that prepares itself for your arrival, and for mine" (Ligotti, "Sect" 200). The introductory pronouncement about how integral solitude is to the extraordinary gets immediately tested by the very circumstance of reading. Like prayer at the beginning of *Wieland*, reading is a solitary act confusingly rendered *less so*, in this case by the narrator's direct address to readers ("your arrival," "for mine"). How, after all, can the story's extraordinary component resonate with readers if the narration assumes a conversational

form, rather than opting for a more authoritative, distant remove to foster a sense of readerly solitude? With this mystifying entrée, Ligotti creates a definite division rooted in questions of perspective between the narrator and readers that will grow as the story continues.

When these inaugural lines are read in conjunction with the story's allusive epigraph, readers might believe they are in for a story like "The Call of Cthulhu," since both wax philosophically about circumstances beyond human ken. Though indisputably influenced by Lovecraft, Ligotti is not afraid to critique his literary forebear, remarking in a 1988 interview: "I find Lovecraft's fastidious attempts at creating a documentary style 'reality' an obstacle to appreciating his work" (Ford 33). Unlike Lovecraft's incorporation of newspaper clippings, expert witnesses, and the other trappings of investigative narrative,⁸ Ligotti refuses to provide diegetic corroboration for the plot. A major stylistic difference here is that Ligotti never alters his dreamlike pacing and prose, pulling more from Poe's belletrism than Lovecraft's Georgian-antiquarian sensibility. Mike Mariani, writing for the *LA Review of Books*, comments on his stylistic predilection for phantasmagoria: "Ligotti's world is one of sensation and impression, like going to a carnival tripping on mushrooms" ("Incognita"). Jason Marc Harris also touches on this tendency: "rather than moving from a state of normalcy as one expects in a fantastic narrative of the supernatural, Ligotti compromises the very idea of 'normalcy' and allows for no sane high ground from which to observe the descent into nonsense that the narrator experiences" (1257-58). In "The Sect of the Idiot," Ligotti compromises normalcy by leaving readers alone with a narrator who is not merely unreliable, but increasingly non-human. Readerly doubt about the narrator's humanity builds as he inflects the opening of

⁸ I am not the first to cite Lovecraft's leanings towards detective fiction. Berruti has described "The Call of Cthulhu" as being "eminently a *detective story* ... developing around the protagonist's investigations and 'piecing together of dissociated knowledge'" (364, emphasis original).

the story with hints of the numinous, describing the town as a gateway to “a *miraculous hell*... whose allegiance to the unreal inspired my *soul* with a *holy madness* long before my body had come to dwell in that incomparable place” (Ligotti, “Sect” 200, my emphases). The narrator himself is sub-divided, inspired within his soul by a place that his body has not yet come to inhabit. Nothing in this story is stable or reliable, except for a sense of profound fragmentation that emanates from the implied gulf of ontological difference between readers and their narrator, a product of unspeakable transcendence.

Despite differences in style and thematic priorities, Ligotti is still indebted to Lovecraft, steadily building dread through the use of interruptive prefatory commentary upon his narrative as it unfolds—a stylistic move that Lovecraft pulled from Poe. But, unlike the nameless aesthete narrating “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) or Lovecraft’s doggedly investigative Thurston, our narrator actively struggles with his duties because he has not been entirely himself, biologically or otherwise, for the meta-compositional duration of the narrative. This stylistic disjunction is exemplified when the narrator qualifies his opening description of the town: “whose identity, along with [his] own, it is best not to bring to light” (Ligotti, “Sect” 200). His fear of revealing too much about the sect or its role in his ongoing transformation competes with his desire to impart information to his readers, providing a diegetic basis for Ligotti’s characteristically opaque belletrism. Ligotti has commented more than once on his peculiarly reticent style, saying, “extraordinary subjects require a certain deviousness in the telling ... a twisted or obscure technique is needed to realize the maximum power of the strange” (qtd. in Joshi, *Weird* 247). So, what first appears to be anecdotal incompetence or merely the creation of suspense actually gestures to the narrator’s internal conflict, explored further in the story’s disturbing conclusion.

