ABSTRACT

The Spectral Narrative: Hauntology and the Meaning of the Sacred in Postmodern American Literature

Robert Hamilton, Ph.D.

Chairperson: Luke Ferretter, Ph.D.

This dissertation reads the novels of three postmodern authors—*Snow White* and *The Dead Father* by Donald Barthelme, *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan—in light of the concept of hauntology. Hauntology, a term introduced by Jacques Derrida in his work Specters of Marx, refers to influences and forces that operate remotely and partially, without being genuinely present in the work, but also not entirely absent. Therefore, hauntology can, on a literal level, account for the presence of actual ghost stories within literary works; on a broader plane, though, it can also comprehend the unreal or hyper-real effects of ideas, linguistic styles, ethical systems, and theological propositions that continue to control the postmodern novel from "beyond the grave." I argue that hauntology becomes increasingly important to postmodern literature, but that it shows signs of a long and healthy existence in earlier works, and also that there is every reason to assume it will continue to determine the literature that struggles to move beyond the postmodern styles of the second half of the twentieth century.

After a theoretical introduction, the second chapter considers the "high postmodern" novels of Donald Barthelme, which display a collage-like surface and an excessive deployment of manic styles that point to something larger than themselves; they are more than the sum of their parts. They also directly deal with the idea of revenance and zombification, of both characters and concepts. The third chapter moves to David Foster Wallace, whose discomfort with postmodernism leads him to try to escape it, while still letting its characteristics haunt his narratives. Finally, the fourth chapter discusses the work of Jennifer Egan, who develops an eschatological style that welcomes the ghosts that come from the future, demonstrating that the orientation of future fiction will be fundamentally messianic. Not only does this chronological study show the development of postmodern novelistic style over the span of five decades, but it also shows the power of hauntology to explain the fiction of the future as well as the past and present.

The Spectral Narrative: Hauntology and the Meaning of the Sacred
in Postmodern American Literature

by

Robert Hamilton, B.A.

A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of English

_____

Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of

Doctor of Philosophy

Approved by the Dissertation Committee

_____

Luke Ferretter, Ph.D., Chairperson

_____

Emily E. Setina, Ph.D.

_____

Sarah K. Ford, Ph.D.

_____

Gregory T. Garrett, Ph.D.

_____

Ralph C. Wood, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School

August 2013

_____

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Page bearing signatures is kept on file in the Graduate School.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

CHAPTER ONE 1

Introduction 1

Spectrality in Literature 1

Specters, Deconstruction, and Hamlet 2

Specters and Religion: Weak Theology 8

Some Precedents in the Study of Literature 14

A Few Critiques of Postmodernism 20

A Brief Taxonomy of Specters in the Novels 28

CHAPTER TWO 41

(Un)dead Fathers: Fugues, Excesses, and Ghosts in the Novels of Donald Barthelme 41

Barthelme and his Critics 41

"Not-Knowing" and Nothing: A Postmodern Response 45

The Negative Path to Sacred Words 51

Snow White: A Fable in Crisis 57

"The Failure of Snow White's Arse": A Background of Semiotic Discontent 64

Collage: The Surface and the Sacred 70

The Dead Father: Introduction 81

The Ghostly "Deadness" of the Dead Father 86

The Dead Father as (almost) God the Father 90

"O Grave, Where is thy Victory?"Schrödinger's Tomb and Weak Theology 95

Conclusion 111

CHAPTER THREE 114

Postmodernism in Crisis: Ethics, Haunting, and Deferred Hope in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest 114

Introduction 114

Wallace and the New Sincerity 119

Wallace and Religion in Fiction and Non-Fiction 130

Sincerity in Infinite Jest: AA and the Deus Absconditus 135

Ghost Stories: The Wraith of Postmodernism Haunting Sincerity 150

Badiou and the Tunnel out of Postmodernity 160

CHAPTER FOUR 180

"Those who weren't aware of having any left": Eschatology and Anagogy in A Visit from the Goon Squad 180

Introduction: A Novel for the Future 180

Egan's Career: Early Work, Religion, and Haunting 191

A Visit from the Goon Squad: Anagogy and Eschatology 198

The Future, Ecology, and the Desert in A Visit from the Goon Squad 219

Conclusion 245

BIBLIOGRAPHY 248

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could never have begun without the incredibly generous support of the Baylor University Graduate School, Dean Larry Lyon, and the Presidential Scholarship, which kept me fed and insured throughout my time in the Ph.D. program. Dr. Luke Ferretter, my director, provided the kind of incisive critiques and difficult questions that are all too rare in the humanities, and his guidance inside and outside of the classroom is a model of truly exemplary teaching. My composition and literature students, all 368 of them, have kept me sane during graduate school; for sharing your enthusiasm and always forgiving me when you find out I am a student too, thank you. Mrs. Jerrie Callan has been a constant source of sound advice and honest conversation, and the English department staff, particularly Julie Sherrod, have gone beyond the call of duty helping me navigate the sometimes baffling requirements that attend the dissertation project. Of course, I am eternally grateful for the support of my parents and brother, who have always been almost embarrassingly proud of my work in the way only family can be. Finally, I wish to thank Sarah Honeycutt for her intellectual and moral support over all these years. For talking me out of defecting to Russia, for taking a red pen to a thousand of my stylistic peccadilloes, and for providing such lucid writing for me to emulate, thank you.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Spectrality in Literature

Insofar as literature concerns itself with the past or the future, it is haunted. Literature embraces, and always has embraced, the spectral along with the verifiable. Considering the sheer quantity of ghost stories in world literature, this much seems beyond debate. The contention of this dissertation, however, goes beyond this observation in several respects: first, I argue that the accumulation of precedent makes haunting and spectrality increasingly central to the project of literature in the second half of the twentieth century, continuing to the present moment and beyond; second, I further argue that haunting provides the primary impetus for postmodern experimentation in the realm of narrative; finally, I argue that haunting preserves a sense for the sacred in postmodern literature even where religious language is deliberately excluded. I pursue this complex of ideas here in chronological progression through the work of just three authors—Donald Barthelme in the 1960s and 70s, David Foster Wallace in the 1990s, and Jennifer Egan in the 2000s—although many others could easily be joined to this list. This chronological study reveals a series of subtle changes in the deployment of spectral narratives over time, even while all three authors remain grounded in a similarly haunted treatment of time, language, and humanity's ability to transcend itself. Therefore, I maintain that even as the techniques of contemporary narrative fiction change, from Barthelme's "high-postmodern" style through Wallace's ostensible rejection of

postmodernity and Egan's partial rehabilitation of the style, haunting is the defining feature of the literature of the present day, and will continue to be so even if the postmodern style is rejected entirely.

Specters, Deconstruction, and Hamlet

Ghosts have certainly existed in literature since its very earliest beginnings. To select just one of many examples, the underworld scenes in the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* show that spectrality was important (if not centrally so) to ancient literature. W.B. Stanford, for instance, notes that "apparitions" in classic epic literature create "fear and solemnity" and also "give advice and forewarnings which no natural counsellors [*sic*] could give" (91). Also notably, ghosts pervade the work of Shakespeare, to whom we shall have cause to return, not to mention other clear examples ranging from Celtic and Haitian folklore through Poe and Dickens and Henry James to Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, and thousands of others. But such a history would far exceed the limits of this work, and must be left to others. To understand the role of haunting in the much narrower universe of postmodern fiction from the 1960s—2010s, we cannot avoid the intersection of spectrality and deconstruction, which was perhaps obvious all along but was first propounded explicitly in Jacques Derrida's 1994 book *Specters of Marx*. This work, which comes relatively late in Derrida's career, was designed first of all as an intervention into the neoliberal philosophy of history proposed by Francis Fukuyama, which proposed an "end of history" pursuant to the general consolidation of a capitalist, post-communist, and globalized economy (*Specters* vii; Fisher 16). For better or for worse, Fukuyama became a nexus for leftist critique, and Derrida is certainly not the only theorist quoted here to take

potshots at his idea of a political consensus in which only minor crises, not looming ideological conflicts, would define the future—a future, in short, without drama or event. Only Derrida, though, took the Fukuyama debate as an opportunity to recast his own deconstructive philosophy as a theory of the specter.

Derrida's response to Fukuyama is not to deny flatly that history is ending, but rather to demonstrate how a deconstructive theory of the specter can do far more than just trace the line of history from beginning to end. Indeed, deconstruction, by blurring the distinction between presence and absence, changes "ontology" (the study of being) into its near-homophone "hauntology," which Derrida is at some trouble to define broadly. Attempting to answer the question "what is a ghost," he writes that it is

> Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being […] It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensibly. (10)

In short, the ghostly understood philosophically—hauntology—is the expansion of being beyond being and into both the past and the future. As John D. Caputo writes, ghosts (which he calls "events") "are provocations and promises, and they have the structure of what Derrida calls the unforeseeable 'to come' (*à venir*). Or else they call us back, recall us to all that has flowed by into the irremissible past […] Events call and recall" (*After the Death of God* 48). Likewise, Mark Fisher, drawing on Slavoj Žižek's formulation, notes that "[h]auntology itself can be thought of as fundamentally about forces which act at a distance—that which

[…] insists (has causal effects) without (physically) existing" (20). Fisher also takes care to tie hauntology to both advances in technology and capitalist globalization, both of which have a tendency to collapse space and time (19). As we will see later, distinguishing the logic of haunting from the adverse effects of a commercialized society will become very important to the thinkers who deal with such issues.

The temporal blurring that comes with the specter—it is always both present and absent, belonging to another time but present in this—leads Derrida to an emphasis on the future, the obscurely "coming" event, and even the messianic. But this is not a messianism with identifiable content; instead, it is "the non-knowledge and the non-advent of an event, of what remains to be" (*Specters of Marx* 19). Furthermore, even the actual coming of the event (which would seem to signal the solidification of a specter into a real body) is not guaranteed; it is deferred: "the proper of a proper name will always remain to come. And secret […] What has been uttered 'since Marx' can only promise or remind one to maintain together, in a speech that defers, deferring not what it affirms but deferring just *so as to* affirm, to affirm *justly*" (19). In short, the much older Derridian and deconstructive concept of *différance*, a portmanteau expressing the process by which language experiences both deferral (postponement in time, or a lack of match-up between lexeme and definition) and difference (words taking definition not from an essential *meaning* but from their differences from other similar lexemes) is here refined into a more general hauntology. Derrida imbues *différance* with an ethical urgency, noting that it "does not mean only (as some people have too often believed and so naively) deferral, lateness, delay, postponement" (37). Instead, it "unfurls […] without

lateness, without delay, but without presence" and "responds without delay to the demand of justice" (37). This claim is quite startling, especially to those who tend to criticize deconstruction as vacuous, faddish, and nihilistic. Derrida essentially claims that real justice and a proper ethical vantage are actually predicated upon the deferral without delay of the specter: that which is coming but coming only in non-knowledge is the only hope for humanity. It is also, as we shall see, a very real precondition for literature that can speak to society in a meaningful way.

As is clear in the four books that this dissertation studies, the process of deferral and difference that characterizes a deconstructive understanding of language is also at play on a larger, narrative level[1] in the postmodern novel, particularly when understood hauntologically—as a spectral deconstruction that hinges on the lack of, and need for, justice. Any ghostly voice—for example, that of the "wraith" of James Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, or the endless collage of cliché and stereotypical phrases in *Snow White*—experiences some kind of deferral, because its *effect* comes at a different time from its actual existence or *cause*. Barthelme's *Snow White* is not at all a traditional fairy tale, but it bears the ghostly imprint of one; the character of the Dead Father in his eponymous novel is likewise somehow at his most vigorous and speaks most insistently after his death. The effect can also *anticipate* the cause, as Derrida reminds us by pointing out that hauntology is larger than, and encompasses, eschatology (10). For example, by setting *Infinite Jest* in a dystopian future, Wallace signals to his own

[1] Indeed, Derrida himself suggests that hauntology displaces personal identity as well as concepts of philosophy and language; the individual beset by specters "no longer has and must no longer have, insofar as it is living, a pure identity to itself or any assured inside" (*Specters* 136). This is in itself a broad narrative claim with great significance for literature.

contemporary age (the 1990s) the problems of narcotic entertainment that plague it, and that will continue to get worse if left unimpeded. Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* similarly perfects a proleptic style that constantly gives spoilers and advance notice about the fates of characters long before those fates could be accomplished in narrative time, making the whole novel a sort of anagogic text, giving conditional hope and instruction about the future by mapping it from the course of the present. For all of these writers, too, truth, sacredness, and divinity are all presented as specters, not obviously accessible or present, but hinted at in traces from the past (i.e., as fragmented traditions) or the future (i.e., as promised messiahs or eschatological predictions). In all cases, the motivation is a profoundly moral discontent with the current course of the world, philosophically, environmentally, socially, and beyond.

The demand for justice in both Derrida and these three authors, then, is predicated on a sense that the world is profoundly "out of joint," and this disjointedness recalls what is (for Derrida, at least) essentially the ur-text of hauntology: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Derrida makes much of this, saying that justice "as a relation to the other" presumes "the irreducible excess of a disjointure or an anachrony […] some 'out of joint' dislocation in Being and in time itself" (32). He later adds that "the gift" and "undeconstructible justice," which is "the undeconstructible condition of any dconstruction" and also "itself *in deconstruction* […] must remain (that is the injunction) in the disjointure of the *Un-Fug* [i.e., time being 'out of joint']" (33). This complex relationship—in which justice requires unsettlement and discontinuity, and can only be true justice in such a context—is important to *Hamlet* as well, where "time is out of joint," and Harold Bloom is close to Derrida when he argues that "Elsinore's disease is

anywhere's, anytime's. Something is rotten in every state, and if your sensibility is like Hamlet's, then finally you will not tolerate it" (431). Something is rotten with modernism (and eventually, postmodernism) as well, and the ghosts deployed by the authors studied here all militate for the kind of justice that can, if not quite set things right, at least point toward possible future justice.

The spectral scenes of *Hamlet* also show that it is not just disjointure that counts, but collision: a ghost is, by definition, from another time, and that time will not sit perfectly well with whatever "present" is being visited. This is particularly true when the ghost returns to demand something: revenge, information, or some correction of course. Again, Bloom notes that in *Hamlet*, "the Ghost is a warrior fit for Icelandic saga, while the prince is a university intellectual, representative of a new age […] the two Hamlets meet as if the Edda were encountering Montaigne: the Archaic Age faces the High Renaissance, with consequences as odd as any we might expect" (387). This collision between different eras and modes of understanding the world, motivated by a general sense of disquiet and wrongness and the desire to correct such wrongs by literature, is the defining set of circumstances for the novels discussed here. Each writer cares deeply about literature's value for society and how literature can enrich humanity in a moral sense; what saves them from didacticism is their hauntedness. None of these authors forces the issue of sociopolitical rightness or wrongness. Instead, each lets the ghosts of the past and the future play freely within the text, sometimes only there in small traces, other times speaking quite directly as "wraiths" and fathers who are "dead, but with us." And while none of the three would likely avow a belief in "deconstruction" *per se*, even going so far as to borrow concepts from anti-deconstructive philosophies, I argue that

deconstruction and its filiation, hauntology, are the best means by which to understand these postmodern novels and the challenges they pose to society as a whole and their own aesthetic frameworks.

Specters and Religion: Weak Theology

It is a commonplace to say that there has been a general "religious turn" in continental philosophy and critical theory over the past few decades. Gianni Vattimo, acknowledging this, implicitly identifies it with postmodern concepts of knowledge: "there is a return to religion today because people have realized that all the forms of knowledge regarded as definitive have turned out to be dependent on historical paradigms, on various kinds of conditioning—social, political, ideological, and so on"; the more knowledge looks like faith, the more faith itself looks just as legitimate as anything else (Vattimo and Girard 39). The turn to religion comes not in spite of, but because of, the dissolution of confidence. But while this turn has been striking and intellectually fertile, it is often puzzling and riddled with conflict as well. As we will soon see, very different types of thinkers have made a return to religious traditions and forms of critique (sometimes professing a personal belief, but more often not), and their modes of thought are often difficult to harmonize or even irreconcilable. However, since ghosts and specters are necessarily part of the spiritual and invisible world, to bring up the topic and to found a hauntological study is to implicate oneself perforce in the religious turn. Derrida certainly does not shy from this implication, explicitly bringing up "messianism" as integral to both Marx's and his own thought, even if it is a messianism "without content and without identifiable messiah" (*Specters* 33, 111). Derrida also, importantly for the

works studied here, engages with the concept of apophatic, or negative, theology at length in essays like "Sauf le nom," and his major English-language apostle and interpreter John D. Caputo likewise shows the pervasiveness of a religious sensibility throughout Derrida's work, particularly in his book-length study *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Furthermore, other theorists important to this dissertation, such as Marxist thinkers Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, have also turned to religion for their own purposes,[2] sometimes designed to conflict directly with those of Derrida, Caputo, and other deconstructive thinkers. But since both Žižek and Badiou are vital to understanding the novels considered here, some time will have to be devoted to thinking of them together, with as little oppositional friction as possible.

Conflicts aside, what all these authors hold in common is the articulation of what can only be called a "weak theology": a mode of thinking about divinity that exaggerates almost to the breaking point the immanence of God, recasting the omnipotent divinity of traditional understanding with a less present presence, a kind of being who suffers and delays rather than one who comes in glory. John D. Caputo, whose volume *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* is arguably the founding volume of weak theology, speaks of God as a contingent "event," and the resulting weak "theology of the event" as one that "lacks corpulent articles of faith, a national or international headquarters, a well-fed college of cardinals to keep it on the straight and narrow, or even a decent hymnal" (7). In other words, pursuing our idea of hauntology as a presence dislocated from its time and place into a presence-absence hybrid that bears influence from afar, the

[2] See, among others, Žižek's *The Fragile Absolute*, *Specters of Ideology*, or *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, co-written with John Milbank; see also Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.

weak God and weak church are *spectral* forms of religion. Unsurprisingly, just as Derrida sees the specter as a force that responds to injustice, Caputo also continues to redefine theology in a specifically political direction: Christ was executed, he writes, "very much against his will and the will of God. And he never heard of Christianity's novel idea that he was redeeming the world with his blood"; instead, "God is in attendance as the weak force of the call that cries out from Calvary and calls across the epochs, that cries out from every corpse created by every cruel and unjust power" (44). Time and again, what characterizes general spectrality and spectral religion (these two concepts really are not separate, but exist along a continuum, since any specter is at the very least a supernatural metaphor) is an engaged, political response to whatever time happens to be "out of joint." This applies just as well to the three authors studied here, all of whom (surprisingly and perhaps unfashionably) argue for a literature that is dedicated to social melioration.

It is not only the Derridian camp, with its ethics founded on Lévinas's idea of alterity—the welcoming of the messianic "altogether other" that is always yet to come—that has shown interest in a weak or spectral theology. While this may seem to be a threat, in fact, it is a strength for hauntology, because the broadness of appeal shows that hauntology is not merely another deconstructive term of art like "grammatology" or "archi-écriture," ready to go out of fashion nearly the moment it is coined. Instead, even if it sometimes goes by different names or receives a different spin, it is capable of influencing two opposing camps of philosophy. Slavoj Žižek, for example, contemplates the threat of the Christian concept of the Incarnation in his collaborative work *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* The fear, he writes, is that we all might

> lose the transcendent God guaranteeing the meaning of the universe, God as the hidden Master pulling the strings—instead of this, we get a God who abandons this transcendent position and throws himself into his own creation, fully engaging himself in it up to dying, so that we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself. (25)

Weak theology is political and committed to justice, it would seem, precisely because of this shift in responsibility: if God is weak very much like humans are, then we are co-belligerents more than ruler and subject.[3] Žižek makes this point in a very hauntological way when he describes the Holy Spirit "as spiritual-virtual substance, as the substance that exists only insofar as it is 'kept alive' by the incessant activity of individuals" (73). Even Alain Badiou, Žižek's sometimes uncomfortable philosophical ally, makes his "religious turn" in a way that is hauntological, even if not quite overtly so: writing about Saint Paul as a sort of proto-revolutionary figure who insists upon universal ethics, Badiou says "I have never really connected Paul with religion. It is not according to this register, or to bear witness to any sort of faith, or even antifaith, that I have […] been interested in him" (1). Admissions like this—common in this critical-theoretical turn to religion—I also call ghostly. To speak of faith without desire "to bear witness to any sort of faith" is to engage with a concept that is influential without existence. And it should come as no surprise that Badiou is even more political than the others: he goes so far as to call Paul a "militant" and compares him to "Lenin and the Bolsheviks" (2).

[3] Vattimo makes a similar point in *The Future of Religion*, noting that "it is not so very absurd to assert that the death of God announced by Nietzsche is, in many ways, the death of Christ on the cross told by the gospels"; this is why he argues that Christianity opens the door to secularization and postmodernity. "[P]ostmodern nihilism," he continues, "constitutes the actual truth of Christianity" (47).

Indeed, the weak theologians make as much of a frontal attack on Being and presence as do the deconstructionists, even if they proceed in a slightly different manner. Gianni Vattimo, one of the most prominent exponents of the idea of "weakening faith" and a self-described Catholic, argues that we should

> reject […] the idea that Being *is* something"; instead, it is "subtracted from our possible experience, like the God of negative theology, but nevertheless objectively 'given' somewhere else, beyond all names by which we might call him […] a postmetaphysical philosophy has to be ready to think the event of Being in terms of an indefinite type of ongoing subtraction, a weakening, a taking-leave, or long farewell. (Vattimo and Girard 84)

Vattimo pursues this line of thinking up to the point of saying that "Being is the very principle of weakening," a paradoxical statement that is absolutely hauntological: once again, hauntology goes beyond the boundaries of a single critical school, finding its principle of blurring and present-absence cropping up again and again. For Vattimo, this weakened being (and what is a ghost if not a vitiated form of a fully present thing?) is expressed through "[m]odernity, in its dissolutionary aspects," and that modernity, by making it "impossible to still believe in the victimary mechanism" that characterizes traditional Judeo-Christian faith, "belongs positively to the history of salvation" (85). The way in which modernity (by which I presume Vattimo means both modernism and its heir, postmodernism) can be a *positive* development for faith, and not a decisive rejection of it, is a hauntological principle: weakening and spectralization makes religion *more* just, *more* engaged, and *less* violent and absolutist (Vattimo and Girard 86-7).

The alliance with postmodernism, of course, makes it clear that hauntology can deal with more than just the dissolution of religious confidence.

As I hope to demonstrate, postmodernism itself shows signs of passing into a spectral form of itself as it declines (or ascends?) from its crystalline form articulated in the 1960s and 70s, of which Barthelme is here the representative, into a more complex, sometimes self-critical and self-undermining form closer to the turn of the century, a process which can be seen in Wallace's and Egan's work. And it goes without saying that any philosophical concept, assertion, or datum can exist in a spectral form. We will consider spectral fragments of discourses that are non-religious, such as fairy tales and other literary genres. The implication of ghosts in the supernatural realm, though, means that they not only *represent* older and vitiated forms of faith, but also that they can *motivate* a preoccupation with religion even when the author seems furthest from a system of faith, and can make new promises of a religious nature about the destiny of the world and the possibility of a messianic intervention.

This idea is closely related to John D. Caputo's discussion of the "event" in his essay "Spectral Hermeneutics," where he argues that postmodernism is the proper locus of a spectral theology specifically *because* it is designed to guarantee that which is ghostly. Referring to specters here as "events," he writes that events are "never present, never finished or formed" and therefore "not deconstructible" (*After the Death of God* 48). "Postmodernism," he argues, "is the gardening of the event," the sort of thinking that "must exert every effort to cultivate and keep safe" the ghosts of events (48). Events are threatened by grand metaphysical truth claims, and therefore, since postmodernism and deconstruction are occupied with dismantling just such claims, then "[t]he work of burning off the old metaphysics of omnipotence, which can never cease, must always be a way to fan the flame or build the fire of the even that transpires in

the name of God" (67). In a word, the contention of both Vattimo and Caputo here seems to be that religion as such is not threatened by postmodernism or by hauntology (although neither uses that precise term); instead, it is only perhaps the most traditional, ontological, and power-based discourses of faith that postmodernism attacks, and paradoxically, by doing so, liberates faith and the supernatural from its repressive past. This will be an important fact to consider in the overtly secular sections of the narratives we will consider—they do not necessarily give explicit room to supernatural incursions of the sort that specters make, but the overt is not what matters: what matters is the never-quite-present ghost. Whether that ghost is tied to a religion or not, it is certainly not harmed by the process of secularization.

Some Precedents in the Study of Literature

This dissertation is certainly not the only work to problematize the idea that modernity and postmodernity have thoroughly secularized the world; indeed, it is not even the first to apply such an idea to literature, and it is worthwhile to consider the foundational work that has been done in this field. While it can be difficult to find works that read literature in a spectral light, authors such as Pericles Lewis and Amy Hungerford have demonstrated ways in which spiritual and even religious concepts persist in modern and postmodern literature. While they do not necessarily rely upon the work of philosophers like Derrida, Vattimo, Caputo, Žižek, or Badiou, they arrive at conclusions not too far removed from the discussion above; pervading their work is a sense that modern and postmodern realities do not reduce the world to a nihilistic locus of denial. There is infinitely more to modern and contemporary art than withdrawal from

an interest in truth, beauty, human nature, and the gods; what *does* change is the metaphysical presence and binding force that these qualities are often given in traditional systems of thought. While Lewis and Hungerford do not specifically predicate their analyses on weak theology or hauntology, they do hint at the same concepts: weakened faith, spectral presences, and influences that are felt but not entirely real or at hand. My contention here is that these ideas can be pushed further, that they are crying out for a framework, and that hauntology provides not only the best, but perhaps the only convincing way to understand the odd pervasiveness of ghostly and evental passages in books that by all rights should be totally secular and disenchanted.

Pericles Lewis's fine volume *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* does a great deal to challenge the idea put forward by Georg Lukács that the novel as developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (qtd. in Lewis 23). Lewis writes, tellingly, that "[i]f God died in the nineteenth century, he had an active afterlife in the twentieth" (25). Taking as *terminus a quo* Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, Lewis documents, in several landmark modernist novels from the British Isles and Continental Europe, the persistence of divine influence long after the formal death of the concept of God as intellectually viable, an influence which reveals the "limits of the secularization thesis" (24). This thesis, Lewis argues, "characterizes the emergence of modernity as the result of increasingly rational modes of thought and a rejection of belief in the supernatural," or what Max Weber called "'disenchantment'" (23). In fact, Lewis even sketches a concept of modernism itself that is quasi-religious: thus, "the modernists were not […] devout secularists," and instead "sought,

through formal experiment, to offer new accounts of the sacred for an age of continued religious crisis"; the search for a sense of the sacred "without God or church […] contributed to the development of literary modernism" (24).