The setting itself resists clear description, adding to the narrative's already-elusive quality. Ligotti's speaker clearly prizes his dwelling for the views of the town it affords him. The premium he puts on lofty vistas is somewhat ironic, given our misty impression of his locality:

A sense of serene enclosure was conveyed by every aspect of the old town... Colossal roofs overhung entire streets and transformed them into the corridors of a single structure containing an uncanny multitude of rooms...

It is difficult to explain, then, how the old town also conveyed an impression of endlessness, of proliferating unseen dimensions, at the same time that it served as the very image of a claustrophobe's nightmare. Even the nights above the great roofs of the town seemed merely the uppermost level of an earthbound estate, at most an old attic in which the stars were useless heirlooms and the moon a dusty trunk of dreams. And this paradox was precisely the source of the town's enchantment. I imagined the heavens themselves as part of an essentially interior décor. (Ligotti, "Sect" 200-201)

The narrator speaks from a privileged position, physically and narratively. In his high home, he can see over the rooftops of the town; as narrator, he is aware of the narrative's telos. But, readers are aware that this is a horror story. Accordingly, the vast view that the nameless speaker enjoys does nothing to warn him of the threat posed by the eponymous sect. Instead, his view inspires him to ramble about claustrophobic fantasies. Ligotti's critical perspectival difference from Lovecraft—and cosmic horror writ large—is best articulated in this passage. Where Lovecraft views the universe as an endlessly expanding abyss, Ligotti is thematically obsessed with reductionism. He imagines outer space as a cramped interior. Here, he writes a baroque version of the trope of indescribable, Cyclopean geometries Lovecraft made popular in "The Call of Cthulhu" and *At the*

Mountains of Madness (1936). Ligotti reverses the Lovecraftian obsession with astronomical scale and instead defines his setting by a sense of architectural encroachment or limitation. Celestial bodies, in “The Sect of the Idiot,” amount to little more than detritus dotting an attic floor, a lateral thematic move from the dusty galaxies and nebulae that inexplicably choked Peter Leland in *Dagon*. A labyrinthine town can seem endlessly expansive without ever losing its profound sense of confinement. Unlike Lovecraft’s dependence on “surplus specificity,” Ligotti “turn[s] the real world inside out to show that it has been unreal all along... seeking to capture [an] atmosphere of nightmarish or hallucinatory strangeness” (Weinstock 231, “Afterword”; Joshi, *Weird* 247). His Piranesian approach to describing the town exemplifies how Ligotti uses his deliberately abstract style to differentiate his sense of scale from Lovecraft’s more rigid scientism. In Ligotti’s universe, everything and everyone is steadily and irrevocably reduced to a state of grotesque, abstract insignificance.

Even when he abandons the description of a relatively concrete setting for that of a dream, narratorial inarticulacy maintains Ligotti’s confinement-driven sense of horror. Our narrator dreams of a room in town. The doings of this room’s inhabitants seem important yet remain frustratingly unclear. Imagining the room, the narrator writes, “I was no more than an irrelevant parcel of living tissue caught in a place I should not be, threatened with being snared in some great dredging net of doom, an incidental shred of flesh pulled out of its element of light and into an icy blackness” (Ligotti, “Sect” 203). In this passage, Ligotti acknowledges cosmic horror’s generic debt to the sublime without compromising his reductionism. He metaphysically shrinks his narrator but provides no comparative referent, instead opting for lyrically indistinct prose that uses the vocabulary of the sublime *without* giving readers a specifically sublime image on which to focus. Without a distinct object to apprehend and redefine, the cathartic humanist turn of the

traditional literary sublime cannot occur. All our narrator is left with is a truncated sense of the sublime, terror without intellect-affirming abatement, a vacancy wherein Ligotti builds a strong case for universal belittlement, in keeping with numinous horror's trademark subversions of sublimity.