Lewis thoroughly backs up the claim that the high modernist prose writers (and not just the poets) were not wholly secular; "Proust and Joyce," for example, came to the idea that artists should work "to discover the sacredness of experience itself." He quotes Proust to the same effect: "'Reading is at the threshold of spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it'" (36). He similarly seizes on curious religious images or impulses in the work of Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Franz Kafka (36-7). Ultimately, using these and other more general and social proofs, Lewis argues that "the early twentieth century was a period not of widespread agnosticism and liberalism, but of heightened tension and conflict over the possibilities for a religious life in the modern world" (43). There is no simple arrow pointing from thoroughgoing religion and credence to an equally pervasive irreligion and skepticism. Instead, the reactions to nineteenth century religion are multiple, coming from both extremely conservative and also extremely avant-garde wings of the intellectual world (38-43). While Lewis's focus here is entirely on modernist authors, and while he does not venture anywhere near later ideas like deconstruction or hauntology, his critique of the standard concept of how secularization has proceeded in the literary and cultural sphere is important. In particular, the idea of God's "afterlife" is fertile (25), and we will have cause to return to it particularly when discussing Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* and its depiction of an omnipotent *deus pater* who is both dead and alive. This conceptual placement of divinity not in the sky but on or even under the earth is not explicit in Lewis's

analysis, but it is a fairly easy step from speaking of God's afterlife to thinking of God as a kind of ghost or even zombie, as Barthelme does rather grotesquely and the others do more subtly.

By contrast, in her volume *Postmodern Belief*, Amy Hungerford directly tackles the issue of religious appearances in contemporary American literature. Although the authors are different from the ones considered here—Hungerford primarily analyzes J.D. Salinger, Allen Ginsberg, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and Marylinne Robinson—the essential goal of the study is similar, and she even features the religious turn in Jacques Derrida's thought as a crucial building block of her argument. Hungerford describes her book as being "about belief and meaninglessness, and what it might mean to believe in meaninglessness […] belief without meaning becomes both a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions and a way to buttress the authority of the literature that seeks to imagine such belief" (xiii). She explores contentless belief through such channels as "the public religion of Eisenhower," "the Charismatic movement," "the vibrations of […] words having divine power," and "the ritual aspects of language […] in sacramental terms modeled by the Latin mass" (xiv); while she does not specifically mention Donald Barthelme or his idea of words being unstable and therefore "enhaloed" with a sort of apophatic uncertainty, his concept would certainly accord with her reflections on the religious value of "the nonsemantic" (xiv). Hungerford also considers only "writers who live in oblique relation to the structures and discourse of institutional religion, or whose religious biographies are unavailable"; such a focus implicitly acknowledges the partiality and betweenness of hauntology, and that one is most likely to find a strongly

hauntological literature from a writer who is personally "haunted" by a specific tradition.

Hungerford also argues that "several prominent features of postmodernism," when considered in a religious light, "are eclipsed," and that "sincerity overshadows irony as a literary mode when the ambiguities of language are imagined as being religiously empowered" (xix). This is a sentiment that David Foster Wallace would surely find attractive, and we will certainly have occasion to consider the challenge posed by the so-called "new sincerity" in fiction to stereotypically postmodern styles. However, it does appear at times that Hungerford means to isolate certain postmodern works from their companions, exalting those that are less ironic and potentially more religious, to the point of arguing, for example, that "the ironic, playful *White Noise* (1985), a standard text of the old postmodernism, now seems an aberration within DeLillo's oeuvre" (xx). Later on in the study, she similarly divides Derrida's early work from his later; while he began with an "argument against the sign" that is also "an argument against the reign of theology," he later made an "explicit, late-career move toward theological subjects and quite at odds with the common understanding of [his] linguistic theories" (18-9). Ultimately, then, writers like Derrida "posit the text as radically autonomous, then return language to an intensified version of presence by personifying the text so conceived […] Language in their hands becomes immanent in much the same way that the names of God are imagined to contain God's presence" (19). The goal here, overall, appears to be "rescuing" postmodernism from nihilism by selecting contrasting threads in its generally bleak tapestry.

My own approach is different: while I do not dispute Hungerford's factual claims about the religious turn in Derrida or about the broad spectrum from irony to sincerity and back again in postmodern literary fiction, I see little point in writing about postmodernism without considering its most blatant, most criticized, and most apparently trivial or anti-theological instances. This is why hauntology seems, time and again, to be the best model for understanding what is going on in postmodernism, and while it necessarily can embrace religion and the supernatural, it need not stop there.[4] By choosing to focus on religion alone, Hungerford and Lewis both run into the explicit atheism of many of the twentieth century's leading theorists and the implied skepticism of most of its literary practitioners; all that is left to do is to seek the religious shape of the words themselves, regardless of content, or to search for contradictions within the fundamentally irreligious trajectories of careers like Derrida's. Hauntology goes a step further, all but obliterating the line between faith and atheism, nihilism and optimism, the omnipotent sky-god and the immanent ghost. We no longer need to comb through the wreckage of religious consensus, taking inventory of the mangled bits that survive. Instead, the wreckage itself is pervasively haunted by ghosts, to the point that it cannot be imagined otherwise, and since postmodern ghosts emanate from both the past and the future, postmodernism no longer even seems to be a wreck, but a memorial of what has passed and a window looking out on what is still to come.

[4] While nothing explicit has been written to date about literature being haunted or hauntological in character, it would be remiss not to mention Flannery O'Connor's famous statement that "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (*Mystery and Manners* 44). In a sense, this dissertation builds on that quote by expanding it doubly: first by broadening the focus from the American South to the United States in general, and second by showing that Christ is only one of many possible specters to haunt postmodern fiction.

A Few Critiques of Postmodernism

That this optimistic view is not universal should come as no surprise whatsoever. Critiques of "postmodernism," or what a given author understands to constitute some form of postmodern thought, morality, or aesthetics, are all but ubiquitous now, and have been so for many years. There is no scope here even for beginning to address each one, let alone for a rebuttal, but in the second and third chapters of this dissertation, concerning Donald Barthelme and David Foster Wallace respectively, we will have occasion to look into two of the most convincing anti-postmodern schools of thought. In the first, I read Barthelme's work in a way that responds to a general contention that Barthelme, and postmodern writers in general, produce little more than a depthless congeries of linguistic trash, all of which can only amount to a reflection of an impoverished cultural scenario, not a real response thereunto. This argument is made by a range of critics, from the conservative Christopher Lasch to the Marxist Frederic Jameson, and as such, it must be taken quite seriously. In the second, I begin with Wallace's own increasing discomfort with postmodernism as a style he could identify himself with, due to its persistent ironization of the world of discourse. This recourse to irony, Wallace explains in his essay "E Unibus Pluram," removes the possibility for authentic social engagement because it also undermines any moral authority that fiction might have to attain a satirical perspective.

This objection is quite common, and forms of it constitute the principal leftist objection to postmodernism, and therefore to the hauntology that grows out of it. For example, Terry Eagleton, the Marxist literary critic, argues that postmodernism grows out of nothing more than the "blend of euphoria and

disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968"; the point was that one could simply begin to "subvert the structures of language" if it proved impossible "to break the structures of state power" (123). Frederic Jameson brings up largely the same idea when he says that postmodernism is characterized by pastiche, whose amorality and lack of perspective is a "symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (68). This idea depends on a particular conception of postmodernism and deconstructive critique, one that Eagleton calls primarily "Anglo-American" and which revises history "in its own image, viewing famines, revolutions, soccer matches and sherry trifle as yet more undecidable 'text'" (126-7). Eagleton does admit that Derrida himself was not so simplistic about obliterating meaning and inviting a deleterious sort of relativism, however (128-9). Even with this qualification, it is important, if we wish to discuss postmodernism, to acknowledge and resist the tendency of its critical thought to devolve into mere withdrawal into inside jokes and auto-erotic self-perpetuation.

Eagleton gives Derrida a pass, largely, when attacking the faults of the deconstructionist critics, but the anti-postmodern philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek go a step further, specifically damning the Derridian model of ethics insofar as it hinges on alterity and messianism (and since these authors are both important for helping with a hauntological understanding of our postmodern novels, their critiques cannot be ignored). For instance, in his book on Badiou, Frederiek Depoortere describes how the process of deferral inherent in Derridian *différance* (and vital to the concept of hauntology) echoes, and is perhaps implicated in, "the movement of the consumer in capitalism which consumes

ever new commodities" (4). Philosophy, for Badiou, "must be able to propose […] something that can interrupt this endless regime of circulation," and an ethics based on alterity and expectation is not that proposal, because describing alterity simply describes "*what there is*," not the sort of event that can make a decisive break with the (dully capitalistic) background (*Infinite Thought* 36, *Ethics* 25-6). The accusation that deconstruction is complicit with capitalism is not made lightly; this line of thought builds clearly on what left-wing critics like Eagleton and Jameson have already established about postmodernism's tendency to retreat from real-world action. Badiou argues in the strongest possible terms that his own position—one of radical subtraction from the ordinary in the service of super-human heroism—is the only one that preserves any chance of social change or cultural critique. The rest is mere acquiescence.

Žižek is quite positive about the power of spectrality for understanding philosophy and human life (c.f. *The Puppet and the Dwarf* 98-101), but later in the same volume, he directly attacks *Specters of Marx* as a problematic text: arguing that the "*achievement of Christianity* [is] *to reduce its Otherness to Sameness*," he criticizes "the deconstructive purifying of [the] Other, so that all that remains of the Other is its place, the pure form of Otherness as the Messianic Promise" (138-9). Not only is the reduction of otherness to sameness closely related to Badiou's *Ethics*, but it also lays the foundation for Žižek's idea of the incarnation: we have already seen how in *The Monstrosity of Christ* he creates a sort of weak theology based on the death of God and his passage into the world of political action; here, he similarly argues that the incarnation means that "there is no mystery, no hidden true content, behind the mask […] of the Other" (138). This disenchantment can lead to the real, political and social activity that Žižek calls

the "Holy Spirit" (138). This is, for him, the part of Christianity worth saving; by contrast, Derrida's work maintains a Jewish reduction of "the promise of Another Life to a pure Otherness, a messianic promise which will never become fully present and actualized" (141). Again, the critique is virtually the same: obsessive focus on deferral and waiting means that any political potential dissolves into an unbecoming and complicit quietism.

The potential replies to such serious concerns are manifold. First, it is quite possible that Badiou and Žižek are correct about some things (as I argue they are about heroic fidelity, weak theology, and the environmental implications of futurity) and incorrect about others; there is no reason to reject their contributions simply because they critique hauntology and Derrida. Second, one could point out that these philosophers' calls to action are immoderate and difficult to distinguish from the mere *passage a l'acte* that can belong to anyone, of any political alignment—in other words, neither philosopher takes the greatest care possible that his most extreme views do not lead to senseless violence. These solutions still leave an incommensurable heterogeneity at the center of any work that tries to tap both of these philosophical veins, however, and while this tear is in some sense irreparable, it is at least worthwhile to consider some kind of rapprochement between the two. Also, answering these critiques, will, *a fortiori*, answer the attacks made by Jameson and Eagleton, which are rather weaker insofar as they focus primarily on a naïve and undeveloped form of deconstructive and postmodern theory.

Difficult as it is to imagine any harmony between these mutually hostile philosophies—and it must be admitted that a real treatment of the issue is beyond the scope of this study—for the present purposes, I turn to Giorgio

Agamben's work *The Coming Community*, with its difficult but extremely pertinent discussion of the term "whatever" (*quodlibet* in Latin, and *qualunque* in Agamben's Italian original). Michael Hardt, the translator of the English edition, notes that *qualunque* is difficult to render into English, with "whatever" not really carrying all the weight of the Italian term; indeed, along with its French counterpart *quelconque*, it has been translated as both "particular" and "general" in English (107n1). In the first section of the work, after pronouncing that "[t]he coming being is whatever being," Agamben notes that the Latin term *Quodlibet ens* "is not 'being, it does not matter which,' but 'being such that it always matters'"; therefore, this coming being in its particular-generality "relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property […] but only to its being *such as it is*" (1). On this basis, he is able to argue that "the intelligible […] is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series, but rather 'singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity'" (1). And again: "[l]ove is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love)" (2). This subtle distinction is important because it subverts (indeed, subverts in a deconstructive way) the boundary between pure alterity (respect for the Other as such) and the universalizing claims of the Same (Badiou's and Žižek's conception of the event as absolutely singular and universally binding).

Agamben goes on to clarify the idea of the particular-generality in a number of ways, arguing that "the example" is a "concept that escapes the antinomy of the universal and the particular," because "it holds for all cases of the same type, and, at the same time, it is included among these" (9-10). This

alliance of, or hovering-between, the particular and the general becomes important for Agamben's own unique definition of sacredness and the divine:

> God is in every thing as the place in which every thing is, or rather as the determination and the "topia" of every entity. The transcendent, therefore, is not a supreme entity above all things; rather, *the pure transcendent is the taking-place of every thing*. God or the good or the place does not take place, but is the taking-place of the entities, their innermost exteriority. (14-15)

This description, difficult as it can be, means that divinity itself is to be found not in generalized Otherness alone, nor in the universal and crystallized moments of Events alone, but precisely in those paradoxical cases that run along the margin between the two: divinity occupies the impossible both-and position that subverts the distinction between these two incommensurables. And much later in the book, Agamben also does considerable work to incorporate a deconstructive vision of language into his idea of the coming community, but without surrendering to a lack of meaning (of course, linguistic relativism and nihilism are two charges commonly brought against postmodernism by its critics on both left and right). Arguing that we are caught in a "society of the spectacle" and that it is impossible to just turn the clock back and invest language with meaning again, he instead claims that "only those who succeed in carrying [language itself] to completion—without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals, but bringing language itself to language—will […] enter into the paradise of language and leave unharmed" (83). This middle road will become a key part of the analysis of *Infinite Jest* in Chapter Two.

Agamben's idea, which places the most important concepts in a sort of deconstructive limbo between alterity and universality, is surely not sufficient to cause these two camps to lay down their weapons and make peace. However, it

is at least a way for us to think of each of these contributions in a balance with one another; a middle ground exists in which neither side's insights have to be discarded entirely. And this middle ground is possible only because it itself partakes in the impossible logic of the ghostly: it is neither one thing nor another, neither singularity nor generality, and so it wanders like a specter through the battlefields of contemporary theory. And this is essentially the response that must be made by the defenders of hauntology against its critics: postmodernism itself may contain flaws, but those very flaws are healed and subsumed into a dialectic *because and only because* hauntology intervenes: it makes possible impossible reconciliations between not just postmodernism and its Marxist critics, but also between religion and atheism, orthodoxy and heresy, sincerity and irony, and a whole host of other binaries. In this sense, it is *like* Derridian grammatology and *différance*, but it is also larger than they are, comprehending more, and exceeding its own time and space—just as a ghost should, and by definition, must.

I have dealt with these critiques first and at the greatest length, because they seem to me to be the most relevant to the topics at hand and also probably the strongest, most philosophically sound objections to postmodernism. It is also my belief, however, that hauntology can help us reply to a whole host of other objections as well. For example, Alan Sokal, a mathematician and physicist who famously sent a nonsensical "postmodern" essay to the journal *Social Text* and had it published, has been one of postmodernism's most strident critics in the scientific community. He argues that postmodernists are little more than lazy scientists: "some people," he writes, "starting from the undoubted fact that it's difficult to determine the truth […] have leapt to the conclusion that there is no

objective truth at all. The result is an extreme epistemological skepticism […] postmodernists […] hobble themselves with a self-imposed inability to make any coherent assertion about [the external] world" (914). It should be quite clear from evidence such as Agamben's concern with meaninglessness in language, from Derrida's persistent engagement with politics in *Specters of Marx*, and from the messianic tone of so much postmodern writing, that the goal in postmodern philosophy is no longer simply the dissolution of all chance at engaging the physical world (if it ever was). Hauntology, far from denying any discourses or forcing us to accept each and every assertion as the equal of all other assertions, embraces a greater number of discourses, including those that are dislocated in time and space. To say that it defers and resists absolute and tyrannical imposition of a single truth (which it certainly does) is not to say that it abolishes truth. It could be more appropriately said to *expect* truth at all times.

And much the same could be said of Catherine Pickstock's religious critique of Derrida, which ends up accusing him of nihilism, but also focuses almost exclusively on his early work. Because *différance* places the speaker "into a situation of double passivity, both unable to choose language (rather, chosen *by* it), and *unaware* of this passivity," it hides all of its pleasure and meaning from everyone involved and robs them of genuine truth (36). The "impersonal Derridian god: writing" is "a universalizer in the nihilistic mode. There is no subject. There are only objects, death(s)" (36). Pickstock instead wants language that is "*doxological*, that is to say, […] ultimately concerned with praise of the divine"; language can be "magical, efficacious, and *liturgical*," and Derrida's grammatology denies this possibility (37, 27). It is easy to argue that a far less deadly kind of philosophy is implied even in early Derrida works like "Plato's

Pharmacy" (which Pickstock quotes liberally), but this is far clearer in his later work as he turns toward religion and spectrality. It becomes increasingly clear that the operation of deferral is analogous to waiting for the (spectral) messiah and memorializing the (also spectral) dead, and with that key insight in place, the accusation of nihilism no longer makes sense. The ways in which hauntology allows for dialectic, for hope, for new contact points of analogy, for political action, and for an onto-theology that is liberating and democratic make it clear that this mode of thought is not all about nihilism, the god of death, or the death of god: it is about the *afterlife* of god.

A Brief Taxonomy of Specters in the Novels

All that remains before engaging with the literature is to introduce briefly the ghosts who most particularly haunt these narratives, and to defend the inclusion of these few at the expense of so many other, perhaps more obvious candidates. Why Barthelme, Wallace, and Egan, when so many postmodern and contemporary authors fit the bill?[5] The answer is threefold: first, these authors share a style that, while far from identical, is recognizable across the decades.

[5] The list of novels that could be included in a study of hauntology is intimidating, but even a preliminary attempt would have to number among its contents the work of Toni Morrison, whose *Beloved* takes its title from the name of a ghost and whose *Song of Solomon*, she claims, incorporates insights gained when her father "answered" her calls for advice "after his death" (xii); this holds true even though Morrison's style holds far more in common with literary modernism than do the authors in this dissertation, in whose style the break is more decisive. Ana Castillo's *The Guardians*, with its overtly postmodern style and its characters who operate on a literal and a religio-allegorical level at the same time, would also be an ideal candidate, and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo-Jumbo*, which draws upon the Haitian vodou that originated the very spectral concept of the zombie, would add a vital global-southern perspective to the hauntological scheme. Thomas Pynchon, particularly in his 2006 mega-novel *Against the Day*, allows his text to be invaded by various revenants, time-travelers from the future, and obscure, ghostly presences, and this work presents an especially rich hauntological narrative structure. Much the same could be said for the very recently published novel *Gods Without Men* by Hari Kunzru, who brilliantly makes use of UFO cults, Native American myth, and stock market manipulation to depict a haunted desert at the heart of the American experience. We can only hope for further hauntological studies of works like these; for now, suffice it to say that hauntology appears to be alive and well across a wide spectrum of the best contemporary literature.

Each author is willingly experimental, distorting the fabric of the traditional novel with authorial intrusions, divergent and sometimes incommensurate voices, speculations, invented words and languages, and so on; in other words, they all draw on the rich vein of postwar, postmodern fictional techniques. While the death of such techniques has been predicted almost since their first appearance, and while precedents are everywhere (in Joyce, especially in Beckett, and as far back as Cervantes, Rabelais, Sterne, and Fielding), these are manifestly part of the postmodern heritage, and they happen to make an especially rich backdrop on which the shadow-drama of haunting can play itself out. Second, each author was personally "haunted" by an engagement with the Roman Catholic faith (Barthelme and Egan were both raised Catholic and lapsed in adulthood, while Wallace repeatedly pursued conversion and joined Catholic lay movements, but never actually felt capable of completing the process), the strong linguistic resonances in the Roman Catholic Mass are profoundly influential on contemporary literature (c.f. Pickstock's *After Writing*, Marion's *God Without Being*, and Hungerford's chapter on DeLillo in *Postmodern Belief*), and the powerful cultural resonance of the religion apart from creedal belief makes it an ideal candidate for pervasive haunting. Finally, these three authors are ideally placed at the first flowering of postmodernism in the 1960s, the crisis-riddled postmodernism of the 1990s that struggled to keep up with the vertiginous pace of popular culture, and the current resurgence of tech-obsessed postmodernism that lives on despite repeated autopsies. This chronological arch makes it abundantly clear that hauntology is the glue that binds together the chaotic and disparate threads of the postmodern tapestry.

The specters that haunt these novels should not be considered the only sorts that show up in contemporary American fiction. However, it is important to describe in brief the kinds of tropes that appear in these novels, which I will be describing as ghostly. The most important of these tropes are actual ghosts, wraiths, and zombies (including the ghost of postmodernism itself); deconstructively "enhaloed" language (especially archaic language); God, negative theology, and the sacred; and the messianic, anagogical promise of the future. Each of these literary features dwells, as hauntology says it should, in a kind of suspension or limbo, and cannot be said to truly *exist* in the present tense. Some of them are relics of great antiquity, with an ancient or Medieval heritage; others are ghosts of very recent vintage; still others are ghosts whose outline can be traced in the present but which have not yet been manifested in any fully knowable way. All of them are situated at the limits of knowledge and description, which is to say that they help to define the shape and possibilities of literary inquiry, and I argue that they all militate *against* nihilism not by countering it with plain and verifiable knowledge, but by demonstrating that the locus of hope is in a "cloud of unknowing."

Wraiths and Zombies

Not all of these novels contain explicit ghost stories, and it is certainly not necessary for a hauntological work to include ghosts or specters as characters. However, notably, Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* features an "undead" character who resembles a zombie most of all, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* stages a scene between a "real" human character and the "wraith" of another character who has committed suicide before the events of the novel begin. While

these characters are not necessary to mark their respective novels as hauntological, in both cases, they are tremendously important and help us understand the authors' particular hauntological orientations.

In *The Dead Father*, the eponymous character is described as "dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead" (3); as we will see in Chapter Two, this places him directly between death and life, suspending him deconstructively between presence and absence, and since he is so powerfully associated with God the Father and other authoritative discourses, it does the same for religion and the patriarchy. Since the Dead Father retains a body and is capable of operating in the world at large, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of him as a zombie than as a ghost, although as a paternal ghost, he certainly evokes memories of *Hamlet*, hauntology's ur-text. The zombie is a powerful trope both for Afro-Caribbean religion and contemporary American popular culture; according to Elizabeth McAlister, "[t]he word zonbi appears in writing as far back as colonial Sait-Domingue […] as the slaves' belief in a returned soul, a *revenant*," while "20th century reports describe not a returned soul but a returned body—a person bodily raised from the grave and turned into a slave worker" (459). The original Caribbean zonbi, in other words, already *ab origine* subverts the body-soul distinction so pervasive in Western thought: its double meaning suspends it between ghost and automaton. The zombie has made quite a comeback in American culture, not coincidentally during the height of the postmodern era, beginning with "George Romero's 'Living Dead' films" and continuing through the video to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" to the current metaphor of what McAlister calls "'zombie banks'—banks whose debts are greater than their assets" (460). In a time of financial chaos, in other words, they

"highlight the overlap between capitalism and cannibalism" (McAlister 459).

The recent popularity of zombies speaks to the pervasive influence and dissemination of hauntology throughout contemporary American culture in a way that, perhaps, the rest of this dissertation cannot. In *The Dead Father*, though, we will certainly see that this zombified body provides us with a way to think about afterlives: the afterlife of God that Pericles Lewis mentions, the afterlife of the patriarchy, and the afterlife of Freudian concepts of paternity and the psyche. Indeed, McAlister notes that "[s]ome Vodouists understand Jesus as the first zonbi," and that two Haitian soldiers were guarding the tomb and "stole the password God gave when he resurrected Jesus"; this story sets up Vodou sorcerers against Roman Catholicism with "its affiliation with landowning elites" in Haiti while still "sympathize[ing] with Jesus, who is himself victimized by the sorcerers" (467-8). The way this story hovers between blasphemy and devotion, between a respect for religion and extreme heterodoxy, even opposition to established churches, echoes the way in which hauntological weak theology seeks to drive a wedge between the idea of the messiah and the way it has been mythologized and maliciously controlled by established churches. But the zombie is not only a bizarre and specialized religious symbol; it also, according to Amy Fass Emery, "represents" both a "sacrificial offering" and an "uncanny return" (330). The zombie is, then, a symbol for both the persistent post-mortem return of suppressed concepts and also for the ways in which the process of spectrality revises the concepts and detaches them from their ostensibly solid existence.

The "wraith" of James O. Incandenza in Wallace's *Infinite Jest* serves largely the same function, although in this case the revenant is never

demonstrated beyond all doubt to exist outside the mind of Don Gately. *Hamlet* allusions, as we shall see, are even more determinative in this novel, but Wallace brilliantly displaces the *Hamlet* narrative by making the ghost appear not to Hal Incandenza, James's real son, but to the surrogate Don Gately, who is Wallace's trope for the kind of sincerity that survives and resists addictive irony. Since James O. Incandenza was (in pre-wraith form) an amateur filmmaker of experimental and postmodern tendencies who made the titular (and fatally addictive) film *Infinite Jest*, the meeting and collision of the two is remarkably fertile. Incandenza the man shows how postmodernism, at its worst, can perform just the sort of collusive tricks that Badiou and Žižek accuse it of, perpetuating social ills and failing horrendously to communicate in an authentic way; Incandenza the *wraith*, by contrast, actually does communicate: he seeks to right wrongs, he gives new information to Gately, he tries to arrange a reconciliation of sorts with his son Hal, and he works (even if he does not fully succeed) to prevent the dissemination of his own addictive entertainment to the world at large. Not only does this show how postmodernism can be accommodated and dealt with better as a ghost than as an ostensibly "present" and "real" aesthetic form, but it also reinforces yet again the (very Derridian) idea that specters tend toward justice: only the spectral lineage of postmodernism fully escapes the gravitational pull of capitalistic entertainment and recursive, terminally hip irony.

"Enhaloed" Language

We have already seen how deconstruction is the parent of hauntology; deconstruction is also present in the language and narrative structure of these

works, which time and again rely on deferral, ambiguity, and undecidability. Donald Barthelme, while claiming to object to deconstruction, actually illustrates the heart of this process very well when he writes in his essay "Not-Knowing" that "[w]ords have halos, patinas, overhangs, echoes" (21). Barthelme's brilliance here is to ally the trace (without persistent traces, there could be neither deconstruction nor hauntology) with the halo; this alliance, if true, will also serve to answer Catherine Pickstock's assertion that Derrida's theories of language leave only death behind and cannot compete with liturgical language (36-7). Under this rubric, deconstructive signifiers are themselves invested with an excess, a saturation, that is itself close to the sacred (as we shall see below). The important idea here is that haunting operates on many levels—individual words, sentences, and even entire plots—and the individual signifier is the type for all the other hauntings. Thus, just as words can be caught among a whole field of meanings (and very often are in Barthelme's *Snow White* and *The Dead Father*), so too can the ending of *Infinite Jest* be caught in suspension between an optimistic and pessimistic conclusion, and *A Visit From the Goon Squad*'s narrative can be pervaded by future speculations and messianic predictions that cannot be confirmed, but which can confer on the text a kind of non-specific sacredness, not attached to any specific religion but inspired at all times by weak theology.

The Sacred (Weak and Apophatic Theologies)

We have already seen how weak theology and hauntology are natural allies, so it only remains to clarify what is meant and not meant when discussing "the sacred" as it pertains to these novels. First, these chapters disclose as much as is possible the personal religious heritages and hauntings that the three

authors bring to their work, while also being completely honest about their personal skepticism. No attempt is made to call these works or writers "religious," and at the same time, no attempt is made to claim that religion is *only* a relic, or that it *only* exists in hauntological form. The argument is only this: that when the sacred appears in these works, it appears in the form of a specter: an effective force that does not fully exist, an ambiguous deferral of meaning, a potentiality that is not yet actual. This process seems to be accentuated by a heritage in the liturgical faiths (perhaps because of their intense attention to language), but such a heritage is far from necessary. The most easily identifiable forms in which this trace of the sacred appears are what is being called "weak theology," and also the very old tradition of "apophatic," or "negative," theology. This form of theology that strives to go beyond knowledge and being, speaking of the divine only through negation and humility, is represented in the Patristic era by Pseudo-Dionysius, modified in the Middle Ages by writers like Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius, brought into the twentieth century by Jean-Luc Marion and more radically transformed by Jacques Derrida.[6] While weak theology, the newer and more general of the two terms, appears in all of these works (often without specific creedal content of any sort), apophatic theology is most easily observed in *Infinite Jest*, in a single passage considered at length in Chapter Three. I also argue that Donald Barthelme's work shows a strong apophatic bent, both in the essay "Not-Knowing" and several short works that help understand the novels interpreted here.

[6] For a general account of apophatic theology's long history and contemporary revision, see the excellent anthology *Derrida and Negative Theology*, the brief collection of Derrida's essays on the subject in *On The Name*, and Jean-Luc Marion's excellent *God Without Being*.

There are, however, other and more elusive events in these novels that are not so easy to pin down, but which still deal with humanity's relationship to that which is beyond it or above it, and therefore deserve (at least for the sake of convenience) to be associated with sacredness, transcendence, or divinity. Consequently, these terms show up in the chapters below, and are used in ways that seem most suited to the passage at hand. They should not be considered interchangeable, exactly, but neither are they mutually exclusive. For this alliance between excess, beyondness, and the sacred, I rely quite heavily on Rowan Williams's description of sacredness and aesthetics in his volume *Grace and Necessity*, which is particularly useful for explaining Barthelme's manipulation of surfaces and his collage-like style in Chapter Two. Williams speaks of "the sacred" as an "awareness of a depth in the observable world beyond what is at any moment observable," or again, "the element of gratuitous energy in the world's life" (154-5). The sense of excess is what moves the sacred out of a mere "aesthetic category," although Williams is careful to note that many artists do not actually associate this excess energy with "God" (155, 157). Such excess manifests itself constantly in these narratives: they exceed themselves in time, in space, in style, and many other ways, and these chapters all point out the ways in which each author accomplishes the goal of "asymptotically approaching […] fullness" (Williams 154). For the purposes of this dissertation, that is the meaning of "the sacred."

Messianism, Anagogy, and the Future

In his very first definition of hauntology, Derrida notes that it is the sort of expansion of ontology that can embrace teleology and eschatology as well

(*Specters of Marx* 10). Therefore, one of the most important elements of hauntology is its futural orientation, something which will prove incredibly important to the work of Jennifer Egan, and only slightly less so to that of David Foster Wallace. Also, since this project considers a trajectory of postmodern fiction from the 1960s to the 2010s and beyond, the future of such fiction and its engagement with hauntology is integral. Chapter Four, which considers Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, extensively reads her conception of anagogy, which is the Medieval interpretive method that relates a given scriptural passage to its more general future meaning: anagogy asks what profit something is for eternity, or what of it will last until the end of the world. In Egan's work, anagogy takes center stage, but it is revised to have a more open, elastic reference point. Fittingly, then, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is the last work discussed here, and its concern with projection into the future says something about the future of fiction and the future of hauntology, as well.

Beyond the repurposing of anagogy, however, hauntology has much to say about the future in general; indeed, the future is the realm of the messiah and the locus of hope in general. These concepts, in turn, are vital for the entire Lévinassian-Derridian ethical system, which bases itself on a radical orientation toward the altogether-other, to that which is yet to come (and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for Agamben's "coming community"). Hauntology's view of the future relies on the distinction between two possible concepts, not entirely unlike the old distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*: the future as an incremental outgrowth of the present on the one hand, and the future as decisive, irruptive break on the other (c.f. Agamben, *The Time That Remains* 68-9). Slavoj Žižek explains:

> There are in French two words for "future" which cannot be adequately rendered in English: *futur* and *avenir*. *Futur* stands for "future" as the continuation of the present, as the full actualization of tendencies already in existence; while *avenir* points more towards a radical break, a discontinuity with the present – *avenir* is what is to come (*a venir*), not just what will be. (*The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* 134)

Žižek continues, in a passage that Derrida might well have approved of, that even Marx was too incremental in his view of the future, only imagining "capitalism without capitalism," but that to Marx must be added "Hegel's 'tragic' vision of the social process where no hidden teleology is guiding us, where every intervention is a jump into the unknown, where the result always thwarts our expectations" (134). Since "the existing system cannot reproduce itself indefinitely" anyway, the future as radical break is the only option, and we have no choice but to guide ourselves "on nothing more than ambiguous signs from the future" (134-5). Much as *chronos* has been seen as the pedestrian counting of hours and minutes while *kairos* is a heightened and indefinite sort of time in which true events can occur, so *l'avenir* is a more cathected, more evental kind of future than the plain *futur.*

If *l'avenir* is the future understood as a break with the present, the time for a coming event, even that should not necessarily be seen as only a far-off moment. Giorgio Agamben has written powerfully on the idea of messianism, distinguishing "between messianism and the apocalypse" by noting that messianic time is "not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end" (*The Time That Remains* 62). Interestingly, since he distinguishes messianic time from both *chronos*, which Saint Paul understood as the time before the incarnation, and the *parousia*, when time "implodes into the other eon, into eternity," we end up with a time that is neither this nor that, that

is indefinitely extended and protracted without a clean break (63). "Messianic time," he writes, is "part of the secular eon that constitutively exceeds *chronos* and as a part of eternity that exceeds the future eon, while being situated in the position of a remainder [*resto*] with regard to the division between the two eons" (64). The other name for this is "operational time," i.e., "the time that time takes to end" (71).

What this means is that for Agamben, and I believe this is also true of our three authors, we are caught in the event horizon of a profoundly spectral time: one that is neither this nor that, exactly, but participates in *chronos* and messianism equally. Just as an object entering the event horizon of a black hole will never appear to enter the black hole fully to an observer, but only to stretch and accelerate toward it, so the philosophy and fiction of spectrality and postmodernity is always asymptotic: it bends and shifts and delays and defers toward a goal (the Other, the messiah, the full and blazing logic of presence), but it cannot and will not reach that goal. In short, postmodern anagogy and messianic time are the final and largest of the matryoshkas of hauntology—one can observe the behavior of individual signifiers and find it mirrored and recapitulated all the way up to the very time in which we are immersed and the future which we all expect. Of course, if Agamben is right about Saint Paul, then this has really been the conception of time for at least the duration of the Christian epoch, if not earlier, since most of these concepts are present in Judaism as well; this only goes to show that hauntology is arguably useful to a much wider-ranging group of ideas than postmodernism alone. However, it is in the postmodern era that these ideas have been finally set down and clarified, and it is in postmodern fiction that I believe they most clearly manifest themselves.

While we will see quite the procession of ghosts through these four novels, it is this one toward which they all march. What else is fiction for, if not to help us figure out where we are all going, and to make us a bit wiser and better along the way?

CHAPTER TWO

(Un)dead Fathers: Fugues, Excesses, and Ghosts in the Novels of Donald Barthelme

Barthelme and his Critics

Donald Barthelme (1931—1989) is perhaps best known as a writer of short stories – he began his career with two short story collections—but he is just as accomplished in the form of the novel. He published three in his lifetime—*Snow White* (1967), *The Dead Father* (1975), and *Paradise* (1986)—with a fourth and not entirely finished novel, *The King*, being published in 1990, the year after his death. All three are relatively short and compressed narrative works, and except for *Paradise*, they make overt use of organizing principles derived from myths, legends, and other old-fashioned, "organizing" stories. While it is impossible to discuss Barthelme's work without reference to the short fiction, this chapter will focus primarily on his first two novels, *Snow White* and *The Dead Father*, as each novel provides a sustained context in which Barthelme was able to pursue fully his program of collage-like reconstitution of prior narratives. So, while both novels are classified as "postmodern" works and, as we will see, accused by many critics of being little more than trivial riffs on popular culture, I argue that they are quite seriously haunted by once-authoritative discourses of the sort once "upheld as […] the true 'structure' of reality, having the same function as the traditional God of metaphysics" (Vattimo 3). In other words, each novel's narrative structure is a tissue of previous discourses, and it is less important to determine which discourse is being accessed, riffed on, or parodied at a given

time than it is simply to realize that it is *there*. As Jerome Klinkowitz rightly notes, "The object known as the Dead Father being hauled across the landscape in Donald Barthelme's novel can be almost anything or anybody one wishes" (13). Thus, it is important to resist the temptation to find obvious, programmatic and allegorical meanings in Barthelme's prose narrative; the novels are exceedingly open-ended and explicitly invite readerly participation and multiple interpretations. However, even in this context, the overwhelming pressure of mythic and theological inheritance in the novels is impossible to ignore, even though the characters and narrative voices often express negative opinions about religion. It is important, therefore, to incorporate these attitudes toward the sacred and the theological, as they are too pervasive to be dismissed as simple fragments of an eclectic collage. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter One, it is possible to think of sacredness as dwelling in aesthetic excess and ambiguity, so it is not in spite of but *because* of the open-ended and collage-like structure of the works that it is possible to understand the strange, deconstructed world of the sacred in *Snow White* and *The Dead Father*.

Critical Evaluations of Barthelme's novels have been mixed, with some scholars faulting them for narcissism and irrelevance, and others seeking a moral or allegorical motive to their structure. Robert Con Davis heads up the allegorists, reading *The Dead Father* as positing the quasi-allegorical question "how does a novel, part of an English tradition of fiction […] that explicitly articulates the function of paternity […] exist within its tradition without being overcome by it?" (187). Richard Walsh specifically criticizes this tendency of commentators to "compete in allegorical interpretation of the Dead Father," arguing that in this novel, Barthelme "has found his unifying master-theme […] a

metaphor whose tenor is unspecified and unfixed while its vehicle is developed on its own terms" (174-5). Jerome Klinkowitz likewise distances himself from most of the expository camps, instead comparing *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* alike to contemporary techniques in the visual and plastic arts (7-8); he also notes, apropos of Barthelme's journalistic background, that he tended to "handl[e] words and images as blocks of material rather than as purveyors of conceptions" (10). John Barth is more strictly laudatory, noting that Barthelme "didn't waste words," but rather "barely *indulged* words—he valued them too much for that—and this rhetorical short leash makes his occasional lyric flights all the more exhilarating" (qtd. in Hudgens 71).

These evaluations may not all rank Barthelme among the best of literary authors, but they are far more appreciatory than the group who finds Barthelme—and often enough, his other midcentury colleagues—to be terminally frivolous, nihilistic, and/or narcissistic. In this rather dismissive camp, one finds such critics as Larry McCaffery, who sees "a heterogeneous mixture of learning and verbal trash" surrounding the mythic source, contributing no "truly mimetic design" (145).[1] James Dickey, similarly, characterized Barthelme's fiction as "cute trash," while Robert Scholes specifically accuses Barthelme of an inability to achieve a "perspective beyond the disordered wanderings of damaged brains" (qtd. in Johnson 89). Robert A. Morace, slightly more positive about the fragmentary texts, believes the fragmentation of the collage-style text of *Snow White* is intended to show, from a moral vantage point, "the perversion of private expression, and […] the devaluation of significant historical acts" (166).

[1] This is, perhaps, an early perception of McCaffery's, as he went on to show interest in Barthelme's career, and his interview with the author is perceptive and quite good.

In other words, at best, Barthelme's work simply reflects the ethical chaos and frivolity of his epoch; at worst, he collaborates with it.

More generally, Barthelme came in for a scathing evaluation in John Gardner's work *On Moral Fiction*; in the Brans interview, Barthelme calls it "an attempt at a Saint Valentine's Day Massacre" (qtd. in Hudgens 95). Gardner's critique is important, because it articulates in the sharpest terms the difficulties that so many critics have expressed about the postmodern novel, and more broadly, postmodern art in the latter half of the twentieth century. Specifically, Gardner's attack is *moral*, as the title of his work betrays: this is far from a purely aesthetic judgment rendered upon a style, but rather, an ethical indictment of an entire attitude toward the world. Gardner specifically indicts postmodernism, ranging from Barthelme and fellow prose stylist William H. Gass to the compositions of John Cage, of being "too obviously constructed to fit a theory" (9). A whole slew of postmodern authors, including Barthelme, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and other "inflated reputations," are all consigned to history's dustbin (94). Barthelme is, he suggests, "the best" of the younger writers "holding up a mirror to the age." However, his satire is "the satire of despair, not grounded on theory […] of what ought to be, but constructed out of bemused weariness, irascibility, New York stylishness, and, sometimes, disgust" (79-80).

The accusations are, in a sense, absolutely trivial—superficially, Gardner does not go far beyond the standard litany of demotic grudges against postmodern art: these writers will, he forecasts, "die quickly, of pure meanness […] intellectual blight, academic narrowness, or fakery" (94). However, they also contain a serious kernel of threat to the postmodern epistemology, and

specifically to the idea that hauntology (postmodernism's heir) is uniquely equipped to help us understand the ambiguous state of transcendence in the contemporary world. For instance, when Catherine Pickstock mounts her complex assault on Jacques Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy," she does so in terms that smack of Gardner's jeremiad, only more academic and more carefully worked out: Derrida, she charges, qualifies "the autonomous subject, via the removal of all elements of choice, intention, desire, and particularity from the speaker or writer"; this prevents access to a "middle voice" that could "mediat[e] all divine via human action" (36). One is left with "no *knowing* invocation of the impersonal Derridian god," because *différance* is "a universalizer in a nihilistic mode. There is no subject. There are only objects, death(s)" (36). Postmodernism as denial of knowledge, the movement proclaiming structural unknowability, and most devastating of all, the movement of nihilism: what could be more commonplace, and yet more difficult a charge to deny?

"Not-Knowing" and Nothing: a Postmodern Response

Donald Barthelme has a very specific answer to these questions in his tellingly-dubbed essay "Not-Knowing," and it is to this essay that we must turn in order to understand how Barthelme worked out his defense against the critiques of Gardner and, *mutatis mutandis*, the entire anti-postmodern cadre. The essay provides at once an excellent introduction to Barthelme's limpid, off-center, and extremely funny style, and to his conception of morality in art. At the beginning of "Not-Knowing," Barthelme imagines "someone […] writing a story"; this someone creates an oddly specific scenario "from the world of conventional signs": "he takes an azalea bush, plants it in a pleasant park […] he

takes from the same rich source a handsome thief and a chastity belt, places the thief in the chastity belt and lays him tenderly under the azalea […]" (11). The key moment comes, though, when Barthelme asks, midstream, "what happens next?" The answer is, "Of course, I don't know" (11). This answer—ostensibly little more than a pragmatic description of the writing process—contains the seeds of a kind of artistic manifesto. "Writing," Barthelme argues, "is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how […] The not-knowing is not simple, because it's hedged about with prohibitions, roads that may not be taken" (12). In short, Barthelme does acknowledge the serious charge of misology—that postmodernism hates, proscribes, and militates against knowledge—but he also modifies the terms of the charge itself.

Barthelme justifies "not-knowing," and *a fortiori* the entire postmodern milieu, by invoking the necessity of "problems" in fiction. "If I am slightly more sanguine than [imaginary anti-postmodern critic] Alphonse about Postmodernism," he writes, "however dubious about the term itself and not altogether clear as to who is supposed to be on the bus and who is not, it's because I locate it in relation to a series of problems, and feel that the problems are durable ones. Problems are a comfort" (14). The need for problems is acute because without them, writing, like philosophy, would become "immeasurably shallow and trivial" (14, quoting Wittgenstein). It is at this point in the essay that he explicitly includes himself among the ranks of postmodern authors—an unusually candid and helpful admission; here, too, he acknowledges the typical critiques leveled against postmodern fiction, of the very type that John Gardner invoked: "that this kind of writing has turned its back on the world, is in some

sense not about the world but about its own processes, that it is masturbatory, certainly chilly, that it excludes readers by design […]" (15).

In other words, Barthelme is acutely aware that his writing, and that of his colleagues, can be considered anti-epistemological, misological, at once narcissistic and nihilistic. This amounts, ultimately, to the charge of *triviality*: as in the Scholes quote above, the works are a window not upon the world, but only upon the workings of a self-involved mind. As "trivial" objets d'art, they cannot teach about or comment upon, let alone change, the world, and postmodern literature of Barthelme's style thus fails to satisfy two very disparate camps: the theological/traditional, which demands that fiction be "moral" (Gardner), and the anti-postmodern left, which demands that fiction be politically engaged. This can be seen quite clearly in Fredric Jameson's essay "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," where he argues that postmodern literature is capable only of pastiche, not parody (which bore a closer, satire-like connection to the world at large). Pastiche is, he writes, "a neutral practice of […] mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives […] devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (65). This modality is a "symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (68). Again, the charge is clear: postmodernism precludes, in a structural way, even a seemingly-trivial art form like parody: by withdrawing from the knowable world into the obscurity of not-knowing, even humor and mockery cannot be placed at the disposal of a robust social critique, of a sense of history with a direction and an ethical dimension.

The sheer proliferation of anti-postmodern polemics should alone make it obvious that these charges are serious in nature. Barthelme's answer, articulated in "Not-Knowing," is a further pursuit of the Question and the Problem as central to art – in particular, the problems that plague language: revitalizing language that has been used up excessively, contending with the "political and social contamination of language," and liberating artistic language from "our devouring commercial culture" (15). The argument is elliptical, but Barthelme appears to assert a standard defense of postmodernity: it shies from answers and from overt assertion of truth claims precisely because such claims are always already "contaminated" by the compromises that prior discourses have made with evil (e.g. theology with socio-political repression, Marxist critique with Stalinism, etc.). Barthelme even invokes very non-postmodern sources, including Georg Lukács and George Orwell, in defense of the postmodern attempt to wriggle out of traditional language's onerous compromises (15-16). All of this is fairly standard, and will perhaps be convincing only to those already convinced of the value of postmodernism as commonly understood from Lyotard on. It is Barthelme's next statement, though, that is more telling, and (I argue) more central to an understanding of his fictional (and specifically novelistic) program. Speaking of these challenges faced by language, he continues:

> If I call these matters "thorny," it's because any adequate attempt to deal with them automatically creates barriers to the ready assimilation of the work. Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art. However much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, and straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken. (15)

This is as close to an aesthetic manifesto as can be found in "Not-Knowing," and it bears closer scrutiny; this is particularly true because it is an evidently hauntological manifesto, as well; art looks into the future, and deals not with things that can be plainly spoken, but that hover between communicability and chaos. In short, it deals with ghosts.

"The as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken": as desiderata for art, these can either be ridiculous, terminating in nothingness and despair, or profound in a sense that approaches the messianic subject-to-come in Derrida, or indeed, the God of apophatic theology. Barthelme will insist that they are the latter; indeed, he goes so far in "Not-Knowing" as to say that "art's project is fundamentally meliorative" and that "the aim of meditating upon the world is finally to change the world" (24). To see this at work in Barthelme's fiction, it is helpful to turn briefly to a 1974 short story called "Nothing: A Preliminary Account." Like so much of the rest of his canon, this story is easily read as little more than an academic joke: nearly every sentence in the story is either a direct statement of negation, or somehow leads up to, amends, or qualifies such a statement; the subject of the negations is the word/concept "nothing." Thus, in its basic form the story is merely a list of what nothing is *not*: "Nothing is not a tongue depressor; splendid, hurry on. Not a tongue depressor on which a distinguished artist has painted part of a nose, part of a mouth, a serious, unsmiling eye […] Nothing is not a Gregorian chant or indeed a chant of any kind" (*Sixty Stories* 239). The relation to the thesis "Not-Knowing" is clear: the attempt to express the ineffable or inaccessible, which Barthelme clearly situates at the center of the fictional project, is reduced here to its barest skeleton. The narrator simply tries to contain the uncontainable and fundamentally ungraspable concept of

"Nothing," and, inevitably, fails. The ghost of the half-intelligible proves elusive, at least for now.

Interestingly, although the subject "nothing" exists in the title of the story, its introduction into the text is delayed for five lines, with the pronoun "it" picking up the slack; in other words, Barthelme inscribes the beginning of the text with a notable absence, one which nonetheless must be filled by a stopgap. This kind of substitution gives the entire piece its raison d'être, as the rest of the text also comprises inadequate substitutions, a chain of attempted non-signification that is condemned to a partial, ever-shifting existence. Even before the first page is over, it becomes clear that no term following the copula in the phrase "nothing is" will ever satisfy; only a genuinely *infinite* chain of such terms could serve. This sort of limited, deferred language is characteristic of the postmodern movement in general; as Olsen argues, the projects of Barthelme's contemporaries "refuse centricism, total intelligibility, closure, and absolute 'significance'" (76). However, the scope of this futile attempt, notwithstanding all of its humor and surface-level frivolity, should not be underestimated: the narrator is clearly shooting for, dare one say asymptotically approaching, something very ineffable, very much beyond human comprehension.[2] Without denying Barthelme his self-appointment to the camp of the postmodernists, it must also be said that treating such uses and abuses of language as *de novo* inventions of the postwar twentieth century is naïve, and does a disservice to the other, older traditions that have a hand in shaping Barthelme's fictions.

[2] Recall here that the asymptotic approach to the world's fullness is central to Rowan Williams's conception of the sacred (c.f. *Grace and Necessity* 154).

The Negative Path to Sacred Words

One of the most important traditions that I believe informs Barthelme's work, and among the oldest, is negative, or apophatic, theology. The reason it is so important to understanding Barthelme, and to the argument of this dissertation, is that it maps a clear route from nothingness as mere nihilism to nothingness as a route to the "sacred" or "enhaloed" words that are a feature of Derrida's *différance* and also of hauntology's approach to language, sacred and secular. Apophatic theology is postulated classically in *The Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius. This 5th—6th century theologian and philosopher makes his program abundantly clear in the introduction to the work: "we must not dare," he writes to his interlocutor Timothy,

> to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being […] Since the unknowing of what is beyond being is something above and beyond speech, mind, or being itself, one should ascribe to it an understanding beyond being. (49)

A species of irony suffuses these words, simply due to the fact that they *are* words: Dionysius makes use of discourse in order to demean, to warn against, the use of discourse. In order to resolve this conundrum meaningfully, it is necessary to take "words or conceptions" to mean *positive*, plenary statements. As it happens, Dionysius is more than happy to use language, but he uses it in a feinting, negative, and supplementary manner. He notes the tension between the use of language in Biblical texts and their tendency to disavow the possibility of speaking about God: "they give [the deity] many names, such as 'I am being,' 'life, 'light,' 'God,' the 'truth' […] they say he is […] sun, star, and fire, water, wind, and dew, cloud, archetypal stone, and rock, that he is all, that he is no thing" (55-6). Later, in *The Mystical Theology*, he writes that union with divinity

comes about by "a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge […] by knowing nothing" (137). The virtual word-for-word kinship among Dionysius's words and Barthelme's "Not-Knowing" should be abundantly clear.

It is tempting at this point, and with such correspondences at hand, to set up a completely new Donald Barthelme, one antipodal to the auto-erotic entertainer, the nihilistic fragment-wrangler, the cunning linguist of his harshest critics: instead, Barthelme the mystic, the pseudo-saintly negative theologian of the post-Enlightenment. True enough, he does speak of an "ethical" and "meliorative" project underlying his art ("Not-Knowing" 24). However, this is not quite correct either, and it would be wrong to read too much orthodox religious doctrine or intention into Barthelme's fiction. Dionysius, as we have seen, emphasizes the way in which negative theology soars to transcendence. Similarly, the later exponent of negative theology, German mystic Meister Eckhart, writes "in that Nothing God was born; He was the fruit of nothing. God was born in the Nothing […] he has the essence of all creatures within him" (140). The endpoint, thus, is always Godhead and fullness, even if the route is through utter vacancy. These claims are surely too high and too definite for Barthelme, who, after all, notes that "problems are a comfort" and that they are "not to be avoided but embraced" ("Not-Knowing" 14, 18). Despite the obvious sympathy between his work and the writings of the negative theologians, Barthelme is not a theologian, only a writer who invokes and attempts to deal with theological concepts; it is a serious mistake to argue that his veneration of obscurity and problematics is simply a detour on the way to a traditionally "plenary" epistemology or a classically Pseudo-Dionysian catalogue of the things that God is not, one with a purely devotional purpose.