Ligotti's refusal to provide readers with a concrete antagonist also demonstrates the text's metafictional awareness of the experience of reading horror. The story refrains from explicit mentions of Azathoth beyond its epigraph and frames the narrator's first divine encounter as a dream, adding another layer to the division between speaker and audience: "In the dream nothing supported my existence, which I felt at any moment might be horribly altered or ended. In the most far-reaching import of the phrase, my life was of *no matter*" (Ligotti, "Sect" 203, emphasis original). Indeed, the narrator seems almost aware of his fictiveness. Ligotti makes readers complicit in the protagonist's existential terror by likening the narrator's dream-state to the dependence of a fictional character's existence upon authorial and readerly whims. Our narrator's oneiric revelation demonstrates Ligotti's ability to "metafictionally enunciate his own literary agenda in his tales" without sacrificing the diegetic horror of the scene (Joshi, *Weird* 248).

Vague narration assumes a grander, more baleful magnitude during the protagonist's first encounter with the titular sect. In another moment of hazy magniloquence, Ligotti describes the beings without revealing anything substantive about how they look:

Though each of them was completely draped in a massive cloak, the places in which the material of these garments pushed out and folded inwards as it descended to the floor, along with the unnatural contrivance of the chairs whereupon these creatures were situated, betrayed a particularity of formation that

held me in a state of both paralyzed terror and spellbound curiosity. What were these beings that their robes should adumbrate such unaccountable configurations? (Ligotti, "Sect" 204)

Azathoth's acolytes embody what Patricia MacCormack, in her description of Lovecraft's bestiary, calls "monsters that are horrific not only in their hybrid incarnations but also in the impossibility of their being perceived through human modes of apprehension" ("Deleuzio-Guattarian"). The protagonist does not take the traditional route expected of a Cthulhu Mythos story, wherein readers are explicitly told that the creatures being witnessed simply defy description.⁹ Instead, the narrator contemplates the reality that these organisms can only be described in terms of how they warp conventional objects and surroundings. Postures assumed by the creatures consist of "mysteriously symbolic ... patterns hostile to mundane analysis" (Ligotti, "Sect" 204). They nod to each other "in ways heretical to terrestrial anatomy" (Ligotti, "Sect" 204). Hybridizing religious and scientific phraseologies, Ligotti further compromises his narrator's authority while acknowledging the apophatic truth of numinous horror: certain things can only be described negatively, if at all.

The very possibility of transmitting knowledge through language is put into question during the narrator's dream, building on Ligotti's apophatic description-via-negation of the sect. Our speaker nearly awakens upon recognizing the creatures as living beings, feeling "a sense of terrible enlightenment without sure meaning or possibility of expression in any language except the whispered vows of this eerie sect"; his enlightenment is "an intolerable knowledge, some ultimate disclosure concerning the

⁹ Graham Harman has discussed at great length "the classic Lovecraftian gesture in which an entity is described as having certain properties while also being said to resist description by those very properties, as if such details were able to give us nothing more than a hopelessly vague approximation" (*Weird Realism* 237).

order of things” (Ligotti, “Sect” 204). For humans, communication is a necessity, the sole vehicle of knowledge’s transmission and preservation. Communication, for Azathoth’s clergy, appears absolutely alien and incomprehensible. The act of narration appears incommensurate with the task of describing Azathoth’s faithful. For experienced readers of the Cthulhu Mythos, this mention of order is laughable, as “shapeless and ravenous” Azathoth’s primary domain is chaos (Lovecraft, *Kadath* 191). Whatever the narrator’s elusive dream-disclosure may be, it will likely provide no explanation for the universe he inhabits. What, after all, are the chances that an idiot god’s cult uses anything resembling a consistent, internally logical language to communicate, if they even need to communicate at all?