Rather, it is more helpful to follow Jacques Derrida's commentary upon the negative theological tradition, a commentary which sees the tradition split into two strands: the orthodox, as described above in the work of Dionysius and Eckhart (or at least in *some* of their work), and the emptier, more heretical strand. In his essay "Sauf le nom," Derrida writes

> There is one apophasis that can in effect respond to, correspond to, correspond with the most insatiable *desire of God* […] the other apophasis, the other voice, can remain readily foreign to all desire, in any case to every anthropotheomorphic form of desire. (*On the Name* 37)

In short, apophasis (the process of denial that constitutes negative theology) can either deny only *in order to* obey "a logic of the *sur*, of the *hyper*, over and beyond" (*Derrida and Negative Theology* 102); alternatively, it can progress more radically, pointing to what Derrida (borrowing from Plato) calls *khora*: "body without body, absent body but unique body and place of everything, in the place of everything, interval, place, spacing" (56). It is this latter alternative, *khora*, that more closely resembles both the "nothing" of Barthelme's short story, and the not-knowing of his essay.

Khora is a concept first identified in Plato's *Timaeus*, where it is described as a "mother," "nurse," "receptacle," or "imprint-bearer" (Derrida 93). It is an intermediary place where real forms are spaced out and given shape. Derrida strips it of this full significance, however, and argues that "there is *khora*; one can even ponder its *physis* and *dynamis* […] but what *there is*, there, is not" (96). Again, he writes "There is *khora* but *the khora* does not exist" (97); importantly, this means that *khora* is a ghostly space, a principle of spacing that is purely hauntological since it somehow "is" without being fully present. Thus, when in *Sauf le nom* Derrida speaks of the "oscillation" in negative theology between "the

Babelian place (event, […] history, revelation, eschato-teleology, messianism) and 'something' without thing, like an indeconstructible *Khora*," he is mapping the two directions in which negative theology can be pulled: either toward a project with a stable goal, like that of Dionysius or Eckhart, or toward something much more spectral, without real existence. "The *via negativa* would perhaps today," he writes, "be the passage of the idiom into the most common desert […] the chance of a promise and of an announcement in any case" (81). This "chance of a promise" is exceptionally contingent—far from a transcendent fullness, Derrida's negative theology only contains a chance, an expectancy, one that trails off into the distance. Negative theology, he writes in conclusion, is "a reserve of language, almost inexhaustible in so few words […] forever elliptical, taciturn, cryptic, obstinately withdrawing […] a literature for the desert or for exile. It holds desire in suspense, and always saying too much or too little, each time it leaves you without ever going away from you" (85). Read through Derrida's lens, then, negative theology is nothing more or less than a theology of ghosts: the attention we pay to that-which-is-coming or to that-which-haunts, without metaphysical existence.

The relationship to Barthelme's own meditations on the aesthetic project of postmodernism is certainly striking here. When Derrida writes that negative theology offers "the chance of a promise and of an announcement" (81), it is impossible to miss the connection with Barthelme's progression from the not-knowing of postmodern art, the productive sense of an unspeakable that must be wrestled into inadequate words, and the "meliorative aspect of literature" he invokes at the end of "Not-Knowing" (24). Furthermore, in the short story "Nothing: A Preliminary Account," by submitting to readers a list of negations

that could never be possible or complete, by driving language to its limit, finding hope within it, and then immediately retreating from that hope into more deferral and fruitless signification, Barthelme does indeed present a literature that passes into the desert, where there is no transcendent goal to be reached, but only the arid expectation that stems from continuously deferred arrival. As Barthelme puts it in the one positive predication in the entire story, "Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever)" (241). "The passage of the idiom into the most common desert" must be read as an embrace of the very postmodern style of signification: words do not simply contain meanings with a direct, one-to-one correspondence with the physical world, but ramify endlessly, suggesting other words, other hidden meanings, in a process that never really stops and that certainly cannot be contained by the limits of the individual text. As Barthelme himself puts it, "we do not mistake the words *the taste of chocolate* for the taste of chocolate itself, but neither do we miss the tease in *taste*, the shock in *chocolate*. Words have halos, patinas, overhangs, echoes" (*Not-Knowing* 21).

This haloing effect—the halo is, after all, a kind of mark that can separate the supernatural from the merely terrestrial, or more appropriately, hover over and slightly behind a figure that is in all other respects secular and endow it with an unmistakable sacred patina—is crucial to the interpretation of *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* that I will offer in the remainder of the chapter. Essentially, the Saussurean ramification of signifiers that Barthelme is noticing in individual words themselves also works on the macroscopic level of whole works of fiction: assembled in collage-like fashion, these novels are themselves "haloed"—or, to use the terms of this dissertation, "haunted." The halo, though, an image taken directly from Barthelme's meta-reflection on his fictive art, emphasizes the

sacred nature of this haunting; not just an ordinary ghost or after-image pervades these works, but the very organizing principle, theological or pseudo-theological, that preceded the fragmentation of the postmodern era (or that may succeed it). This may seem like nothing but an impoverishment, but in fact, it is also a way to talk about the sacred and even the theological, but without the political, cultural, and economic contamination that Barthelme finds in language (*Not-Knowing* 15-17), and which certainly can be found in religious and epistemological discourses as well. This deconstructive "halo" that surrounds Barthelme's words can be seen as the signature of his own brand of "weak theology," which as we saw in Chapter One is supremely concerned with renouncing the absolutist claims of older theologies and replacing them with a more human and even still more ghostly reinterpretation.

Jerome Klinkowitz identifies Barthelme's fiction at its most accomplished level with the silkscreen technique, which "expands the catalog of items and permits a photomechanical superimposition of elements so that they can bleed through, yielding images seen through one another rather than in simple juxtaposition" (8); this analogy is potent and will be useful to this and any discussion of Barthelme's novels. To this must be added, however, the halo effect. A halo, and even more so a mandorla, hangs *around* and *behind* the primary artistic subject (nearly always a more-or-less ordinary human body), as though issuing from a light source that is itself out of view, obscured by nothing less than the body to which it bestows the dignity and glory of the sacred. Barthelme's work—and, by extension, that of other postmodernists who share his concern with the productivity and "haloed" elusiveness of the sign—obscures the sacred, no doubt, but this does not mean that it cannot be surrounded by it,

just out of sight but nevertheless manifested clearly at the edges and margins of the text, the places where the text itself falls apart a bit, where it contradicts itself. It is precisely in these moments of death and irony that the halo shines through. One might think of the otherwise realist St. Stephen painted in the late nineteenth century by John Everett Millais: the martyr, surrounded by the naturalistic and obviously heavy rocks that have killed him, is clearly nothing more than a young man, nothing more than dead. However, the artist has incongruously placed, at the moment of death, a pencil-thin but almost neon-glowing halo around the martyr's head. This is what, in Barthelme's mature fiction, can be seen in the dialectic between postmodern despair and the sacred that haunts it: at the very moment that seems most hopeless for knowledge, understanding, and anything beyond nihilism, a pencil-thin halo appears, from God knows where, illuminating the edges of the text left open precisely for such a glow as this.

Snow White: a Fable in Crisis

Snow White, Donald Barthelme's first novel and second book, was published in 1967, just after his short story collection *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. Although it was written relatively early in his career, it is stylistically consistent with the remainder of his work; as John Barth has asked, "Is there really any 'early Donald Barthelme'? Like Mozart and Kafka, he seems to have been born full-grown" (qtd. in Hudgens 71). Although it is, as the title plainly suggests, a kind of retelling of the Snow White legend as filtered through the Brothers Grimm and the Walt Disney film, its primary mode of communication is certainly not the linear plot of the ordinary legend: instead, it is, among other

things, a "sustained collection of fragments" (McCaffery 154), a "one hundred-and-eighty-page verbal vaudeville show" and "a kind of theatrical collage" (Morace 167), a work that leaves the reader "in the throes of […] radical irony" (Nealon 135), and a "narration [that] moves with the deliberate pace of phenomenology" where characters "speak like Maurice Merleau-Ponty convening with the philosophy department at the Collège de France" (Klinkowitz 81, 83). Like all of Barthelme's work, and like postmodern fiction as a whole, it has come in for criticism as a narcissistic work primarily concerned with its own status as a work of language, or as an excessively democratized and leveling narrative that denies any possibility of aesthetic or moral discrimination—in short, a work that anaesthetizes value in culture, not satirizing the popular, but rendering it indistinguishable from the *belles-lettres*.[3]

These critiques are approximately what one would expect, but more interestingly, the novel itself anticipates them, and, if it does not exactly answer them, at least it acknowledges them as problems. In a particularly oft-quoted passage, one character notes that "per-capita production of trash in this country is up from 2.75 pounds per day in 1920 to 4.5 pounds per day in 1965"—this bureaucratic and statistical language, as far as can be imagined from the more mysterious and seductive style of the fairy tale, being entirely typical of the narrative—and concludes that

> we may very well soon reach a point where [trash is] 100 percent. Now at such a point, you will agree, the question turns from a question of disposing of this 'trash' to a question of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it's 100 percent, right? And there can no longer be any question of 'disposing' of it, because it's all there is,

[3] See, for instance, Christopher Lasch's critique of Barthelme in *The Culture of Narcissism* (e.g. 18, 96-7, 151-3), Gerald Graff in *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*, and Pearl K. Bell in "American Fiction: Forgetting the Ordinary Truths," from *Dissent*.

> and we will simply have to learn how to 'dig' it—that's slang, but peculiarly appropriate here. (103).

So central is this passage that Larry McCaffery even subtitles his study of *Snow White* "The Aesthetics of Trash," and the various challenges and questions put forth by critics of the novel can probably all be reduced to a disagreement over the status of the "trash" passage above: is it in fact a self-indictment, an admission that Barthelme is only creating linguistic "trash" with a limited and subjective entertainment value, or is the novel somehow satirizing the trash phenomenon, thereby maintaining an appropriate authorial distance capable of speaking relevantly on moral and/or aesthetic questions? This dilemma is important: Alan Wilde, for instance, sees the loss of objective distance from the satirized object as the fundamental difference between modern irony and its postmodern descendant. No longer is irony based on "the model of the fixed observer viewing an essentially ordered, three-dimensional world"; instead, the postmodern ironist "transforms depth into a void and the sensible world […] into a flattened-out map" (101). But if this is true, then it is difficult, if not impossible, to fend off the epistemological critiques made by authors like Lasch, Graff, and Bell, and if one is to read *Snow White*, this reader is condemned merely to float along in an undifferentiated sea of trash.

One way out of the dilemma is to refuse to make a choice between *Snow White* as pure trash phenomenon and satirical critique thereof; Jerome Klinkowitz, Stanley Trachtenberg, and Jeffrey Nealon all do something of this sort. Klinkowitz writes that the trick is reading books "with the knowledge that they are devoid of referential content"; this is "one way of making the work of fiction not be about something but be that something itself," or elevating the

written text to the status of an *object* which need not communicate morally, but can simply offer itself for appreciation (86-7). Trachtenberg writes, in the same vein, that Barthelme's texts exclude the basic characteristics of myth, noting that by exalting the "value of the story itself" as a textual artefact, he is able to recover "the surprise available in the linguistic variety of popular oral forms" (167). Detached thus from the world, the novel need not be construed as ancillary to another reality, nor as a thing that bears constant reference to reality; this way out is beguiling, but it is difficult to imagine *Snow White* detaching itself from the world in any way, crammed as it is with references to contemporary car makes and models, breakfast cereals, hair products, presidents, dialects, women's issues, and so on. Nealon, taking a somewhat different course, notes that in Barthelme's work "the wonder of the desire to know does not and should not reduce simply to knowledge"; therefore, the novel could take as its end "an attempt to *preserve* the wonder of ironic dissimulation […] to reenchant an otherwise wholly disenchanted world" (126-7). In other words, expecting *Snow White* to conform to traditional epistemological models of the aesthetic (which Nealon traces all the way to Aristotle) is simply missing the point: Barthelme means to show that trash is not just trash, that irony and a lack of knowledge ("not-knowing") have their own value, their own enchantment (a word that is redolent of the supernatural, not entirely unrelated to haunting or enhaloing). Even if the Weberian term "reenchantment" is not quite *le mot juste*, Nealon is actually on the right track. The disjunctive and democratized surface of *Snow White*'s narrative may have the look of a crisis, but this format does not preclude a meaningful interaction with the human condition; indeed, the very excessive crowding of the surface, the way it bears the signature of perhaps a few too

many spheres of discourse, is itself the precondition for the irruption of the sacred. To attempt this project any other way would be *less*, not more, aesthetically serious and epistemically meaningful.

Although *Snow White*'s narrative structure can rightly be described as a collage or a palimpsest, it is first of all explicitly formed around the received or traditional form of the fairy tale or fable. Indeed, the particular tale it chooses is not only pre-existing, but also among the most recognizable and frequently-retold stories in the European folkloristic canon; from its very title on, this novel enters a cloud of predecessors and models both literary and popular. It does not, and cannot, make a claim to originality of plot. Instead, its contributions must come from the interaction between the extant source narrative and whatever it can bring to dress it up, revive it, or modify it. Since fairy tales are traditional uses of language meant to explain the world, this source narrative should be taken as a kind of organizing principle haling from a time with greater epistemic certainty at its disposal, bearing a certain relationship to the religious and the theological, though not identical therewith. Mircea Eliade, for instance, notes that in the fairy tale, one finds "a camouflage of mythical motifs and characters" in which, "if the Gods no longer appear under their real names […] their outlines can still be distinguished" (200). Similarly, Wolfgang Meider, in a study of oral storytelling, argues that "traditional modes of expression such as fairy tales, legends, nursery rhymes, and proverbs […] have for a long time been part of a verbal folk art giving durability to our understanding of the world" (ix). David J. Hufford likewise associates folk belief, especially belief in the supernatural, with the unofficial passage of cultural authority across generations (18). In short, Barthelme has chosen not only a story that already exists in multiple retellings,

but also one from a genre that is vested with a certain privilege or authoritative status; while this status is clearly not equivalent to that of holy writ, folklore has its own pseudo-religious claim to authority. As Hufford notes, "Folk beliefs—unofficial beliefs—are those that develop and operate outside powerful social structures" such as, for example, churches (22). By governing the narrative of *Snow White* but also existing separately from and prior to it, the original Snow White story, with all of its traditional European moral baggage, "haunts" Barthelme's novel much as Christ "haunts" Flannery O'Connor's south.

The original story of Snow White, definitively anthologized by the Grimm brothers, has itself attracted a substantial interpretive corpus. Notable among these is Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's feminist account of the fairy tale in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which collapses (as do several early versions of the tale) the mother and evil stepmother of Snow White into one figure and associates the voice of the talking mirror with the King and, by extension, the patriarchy as a whole (36-9). Likewise, the authors interpret the Queen's three attempts at murdering Snow White as "poisonous or parodic use[s] of a distinctly female device" (39). Ultimately, like so much literature of the time, the Snow White fable presents no model for womanhood between the extreme poles of good and bad, of angel and whore (40). Cristina Bacchilega takes this point further, arguing that this obviously magical tale is indeed possessed of "*vraisemblance*," reflecting cultural norms and social realities accurately. The story of Snow White, she argues, "claims to tell us the truth about our world and about the nature of our fictions; at the same time, it prescriptively defines what this truth is by framing and reflecting it in ways that seem to be natural, but are culturally and narratively conventional" (6). Much as Eliade, Meider, and

Hufford argue, the original Snow White fairy tale is indeed part of a traditional corpus of stable, transmittable social knowledge in a vernacular form. What its more recent exponents have questioned is whether that social knowledge is progressive or regressive, and how it should be understood in light of feminist scholarship.

The implications of the Snow White fable for gender studies and feminist theory are by no means lost on Barthelme. As Bacchilega notes, Barthelme allows Snow White herself to be one of the narrators of his novel, thus freeing her from being nothing more than an object of the omniscient narrator's whims (7). The novel itself is very concerned with the changing roles of women across time, as is clear in a passage from the end of Part Two. Snow White has hung her hair—a fairly straightforward representation of her sexuality—from a window, having "just washed it too with golden Prell" (137). Already, we are reminded of the disjunction between the traditional cast of the narrative and its obsessive tendency to blend the fabulous and the quotidian anachronistically. Snow White is "experiencing a degree of anger at male domination of the physical world," eventually deciding to take her hair back inside and declare, "Women may not be serious, but at least they're not a damned fool!" (137). Eventually, she speaks at length, casting aspersions upon her own time and place:

> This time is the wrong time for me. I am in the wrong time. There is something wrong with all those people standing there, gaping and gawking. And with all those who did not come and at least *try* to climb up. To fill the role. And with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story. (137-8)

Far from being a vehicle by which cultural norms are transmitted, Barthelme's *Snow White* is a deconstruction of those old values *and* of the contemporary

world. The fragmentary nature of the narrative makes it function as a sort of dialogue between a comparatively stable, folkloristic and accretive interpretation of the world and the more perplexing realities of the postmodern world and the sexual revolution. The crisis precipitated by the collision of ancient and modern—and specifically, how the present can deal with the past—is eminently postmodern, and it also sets the stage for haunting, for traces of the past to show up in ways that are powerful if not entirely present.

"The Failure of Snow White's Arse": a Background of Semiotic Discontent

Much of the narrative of *Snow White* documents a profound sense of discontent or lack, something that ultimately seems to stem from the absence of expected plenary signifiers that (in the traditional conception) ought to give unmediated linguistic access to reality. The difficulties of interpreting, and of being fulfilled by, the contemporary situation are mirrored in prose that, while not necessarily difficult in the manner of the high modernists, is certainly experimental, and most saliently, is derived from a whole congeries of heterogeneous styles. As McCaffery notes, "*Snow White* presents us with a profusion of bits and pieces drawn from books and other literary storehouses such as folktales, movies, newspapers, advertisements, and scholarly journals"; these styles, he argues, do not amount to a "mimetic design," instead evoking "a sense of what it was like to be alive in America during the mid-1960s" (154). Any sense of story is "continually interrupted by digressions, catalogs, lists, and seemingly gratuitous trivia" (155). Klinkowitz says that "the narrative is presented in Barthelme's clipped, understated manner that isolates each element of semiotic syntax all the more." In short, what the novel offers is not a single,

coherent, and comprehensible picture, but rather a series of passages—indeed, though chapters are not numbered, the text is broken up typographically into numerous short "episodes"—in which the language used seems more important than the truth communicated.

Language, though, is always vulnerable to becoming repetitious and exhausted, as Barthelme himself acknowledges (*Not-Knowing* 15) and as Snow White similarly laments in her very first line of dialogue: "Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" (12). The seven dwarfs—who are really just men with ordinary names like Kevin and Bill—offer a few words to her, including "Injunctions!" and "Murder and create!" (the latter a direct quotation from T.S. Eliot) (12). Likewise, the text itself immediately offers the reader a few neologisms, as the dwarfs mention their boxes of breakfast cereal labeled "'Fear,' 'Chix,' and 'Rats'" (12). This is the first of many instances in which Barthelme will play on the dull language of brand-names and commodification, but with a slight twist—words are, time and again, wrested just slightly out of their usual context, provoking humor and a slight distancing, an alienation, that forces us to question McCaffery's assertion that the novel gives a sense of what it was like to be alive in the 1960s. Perhaps, but only through a very refracted, distorting lens (afflicted, one might presume, with a distinctly halo-like lens flare).

The sense of *ennui* that plagues Snow White at the beginning of the novel dogs the characters throughout. Well over halfway through the novel, at the beginning of part three, Snow White proclaims her intention to "deny [her]self to them. These delights. I maintain an esthetic distance" (141). Very soon, though, it occurs to her that this change might really not affect her for the better: "I don't

even know what such a policy will win me. I am not even sure I wish to implement it […] I have conflicting ideas. But the main theme that runs through my brain is that what is, is insufficient" (141). This sense of lack in the world provokes a nostalgia in Snow White for her life as it is described by the Grimms: "Perhaps the seven men should have left me in the forest. To perish there, when all the roots and berries and robins had been exhausted" (141-2). But she ultimately terminates this train of thought with a return to contemporaneity: "Another orange juice, with a little vodka in it this time" (142). This passage is notable not only for its pessimistic reversal of Alexander Pope's famous dictum "Whatever is, is right," but also for its direct allusion to the Snow White myth—perhaps surprisingly, such allusions do not occur very often in Barthelme's text. Here, it appears to represent for Snow White a simpler world; literally, she imagines herself living off the land (rather than drinking a rather more decadent and bourgeois beverage, the screwdriver, in the "contemporary" world), and more generally, she recalls living in the forest before the "men" found her, the dwarfs with whom she "cohabits […] in a mocksome travesty of approved behavior" (164). These men are the ones who precipitated her entry into the conditions of postmodern *ennui*; as with so many problems in the 1960s, new attitudes toward sexuality are always in the background.

The men, too, suffer from a related *ennui* and dissatisfaction, generally typified as sexual frustration; this feature pervades the narrative from beginning to end, and Barthelme's discussion of it acts as a concise fictional representation of the postmodern problem. The second "chapter" of the book begins with the information that "Bill is tired of Snow White now"; however, he "cannot tell her," and instead says "To have anyone touch him is unbearable" (10). Later, in

a well-known passage, the dwarf Dan argues philosophically about exactly what he and the other six dwarfs desire in Snow White:

> Now, what do we apprehend when we apprehend Snow White? We apprehend, first, two three-quarter-scale breasts floating toward us wrapped, typically, in a red towel. Or, if we are apprehending her from the other direction, we apprehend a beautiful snow-white arse floating away from us wrapped in a red towel. Now I ask you: What, in these two quite distinct apprehensions, is the constant? The factor that remains the same? Why, quite simply, the red towel […] the problem of Snow White has to do at its center with nothing else but *red towels*. (106-7).

Dan does not stop there; he has gone to the length of actually purchasing each dwarf a red towel. Chang, though, is not impressed with the world of phenomena, and will settle for nothing less than access to the *Ding an sich*: "I don't want a ratty old red towel," he protests. "*I want the beautiful snow-white arse itself!*" (107). Dan's argument is, of course, pure sophistry, and it works extremely well as parody of Scholastic logical discourse. But the conflict between Dan's sophistry and Chang's demand for the real substance, for that which really matters, is by no means only a parodic tableau. Indeed, one might go so far as to see the desire for the "beautiful snow-white arse itself" in those critics who reject postmodernism entirely as obfuscutory and misologistic: the "trash" aesthetic of *Snow White*, the novel, can be seen as only so many red towels that lead us to demand something far more satisfying and substantial: as Nealon so delightfully puts it, an "arse poetica" (129).

The request is denied by the end of the work, though: on the last page, as he does several times throughout the novel (to greater or lesser degrees of coherence), Barthelme sets forth a list of discrete, unpunctuated phrases in boldface type and all-caps. The final list is as follows:

THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE
REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE
APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE
SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY
THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF A NEW PRINCIPLE
HEIGH-HO (187)

The first term is important in light of the discontent of Chang: he desired the "snow-white arse," but by the end of the novel, it has "failed"—under the aesthetic and epistemological conditions of the novel, the *Ding an sich* simply cannot be accessed (as Jeffrey Nealon notes, this condition is best analogized to Blanchot's *disastre*, quite literally, the preclusion of humanity from the stars) (131). Immediately, in a way that recalls Milan Kundera's meditation on the proximity of "God" and "shit," the exalted and the base, the language converts itself from the slightly vulgar and anatomical to the religious: beginning with "revirginization," Snow White is granted, as her exit from the narrative tissue, a kind of Marian assumption, clearly glorious and dramatic, but an event which nevertheless leaves the dwarfs (here playing an extremely etiolated version of the twelve apostles, left behind on the earth after the miraculous ascent) no better off than before. Since, quite unlike the biblical apostles, they immediately "depart in search of a new principle," one gets the clear sense that the final pages of the novel are not to be read as a closed ending: this is merely one episode in the larger myth that should, perhaps, be called not *Snow White* but *The Dwarfs*, or better yet, have no name at all. They will continue, quite enthusiastically (with the obviously Disney-derived, industrious cry "Heigh-ho"), in their search for the *Ding an sich*, and there is little reason to believe that any "new principle" they might attach themselves to would be any more graspable or fulfilling. On the one hand, the ending suggests that "principles" can simply be prescinded from

the sensory realm (what else could be the result of a revirginization and ascent into heaven?); on the other, it is likely that contemporary men (who are, we are given to believe, inherently "dwarfish") are simply incapable of real fidelity to a "principle." As Clem notes when "no one responded to Snow White's hair initiative," in the contemporary situation, "Americans will not or cannot see themselves as princely. Even Paul, that most princely of our contemporaries, did not respond appropriately" (146-7).

The case of Paul is interesting, because he is manifestly incapable of fulfilling his role even in a fictional world where characters appear aware of their roles in a sense so mechanistic as to approach the Proppian. For example, Jane—the wicked-stepmother figure—at one point soliloquizes about her inflexible folkloristic role "in the rare-poison room of her mother's magnificent duplex apartment on a tree-lined street in a desirable location" (164). Regarding the "floor-to-ceiling Early American spice racks" full of poisons with names like "scumlock" and "hurtwort," she says "Now I must witch someone, for that is my role, and to flee one's role, as Gimbal tells us, is in the final analysis bootless. But the question is, what form shall my malice take, on this occasion […] whose interpersonal relations shall I poison?" (164). A few chapters later, seemingly out of nowhere, we are told that "Jane gave Snow White a vodka Gibson on the rocks"; this cocktail is, of course, poisoned, but as it turns out, Paul, the subject-supposed-to-be-princely, is the one who drinks the poison and dies with "green foam coming out of his face" (180-1). Earlier, as noted, he "did not respond appropriately" to "Snow White's hair initiative" (146-7); similarly, just after the passage in which Jane accepts her role as "witch," there is a kind of narrative

jump-cut to a parodic courtroom scene in which the leadership of Bill, one of the seven dwarfs, is questioned: "Bill," says the judge,

> you will begin. By telling the court in your own words how you first conceived and then supported this chimera, the illusion of your potential greatness […] despite tons of evidence of total incompetence, the most recent instance being your hurlment of two six-packs of Miller High Life, in a brown-paper bag, through the windscreen of a blue Volkswagen operated by I. Fondue and H. Maeght. Two utter and absolute strangers, so far as we know. (165)

The scene—as typical of Barthelme's polished and dislocating sense of humor as any—shows the difficulty that the characters, especially the male ones, have with fulfilling their own roles. Bill's answer to how he tried to act as a leader is equally hilarious and pathetic: "I tell myself things […] Bill you are the greatest. Bill you did that very nicely. Bill there is something about you. Bill you have style. Bill you are *macho*" (165). *Snow White* had the potential to be nothing more than an eminently Proppian re-cast of an old tale into a contemporary mold, in the manner of thousands of literary and cinematic "adaptations" of myths and legends. But by simultaneously drawing attention to the formalistic "functions" of different characters and then consciously frustrating them, Barthelme signals that he is changing the rules entirely to reflect his postmodern milieu: the satisfaction of playing a role, like the satisfaction of accessing the *Ding an sich*, is no longer possible.