The narrator’s dream hinges on a crucial realization about the nature of the sect and his own world; here, Ligotti turns his gaze *inward* from Lovecraft’s traditionally *outward* emphasis on physical difference. Seeing a “vision of a world in a trance,” the narrator imagines humanity as “a hypnotized parade of beings sleepwalking to the odious manipulations of their whispering masters, those hooded freaks *who were themselves among the hypnotized*” (Ligotti, “Sect” 205, emphasis original). Idiocy, of a kind, is a condition shared by humanity and the things in the high room. By highlighting the subjectivities of his monsters, rather than merely mimicking Lovecraft’s obsession with physical difference, Ligotti likens the condition of Azathoth’s frightful clergy to humanity *without* sacrificing their physical alterity in another masterful, numinous inversion of Lovecraft’s cosmic, macro-approach to horror. Cognitive similarity, rather than physical difference, is the true locus of terror here. Both humanity and Azathoth’s contorted clergy exist in thrall to “something which was beyond the universal hypnosis by virtue of its very mindlessness, its awesome idiocy” (Ligotti, “Sect” 205). Suffering may be humanity’s only path to making meaning in *Dagon*, but attaining or generating

transcendent meaning in “The Sect of the Idiot” is a pipe dream; idiotic oblivion is inherent to existence.

Our nameless speaker’s first meeting with the old man illustrates idiocy’s ontological omnipresence in the story. Their first meeting highlights the apparent difference between the two characters, as a mere knock on his door disturbs the narrator’s Poe-ish “developed ... sensitivity” to the point that the innocuous sound seems like “a kind of cataclysm of empty space, an earthquake in the invisible” (Ligotti, “Sect” 201). This initial distinction between our hypersensitive narrator and his visitor is self-perceived or illusory, as the harbinger of such a metaphysical disturbance is an old man characterized by “neatly groomed hair and strikingly clear eyes” (Ligotti, “Sect” 201). So much for the narrator’s supposed acuity. Self-diagnoses of heightened nerves in Poe unerringly indicate a depraved criminality. Our narrator’s nervous complaint—supposedly a sign of refined sensory or observational faculties—is undercut by the old man’s unimpressive aspect and their subsequent, uneventful interaction.

In fact, their encounter is so quotidian that it appears to be a mere mistake. The old man complains of having received the wrong address, saying, “The hand-writing on this note is such chaos” (Ligotti, “Sect” 201). This is the first occurrence of the word “chaos” within the story itself, having previously appeared only in the epigraph. The old man is simply tasked with following the note’s instructions. No reference is made to its source or to the contents of these instructions. This lack of information plays into the story’s grim prognosis about the efficacy of language. The fleeting mention of chaos immediately catches the suspicious readerly eye, but it is couched in a scene revolving around a run-of-the-mill mistake. Given the epigraphic association of chaos with Azathoth’s pervasive alterity, I argue that the dissonance between this scene’s obvious foreshadowing and the mundanity of its circumstances constitutes a gesture to language’s

inefficacy that depends upon the supernatural elements of the narrative. Whether or not the meeting is an actual mistake (which would seem appropriate for an idiot god's servant), the old man's statement highlights Ligotti's thematic interest in the futility of communication, not as a semiotic problem, but an existential one—a byproduct of humanity's vulnerability to Azathoth's deific idiocy.