Collage: the Surface and the Sacred

This uncomfortable proliferation of roles without traditional fulfillment, ultimately, is what governs the madcap stylistic collage through which *Snow White*'s narrative material is presented. *Pace* its determinative title, it is not an adaptation, and its glittering surface, complete with "filler" and "trash," must be seen as a confluence of not just the Snow White legend and contemporary

America, but rather of dozens, if not hundreds, of voices, myths, legends, fachs, functions, roles, and discourses (McCaffery 154). To call it anachronistic is to understate the case: it is more properly palimpsestic, all-embracing, and most of all, *fugal*.[4] The way in which juxtaposition becomes not only a fictional technique but the very basis for Barthelme's art here is already evident in several quoted passages above—as when, for example, Jane selects poison from a room in a "duplex"—but it is even clearer in other passages. Take, for example, the following passage from *Snow White*, narrated anonymously, which abruptly opens one of the book's unnumbered chapters:

> *The psychology of Snow White*: What does she hope for? "Someday my prince will come." By this Snow White means that she lives her own being as incomplete […] that is, she lives her own being as "not-with" (even though she is in some sense "with" the seven men, Bill, Kevin, Clem, Hubert, Henry, Edward and Dan). But the "not-with" is experienced as stronger, more real, at this particular instant in time, than the "being-with." (76)

This passage is a collage of at least five discourses: academic textbook, Disney song lyrics, faux-Heideggerian diction full of hyphenated words that sound like they have been rendered from the German, a banal series of proper names, and contemporary slang ("with" here colloquially indicating some species of formalized intimacy). Almost any passage, selected at random, would yield up an equivalent patchwork of discourses, if not more; the effect is so diffusing that Larry McCaffery says "Barthelme obviously feels that previous mythic structures no longer can serve the writer as useful framing devices"; rather, "the original mythic structures are mocked, parodied, and transformed (with the assistance of various elements accumulated from contemporary myths and clichés" (154-5). In

[4] I owe this relation of the fugue to art of great surface complexity primarily to Rowan Williams's volume *Grace and Necessity*; see especially pp. 135-8.

this sense, the work can be seen as a parody of modernist myth-making (McCaffery 155). It is more than just a parody, though; as we shall see, this democratizing narrative surface becomes an ideal (if unexpected) canvas on which to portray sacred excess.

Sometimes this principle operates at the level of single phrases or even words; when Snow White lets her hair down out of her window, one of the dwarfs refers to it as a "hair initiative," a phrase redolent of the rhetoric used to discuss and defend the Vietnam War (146-7; Klinkowitz 85). Thus, a dash of political radicalism and bureaucratic doublespeak is introduced into the mythic substructure. Similarly, Barthelme coins (or allows his characters to coin) various neologisms, as when the dwarf Edward makes a lengthy and malapropism-riddled speech about "the horsewife": "*The horsewife*! The very base-bone of the American plethora! […] *The horsewife!* Nut and numen of our intersubjectivity!" (105). This "horsewife" he describes as "sitting in her baff [another neologism], anointing her charms with liquid Cheer and powdered Joy" (105). This passage is particularly rich: first, the slight lexical alterations and intentional mishearings that make possible portmanteaux like "horsewife" are vivid examples of the kind of "haloing" of words that Barthelme takes care to point out in "Not-Knowing"; they demonstrate simultaneously the power and multivalence of words, and also their fragility. Second, the word "horsewife," which is clearly more degrading than (or used to reveal the degradation already latent in) the usual "housewife," snaps the narrative back into the middle of the twentieth century and its changing gender roles. Third, the capitalization of Cheer and Joy continues this trend by showing the way in which brand names (and, *a fortiori*, the commodification and corporatization they represent) have

pervaded contemporary America, changing the signification of certain signifiers and permanently changed the parameters in which happiness and existence are possible.

The passage that immediately follows the "horsewife" monologue above is, tellingly, the passage about red towels and the desire for the "snow-white arse itself" (106-7). Thus, the progression in this crucially important chapter is obvious: the dissolution of the signifier into enhaloed puns, neologisms, brand-names, and so on leads by necessity to a shift of attention from signified to signifier (e.g. the red towels), while leaving behind a frustrated nostalgia for a signified that is believed (perhaps falsely) to have been accessible in the past, or to be just barely out of reach, *presque vu* (and it is just barely out of reach—the men even manage to possess Snow White, sexually and domestically, for a short time, only to see her "revirginized" and assumed into heaven, thus shrouding her from the gaze of epistemology). The glittering and fugal surface of the novel bears witness not just to devaluation and a kind of pernicious democratization—indeed, there is a touch of elitism around those critics like Lasch who find Barthelme's narrative egalitarianism so offensive—but also to *incompleteness*: the incompleteness of the process of signification, familiar from Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, and a greater, epistemological incompleteness of which the former is a synechdochal emblem. In short, for Barthelme, it appears that a single, unitary authorial voice (or satirical perspective) would betray the reality of an incomplete world; the fictional account ought not have an ersatz completeness that does not reflect reality itself as we now understand it—textually and semiotically. Instead, just as our understanding is comprised of an ever-more dizzying array of input from a host of cultural sources, so must

narrative be structured as a kind of demented fugato. Only this plurality of voices can reflect reality without pretending to a secure, almost clinical grasp on signifiers to which it is not, in fact, entitled.

Still, bleeding through, haunting, and enhaloing this collage is always the spectral fairy tale itself: barely there, divested of its folkloristic authority and even its basic continuity, it is still the final cause of the narration; without it and its minimum contribution of characters and the sketchiest outlines of plot details, the collage would not exist. And since, following Eliade and Meider, folklore functions as a deposit of cultural authority and a didactic tool, encoding and enforcing common sense, inculcating virtues, and perpetuating traditional stereotypes of gender, class, and so on, it is easy to see at the heart of the novel a ghostly after-image of the cultural authority which was once possessed by artists and storytellers—or at least pretended to by them. However, Barthelme's characters are hopelessly cut off from this tradition; this could be seen as a disaster, and it is, by conservative critics like Lasch. However, Jeffrey T. Nealon, reading the text through the lens of Maurice Blanchot's notes on "disaster," positively re-evaluates the cut-off condition of Barthelme's literature. Citing Blanchot's thesis that dis-aster (literally, being precluded from the stars) means abandoning a fixed, heavenly identification of aesthetics and knowledge, he writes that "being cut off from the star means being cut off from a metaphoric or hypotactic necessity, cut off from the ability to metaphorize—and there by aestheticize and judge—our world in terms of the far-away star's perfection" (131). Disaster casts us into a world of "parataxis" and "metonymy" (131). Unlike the "Odyssean economy of assured returns," the postmodern disaster is

"a departure without return" (133)—much like the ambiguous journey in search of a "new principle" that concludes Snow White.

The "disaster," then, that critics of Barthelme's postmodern style find in the novel is not necessarily something that results in undifferentiated leveling and a mass of aesthetic trash. It can, instead, point to a new aesthetic and a new ethic; about this, Nealon is quite grand: he notes quite correctly that "in the starless horizon of the disaster, knowledge is not synonymous with appropriation as sight; it does not begin and end in the horizon of our faculties" (134). This is, of course, quite close to Barthelme's own thesis in "Not-Knowing"; despite the received wisdom that secularization and "disaster" *removes* mystery from the world through de-divinization and democratization, Barthelme (and Nealon) insist that the openness of not-knowing itself contains more mystery and enchantment than a guaranteed, even autocratic vantage point ever could. Nealon even goes so far as to associate the disaster with the divine:

> Knowledge, thinking, ethics, and aesthetics are […] a matter of *responding to the disaster, responding to something that strips us of privilege and possibility*. One might be tempted to call this disaster god, if one understood god as anything other than an anthropomorphic projection that offers concrete conditions of possibility. (134-5)

He thinks of the disaster as a variant of the "god of negative theology," so long as that god is not construed as "a negative foundation or the withdrawal of a former wholeness" (135). It must instead be construed as a "(non)founding 'event'" (135). There is indeed something to be made of the disaster as a call requiring a response, or as an unthinkable "beyond" toward which we are drawn in a state of subjectivity and humility (indeed, there is something of this quality to Derrida's understanding of the specter, discussed below). However,

Nealon arrives at his grandiose conclusion too quickly; the excess and mystery of the disaster certainly does *evoke* the sacred, but it seems premature to immediately equate any mystery with divinity. The path to this point, if it can be reached at all, is rather more tortuous.

To say that Barthelme's cluttered and chaotic textual surface is merely a reproduction of the experience of living in a postmodern world, and to leave it at that, is tempting. One can simply say that it is an emblem of its *Zeitgeist*, or a parodic indictment thereof; which option one takes is probably left up to personal preference and the relative dissatisfaction one feels with postwar American culture. But it is not only the novel's critics who feel some nagging dissatisfaction with the "disastrous" situation of *Snow White*; as shown above, this ennui is shared in the strongest terms by the novel's characters, too. This loose thread—like the other loose threads in boldface at the end of the novel—requires that a serious critique go beyond this binary choice. I will argue (with a caveat) that to understand the incompleteness, loose ends, and inherent disenchantment of *Snow White*, it is necessary (as Nealon does) to interrogate the meaning of the sacred in Barthelme's novel in a way that does not jump too quickly to conclusions. So first, a caveat: it would be easy to find in these characters and their perception of the world as "insufficient" mere exempla of C.S. Lewis's famous "argument from joy": the contention that dissatisfaction with the present world must mean that the subject is "made for another," just as physical desires for food or water or sex have their own respective sources of (alleged) satisfaction (*Mere Christianity* 120). This is close, but not quite sufficient, because the idea that a vacancy ought to be filled is too simple and direct to justify the crafting of a novel as complex and strange in its profusion of lacks as

this one. Similarly, the problems that Snow White and her attendant dwarfs experience are not just the problems of having no "new principle" to follow, but they are also problems of perception and of linguistic certainty: as Barthelme suggests in "Not-Knowing," language that is totally corrupted by politics and commodification can hardly be a useful conduit for truth (15-17). And finally, the "heaven" to which Snow White is assumed appears to be parodically invoked at best, and it is certainly not a locus with which the dwarfs can communicate. So it is not enough to say that the insertion of a typical monotheistic deity into this narrative would solve its problems; they go far deeper and pervade the consciousness more totally than the simple existence or nonexistence of the supernatural. A reading of *Snow White* must find meaning *through* the chaotic collage of the surface, not *in spite of* it.

For this purpose, I turn first to *Grace and Necessity*, a volume on the interrelation of art and religion by the then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. In a discussion of the art of Welsh painter and poet David Jones, Williams concerns himself "with what [Jones's] actual technique says about the perspective underlying the work […] the pencil lines, very delicate and exact, present superimposed layers of representation" (68). This technique is artistically separate from the "silkscreen" style that Jerome Klinkowitz identifies in Barthelme's mature fiction, but its production of a surface "superimposition" is ultimately similar (Klinkowitz 8). Interestingly, Klinkowitz finds this technique much more in *The Dead Father* than in *Snow White* (8); while he is right that it exists in the later novel, I find that *Snow White* is not really less adept at presenting a surface of superimposition and simultaneity. Indeed, its more contemporary setting, more intense focus on commodification, and weaker sense

of plot compared with *The Dead Father* arguably make it the archetypal novel of simultaneity and palimpsestic style. This style is very much an analogue to Jones's busy, surface-oriented pencil lines, in which Williams finds an "absolute refusal to be linear, so that further detail can be woven or posed in tension with it. This is how you show what is 'more than it is'" (68). If *Snow White* is open to something beyond its own "trash" and "filler," its own postmodern milieu, then it is in precisely this way: the surface clutter itself is always attempting to exceed the text in which it is inscribed and re-inscribed, precisely so that the novel will *not* be lodged in a numbingly contingent single context and, therefore, vulnerable to nihilistic readings.

I have argued that Barthelme's polystylism and "collage" or "layering" resists identification with a single mode of "depth," or a resolved authoritative perspective. This, too, is echoed in Williams's work on Jones. In a particularly telling passage, he relates the concept of surface to that of the Byzantine icon:

> This is how you paint 'excess': by the delicate superimposing of nets of visual material in a way that teases constantly by simultaneously refusing a third dimension and insisting that there is no way of reading the one surface at once. As in the Byzantine icon, visual depth gives way to the time taken to 'read' a surface: you cannot construct a single consistent illusion of depth as you look, and so you are obliged to trace and re-trace the intersecting linear patterns. (69)

This is precisely how the novels of Barthelme, and *Snow White* in particular, ought to be read—with the caveat that one ought not pursue the iconic analogy too relentlessly; it is probably overstating the case to find the sometimes obscene and parodic text of *Snow White* to be a sacramental signifier, but not to find in its dazzling surface a radical openness to a form of the sacred. Barthelme refuses depth, indeed, because in the contemporary context, depth of character or

perspective is all too complicit with the established violence of the political order (*Not-Knowing* 15-17). As Barthelme himself makes clear, there is value in "not-knowing"; we might add, in the context of *Snow White*, not "knowing with certainty." As Williams writes, the "world that art takes for granted […] is one in which perception is always incomplete" (135). If art were to strain too hard for completeness, it would lapse into "an insanity in which excess is denied and the world reduced to that series of problems which my mind currently happens to engage" (141). Despite a broad gap between their respective confidences in the actual, personal existence of the divine, Barthelme and Williams concur with regard to the perils of Enlightenment-style overconfidence and the necessity of art to resist such totalitarian applications of knowledge by remaining open systems that cannot be captured, doused in formaldehyde, pinned down, and displayed.

Indeed, one does not really need to posit an external sacred object or being to which *Snow White* refers—for instance, the parodic and inaccessible heaven into which Snow White is "assumed"—to find a vision of the sacred. As Williams argues, one should not seek a "real presence" behind and separate from the work of art, but rather "a presence *within* what is made that generates difference, self-questioning, in the perceiving subject" (150; emphasis author's). This is a high view of art—one in which it not only mirrors or points out, but indeed generates a sense of the sacred on its own (recall that the halo or mandorla emanates from a light source "behind" the haloed figure, such that it is impossible to tell whence it comes specifically because the sacred object is interposed in the line of sight). One might fear this is all a bit too high-romantic, but recall Barthelme's own admission in "Not-Knowing" that he sees art as

bearing a meliorative signature (24). Williams, too, invokes a kind of meliorative thesis when he notes the "hidden assumption in that idea that the world's reality is always asymptotically approaching its fullness by means of the response of the imagination" (154). The asymptote—a curve of a line that approaches, but never reaches, zero distance form its line—is a powerful emblem of the post-Saussurean concept of language and text. Since words are not stable in and of themselves, but instead are enhaloed by fluctuating valences of meaning, texts made of words are also inherently unstable, seeking a permanent meaning ("a new principle") but never truly finding it; inevitably, before the text closes, its referent absconds into an inaccessible heaven.

No matter; the incomplete and depthless collage of *Snow White* is indeed under the conditions of "disaster"—separation from the numinous heaven—but it is not therefore a disaster, a wreck, or a failure. As Williams writes, "awareness of a depth in the observable world beyond what is at any moment observable is close to what seems to be meant by 'the sacred' […] the element of gratuitous energy in the world's life […] corresponds to what we can call the sacred. Or rather, of course, what we call God" (154-5). Williams's point does not immediately seem relevant—talk of "depth" and "gratuitous energy" is not immediately analogous to the novel as cut off from its inspiratory sources that still languidly haunt it. But recall how Williams has come to this conclusion: through incompleteness, asymptotic approach to fullness, and the perception that the artwork cannot in and of itself sustain an intellectually honest depth or completeness on its own. Instead, by tracing and re-tracing surface lines, by bringing together discourses that would normally be quarantined from each other, it exceeds itself, rendering its contents restless, always attempting to slosh

out over their own borders. It leaves its ending radically open, inconclusive, and indicates an ongoing, relentless search for a presence that is not necessarily "really out there," but which is instead generated by the very incompleteness that the text is trying, yet always failing, to overcome. The overlapping lines of discourse in *Snow White* always refer to something else, and usually to more than one thing: as we have seen, it is full of political language, commercial jingles, mid-century philosophy and psychology, parodic juridical proceedings, and so on. Barthelme's wife Helen even suggests, rather quaintly, that the novel "explores [Barthelme's] own love life" and "largely deals with Don's own inner struggles with marriage and ultimately his decision to give up the notion of "romantic" love" (165). Much as one might be tempted to avoid seeking biographical correspondences in the text, in this case, its openness permits this contention to lie with all the others. Surmounting all, though never dominating it, is the ghostly image of the original fairy tale, providing minimal control but always receding at the advent of other tracings and contributions. This is leveling and democratization indeed, but not of the sort that destroys artistic merit or militates against aesthetic sensibility. By cutting off aesthetics from a deeply compromised position of elitism and false authority, it actually opens the field up to an excess of voices that cannot be rationalized from just one perspective, instead spilling over to an extent that it generates a frenzy of sacred inadequacy.

The Dead Father: *Introduction*

The Dead Father is Barthelme's second novel and a work he wrote almost exactly in the middle of his career (Klinkowitz 100). It is a different book from

Snow White in many ways, but perhaps the most obvious is that it has, in the words of its author, "a fairly strong narrative line" (*Not-Knowing* 270-1). The mainspring of its action can be found in the tension between its title, with its apparently terminal and unquestionable adjective "dead," and the actual events of the novel, in which the Dead Father is "dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead" (3). Already, the linguistic character of the novel's powerful ambivalence is clear—the Father is quite obviously not "dead" in the traditional sense, and yet, much in the manner of Schrödinger's cat, he is also simultaneously most certainly dead—and it shares this ambivalence with *Snow White*. This book has a narrower scope, however, focusing upon questions of paternity, life, and death; it is less given to linguistic punning (at least by Barthelme's very punning standards) and more concerned with the overarching state of fatherhood and exactly in what way a father can be dead, how his children can deal with him if he lives beyond his death, and how he can be buried. The Dead Father character has been treated, as we shall see, as an allegory for a whole host of persons and concepts, ranging from the obvious (God the Father, the Freudian superego) to the somewhat more attenuated (the novel, modernism, the heritage of James Joyce or Beckett). While this reading will definitely make much of Barthelme's insistent associations of the Dead Father with divinity, ultimately, it will resist one-to-one allegorization of the narrative, instead focusing on the productivity of the space between death and life, particularly when the entity caught between the two is not just an ordinary ghost or zombie, but an organizing principle, an authority, an *arche*.

The criticisms of this novel in particular, as distinct from Barthelme's work as a whole, are perhaps not entirely surprising; Robert Walsh cites a few,

such as Maureen Howard's contention that the novel is not only not realistic, but even worse, is "written at an extreme distance from life" (qtd. in Walsh 173). Other critics, such as Michael Mason, accuse Barthelme of insufficiently distinguishing himself from his experimental modernist forbears, such as Samuel Beckett (Walsh 173-4). Michael Zeitlin, though he hopes to rescue Barthelme from the characterization, points out a number of critics who have accused him of writing, in a sterile manner, about nothing other than writing itself (183-4). Among the less hostile critics, there are debates on two obvious fronts: what or whom the Dead Father might symbolize, and to what extent the novel should be read as an archetypical postmodern "text," commenting on the dissolution of or reclamation of language after the trauma done to the sign in the mid twentieth century. Klinkowitz and Jeanette McVicker are aligned in discovering a kind of war between the monologic style used by the male characters and the less constrained dialogue of the female ones; these interpretations highlight the novel's obvious feminist strand, arguing that the characters Julie and Emma are carving out a kind of linguist space free of patriarchal contamination (Klinkowitz 92-7; McVicker 364-5). Zeitlin, though, cautions against the potential dead end of treating the novel as merely a critique of the sign, and prefers instead a more robust Freudian reading (184-5).

Zeitlin is hardly the only critic to advance such a "strong," symbolic reading of the text; Robert Con Davis also takes a psychological approach, but rather than associating the Father with the superego in a simple one-to-one correspondence, he focuses on the dynamics of literary paternity and the novel as ancestor and controlling (but, in a sense, dead) father (186-8). Richard Todd interprets the Father allegorically not just as one concept, but a whole litany:

"God first of all […] the novel, Western Culture, Truth, Duty, Honor, Country" (qtd. in Walsh 174). Klinkowitz similarly suggests that the Father symbolizes a "voice" that persists in its influence long after its expiration; the Dead Father is "like the lingering presence of an aesthetically outdated modernism that bedevils so many of the characters in Barthelme's early stories and […] clings to influence by virtue of [its] voice" (89). Dead Fathers, he maintains, are "like outmoded ideas" (90). Ultimately, despite a few dissenting voices, Barthelme critics tend to find *The Dead Father* to be the fulfillment of his novelistic promise, even perhaps his best novel overall (Klinkowitz 93). This approbation has led to a greater focus of attention on what Barthelme is up to with this narrative, these characters, and this fascinating governing concept, and so none of the above perspectives entirely lacks value. Indeed, many of them are mutually compatible, especially since it is generally best to resist pegging such a vast and elaborated symbolic character as the Dead Father to just one allegorical referent. Still, this reading goes further than the others in pondering the exact nature of the "deadness" of the Dead Father; far from being a diverting linguistic paradox to explain away, or simply a hyperbolic way of saying "passé" or "outdated," the word "dead" in the novel's title is the single issue that must be thoroughly investigated to understand anything about the novel and its emphatically spiritual resonance.

The tone of *The Dead Father* contrasts with that of *Snow White*, even if the prose is immediately recognizable. In a 1975 interview with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman, Barthelme himself noted that the title of "*The Dead Father* is nonparody—it's not a parody of anything, it's a simple announcement of what the thing is" (*Not-Knowing* 234). *Snow White*, of course, has been criticized for overly parodic content, and *The Dead Father* also *contains* exceedingly obvious

parodies of various literary and vernacular styles. However, within just a few years of its publication, Barthelme was adamant that the title was not parodic in import. Similarly, where *Snow White* is a largely plotless novel, with only the faintest, most ghostly incursions of the original folk tale appearing in the narrative structure and not really giving a shape to the work, *The Dead Father* has an essentially forthright narrative arc: the Dead Father, who is never otherwise named but who dominates the text, is moved from "our city" (an vague and undefined locale) to "a large gap in the earth" where he is allegedly buried, although the only indication that burial proceedings have actually begun in the text is found in the final sentence fragment, the single word "bulldozers" (177).

However, it is difficult to agree with Barthelme that the title expresses "what the thing is" in a "simple" way: indeed, there is nothing simple about the deadness of the Dead Father. Not only the title, but also the first sentence of the book refer to this figure as "dead," but he is "still with us" on the first page (3), he speaks on the first page of the first official chapter, although he is still supine and apparently needs to be dragged (6-8), and he "leap[s] to his feet" and begins "slaying" within the same chapter (10-11). He is still speaking on the last page; as the bulldozers close in, he requests, in a rather Faustian modality, "one moment more" (177). The protraction of the time between death and burial—which is at the very least as long as the actual text of *The Dead Father*, but probably longer (he is already "dead" at the outset, and not quite buried at the end)—means that the novel can only be construed as a paradoxical interstitial region hovering between life and death, between death and burial, and most importantly, between the concepts of death (presumably the most stable state, and among the most stable of signifiers) and "undeath," "living death," or

"zombification"—that is to say, the same concept, but destabilized. No, this is not "simple," as Barthelme says, but it is also "nonparody," and this is important to remember: the Dead Father is not called "dead" just as some kind of book-length, oxymoronic (and perhaps just moronic) joke: there is irony here, but not just the irony of insisting on calling something what it is not, or of mistaken identity; neither is it just an inverse of the film *Weekend at Bernie's*, in which a corpse is manipulated to seem alive (to broadly comedic effect). Rather, the irony is intrinsic to the character; it is even possible to say that he undermines the condition required for irony (which depends, after all, on a minimally stable division between "the expected" and "the unexpected"), by resolutely occupying the impossible marginal space between life and death.

The Ghostly "Deadness" of the Dead Father

This marginal space is precisely what has been presented here as the locus of the spectral and the hauntological, and a reading of *The Dead Father* and its eponymous character that fails to take spectrality into account is likely to distort the novel's true message. It is important to work out the deadness of the Dead Father all the more so because it has received less attention than his fatherhood has. Insofar as he is paternal, he has been associated with a whole slew of allegorical meanings; as Jaye Berman has it, "he represents any system of authority," speaks with "the voice of religion" and "the voice of science," and "occup[ies …] a plethora of roles in the mythological pantheon, including the paternal deities of the Judeo-Christian, Greek, Norse, and Indian traditions" (19). He is also "the Freudian primal father against whom the sons rebel" (19). *Vis-à-vis* his status as a *Dead* Father, though, Berman only writes, "even a Dead Father

is dangerous. Given the inconclusive ending of the book, we can hardly rest assured that he's been buried after all" (20). The latter point is exceptionally important, since the ambiguity as to the Dead Father's fate is what allows him to exceed the boundaries of the text (somewhat in the fashion of Snow White, whose assumption into heaven takes her outside the strict limits of her eponymous novel). But considering the strongly paradoxical nature of the novel, this is a fairly brief exposition of the deadness of the Father. Similarly, Teresa Ebert has much to say about the "sign of the father" (75). *Contra* Barthelme himself, she calls the work a "parodic allegory" which ultimately "dislodges the signifier of the father form its routine of ordinary […] meanings," drawing attention to the father's "productivity but also its abuse, tyranny, violence, and destructiveness" (75-6). However, quite surprisingly, as to the deadness, she says only that the Father "may be dead and enfeebled, but he is not powerless" (81). Again, this is true, but it does not fully explain the motivation for Barthelme's extended paradox. Therefore, this particular discussion will focus on the second word of the title, but not to the exclusion of the first.