The old man's next appearance in the story is the closest readers come to an intimation of the sect's plans for the narrator. When he tries to flee the high room of the sect, the old man reappears to block his exit. Once genteel, the old man is now “a thing of strange degeneracy” from his “twisted stance... to the vicious and imbecilic expression that possesse[s] the features of his face” (Ligotti, “Sect” 208). Though it is more superficial, the old man's transformation heralds the narrator's own. Mirroring *Dagon's* conspicuously passive constructions, the old man is not necessarily in control of his nonverbal communication. Instead, like Peter Leland before him, his face is *possessed by* an expression of idiocy; the syntax of this disclosure empties the term “expression” of its communicative function. The old man's joyously servile renunciation of normality typifies “the absurdity of human pretensions towards autonomy in Ligotti's fiction” (Harris 1255). In the narrator's view, the old man is now “no more than a malignant puppet of madness,” a living, breathing showcase for emotions and intents that are not his own (Ligotti, “Sect” 208). His exhortation to the narrator, “They want you with them on their return. They want their chosen ones,” is laden with an undeniably religious argot (Ligotti, “Sect” 208). The clichéd and salvific connotation of “chosen ones” clashes with everything else readers have seen of the cult. Nonetheless, the message is straightforward: Azathoth's servants have chosen the narrator for something. As we have seen from the hopeless standing of language in Ligotti's universe of numinous horror, however, we have no sense of what the narrator has been chosen *for*.

The old man's words set off a startling chain reaction in the narrator's comprehension of speech. The narrator demands release from the old man's grasp, which is fixed on the same hand that explored the strange liquid surface of one of the sect's unoccupied thrones. In hideous mirth, the old man asks, "*Your hand?*" and "repeat[s] the phrase over and over, laughing as if some sardonic joke had reached a conclusion within the depths of his lunacy" (Ligotti, "Sect" 208, emphasis original). The implied semantic satiation of "Your hand" is what simultaneously frees the narrator from the old man's grip and horrifies him to the point that he attempts "to flee [his] own thoughts and sensations" (Ligotti, "Sect" 208). No longer hypersensitive in the Poe-ish style, our narrator seeks safety in senselessness. The sect is already having a profound effect on his priorities and perceptions, despite his outward resistance. The old man's semantic satiation of "Your hand" reverses the spiritual significance of a mantra; rather than reducing words to acoustic vibrations within the body to increase mindfulness or awareness, the old man's anti-mantra *deranges* the mind, making the sect's form of idiocy all the more inviting. Such mindless repetition sanctifies our narrator's confusion, the loss of his sense of self, and his burgeoning unspeakable transcendence.

This anti-mantric effect continues as the narrator runs home through the crowded streets. Being among normal people does nothing to assuage his distress. He experiences "a new terror—the whispering of strangers" that he passes on the streets, demonstrating a newfound difficulty in apprehending standard speech (Ligotti, "Sect" 209). We are told that "words reached my ears in fragments that I was able to reconstruct because of their frequent repetition... the most common terms were *deformity* and *disfigurement*" (Ligotti, "Sect" 209, emphasizes original). The narrator now fixates upon repeated speech despite his anguished desire for the solace of oblivion. The old man's anti-mantra and the muttering of passersby eventually reveal that speech is not merely an infectious agent in

the narrator's mind, but his body as well: his hand has begun to resemble the weird tentacle-talons of the sect. Though the change presumably begins as soon as he touches one of the cultist's thrones, our narrator does not recognize it until *after* overhearing fleeting comments about his new physical abnormality on the street. He discovers the change his body is undergoing upon comprehending the words "deformity" and "disfigurement," but given what readers know and intuit about the story's supernatural happenings, "deformity" and "disfigurement" do not accurately reflect the narrator's transformation. The very words that signaled his change, then, remain demonstrative of human language's incapacity to reckon with the divine. Considering the non-human subjectivity exemplified by the cultists and our narrator's escalating transformation, this scene establishes the deranging effect language can have upon the human body when manipulated by the idiotic forces of Azathoth. In "The Sect of the Idiot," language's failure is not merely systematic, despite poststructuralist perseverations over the unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified. Language fails in numinous horror because it is ontologically inadequate, a product of humanity's incomplete understanding of a universe inhabited by incomprehensible powers. The narrator's body has been chosen for unspeakable transcendence, becoming "the site of another agency, one that resists knowledge, and... marks a fissure that is not contained within the subject but is instead dispersed throughout the world," hence his obsession with repeated speech (Trigg 30).

As "The Sect of the Idiot" ends, the nature of our narrator's transformation becomes clear: it is an evacuation of both physical and speech-based understandings of humanity, which—through the acoustics of verbal noise—become one and the same. His estrangement from his own body grows in proportion with his loss of investment in language as a meaningful enterprise. His metamorphosis is framed as a loss of human

communicative capabilities just as much as it is a loss of human appearance: “Let me write, while I still am able, that the transformation has not limited itself. I now find it difficult to continue this manuscript with either hand. These twitching tentacles are not suited for writing in a human manner, and I am losing the will to push my pen across this page” (Ligotti, “Sect” 209). These lines are the closest Ligotti comes to an articulation of the narrator’s approaching alterity. Jed Mayer, discussing Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Out of Time” (1936), elucidates the tenuous authority of the written word in cosmic horror stories: “If writing—a skill holding a uniquely privileged position among articles of anthropocentric self-definition—can be performed with a tentacle, then the conceptual underpinnings of human exceptionalism begin to unravel” (129). Consider our narrator’s mournful disclosure about his altered anatomy above. With it, Ligotti reminds us that the physical performance of communicating with language, whether verbally or graphically, is ultimately dictated by human biology and, in “The Sect of the Idiot,” a menacing deity and its non-human agents can reshape human biology. Language itself is therefore subject to invasion and manipulation by things that exist outside of its supposedly impenetrable bounds. “New laws of entity have come to their work as I look helplessly on,” the narrator writes, evoking Dylan Trigg’s statement that, in horror narratives, “the body becomes the stage upon which a history other than our own is written” (Ligotti, “Sect” 209; 98).

In “The Call of Cthulhu,” an unequivocal sense of responsibility motivates Thurston’s choice to maintain mankind’s ignorance of Cthulhu. In comparison, the narrator of “The Sect of the Idiot” is wracked with self-contradictory tensions. At the tale’s terminus, he acknowledges the obscurantist choices he made while telling the story: “In the interest of others, I have taken precautions to conceal my identity and the precise location of a horror which cannot be helped. Yet I have also taken pains to reveal, as if

with malicious intent, the existence and nature of those same horrors” (Ligotti, “Sect” 209). Unspeakable transcendence, the fact of the speaker’s ongoing transformation into something godlike and markedly non-human, complicates Lovecraft’s trope of the doomed narrator. Since his humanity is not a given, readers must retroactively question the narration throughout the story. Why did he choose to share certain details and withhold others? If this story were meant to be a warning, would it not be more prudent to include significant details like his identity and the sect’s location? If the tale is not a warning, what, then, is the narrator’s purpose for writing out his account? Can purposive thought even be applied to a narrative coming from such a non-human source?

Pondering these questions provides little reassurance, as the narrator surmises that Azathoth’s faithful could be “guiding [his] pen by means of a hand that is an extension of their own” (Ligotti, “Sect” 210). Instead of being a gift from the divine, language is a tool that is inadequate in our hands, regardless of their shape, and can be used *against* us. His paltry attempts at narration could easily be another whim of Azathoth’s omnipotent idiocy. Describing his uncontrollable urge to return to the high room, the narrator writes, “when I enter again that world of dreams it will be by way of a threshold which no human being has ever crossed... nor ever shall” (Ligotti, “Sect” 210). Our separation from the narrator becomes total here, with this linear-time-defying intimation that he was never truly human to begin with. Godhood, or some ersatz form of it unique to the sect, awaits him. His unspeakable transcendence is now complete. The story’s final lines are a poetic abdication of his humanity and, with it, his narratorial obligations. “The Sect of the Idiot” ends as the narrator tacitly declares himself non-human, leading readers to surmise that narration is a human act doomed to failure because of its intrinsic inability to encapsulate the true nature of a reality in which humanity plays no meaningful part.