First of all, though, it is important to understand the figure of the Dead Father as a symbol, and to resist the temptation to force him to symbolize only one thing. Ebert's insistence that the novel is "a punful, parodic allegory of the struggle of sons with the burden and oppressive heritage that is patriarchy," for example, does not tell enough of the story (75). Barthelme notes of this book that "you [the reader] bring the allegory in," and of a reader who believed it "had to do with the fall of President Nixon," he asks, "how can it possibly be read that way?" (*Not-Knowing* 212). Despite the presence of many associative or metaphorical cues in *The Dead Father*, it is important to remember Barthelme's

strong resistance to allegorical readings. Furthermore, calling the work only a "struggle of sons" forces one to neglect the significant chunks of the novel that are devoted to *female* discourse (see, for instance, pp. 23-7). However, Barthelme did also tell Larry McCaffery in an interview that "having a father and being a father" was the "germinating idea" for the novel (*Not-Knowing* 270). Walsh argues that this "must be taken as rather disingenuous and insufficient grounds on its own for inferring authorial intention" (174); nevertheless, as is always the case with Barthelme's elusive work and his equally cryptic interviews, one must balance these factors against one another. *The Dead Father* certainly *is* the story of sons struggling with their fathers, both literal and literary. But it is also something more. Walsh, again, suggests that the Dead Father "makes his claim to authority" via a "monolithic epic narrative" that "is a parody of several heroic conventions" (180). This is rather subtler, and it reminds one of the manic quotation and parodic style of *Snow White*. Walsh too, though, focuses on the transfer of power from the Dead Father to Thomas, the son who leads the procession: "the shape of the novel," he writes, "is determined by Thomas's efforts to complete the transfer of power without in the process becoming the image of the Dead Father"—in short, being paternal without "taking on his monolithic perspective" (180).

Other critics have seized upon the Dead Father as a primarily linguistic force: a maker of speech-acts, a kind of modernist littérateur, or a symbol of language as a stable and unambiguously meaningful system. Jerome Klinkowitz, for example, notes that the Dead Father believes that "speaking is the same as making something happen," and draws attention to his use of the *ukase*, a "historic term for a czar's pronouncement […] that by its simple utterance

becomes law" (88). This attitude toward language is the beginning of "the father's tyranny," and his tyrannical attitude seems as irrelevant as "a monarchy in decay" (88-9). The result is that his being dead "is the immediate cause of the problem, for—like the lingering presence of an aesthetically outdated modernism […] the old man clings to influence by virtue of his voice, an anxiety of influence the subsequent generation is only now trying to overcome" (89). So the Dead Father's paternity is expressed through his empty and irrelevant *ukases*, and his death is commensurately read as a holdover aesthetic with which newer literary voices must contend—something Barthelme admits to having to do with the legacy of Beckett, among other modernists (*Not-Knowing* 227, 271). Similarly, in a Lacanian reading of the novel, Santiago Juan-Navarro sees the Dead Father as an incarnation of the *nom du père*, in which language becomes both an overwhelming proper name and a prohibition (*nom* and *non* being homophonous in French). So the "Father's Law" is "the order of Language," and the Dead Father is notable primarily for how he uses language. Indeed, he is little more than "a metaphor for language, or more specifically, for the cultural and linguistic structures preceding the child's entry into the Symbolic order" (90). He also considers the problem of literary descent, noting that the novel contains a struggle "between the avant-garde text—Thomas's aesthetics of the fragment—and its literary paternity, embodied by the Dead Father" (92).

However, it is not enough to associate the deadness of the Dead Father with "outdated modernism" alone, even if we admit that this is one level of meaning in an exceptionally polyvalent metaphor. By identifying a discourse—in this case, modernist fiction—that is caught in an interstitial space between full power and influence and complete senescence, Klinkowitz is getting closer than

many authors to the vast potential to be found in this "undead" character; Juan-Navarro is closer yet. Continuing to identify the Father with language, he notes that his "control" can never "be absolute because of the very instability of the linguistic sign" (90). The Dead Father is "imperfect," despite his tremendous power, leading Juan-Navarro to connect him with "Language as the presence of an absence" (90). This is, of the interpretations hitherto considered, the one that is most consonant with the tone of *The Dead Father*, although Juan-Navarro perhaps gives in too easily to the temptation to draw a one-to-one correspondence between Lacan's developmental psychology and the events and characters of the novel. This brief interpretive passage must be expanded upon if the novel's central paradox is to be understood correctly: the Dead Father, together with anything and everything he symbolizes, must be read as "dead but still with us"—as suspended between death and life, acting at once like a ghost (an entity that is dead but still active) and a zombie (a dead body that returns from the ground and is compelled to perform tasks). Neither analogy works perfectly, which is part of what makes Barthelme's text so elusive and interesting, but in any case, this character, by implicating the *body* in living-death and revenance, calls to mind the radical re-thinking of incarnation in weak theology that we have seen in Chapter One.[5]

The Dead Father as (almost) God the Father

The Dead Father certainly can and does represent a whole cluster of concepts, including, as we have seen, language-as-authority, the Lacanian *père*,

[5] It is also worth recalling Elizabeth McAlister's story of how Christ is at times considered to be "the first zonbi" by some Vodou practitioners; the undead body is not at all far from the peripheries of heterodox versions of Christianity (467-8).

the mythological order, the style and substance of literary forbears, and so on. What ties these together, though, is their onto-theological character: as Berman writes, "he represents any system of authority—God, king, father" (19). While he should not be confused directly with "God the Father," as in Christianity (indeed, the narrator, while describing him on the novel's first page, exclaims "*good Christ*" and "*thank God for that*," thus distinguishing his own subject from the deity *per se*), he certainly speaks with "the voice of religion" (Berman 19), and characters react to him as a religious figure, even if the "worship" is always colored by parody. This parody constantly reminds us that the Dead Father is caught precisely in the spectral religious space between legitimacy and weakness. Textual evidence for this is strong: at the very beginning of the story, his mechanical left leg is described as "*working ceaselessly night and day* […] *for the good of all*" (4). It also has

> *facilities for confession, small booths with sliding doors, people are noticeably freer in confessing to the Dead Father than to any priest, of course! he's dead. The confessions are taped, scrambled, recomposed, dramatized, and then appear in the city's theaters.* (4)

This is an extremely grotesque and quite funny description of religion, of course, but (as usual with Barthelme) it has a serious import: after all, this institutionalized and mechanized system of "confession" bears a strong resemblance to Foucault's description of the evolution of confession in religion, a practice that becomes more personalized in the Renaissance until it is finally given over entirely to clinical diagnosis and psychoanalysis (*The History of Sexuality* 58-65). The Dead Father is not God, but he certainly reflects in his very hybridity the status of a religion caught between plenary authority and succession by another system—within the limits of his body, the confessional

becomes mechanized, and then turns into a form of entertainment. And, while the time period of the novel is not specified (nor is it specifiable), that this suspension should still be worth discussing in the seventies is perhaps surprising: after all, the transition from confessional to analyst's couch is believed (naïvely, as Foucault himself would certainly agree) to have happened in the nineteenth century. In reality, the entire idea of secularization, of the baton-toss from religion to scientific discourse, has never really been completed, and postmodernism shows, if it shows anything, that the process may be entirely indefinite—something that never *can* be completed.

The language used by, and to describe, the Dead Father is also eminently religious, as Berman has pointed out (19). It is also jarring and humorous, and often bursts onto the scene with the collage-like abruptness familiar from *Snow White*'s multi-layered narrative. For instance, in chapter one, Julie (one of the only two female characters in the novel) says that the Dead Father is "excluded" because he "is an old fart […] old farts don't get much" (10). In response, the Father storms off (his first time to leave his recumbent posture) and begins

> slaying, in a grove of music and musicians. First he slew a harpist and then a performer upon the serpent and also a banger upon the rattle and also a blower of the Persian trumpet and one upon the Indian trumpet and one upon the Hebrew trumpet and one upon the Roman trumpet and one upon the Chinese trumpet of copper-covered wood. (11)

The list, continuing in this unmistakable parody of the Authorized Version of the English bible, grows more extravagant and contemporary (including "sundry kettledrummers," "a triangulist and two-score finger cymbal clinkers and a xylophone artist," "a player of the small semantron who fell with his iron hammer still in his hand" and so on), but never deviates from its casual

description of slaughter that is clearly redolent of the Hebrew Bible. This King James send-up reaches its apex in the "Manual for Sons" section of the novel, which is separate from the narrative and ostensibly the content of a volume "translated from English […] into English" and given to Julie and Thomas by a certain Peter Scatterpatter (whose name itself puns on, and perhaps suggests an antipathy toward, the Latin *pater* of the *Pater Noster* and other classic liturgical expressions) (108-9). This manual contains a section simply labeled "a tongue-lashing," totally unattributed (although Berman argues it is the voice of the Dead Father himself), which proceeds as follows:

> "Whosoever hath within himself the deceivableness of unrighteousness and hath pleasure in unrighteousness and walketh disorderly and hath turned aside into vain jangling and hath become a manstealer and liar and perjured person […] shall be filled with drunkenness and sorrow like a pot whose scum is therein and whose scum hath not gone out of it and under which the pile for the fire is […] your scum shall be in the fire and I will take away the desire of thine eyes. Remember ye not that when I was yet with you I told you these things?" (135)

If anything, this is an even more devastating send-up of the catalogues of sins in the Pauline epistles, of the prophetic language of the Hebrew bible, and the words of Christ (at the end). The implication is clear: the bible (a book believed to have special authority and a guaranteed plenary truth-content) in a translation commissioned by a King, becomes the voice and chief warrant of paternity. The language sounds parodic and humorous when divorced from its context, but the "sample voices" of fathers show the same severity and senseless anger with the same ventriloquistic panache, only in a more contemporary idiom: "C'mon kid, I'll let you hold the level. And this time I want you to hold the fucking thing straight. I want you to hold it straight. It ain't difficult, any idiot can do it. A nigger can do it […] Flee from the wrath to come, boy, that's what I always say"

(125). Religious fanaticism and destructive anger seem to be the principal characteristic of fathers, on this evidence.

Fathers come across exceptionally poorly in the "Manual for Sons," and it should not be considered Barthelme's final word on the topic. Indeed, Julie's reaction is that it "seems a little harsh," and when Thomas tells her that its harshness can only be evaluated based "on the experience of the individual making the judgment," she says "I hate relativists" and throws the book into the fire (145-6). Despite his tendency to go on "slaying" rampages, the Dead Father actually seems more pitiful and petty than angry and destructive most of the time, and while characters do divest him of various rights and emblems of power as the narrative goes on, they are not entirely cruel to him. For instance, in chapter nineteen, Julie again makes the mistake of withholding information from him, in response to which he "flang himself to the ground" and says "But I should have everything! me! I! Myself! I am the Father! Mine! Always was and always will be! From whom all blessings flow! To whom all blessings flow! Forever and ever and ever and ever! Amen! Beatissime Pater!" (156). When Yahweh proclaims "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*" to Moses, the effect is of awesome and unique power: the name is itself the act, the overwhelming fact of existence that is not divided from the proclamation thereof.[6] Barthelme's version, with its exclamation marks and its inclusion of religiose and liturgical bric-a-brac not quite properly quoted, is more than a few steps down from the former heights the paternal, monotheistic deity occupied. Thomas takes a kind of pity on him, beginning to sing: "For *thine*, […] is the kingdom, and the power, and the glo-ree,

[6] It bears noting, however, that *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* can also be translated with an imperfective, ongoing sense—"I will be whom I will be"—casting doubt on the fact that divine power has ever been seen as pure metaphysical "presence."

for-EVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVV-er …" (157). "That is one I like," the Dead Father comments, and Thomas takes advantage of the Dead Father's placated mood to extract his "passport" from him (157-8). Thomas's kindness is thus not entirely straightforward: indeed, even though he sings a version of the *Pater Noster* to mollify the Dead Father's sense of diminishing divinity, Barthelme's orthography makes it clear that this is the religiose and overblown setting by Engelbert Humperdinck. The whole scene is characterized by a tone of pathos and loss, despite being extremely funny. The Dead Father is certainly in decline, and he is certainly nasty and narcissistic, but nobody seems especially grateful that he is heading toward his grave.

"O Grave, Where is Thy Victory?" Schrödinger's Tomb and Weak Theology

And indeed, what sort of grave is it toward which the Dead Father is dragged? Will it be his final resting place? Will the Dead Father really be dead in the ordinary sense, as the people of his town, "with tears in [their] eyes," wanted him to be from the prologue on (5)? Surely the people wish that he will go to the grave because of the negative, oppressive, and excessively "patriarchal" characteristics of fathers that are revealed time and again in the greatest possible detail in "A Manual For Sons," and if indeed the Dead Father's real, not just nominal, death can be guaranteed, then the novel would really say little more than the secular and political truisms about religion that have become commonplace throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: that traditional religion is an opiate that relies on threats and illusory rewards, that it allies itself all too regularly with statist and colonialist repression, and that the only way to put an end to the tears of the people is via the death of God. However, we have

already seen in Chapter One that, according to scholars like Pericles Lewis, this idea of a neat progression from religion to secularism has not been neat at all, and may not even be progressing (24-5). If, on the other hand, the Dead Father's burial *cannot* be guaranteed, and if the grave is not really an end of the symbolic father figure, then something else entirely is going on. The novel looks more like a postmodern passion play, without any of the devotion but with the same progression through rejection, death, and burial. In both cases, the incarnation makes possible the "death of God," but as this story is spectral and contemporary, that death looks more like the human and non-triumphalist death described in weak theology. An argument can be made for both interpretations, and while I will consider the latter at length, the fact remains that the novel leaves us not with the empty tomb, but with a Schrödinger's tomb: both open and closed, both empty and full. This vacillation is eminently modern, and thoroughly spectral.

I am certainly not alone in considering the possibility that the conclusion, with its burial scene, is not all that it seems to be. Jaye Berman, for one, is doubtful about the completeness of the ending; "we can hardly rest assured that he's been buried after all" by the time the narrative concludes, he argues (20). What we do know is that Thomas and his crew take the Dead Father to a "large excavation," which the Father first believes to be the beginning of a foundation: "What is to be builded here?" he asks; "Nothing" is Thomas's reply (174). When the Father asks if they will "bury [him] alive," Thomas's inevitable answer is "You're not alive […] remember?" "It's a hard thing to remember," the Dead Father says (175). Despite his dead-giveaway of a name, at this point in the text, the reader is inclined to agree with the Father: it is hard to remember his status,

because he contradicts it so regularly. He is still very much lucid when placed in the grave, telling Julie and Thomas that he "knew all along" what his fate was to be. Still, his body is described as a "carcass," a word without a hint of life, or even respect (176). Thomas calls for "bulldozers," but as mentioned above, the moment of final burial is not located within the text (177). Even beyond this ambiguity—Barthelme's readers are not privileged to know the aftermath of the burial, whether Thomas and crew are able to keep the Father underground—there is a more intrinsic ambiguity in the text, that of death and life. There is no way to think about the Dead Father, who bears the qualities of both death and life simultaneously, other than as a ghost or zombie (an animated corpse); these are the only cultural archetypes available to describe an entity that is dead but still walks the earth and can speak. Thus, the burial, ambiguous as it is, cannot be taken as particularly significant: after all, burial is not only *not* an endpoint for ghosts and zombies, it is indeed a *terminus a quo*: burial is only the beginning of a ghost story.

This paradoxical situation, in which the attempt to interpolate the physical earth between the living and the dead is thwarted and the finality of burial becomes the genesis of a new, haunted narrative, is recognized by Jacques Derrida in his writing about *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx*: "every revenant," he writes, "seems here to come from and return to the *earth*, to come from it as from a buried clandestinity (humus and mold, tomb and subterranean prison), to return to it as to the lowest, toward the humble, humid, humiliated" (116-17). The Dead Father certainly is being humiliated here, and his dialogue betrays a struggle against this debasement, or at the very least, an attempt to accept it with a degree of dignity. And yet, the debasement is not at all identical to a real,

"final" death or disappearance. As Derrida continues, a specter is "always still to come and is distinguished […] from every living present understood as plenitude of a presence-to-itself" (123). Indeed, those who deny that a ghost is finally gone once and for all "do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back" (123). A specter "was there without being there" (125). This language is extremely close to the "dead, but still with us" of *The Dead Father*'s introductory chapter (3), and it leads toward a reconstruction of the "real," deferred, unstated finale of the novel: somehow, through the debasement of interment, the paradoxically posthumous and emphatically non-plenary existence of the Dead Father will continue and return. It is the nature of the undead that we cannot expect them to remain buried, or hope that burial and forgetfulness could possibly deliver the characters, or society at large, of their influence. It is nothing more than a contingent interruption of an ongoing and inexorable process; Derrida calls the immortality of the ghost "the undeniable itself," and even on a semantic and structural level, this makes sense: if the Dead Father is "dead, but still with us" before burial, why would burial change anything?[7]

The text of *The Dead Father*, though, will not allow an excessively optimistic reading of the character of the Father, and it is important not to lose sight of his nastiness, his pettiness, and the real antipathy with which the book

[7] Slavoj Žižek also meditates on the same issue in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, noting that under Freud's idea that "primordial" patricide is followed by the return, "more powerful than ever," of the "'virtual' symbolic authority" (99). This leads to a state where people are "still alive" even though "symbolically […] dead" and vice versa (99-100). Freudian attempts to deal with paternity and superego thus directly implicate "the 'living dead,'" or "those who are not dead, although they are no longer alive, and continue to haunt us" (100). And most importantly of all, he concludes that "the prohibition on killing" actually tells us not to kill "*the dead*," because burial rites, meant to "prevent [the dead] from returning to haunt you," only work on the living (100).

ridicules him and makes his burial (futile though it may be) the culmination of the entire narrative. Rather, his character—and his demise—can best be read through a careful attention to Derrida's assertion that specters move "toward the humble, humid, humiliated" (117). Considering the long, bloody, and repressive history of both the patriarchy and monotheistic faiths, many philosophers and theologians have concluded that a conceptual debasement and weakening of the divine is not necessarily anything to lament. In *The Weakness of God*, for instance, John D. Caputo sets forth a conception of God as a contingent "event," and the resulting weak "theology of the event" as one that "lacks corpulent articles of faith, a national or international headquarters, a well-fed college of cardinals to keep it on the straight and narrow, or even a decent hymnal" (7). One may think here of Thomas's kitschy performance of the Humperdinck version of the Our Father, used to placate the Dead Father's ill humor: this sort of organized, hierarchical, and (above all) patriarchal religion is what Thomas, Julie, and the rest of the Dead Father's burial squad seek to put behind them.

Caputo goes even further in an essay called "Spectral Hermeneutics," in which he offers a concise explication of his theology of the event. An event, he writes, is "something going on *in* what happens […] it is not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what is present" (*After the Death of God* 47). The event, which he comes to associate with God (among other things), is "not deconstructible," but not because it is "eternally true like a Platonic *eidos*; far from being eternally true or present, events are never present, never finished or formed, realized or constructed" (48). And, perhaps most importantly of all, events are yet to come; a theology of the event gives affirmation to "*what is coming*, to what stirs within things […] to what is *promised* by them" (50). Thus,

events and specters are inextricably caught up with one another, because ghosts are not just figments or memories of the past, but also revenants, entities that *return* to haunt.[8] Therefore, "in postmodern theology we believe in ghosts, very holy if slightly pale ghosts called events, which are the stuff of what I am calling here a spectral hermeneutics […] we replace *amor fati*, which is one of those big stories that threatens to quash the fragile absolute of the event, with an *amor venturi*, a love or affirmation of what is to come" (50-1). But if we are to avoid confusing the event with the "big stories"—viz., with the *grands récits* that postmodernism so deeply distrusts, and that Barthelme likewise excoriates for their imperialization of literature with politics and commercialism—then we must acknowledge that "the event that shocks the world is not a strong but a weak force" (62). Thus, God cannot be seen as "a cosmic force, a worldly power […] who occasionally intervenes here and there with strategic course corrections, a tsunami averted here, a cancerous tumor there" (65). This is exactly the sort of God that the Dead Father might typify or imitate: an inveterate intervener, sometimes quasi-pagan, as when he transforms himself "into a haircut" in order to seduce a woman and father upon her "the poker chip, the cash register, the juice extractor, the kazoo," and a host of other absurd banalities (35-6). He also complains of being responsible for "the management of the hussars, maintenance

[8] Derrida's argument about ghosts and futurity is important to *Specters of Marx* and, needless to say, quite complex. He notes, first of all, the way that *Hamlet* begins with anticipation of the ghost: "everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the *waiting* for this apparition […] the *revenant* is going to come" (2). Later, he notes that the characteristic appearance of a ghost is "repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time* [… thus] the logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being […] It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves" (10). So the action of waiting for an event ("non-knowledge" and "non-advent") involves a focus upon what will "always remain to come. And secret"—in short, the event is perpetually deferred, as is linguistic presence in *différance*. So our speech is always "deferring just *so as to* affirm, to affirm *justly* […] the coming of the event, its future-to-come itself" (19).

of public order, keeping the zip codes straight, keeping the fug out of the gutters," etc. (17).

This interventionist God, the "*deus omnipotens* of classical theology," is the God that must die, according to Caputo (66). The death of God should not be just a power-struggle or dethroning, nor should it be a purely "mystical death" that simply reaffirms the same God all over again; rather, the metaphysical God dies "in order to nourish the life of the event that stirs within the name of God, which is the stuff of our rebirth" (66-7). If this concept of God's death is to have any meaning, it is as "an ongoing and never finished project of deconstructing the God of ontotheologic, which is for me above all the God of sovereign power […] the work of burning off the old metaphysics of omnipotence, which can never cease, must always be a way to fan the flame or build the fire of the event that transpires in the name of God" (67). Caputo is grandiose here, as often, but there is no denying the applicability of this program to the text of *The Dead Father*. For instance, the way in which Thomas systematically divests the Father of his sword, keys, passport, etc., all while flattering him and singing him pietistic hymns that border on pure sarcasm, charts a systematic demystification and disenfranchising of the interventionist and patriarchal divine. The Father is ultimately set in his grave quite without the baubles and emblems of terrestrial power, which sets the stage for a more vacated and empty expectation of return: it is not enough to have the return be self-identical to the first incarnation. As Derrida reminds us, the only thing that "remains irreducible to any deconstruction […] is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise […] a messianism without religion, even a messianic, without messianism, an idea of justice" (*Specters* 74).

Indeed, the strongest warrant possible for this weak-theological reading comes from the end of the "Manual for Sons," in which the author says that

> Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. The enormities go with the job, but close study will allow you to perform the job less well than it has previously been done […] *Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least "turned down" in this generation*—by the combined efforts of all of us together. (145)

This passage, read in tandem with the weak theologians, leads one to believe that Peter Scatterpatter—the one who scatters and diffuses the paternal power—might be the true hero of this novel. Burial scene notwithstanding, Barthelme is surely aware of the tendency of ghosts, zombies, vampires, and other undead entities to treat burial as a light affliction. Surely, he is not as confident as his characters that the Dead Father is dead *and* gone. Instead, it is scattering and diffraction that become the proper metaphor for dealing with the maddening revenance and refusal of death so strongly evinced by patriarchal, monotheistic religion; the work of deconstruction is (of course) always deferred, but it is nevertheless possible. As Gianni Vattimo has argues, Christianity itself is "moving toward secularization, which may also be called nihilism […] Christianity sets in motion the processes of secularization" (*After the Death of God* 39-41). However, the "limit to secularization, hence a guide to desacralization [is] charity" (41). The progression is certainly downward, into weakness, into the earth, but the *terminus a quo* need not be pure nihilism. There is, both in Scatterpatter's anti-paternal polemic and in Caputo's and Vattimo's weak theologies, a kind of provisional hope and expectation in the midst of divine death, interment, and disenchantment.

Of course, the focus thus far on paternity and "scattering" of paternal power has been entirely androcentric: Scatterpatter's work is called "A Manual for Sons," and elsewhere in the passage, he writes that "the important thing about daughter-fathers is that, as fathers, they don't count […] Fathers of daughters see themselves as *hors concours* in the great exhibition, and this is a great relief" (134). After this dismissal, the rest of the advice is only directed toward sons and their effort to "turn down" paternity (145). But there *are* women in this book, and they do speak at great length—long enough to pass the so-called Bechdel Test with flying colors, and long enough that their contributions cannot be ignored. Teresa Ebert does almost ignore them, or rather, argues that Barthelme deploys his female characters (Julie and Emma) in a critique that "does not in any way disrupt the basic economy of difference in patriarchy. Instead he reproduces the gender differences on which the patriarchal order depends" (82). She particularly fixes upon the way in which Julie's pubic hair is revealed to be the "golden fleece" that Thomas has used to lure the Dead Father along—thus making her nothing more than a male desideratum (Ebert 82; *The Dead Father* 174-5). There is no question that the book is full of scenes of awkward sex and propositions (10, 34, 97, 159-61), ogling (30-1), and consumption of pornography (159).

All of this can be read as just straightforward male attitudes toward sexuality, or perhaps as presentations of those attitudes for ridicule. Either way, the narrative of *The Dead Father* obsessively revolves around the father-son axis. Even so, a closer look at the long and generally unattributed dialogues between Julie and Emma show a more promising view of women than Ebert is willing to admit. As Klinkowitz has it, "Feminism […] is as much a counterforce to Dead

Fatherhood as anything a son might construe—and is, as we shall see, more effective in establishing itself as an alternative" (93). The nascent female discourse recorded here is able to subvert and interrupt androcentric narrative thrust, in a motion parallel and perhaps identical to the motion of deconstruction discussed below. Most importantly, it is impossible to imagine a weak theology being exclusively patriarchal in the mode of older theologies and societies. So, while *Snow White* used the feminism of the 1960s primarily as a contrast with the traditionalism of fairy tales, *The Dead Father* deliberately carves out exclusively female spaces in order to show the changing ratio of power from patriarchy (in traditional theology) to egalitarianism (in weak theology, which might finally be able to fulfill the Pauline promise that "there is neither male nor female").

Much of the dialogue between Julie and Emma is difficult to follow – perhaps mimetically appropriate in a book so overwhelmed by male perspective. There is a kind of Dadaist or Steinian rhythm to the discourses, which are presented without quotation marks or attribution (one must reconstruct exactly who is speaking in which line). For example:

> Whose little girl are you?
> I get by, I get by.
> Time to go.
> Hoping this will reach you at a favorable moment. (23)

As in the Dead Father's final speech near the end of the novel, there are flashes of perfect, often critical and anti-patriarchal lucidity in these dialogues that emerge all the more sharply from the chaotic non-sequiturs surrounding them: "'Ready again to send his Son to die for us.' 'Like sending a hired substitute to the war'" (62). They talk about virtually everything—about their problems with men, certainly, but they never limit themselves to this—offering sharp critiques, as

above, of Christianity, and showing broad knowledge of "current" events (insofar as there is a contemporary time frame in *The Dead Father*). These discussions recur frequently, always interrupting the propulsive flow of the narrative. Barthelme, interviewed by Larry McCaffery, notes that the surrounding structure makes them possible: "there are four or five passages in which the two principal women talk to each other, or talk *against* each other, or over each other's heads, or between each other's legs—passages which were possible because there is a fairly strong narrative line surrounding them" (*Not-Knowing* 270-1). These remarks sound a bit prurient and dismissive, but the reverse is also true: the women's dialogues are not just supported by the (masculine?) narrative line; they also subvert it and push it aside; Klinkowitz notes that the "form and subject" of the dialogues "depart from the narrative, as if making a statement that words can be used another way and that there is more to life (and Barthelme's novel) than just trudging forward" (94-5). Whereas the Father is obsessed less with speech than with the fact that *he* produces the speech (51), the women seem unconcerned with attribution, flowing into an almost indistinguishable (yet still distinct) set of voices where content and rhythm are prized over possession of, and control over, the language itself.