UN-ENDINGS: A CONCLUDING NOTE ON CLOSURE IN NUMINOUS HORROR

In *Closure in the Novel* (1981), Marianna Torgovnick sums up Henry James's attitude towards endings: "Endings enable an informed definition of a work's 'geometry' and set into motion the process of retrospective rather than speculative thinking necessary to discern it—the process of 'retrospective patterning'" (5). She claims that "we value endings because the retrospective patterning used to make sense of texts corresponds to one process used to make sense of life" (Torgovnick 5). Pulling from the work of Erich Auerbach, Frank Kermode has expressed a similar idea, claiming that "there must be a link between the forms of literature and other ways in which ... 'we try to give some kind of order and design to the past, the present, and the future'" (93). Torgovnick splits the basic points of view employed in literary endings into two types: the overview and the close-up. The overview ending trades on the authorial and readerly understandings of events being "often superior to that of the characters" (Torgovnick 15). Such a conclusion "may be told from a point much later in time or more cosmic in knowledge than that available to the novel's characters" (Torgovnick 15). The close-up ending is more abrupt and direct, often with "no temporal distance separat[ing the] ending from the body of the novel" (Torgovnick 15). She assures us that readers "can usually ... discover both the appropriateness of the ending and its implications for meaning through retrospective analysis and through perception of the pattern that controls the ending" (Torgovnick 15). So, the retrospective is widely privileged in literature because of its certainty and lucidity. Readers normally privilege the retrospective because it confirms their standard perception of daily experience as linear and intelligible.

It seems to me that this is precisely where numinous horror veers away from such conventional literary-structural values. Why must we, as casual readers or critics, privilege the retrospective over the speculative when there is no objective reason to do

so? “[E]ndings create the illusion of life halted and poised for analysis,” Torgovnick writes (5). To halt and poise a life is undeniably *godlike*. The very act of literary narration (or criticism, for that matter) imposes human will over the flow of time, shortening or even excising certain moments and distending others. By composing stories that repudiate human identity and endings that often reject retrospectively intelligible narrative geometries, Poe, Twain, Hecht, Chappell, and Ligotti—in their varied ways—all illuminate a horrific potentiality of godhood: the all-encompassing vision and power afforded by a divine perspective may not yield narrative or, by extension, the unspoken but instinctive psychological comfort derived from logical narrative patterning.

Unlike writers working in feminist, realist, modernist, and postmodern traditions, Poe, Twain, Hecht, Chappell, and Ligotti do not resist closure to make political statements. Their resistance to closure is instead a product of their generic commitment to supernatural horror. Numinous horror texts lurk in a no man’s land between Torgovnick’s categories of closure, melding the cosmic removes of overview endings with the urgency and abruptness of close-up endings to create jarring new perspectives. Rather than standard closures, the supernatural elements of these numinous horror texts enact a strange and horrific kind of *un-ending*. Poe left a horse-shaped cloud above the burning Metzengerstein castle with no ready answers, leaving readers as helpless as the angelic throng watching the Conqueror Worm eat its hapless meal. Twain (and his posthumous collaborators) twice denied humanity’s existence in favor of a solipsistic, self-deluded creator, but never resolved the aporia upon which these conclusive denials were built. Hecht first withheld interpretations from readers, only to inundate them later with contradictory narratorial voices and a panoply of horrifying suggestions about godhood that readers could not piece together. Where Lovecraft was content with fleeting glimpses of alterity that often led to madness, Chappell and Ligotti eschew the comforts of

scientism and empiricism, committing to the numinous dimensions of their works' supernatural imaginaries; their narrators assume vertiginous and incomprehensible perspectives that deny humanity's conventionally privileged ontological status. Unlike the indeterminacy facing Oedipa Maas at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49* or even Thurston's last-ditch recourse to ignorance as a survival strategy for humanity in "The Call of Cthulhu," the fearsome gravity of each numinous horror text's un-ending depends upon a single, disconcerting fact: the narratives conclude only for readers but are implied to persist for their characters.

What, after all, is finality—fictional or otherwise—to a god?

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