One does not want to press Barthelme too far into a feminism that he might not readily accept, but it is arresting to hear Mary Daly, in her classic work of feminist theology *Beyond God the Father*, write that "Viragos/Gorgons [i.e. liberated women who have reclaimed negative epithets] expel the phallic presence of absence—that glut of non-sense which expands meaninglessly, suffocating meaning" (xxiii). It would be hard to find a more precise description of the Dead Father and his speech: as dead/alive, he is a "presence of absence,"

and his speeches are indeed reams of meaningless (but emphatically *his*) rhetoric. Women's speech can, at least potentially, vitiate this rhetoric and model an alternate route for language. And indeed, both women do refuse the attentions of the Dead Father throughout the novel, and remain present at his burial. Likewise, in "Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous advises her fellow women writers to "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars—black or gold—nonassessed values that will change the rules of the old game" (880). The father-son axis as described in *The Dead Father*, with its fixation on hierarchy, control, and a system of punishment and reward, is worlds away from "nonassessed values," and while "naphtha" might be a bit excessive to describe the dialogues of Julie and Emma, they certainly are erudite, sarcastic, and full of bitterness against male domination. Best of all, they are non-linear; they do not even *attempt* linear logic, as the Dead Father will (and fail to attain): they can, as Cixous writes, "start scoring their feats in written and oral language […] write and thus […] forge for herself the antilogos weapon" (880). To work against the *logos* is to work against paternity, both in reality and in language (for is not "logocentrism" deconstruction's public enemy number one, particularly when forged into the portmanteau "phallogocentrism"?).

Thus, in that both are concerned with scattering and disenchantment of the patriarchal order, one can discern an alliance between the female dialogue and the operation of *différance* and linguistic trickery in *The Dead Father* (and, by extension, Barthelme's corpus of work as a whole). There is also an alliance between feminism and the weak, hauntological theologies, so long as they are

understood in a positive and not just destructive light. Deconstruction and *différance* have certainly been called nihilistic schools; for instance, Mark Taylor calls deconstruction "a hermeneutic of the death of God" (qtd. in *After the Death of God* 67). While this is true to an extent—our deconstructive novel here does indeed concern itself with the death of God—there is another side to deconstruction, as Derrida himself acknowledged in his later career. This revision, or expansion, of the concept of *différance* meshes well with the fact that *The Dead Father* is actually more about undeath and spectrality than about death *per se*; it also echoes what Barthelme himself says about language (even though he overtly expresses distaste for deconstruction). In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida makes very explicit the anti-nihilism that is at the heart of his earlier concepts:

> differ*a*nce, if it remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come that comes to open it, does not mean only (as some people have too often believed and so naively) deferral, lateness, delay, postponement. In the incoercible differ*a*nce the here-now unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely [*justement*], and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of an instant, in *imminence and in urgency*: […] It thus responds without delay to the demand of justice. The latter by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional. (37)

This concept—that specters, *différance*, and justice form a natural triad, or rather imply one another—is there also in the Exordium to the whole work: "If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts […] certain *others* who are not present […] it is in the name of *justice*" (xviii). We have already noted a widespread tendency to highlight the role that language plays in the Dead Father's speech and characterization: he issues (ultimately impotent) *ukases*, he can be read as a symbol for the Lacanian order of language and paternity, and even his title cannot be read without noting the slippery, not-fully-present nature

of signifiers (after all, is not the "dead" in "Dead Father" subject to the most protracted of deferrals?). And as much as the Father ought to be the guarantor of metaphysical presence, his speeches are in fact completely vacant: in his first speech, he uses faux-scientific (and faux-bureaucratic) rhetoric without any meaning (Berman 19): "Given the existence of the next time, anticipatory design neurosis designs for integration of the until-then-threatening non-self-requested experience of life and sweet, sweet variable stresses and flows to carry inward and inwardize […]" (50). Asked what it meant, he replies, "It meant I made a speech" (51)—his vision of language is, here and at least once later, totally divorced from signification.

Even more importantly, the penultimate chapter of the novel (chapter 22) is given over, without preface, to the Dead Father's final monologue, a monologue which betrays obvious Joycean influence, thus involving itself both with literary paternity in an obvious way, but also pressing the paternal voice farther and farther into ludic, deconstructive uses of language. The passage, coming just after Thomas takes away the Father's keys, begins thus: "AndI. EndI. Great endifarce teeterteeterteetertottering. Willit urt. I reiterate. Don't be cenacle. Conscientia mille testes. And having made them, where now? What now?" (171). Much like *Finnegans Wake*, on which it is fairly blatantly modeled, the text is exceptionally difficult to understand as a whole, but small punning fragments yield quite lucid moments: "Endjoying the endthusiasm which your endtente has endgendered," the Father says, and indeed, the book (and his suspended life-in-death) is about to end; his hearing of the "end" in "engendered" is especially poignant, since it heralds the termination of secure, present, quasi-divine patriarchal fatherhood (171). He continues in the same

vein later, claiming to be "Endshrouded in endigmas" and "Endmeshed in endtanglements" (172). In other words, he seems clearly aware that the ending of the narrative will be enigmatic and unclear, but also inevitable and even necessary.

It is not only the Dead Father himself, but also the remaining characters and the readers of the novel who are "endmeshed," because the book refuses to really, properly end: the burial, of course, does not really conclusively happen, but even more importantly, the language in which the novel (especially this penultimate section) is written is so multivalent and so far removed from obvious linguistic correspondence that one cannot trust it to stay put: it would be dangerous to conclude anything about this novel, least of all that we "know" how it ends. Instead, we are "endtangled" in "not-knowing," just as Barthelme wishes us to be. The last words of his monologue, which simply stops without a period, are "Don't like! Don't want! Pitterpatter oh please pitterpatter" (173). To the very end, the Father is depicted as immature, yet still punning and a bit desperate—he is almost sympathetic. Best of all, we get an echo of "pater" once again in both "pitter" and "patter," but the syllables are also nonsensical onomatopoeia. Is the father significant or not? The phrases clatter to an end before this can be established beyond doubt, but again, we are in ghostly space, abandoned by Barthelme before Schrödinger's tomb, and this is as productive as it is perplexing. The force of the novel's ambiguities between death and life, spirit and body, etc. should, I believe, lead us to a comparatively optimistic reading; there is good reason to believe that the paternal authority (and with it, the ghostly traces of patriarchal religion and knowledge) will return from the earth in weaker form. This optimism does not require a rejection of all other

interpretations of the book, though: these are, recall, words with "haloes," and they can embrace multiple meanings. The Dead Father is still *Pater Noster*, but also a blathering fool. It is not necessary to choose just one or the other; in the haunted sphere of postmodernism, it is a question of both/and, not either/or, and all that remains is to hope for the best.

Barthelme claims, in "Not-Knowing," to be uncomfortable with "Deconstruction," writing that "there is, in this kind of criticism, an element of aggression that gives one pause," and going on to identify the school with the belief that "any work of art depends on a complex series of interdependences" (19). He does not find it entirely "valueless," but instead simply notes that

> the mystery worthy of study, for me, is not the signification of parts but how they come together […] I would argue that in the competing methodologies of contemporary criticism, many of them quite rich in implications, a sort of tyranny of great expectations obtains, a rage for final explanations, a refusal to allow a work that mystery which is essential to it. (19)

And yet, he also finds words to be "furiously busy," to have "halos, patinas, overhangs, echoes" (21). This is absolutely true of his fiction; as we see above, *The Dead Father* and *Snow White* alike use words in such a way that "they're allowed to go to bed together" and enabled to reveal "how much of Being we haven't yet encountered" (21). There is but one caveat: it is not necessarily always Being, especially not with that capital letter, that Barthelme's fiction explores. Rather, what may seem like Being and ontology is really *hauntology*: the "logic of haunting" that Derrida claims is "larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being […] It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves" (10). The strange hovering between death and life—the defining characteristic of

a specter or zombie—which the novel's inconclusive final chapter fails to resolve allows the text to remain open, to enter a process of continuous deferral that certainly weakens the Dead Father and disenchants all that he represents: the progression is, on its face, clearly katabatic and secularizing. However, by stripping the Dead Father of his worst qualities—his fetishized emblems of power, his sexual misconduct, his sadistic punishments and his disregard for the happiness of others—the narrative buries him as an empty signifier, an unknown quality, so that he can prepare to return to a world without the strictures and sadism of patriarchy, with an increasing place for women and their unique ability to talk outside of male phallogocentrism. His vacillation between life and death, and his (non)final burial, mean that he is free to return in another form: a ghostly form, humbled, weakened, and full of promise. Should he do so, he would be the founder of an authentic weak theology in which sacred words are not there just to consolidate power and perpetuate injustice, but to call upon ghosts who mean to right wrongs and anticipate a better, more just community.

Conclusion

When ghosts return to earth after burial, they are typically seeking to correct an injustice. Hamlet laments that his time is "out of joint" and that he is the one who has to "set it right"; and in *Hamlet*, who does the setting? It is, of course, the ghost. This ghost is the model for Derrida's speculation about hauntology, ghosts, and justice in *Specters of Marx*, and he is a good model: of great cultural influence, paternal, frightening, and stern in his tragic demands. However, there have been countless ghost stories over time, and haunting can come from thousands of different ghostly voices. These two works by Donald

Barthelme, like so many postmodern novels, are ghost stories too, even if this is not always explicit. Like Prince Hamlet, the (admittedly less lofty and serious) characters of *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* inhabit times that are somehow unjust, out of joint, confusing. Anti-postmodern critics are inexhaustible in their joyous skewering of postwar and postmodern American culture, as we have seen, and for the most part, they accuse Barthelme of indulging in, or being blind to, the narcissism, hedonism, unseriousness, and aesthetic limitations of his era.

However, it is my contention that his books do far more than indulge in contemporary vices. He recognizes that the great sources of authority—God, religion, philosophy, science, and their attendant linguistic discourses—no longer have the power they once held. He reflects this amply in his punning, and yes, sometimes trivial use of linguistic play and (in the words of *Snow White*) "trash." But he also believes that words have haloes and emanations, that deconstructive and postmodern visions of language can give words new and greater power than they ever had when they were considered stable signifiers. To that end, he has allowed a host of spirits to enter, possess, and haunt his narratives: they are enhaloed with parodies, neologisms, multivalent words, voices, and fragments of myth, fable, and scripture. He does not always treat them with the respect that they were once considered to deserve; indeed, in *The Dead Father*, paternity and divinity come in for harsh criticism. But these are not just inert fragments in a dilettantish collage: like all ghosts, they point toward injustice, and they demand a remedy. Even though the fathers, the ancestral and ghostly voices that still control and haunt contemporary literature, are "dead," they are also "still with us," exceeding the limits of the text and pointing, always, toward the future. The "meliorative" program of art—which Barthelme

professed belief in, and which Derrida associates with the ghostly—is not guaranteed success, by any means: the injunctions of *Hamlet*'s ghost end in disaster. But they are not, for that reason, without hope. At the very limit of ostensibly heathen and postmodern style, this hope—this vacant and contingent sense of promise—is the form the sacred takes in Barthelme's novelistic work.

CHAPTER THREE

Postmodernism in Crisis: Ethics, Haunting, and Deferred Hope in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Introduction

David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* is, by all accounts, a monumental achievement. The book, clocking in at over one thousand pages, contains an astonishing wealth of fictional material. Set in a recognizable but significantly altered near-future, the novel ranges from explanations of the politics of the newly-created O.N.A.N. (Organization of North American Nations), which includes Mexico and Canada; it follows the terrorist groups formed in protest of this organization; its copious endnotes are crammed with ekphrastic retrospectives of the entire filmography of an invented amateur filmmaker; it describes invented games, imaginary drugs, and futuristic football teams; it provides historical tours of the development of video technology and telecommunications. Above all, though, its mammoth structure is divisible into a few major components: the coming-of-age story of Hal Incandenza, a high school student at the Enfield Tennis Academy, and the addiction and recovery story of Don Gately, a resident at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [*sic*], located just down the hill from the Tennis Academy (Boswell 122). Although neither plot line is resolved in a traditional way, these two stories dominate the narrative, with continuous fugal interweaving of other, smaller, threads, some of which are maintained at length, others dropped. The handling of a tremendous collage of narrative voices, some first person, others omniscient,

some vernacular, some full of a bewilderingly developed technical vocabulary, recalls the work of Donald Barthelme that we have considered; this is unsurprising, since Wallace was an early admirer of Barthelme and other "high-postmodernists" of the 1960s. Wallace's use of a quasi-dystopian future, on the other hand, and the way he pairs this setting with an ambiguous and eschatological ending suffused with the dangers of technology, anticipates the work that we will see from Jennifer Egan in the next chapter. Indeed, it is more than likely that Wallace's work influenced Egan's, but the earlier writer's novel is different simply by virtue of being published decades earlier, at a time when Wallace clearly perceived the world of popular culture to be in crisis, and the possibility that postmodernism could address itself to, much less solve, this crisis was slim.

Although, as we will see, Wallace maintained strong reservations about the postmodernism that he had cut his teeth on in college and his MFA program, where he self-consciously set himself up as an experimental writer and wrote deliberately metafictional tributes to (and arguments with) writers like John Barth, critics still call *Infinite Jest* a postmodern work: according to Marshall Boswell, one of the leading Wallace critics, " the work "established him as perhaps the foremost writer of a remarkable generation of ambitious new novelists" (117). More than that, it was a "bold revival of […] postmodern 'maximalism,'" recognizable by its "size, thematic scope, and formal ambition" (117). This is a difficult conclusion to escape, and presumably even Wallace would not have denied it entirely, but the fact remains that Wallace had spent the years leading up to *Infinite Jest*'s publication writing essays that challenged and even arguably denounced postmodernism as a dated system that more often

than not simply colluded with capitalistic acquisitiveness and the mindless entertainment of television. He was quite candid about hoping to progress beyond the postmodern and into a fiction that fought against irony and self-conscious posturing. The tension between these two irrefutable facts—Wallace's critique of postmodernism and his recapitulation of so many postmodern techniques within his magnum opus—is the mainspring of how this chapter will understand the work.

In brief, I argue here that Wallace treats his own postmodern heritage in much the same way that earlier postmodernists like Barthelme treated the religious and philosophical heritage of modernism and earlier epochs: he does not simply ignore it, nor does he revert to it, but instead is *haunted by it*. Just as postmodern literature opens itself to ghosts and all manner of fragmentary and deconstructive spectral traces, so Wallace, by way of actually *challenging* and reforming postmodernism, preserve this basic orientation toward the spectral. He even does this explicitly in one crucial passage which is literally a ghost story, but the ghostliness goes far beyond the explicit. For example, the ending of the entire novel is (rather notoriously) ambiguous, leading readers toward a conclusion that is undecidable, neither present nor absent—and thus the hauntological story of Don Gately, which runs through the entire work and provides its concluding episode, will be the primary focus of this chapter. Gately is a recovering Demerol addict who is shot while attempting to protect his fellow residents at the Ennet House and spends much of the end of the novel struggling to endure the pain of his wound without opiate painkillers of any sort (Burn 28). Since this story dominates the novel's ambiguous *dénouement* but does not properly "end," Boswell argues that "the book refuses to offer its reader a

soothing 'conclusion' for the same reason that Gately refuses his painkiller […] the reader of Wallace's […] novel is trapped inside the infantilized and *therefore* unimaginably brave, feverish, and naked interior of Don Gately" (177).

This remarkable passage strives to recapitulate and mirror the moment-by-moment experience of resistance to addictive power, and necessarily, it takes on a profoundly ethical character; I associate this character here with what seems to be its closest philosophical analogue, the *Ethics* of Alain Badiou. Badiou is one of the fiercest and most persuasive critics of the postmodern ethical scenario, as well, so he fits well with the mindset Wallace was in when he began work on *Infinite Jest*. Considering these two complementary lines of thought—Wallace's assault on postmodernism via his essay "E Unibus Pluram" and Badiou's denunciation of the "ethics of difference" that found Derrida's reflections on hauntology—will give us a chance to look at postmodernism at its moment of crisis, and to question whether Wallace has given up on the school of thought (as he seems to have wanted to), remained firmly within it (as Boswell seems to suggest), or something in between.

Key to deciding his situation is the tension between Gately's Badiouan heroism and the very Derridian quality of the finale: as is the case in virtually all of the "haunted" postmodern works of this genus, the *result* of Gately's heroic fidelity is de-centered and deferred endlessly; we as readers never find out beyond reasonable doubt what happens to Gately, and it is possible to read the last images of the novel optimistically or pessimistically (Boswell 178-9). Indeed, Boswell writes that "the book's primary symbol is in fact an absent center," and while he is thinking of the actual content of the film *Infinite Jest*, which is never fully described, the same thing holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the end of the novel

as well. Wallace himself had the following to say about the ending of his own novel, in an interview he gave to Ann Marie Donahue in the March 21-28 issue of the 1996 *Boston Phoenix*:

> Plot-wise, the book doesn't come to a resolution. But if the readers perceive it as me giving them the finger, then I haven't done my job. On the surface, it might seem like it just stops. But it's supposed to stop and then kind of hum and project. Musically and emotionally, it's a pitch that seemed right.

This humming and projecting is a kind of haunting, the last haunting Wallace leaves us to contemplate after a novel characterized by carefully planned, uniquely fascinating reflections on supernatural phenomena that in their very oddity demand interpretation. Therefore, in a sense, this chapter will be "eschatological," in that it intends to evaluate and add to Wallace's own explanation of his ending. It will do this by reading it in light of Don Gately's ethical struggle, how that struggle is predicated upon Gately's experience with what Wallace presents as the profoundly unironic sincerity of Alcoholics Anonymous (and its attendant, vernacular form of apophatic theology), and how Gately's story interacts with that of James Incandenza, the book's stand-in for old-fashioned, "high postmodernism," who comes to an ignominious end but returns to haunt Gately at his moment of highest crisis. By demonstrating how this haunting is *postmodern* in character, we can see how hauntology remains a viable process by which to understand postmodern work and literature as a whole even as postmodern writers begins to undermine their own style and strive toward a future with a very different aesthetic and philosophical cast.

Wallace and the New Sincerity

David Foster Wallace thought deeply about his relationship to postmodernism, both as a philosophy and a literary technique, and the relationship was always complex and uneasy; while reviewers have always found it easy to lump him in with postmodern novelists (as Boswell does above, to an extent), Wallace himself was considerably less comfortable with the categorization. As Stephen Burn writes, "Wallace's fiction is clearly both inspired by, and an attempt to progress beyond, postmodernism's endgame" (13). This more ambivalent assessment, which places Wallace somewhere in the interstices between postmodernism and its discontents, is probably the best; in any case, Wallace's own ambivalence about his putative literary school was itself tremendously productive for his art and essays. For instance, in an interview discussing an early novella, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," Wallace told Larry McCaffery that he "wanted to get [metafiction] over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (qtd. in Burn 14). This idea of progression beyond the most typical postmodern linguistic chicanery, which violates in some sense the "transaction" between author and reader, is also important to one of Wallace's best-known essays, "E Unibus Pluram," collected in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, which is primarily a reflection on the influence of television on American Culture in the early nineties, and which Wallace wrote while in the process of composing *Infinite Jest* (Burn 15). It is worth spending a moment with this essay, because it helps to understand Don Gately in particular, and the general rubrics that inform and shape *Infinite Jest* as a novel haunted by the ethical.

The thesis of "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace states explicitly, is that "irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fiction writers they pose especially terrible problems" (49). This has not always been the case; indeed, Wallace reserves considerable praise for the postmodern novelists of the middle of the century: "the rebellious irony in the best postmodern fiction," he writes, "wasn't just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful" insofar as it could critique safe and traditional appearances in order to interrogate the foundations of "our arbiters of sanity," "the corporo-bureaucratic weave," or "abstract capital" (66). In short, irony was at one point defensible because it was "difficult and painful, and productive"—indeed, postmodernism itself lampooned and criticized commercial, "simplistic" society because that was the society glorified by television as it first became popular (66). "It was assumed" by early postmodern ironists, Wallace argues, "that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom" (66-7). So what went wrong between the 1960s and the early 1990s, when Wallace wrote the essay (and *Infinite Jest*)? "One clue's to be found," he notes, "in the fact that irony is *still around*, bigger than ever after 30 long years" (67). No longer critical or socially useful, it has been entirely vitiated by the very televisual culture of shallowness it attempted to critique: "avant-garde irony and rebellion […] have been absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment they had originally set themselves athwart" (68). In Stephen Burn's words, Wallace's contemporary ironists fail to "respond" to "televisual culture" because they "rely on the tools of their postmodern precursors: an irony that television has already absorbed, and uses to its own

advantage" (17). Indeed, even in relatively early fiction like the novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," he had already equated standard metafictional postmodernity with advertising's tendency "to lull by pleasing, to fatten without nourishing" (Max 91).

This thesis, and the diagnosis on which it rests, is clearly related to Guy Debord's reflection on capitalism and spectacle in his 1967 classic *Society of the Spectacle*, where he argues that "societies where modern conditions of production prevail" are characterized in the contemporary world by "an immense accumulation of *spectacles*" (¶ 1). This is not just "a collection of images," but the entire set of relationships and appearances that obtain when capitalism ("abstract capital," in Wallace's words) dominates a society (Debord ¶¶ 3-7; Wallace 66). Perhaps most notably, the spectacle "presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible"; it works both to constitute and also to justify the world of capital by saying "nothing more than 'that which appears is good, that which is good appears'" and demanding "passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained […] by its monopoly of appearance" (¶ 12). This is precisely the issue that Wallace has, too—the miasma of televisual advertising culture has indeed presented itself as *the* human condition, not one among many modes of existence, and by proclaiming the goodness of "that which appears," it precludes and undermines even a preliminary effort at social criticism, let alone revolution. This is the mechanism by which the original postmoderns (whom Wallace thinks did provide a useful "meliorative" function, as Barthelme put it in "Not-Knowing"), but the spectacle is the counter-attack: by dissemination of the spectacle, the state of affairs as it is begins to recapture and define even the

rebellious postmodern aesthetic, cutting off its distance from the culture and repurposing its techniques to justify the prevailing regime.

Wallace acknowledges the profound difficulty of extracting art and culture from this bind in which it attempts to fight the fire of mass media with the identical fire of media-derived literary tools. In part, his own difficulty stems from his own immersion in irony, which he does not attempt to deny (76, 81). He also mentions the failure of technological optimists such as George Guilder (70-6) and hip ironist fiction writers like Mark Leyner (76-81), both of whom lead to a cultural point that is "doomed to shallowness" (81). The only solution that Wallace sees is a new rebellion that is not rebellious at all:

> The next real literary "rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles […] These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. (81)

In short, these imagined authors *endorse principles*: they are ethical in a way that is straightforward and even a bit old-fashioned. Wallace keeps his thesis quite tentative, however; he is not even certain that a school of "New Sincerity" will develop, let alone that he himself will be part of it. Indeed, he criticizes his own indulgence in irony immediately after puncturing holes in George Guilder's naïveté about technological culture, so it appears tremendously unlikely, on the strength of "E Unibus Pluram" alone, that Wallace meant to articulate anything remotely like a Sincerist manifesto (76).

Others have been far less modest, particularly in the world of poetry, where a small group of self-professed New Sincerist authors can be found, as

well as a handful of others who have had the title bestowed upon them.[1] Indeed, poet Joseph Massey wrote a New Sincerist manifesto on his blog, which has since been deleted, but which was taken up and excerpted by a number of academics; the manifesto (which according to Jennifer Ashton was "intended as a joke") was aggressively entitled "Eat Shit and Die: A Manifesto for the new Sincerity," and included unequivocal statements such as "FUCK YOU, to the linguistic synthesizers droning all heart way [*sic*] from the art! ... FUCK YOU, and your THEORY GOGGLES!" (qtd. in Ashton 97). Massey's manifesto, perhaps a joke and now certainly confined to cyber-oblivion, should not be taken too seriously, but it does perhaps help to limit the intellectual space in which New Sincerity has developed: on the one hand is Wallace's sense of dissatisfaction with the capability of irony to serve a fictional and social purpose of great import, and on the other is Massey's unsophisticated rant against "theory" as a signifier for, one can only presume, any intellectual movement that does not suit his fancy. While it is understandable to wish to free the world of art from the world of critical theory, it is also impossible simply to pretend that philosophical contributions to the study of language and the limits of art can be dismissed or forgotten, that the clock can be set back to an imagined Eden before the advent of linguistics or modernist and postmodernist literature. Since Wallace's conception in "E Unibus Pluram" is so vague and tentative, and since Massey's has every bit as much the look of an aesthetic dead end as postmodern irony does to New Sincerists, it is necessary to look more closely at Wallace's thought and work to

[1] Jason Morris, writing in *Jacket* magazine, names Andrew Mister, Joseph Massey, Anthony Robinson, Tao Lin, Dave Berman, Catherine Wagner, and Arielle Greenberg, among others, as well as practitioners in other media such as Wes Anderson in film and Cat Power and Devendra Banhart in indie music ("Time Between Time: Messianism & the Promise of a 'New Sincerity'").

see how he himself continued to respond to these questions. Although he never had the ideological fervor to write a manifesto or claim himself for a revolutionary artistic movement, I argue that he forges, with great difficulty, a fiction that does two things at once: makes full use of a panoply of postmodern devices, while subordinating them to an overall ethical goal that seeks to articulate genuine moral principles that can serve as a guide to life in the postmodern world of today, or the future.

Perhaps the best reflection on Wallace and his implication in the New Sincerity comes from Adam Kelly's essay "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." According to Kelly, Wallace does indeed rue the "aestheticization" of ethics in both modernist and contemporary fiction, in which style and formal ingenuity take precedence over direct communication (133-4). However, he also "made it abundantly clear that it could not simply be a question of contemporary literature's returning to the precise kind of sincerity he say informing" earlier fiction; instead, "any return to sincerity must be informed by a study of postmodernist fiction, in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media" (134). This essentially places the contemporary author upon the horns of a paradoxical dilemma: "If […] a writer must anticipate how his work will be received by readers in a complex culture [i.e., the televisual milieu described in "E Unibus Pluram"], and thus about communicating what sounds true, rather than simply what is true, is he really being fully sincere?" (135). Kelly rightly compares Wallace here with Derrida[2],

[2] Rightly, because there is ample evidence of Wallace's admiration of, and thorough engagement with, Derrida's work; his principal biographer D.T. Max notes that Derrida was "the longest-lasting" of his early philosophical influences (38), and that during his M.F.A. program, he

noting that Wallace accepted Derrida's dissolution of the primacy of speech over writing in *Of Grammatology*; thus, the only way to respond to the effects of an advertising- and television-saturated culture would be "by acknowledging one's own implication within this 'system of general writing,'" namely, the deconstructive linguistic realm presided over by non-presence and *différance* (137). This means that one "must begin by recognizing the lack of any transcendent, absolute, Archimedean point form which to judge the authentic from the inauthentic, the sincere from the manipulative, truth from ideology, and so on" (137-8). We have already seen (for instance, in Barthelme's reflections on contemporary trends in linguistic theory and the "enhaloed" nature of signifiers) that this realm of ambiguity has strong implications for theories of haunting and spectrality in the literary world. Its implications for fictive ethics remain a serious open question.

Kelly argues (again, correctly) that since he sees himself as immersed in an unstable system of writing that, like advertising, "tries to anticipate and direct its own reception," Wallace's fiction "relentlessly interrogates its own commitments [… and] reflects back on itself to the greatest degree possible" (138). For Kelly all of this is, oddly enough, not a participation in, but an *alternative to*, the hermeneutics of suspicion—not necessarily the ideal alternative, but perhaps the only one that works, since Wallace can only confront it, can only cling to "traits such as love, trust, faith and responsibility," by a process of self-interrogation that passes "through the frame of paradox" (138-9). In short, the *risk* involved in the attempt of sincerity—the continuous risk of missing the correct tone, of

---

was given to "asking how [his colleagues] could call themselves fiction writers without having read Derrida" (57).

misreading oneself, of betraying an ulterior motive, or of slipping into irony through embarrassment or habit—is the very thing that makes sincerity possible. This is because, like a true gift, sincerity must escape the realm of economic calculation and even knowledge in order to be true sincerity. This will, however, force both author and reader into a region of very Barthelmean "not-knowing": "even the writer him- or herself will never know whether they have attained true sincerity, and the reader will never know either. And yet true sincerity happens" (140). These insights bring us to a reflective space that is impossibly far-removed from that of the formally dubbed New Sincerist poets, and particularly from Massey's manifesto: not only does Wallace refrain from rejecting critical theory outright, he may even (if Kelly is to be trusted) be approaching sincerity itself *through*, not despite of, theoretical efforts.

Thus, while Wallace may not be precisely a member of the New Sincerity himself, the way in which he inhabits "the aporia between the conditional and the unconditional" (Kelly 140) constitutes a serious component of his unique authorial style. The style is characterized by struggle: not just the struggle to *be* sincere, but to perform sincerity, to comment truthfully on that sincerity, and to prove to the reader that even the most evasively postmodern fictional technique does not necessarily detract from said sincerity. While his work is fraught with such passages of anguish and self-debate, a late example from the manuscript of his final (and unfinished) novel, *The Pale King*, should serve as a more-than-sufficient illustration.[3] Well into the manuscript as published, Wallace (both the

[3] That *The Pale King* is unfinished and was never fully edited by Wallace is, perhaps, of import here. Since Wallace's own interview style is also characterized by an almost paralyzing self-analysis and consciousness of the effect he is having on the reader/viewer (see, for instance, the 1997 televised interview with Charlie Rose), it is arguable that the unedited Wallace is more

literal author and the character named "David Wallace") writes, "All of this is true. This book is really true" (68). This is, on its face, a "sincere" statement, or a profession/performance of future sincerity. However, Wallace is far from content to leave his narrative at such a simple point. "I obviously need to explain," he continues.

> First, please flip back and look at the book's legal disclaimer, which is on the copyright page, verso side, four leaves in from the rather unfortunate and misleading front cover. The disclaimer is the unindented chunk that starts: 'The characters and events in this book are fictitious.' I'm aware that ordinary citizens almost never read disclaimers like this […] But now I need you to read it, the disclaimer, and to understand that its initial 'The characters and events in this book …' includes this very Author's Foreword […] I need this legal protection in order to inform you that what follows is, in reality, not fiction at all, but substantially true and accurate. (69)

This sort of thing is hardly new—indeed, reflecting on paratextual items like the copyright page, or pointing out the manner in which a fictional narrator becomes trapped in the funhouse mirror of fictionality, is straight out of the postmodernist playbook, from Flann O'Brien or Barthelme to Calvino or Borges (or even the much earlier *Tristram Shandy*). So far, Wallace uses precisely the techniques he worries might be bankrupt in "E Unibus Pluram." So, to be sincere, Wallace must address this very problem:

> This might appear to set up an irksome paradox. The book's legal disclaimer defines everything that follows it as fiction, including this Foreword, but now here in this Foreword I'm saying that the whole things is really nonfiction; so if you believe one you can't believe the other, & c., & c. Please know that I find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too—at least now that I'm over thirty I do—and that the very last thing this book is is some

---

"pure" by virtue of being more "impure"—more raw, less sure of himself, less subject to revisionist sanding-down. To say this does, however, commit to a comparatively naïve vision of "sincerity" that is undoubtedly unworthy of Wallace's own more nuanced consideration, and in any case, published work like "The Depressed Person" from *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* betrays much of the same recursive anguish that can be found in less polished work.

> kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher. That's why I'm making it a point to violate protocol and address you here directly, as my real self […] So that I could inform you of the truth: The only bona fide 'fiction' here is the copyright page's disclaimer. (69-70)

The experience of reading this prose can be something like the old logical paradox in which two sentences are positioned vertically, the top one reading "the sentence below is false" and the bottom reading "the sentence above is true." Is Wallace being sincere or not? Is he making fun of readers while pretending not to, or pretending to indulge in postmodern games while actually being deadly serious? It is by no means easy to tell, and there is reason to believe that Wallace himself could not always tell: hence the self-questioning. Thus, perhaps the best we can do is what D.T. Max does in his biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*. Discussing Wallace's early interactions with editors, he writes "Over the years many editors would wonder whether Wallace was making fun of them with his excessive-seeming deference. The answer is he both was and wasn't" (70). Wallace was aware of this ambiguity's importance, too, even casually noting of depressive patient Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest* that "she went through a series of expressions that made it clinically impossible for the doctor to determine whether or not she was entirely sincere" (76). He also remains concerned with the ways in which sincerity can mimic, and be mimicked by, performance: one girl at an AA meeting tells a story that "she sees as etiological truth," but "even though [her] monologue seems sincere and unaffected," the audience is not convinced: "faces in the hall are averted […] in empathetic distress at the look-what-happened-to-poor-me invitation implicit in the tale, the talk's tone of self-pity itself less offensive […] than the subcurrent of explanation" (374). In short, just as Kelly posits, sincerity only exists thanks to its

overwhelming fragility, and can only open up under quasi-Heisenbergian conditions of uncertainty.

The idea is very Derridian, and I think it works to explain a vast majority of Wallace's thought in both his fiction and his non-fiction. However, a careful reading of *Infinite Jest* does suggest that more is at stake, that there is a sphere for sincerity that exceeds the usual cloud of unknowing that might have satisfied Barthelme and other, earlier postmodernists. Nowhere is this difference—perhaps the one thing that most obviously distinguishes the very postmodern-influenced Wallace from his predecessors on a philosophical level—more clear than in the story of Don Gately, a story that is fraught with religion, with visitations from the beyond, and with a dedication to a single and contingent even that is, to my ear, best explained by a turn to the anti-postmodern philosopher Alain Badiou's work on ethical philosophy. To make this argument is not to reject Adam Kelly's position wholesale, nor is it to declare Wallace anti-postmodern or a member of some New Sincerist movement. The fact is that he dwells in post-structuralist ambiguity just as much as Barthelme or Pynchon or his other literary ancestors, but also shows a kind of incredibly difficult, vexed, and contingent path by which one can exceed such ambiguity. This idea will guide my interpretation of *Infinite Jest* in this chapter. Before immersing ourselves in the novel, however, it is worthwhile to take a brief detour into Wallace's engagement with religion, since any discussion of Don Gately and his AA experiences requires a discussion of religion anyway, and because what Wallace says about faith can potentially illuminate the ongoing and vexed question of sincerity in his fiction and essays.

Compared to the other writers considered in this study, Wallace was perhaps the least religious in his youth, and he is the only writer not actually raised as a Catholic at some point of his childhood. Indeed, according to D.T. Max, Wallace "claimed that his parents refused to let him or his sister go to church because it would contaminate the rigor of their thought" (114), although his sister Amy disputes this claim, saying that their father was a nonpracticing Catholic and their mother's family was religious but did not attend church, and that they were "encouraged to believe what we wanted" (qtd. in Max 316 n17). In an interview with Patrick Arden for *Book Magazine*, Wallace said he had "tried to join the Catholic church twice"; "I've gone through RCIA a couple of times," he explained, "but I always flunk the period of inquiry […] they don't really want inquiries. They really just want you to learn responses." Ultimately, he came to profess a sort of nonsectarian spirituality: "I enjoy church and I enjoy being part of a larger thing," he told Arden. "I think it's just not in my destiny to be part of an institutional religion, because it's not in my nature to take certain things on faith." Max associates this attempt at conversion with Wallace's engagement to the "active Catholic" Juliana Harms in the late 1990s, when he joined a program called Cursillo, but "at the final ceremony, when the participants were meant to attest their belief in God, Wallace expressed his doubts instead" (251). Wallace himself mentioned two occasions in the late eighties and early nineties in his interview with Arden, so it appears that he flirted with conversion to Catholicism at least three separate times. While Catholicism itself rarely surfaces directly in his work, he does mention in *Infinite Jest* a "psychotically depressed man" who "went to daily Mass when he was not

institutionalized" and "prayed for relief" (697)—in short, he considers liturgical faith as one of many coping mechanisms, however insufficient, for severe depression and "anhedonia."

But as a rule, Wallace retained an interest in formal religion while simultaneously developing his own, distinctly American credo that serves as a sort of natural development from William James's pragmatism. For example, in his commencement address to the students of Kenyon College, published as *This is Water*, Wallace says it is not the case that the "mystical stuff" of traditional religion is "necessarily true." Rather,

> The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're going to try to see it. This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education […] you get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship. (94-6)

And, possibly thinking of the ways in which people under the postmodern condition tend to worship fame, money, or entertainment, he stresses the way in which belief in a higher power, however improvised or tailored to individual purpose, can spare people from a far worse fate:

> And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. (102)

This is, at heart, a very Jamesian proposition; after all, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James argues that religious conversions can only possibly be judged upon their "fruits for life," and when they produce good fruits, they are rightly considered "true" (237). From the perspective of the traditional religions to which Wallace occasionally sought admission, only be told he was too much of a questioner, this would be simply an American heresy that barely qualifies as

religion. However, from the perspective of a writer seeking to position himself as an exponent of a new "sincerity," the idea that truth can be determined through a kind of intensely existential, lived process is striking.

Indeed, this is more or less the concept that gives the title to *This is Water*. The anecdote is of an older fish asking two younger fish "how's the water," to which one of the younger fish replies, "what the hell is water?" (3-4). The idea is that the meaning and beauty in the world is always there, accessible only through the grace of an ordinary life, a truth invisible to most because it is so close—the very medium in which we are saturated. Thus, the real secret to life has to do with "awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, [so] that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: 'This is water'" (131-2). With this in mind, "It will actually be within your power to experience, a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things" (92-3). So this commencement address, which distills much of what Wallace in his later career wanted to transmit to the next generation of students and human beings in America, answers a double question: first, how to choose a system of credence that is neither vacuous and vulnerable to manipulation nor embarrassingly credulous, and second, how to navigate a world that is increasingly characterized by the tedium, frustration, boredom, and ennui that are the sequelae to contemporary capitalist society.

Such concerns remained with him in the surviving drafts from which *The Pale King* was edited and assembled. For instance, the novel concerns itself fairly early-on with religious conversion, figured in two ways: first as the literal, evangelical experience of a young woman who annoys a character by narrating

how, much like the "sick souls" of William James's work, she was "nearly at the end of her rope" until she encountered revivalist Christianity (211), and second, by giving that same character, Chris Fogle, a chance at his own (secular) conversion to the calling of accountancy: he stumbles into an Advanced Tax course taught by a Jesuit priest and feels a personal cathexis in the message that "was ultimately much more like the evangelist girlfriend with the boots' own experience than [he] could ever have admitted at the time" (220). In other words, there is a general fungibility of religious experiences that can (and should) be equated, but whose truth-values depend upon their effects and perceptions rather than their metaphysical reach. Second, *The Pale King* dwells on another topic of *This is Water* in a particularly concentrated way: the possibility of enduring, and even finding meaning in, boredom and anomie. For instance, one of the most boring workers at the IRS office described in *The Pale King* is actually capable of levitation through intense attention (468), while a child who methodically attempts to touch his lips to every square inch of his body is compared to both Padre Pio and a "Bengali holy man" (398-402); in this way, Wallace associates the rare power of transcending tedium with something like saintly thaumaturgy—the signatures of a heightened level of existence. In a fragmentary passage that Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch decided to include as an appendix to *The Pale King*, one gets an idea of what Wallace was thinking of vis-à-vis transcendence toward the end of his life. Pay attention to something gallingly trivial, he advises, and "in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom" (546).

Since *The Pale King* was never finished or subject to Wallace's usual revisions, it is inadvisable to take these fragments as representative of his "last word" on subjects of religion and transcendence. However, they do strongly resemble similar passages in *Infinite Jest*, which will be the subject of the remainder of this chapter. In particular, the protracted passage dealing with Don Gately's recovery from a gunshot wound without the benefit of narcotic analgesics prefigures, and perhaps more fully expresses, the ideas found later in *This is Water* and *The Pale King* about waves of boredom and the ability to wade through the crushing boredom of contemporary existence. Gately's experience, replete with heroism as Wallace clearly intends it to be, rises to the level of the religious without being religious in specific content. However, earlier in the novel, we are told of Gately's entry into AA recovery; there, he is encouraged strongly to begin to pray, or at least to recognize a higher power on whom he can call for help. He does so, but idiosyncratically, praying not to any particular deity but rather to Nothing—an absence that both reflects his despair and natural agnosticism while also evoking the idea of negative, or apophatic, theology. Finally, during his post-gunshot hallucinations, Gately is visited by a character called simply "the Wraith," identifiable as the ghost of James Incandenza, suicide and patriarch of the entire Incandenza family, so important to plot threads *other than* Gately's. While I am far from the first to call *Infinite Jest* a "religious novel" in some sense,[4] I believe that putting these threads together will illuminate the novel's ethical landscape in a light as yet imperfectly seen. Understanding

[4] D.T. Max, for example, says of *Infinite Jest* that "a great intelligence hangs above it and seems not entirely uninterested in our survival […] Gately abides, taking on, almost in a Christlike way, the sins of his flock, and Christ implies a God" (215); similarly, Stephen Burn remarks that "*Infinite Jest* may basically be a religious book […] it is clear that, on one level, the novel is about belief" (60).

Gately's story properly gives the key, if there is such a key, to the way out of the species of postmodern irony that the Wallace of "E Unibus Pluram" found so distasteful and despairing.

Sincerity in Infinite Jest: *AA and the* Deus Absconditus

There are very good reasons to believe that *Infinite Jest* was Wallace's own offering in a "sincerest" vein, the fulfillment of his own prophecy in "E Unibus Pluram." In particular, the sections of plot that orbit the Ennet House and culminate in the story of Don Gately have, even superficially, a greater degree of gut-level, traditional storytelling than much of what Wallace had done before. Wallace left other hints of his hopes for the novel, or perhaps even his self-assessment of the draft, before it was written. In an essay about Dostoevsky's fiction, he wrote that the "laughers" in the culture at large "wouldn't (could not) laugh if a piece of morally passionate, passionately moral fiction was also ingenious and radiantly human fiction" (qtd. in Max 209). This is important, because it shows how Wallace differs from the more reductive members of New Sincerist movements: he does not wish to, or think it possible to, turn the clock back and pretend that none of the discoveries of contemporary philosophy or theory exist, to lay aside "theory goggles" in an absolute way. Rather, he demands fiction that is at once "moral," "ingenious," and "human." In another interview released a few years before *Infinite Jest*, Wallace asked Larry McCaffery whether "we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is," going on to state that "the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (qtd. in Max 214). D.T. Max

does not hesitate to apply these qualities to the novel: "*Infinite Jest* then didn't just diagnose a malaise," he writes; "It proposed a treatment […] the book is redemptive, as modern novels rarely are" (214-15).

I think it is already fairly clear that this position of this article is similar, if not identical, to that of Max and the others who see a serious ethical vision shining through the long text of *Infinite Jest*, and an authenticity that is in no way staged or faked or merely imitative of older, realistic forms. However, not every critic has seen such depth. Michiko Kakutani, for example, found the novel self-indulgent, and although she found Wallace talented, also said that the work "often seems like an excuse for Mr. Wallace to simply show off his remarkable skills as a writer and empty the contents of his restless mind" (qtd. in Burn 68). Others, like Dale Peck, notoriously found the novel sterile and postmodern in exactly the sense it seems Wallace hoped they *wouldn't*. Aside from calling it "bloated, boring, gratuitous, and […] uncontrolled," he also gripes that it is too indebted to mid-century forebears: "[*Infinite Jest*] is, in fact, a virtuoso performance that has eclipsed its progenitor: Wallace out-Pynchons Pynchon, and his third book […] may well be the first novel to out-*Gravity's Rainbow Gravity's Rainbow*" (14). As always, it is not enough to take certain claims by the author or the novel itself purely at face-value when determining the meaning, strategy, or narratological ethics of *Infinite Jest*, and this is especially true when confronted with a novel that is clearly full of ostensibly ironic, postmodern, and distancing techniques that do not immediately promise authenticity or sincerity (Wallace went so far as to refer to the novel's ending as "Artaud-ish" in a letter to his editor Michael Pietsch, raising the very real possibility that the novel is downright *cruel* to its readers and/or characters) (c.f. Max 193). Therefore, it

remains to take a closer look at the plot threads that particularly concern themselves with fictive "sincerity" and, through this investigation, to understand how Wallace manages to counterpoise postmodern and ironic techniques with something new, his own neo-Dostoevskian moral focus.

It is relatively uncontroversial to say that, at least, certain characters in *Infinite Jest* appear to serve as types for greater or lesser degrees of authenticity. For example, if we consider only members of the Incandenza family, Orin, the eldest child, is nearly consumed with insincerity: on dates, he says "Tell me what sort of man you prefer, and then I'll affect the demeanor of that man," and a friend describes him as "the *least open man* I know," because he "has come to regard the truth as *constructed* instead of *reported*" (1048). He refers to his numerous sexual partners as "Subjects," and at one point the narrator notes that he "can only give, not receive, pleasure, and this makes a contemptible number of [his lovers] think he is a wonderful lover, almost a dream-type lover; and this fuels the contempt. But he cannot show the contempt" (596). He is caught, in other words, in a space of permanent irony in which he must constantly project a false front, concealing even the feelings that stem from this falsity (and this situation is only compounded by the fact that he is, occupationally, an entertainer—a professional football player for the Arizona Cardinals). At the opposite end of the spectrum is Mario, the macrocephalic and profoundly disabled middle child whose congenital defects may be the result of a hidden incestuous relationship (314). Mario is very pure of intention, and the narrator says he "never changes"; his love and concern for his brother Hal "makes his heart beat hard" (590). Tellingly, he enjoys going unsupervised down the hill from the Enfield Tennis Academy that his family runs to Ennet House; he likes it

"because it's very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say *God* with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside" (591). Not only does this passage further characterize Mario as a pure and sincere character (a sort of *yurodivy*, in fact, furthering the connection with Russian literature that Wallace clearly wished to forge), but it also bestows some of the same qualities upon Ennet House: it is a place free of irony, of hip posturing, of modern malaise.

Mario, though, is a fairly unusual type in his radical honesty, and to find another such character, it is necessary to look outside the Incandenza family—most of whom are caught up quite intractably in the problems of the contemporary world. According to Marshall Boswell, Don Gately, "aside from Hal's seriously deformed older brother Mario, is the novel's least 'hidden' character" (142). This is not necessarily due to anything intrinsic in Gately himself, but is the legacy of his commitment to Alcoholics Anonymous, a group that Wallace himself knew from personal experience in a much more real way than he was willing to admit in contemporary interviews. According to Boswell,

> Alcoholics Anonymous, a program devoted to "sharing" and group therapy, serves as Wallace's tentative antidote to all this paralyzing, psychological concealment, the paradoxical product of hyper-self-consciousness. Quite unexpectedly, AA gets transformed from a too easily parodied form of pop psychology to a genuine and viable Kierkegaardian religion, one that attempts to solve the problems of irony, aesthetic self-consciousness, and the dread of being. (143)

Boswell characterizes most of the remaining characters in the novel as various forms of Kierkegaardian "aesthete," someone who, according to Kierkegaard, "holds existence at bay by the most subtle of all deceptions, by thinking. He has thought everything possible, and yet has not existed at all" (qtd. in Boswell 138).

In other words, the aesthete is the victim of "hiddenness" and involuted, depressive, self-reflexive thought of the precise type that afflicts characters like Hal Incandenza (Boswell 140). Boswell also notes that Wallace identifies this aestheticism and serpentine thinking with "a particular brand of postmodern sophistication that treats reality […] as text or simulacrum, or as a pastiche of various phony conventions" (138). Again, this is just the sort of text that many of *Infinite Jest*'s earliest readers found it to be; the chasm between Wallace's self-assessment and certain reviewers is tremendous.

Boswell's idea that much of the book immerses itself deliberately *and critically* in pastiche, irony, and entertainment is fundamentally correct, and I believe that it extends far beyond just a Kierkegaardian reading. Boswell himself also offers a Lacanian gloss on the televisual entertainment world of *Infinite Jest*. Noting that Lacan's "conception of subjectivity" is "inextricable from the world of language," he associates the problems faced by characters like the Incandenzas and the addicts of Ennet House with the plight of a "split subject" who is "always already deferred, always an 'other' totally separate from the self that would presumably be identical with it" (129-30). The Freudian *id* is replaced, if not exactly, with the *objet petit a*, the "little other" that drives us into craving and action not through any internal compulsion, but as "the product of a lack" (130). Thus it is that the great "entertainment" that gives the novel its name but never quite fully appears, the lethal film *Infinite Jest*, is a sort of promised Lacanian return to the pre-mirror-phase epoch when the personality is continuous with the mother's: it is said to consist, after all, of footage of Joelle van Dyne looking at a camera "bolted down inside a stroller or bassinet" and apologizing, using "at

least twenty minutes of permutations of 'I'm sorry'" (939).[5] Clearly, though, Wallace is not optimistic about a world in which Lacan or other postmodern French theorists are to be trusted about the nature of reality—after all, the film, with its promise of a sort of return to the self-identical subject, is actually a brain-destroying ultimate entertainment that renders its viewer catatonic and unable to move, look away, or perform the basic tasks of survival, despite bearing a "very positive, ecstatic, even" expression (79). It would be difficult to find a more blistering denunciation of entertainment culture, and, perhaps, of the very postmodernism that Wallace himself once read about, indulged in, and imitated.

This critique of postmodernism is not exactly unique to Wallace, although he does go about it in an exceptionally idiosyncratic and personal manner. Echoes of the same concern can be found in places like the writing of Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson, who called postmodernism "the logic of late capitalism" in his most famous essay. I have quoted this essay already in relation to Donald Barthelme's work and whether it fits under the rubric of parody or pastiche, but the sentiment bears repeating here: for Jameson, postmodernism's erasure of the idea that "some healthy linguistic normality still exists" means that parody cannot exist either, since it refers to an implicit norm (65). The resulting anarchy of pastiche is a ""symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way"

[5] The film is described more than once in its eponymous novel, and although the differences are not tremendous, they are probably significant: the description above comes from Joelle van Dyne, the star of the *samizdat*, but another source describes it as van Dyne "as some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked […] explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film's camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life's mother" (788)—still more psychoanalytic talk that nevertheless does not really *explain* the film's lethal addictiveness. In the footnote describing its creator James Incandenza's career, we are simply told it is "Incandenza's unfinished and unseen first attempt at commercial entertainment" (986).

(68). Even more alarmingly, Jameson argues that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of every more novel-seeming goods" (4). So postmodern art (architecture, in this case) is "grounded in the patronage of multinational business, whose expansion and development is strictly contemporaneous with it" (5). In short, Jameson very nearly associates late capitalism *directly* with postmodern aesthesis, very much the way Wallace forges related associations between, say, textual supplementarity and addiction to entertainment, drugs, etc.

The same issue arises for Alain Badiou, to whom we shall have occasion to return, and whose philosophy tends to denigrate the desire for difference and the postmodern welter of alterity that has been so important to previous authors in this study. Whereas we will consider, for example, Jennifer Egan's fiction as a type of futural narrative that deliberately opens itself, via the desert, to the "altogether other," Badiou writes that "the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned" because "[i]nfinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*" (25). It would be hard to imagine a position more diametrically opposed to the program of Derrida, Caputo, and others who derive at least some of their ethical scheme from Lévinas (Badiou 18). Whence this opposition? Frederiek Depoortere, in his book *Badiou and Theology*, provides a potential rationale: speaking of "Jewish Messianism as it has been adopted by deconstructionist thought," he warns that certain deconstructive theologies stemming from Derrida and Caputo

> run the risk of […] settling in 'the not-yet' of an event which will never come, may not come, and, indeed, cannot come. In this way, the passion for the new becomes an eternal movement of

> postponement, of deferment, which is the movement of desire ('That's not it. Give me something else!'), the movement of the consumer in capitalism which consumes ever new commodities which are never it, never the real thing. (4)

Thus it is that "deconstructionist religious thought runs the risk of becoming the accomplice of global capitalism" (4). It is not difficult to see how disturbing such a possibility could be to an author who both proclaimed the necessity of reading Derrida for becoming a writer of fiction (Max 57) but also referred to televisual consumer culture as "malignantly addictive" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 38). Wallace and his critics together are forced to ask difficult questions: is there a way to save postmodernism? If it is redeemable, how can it be distinguished from its darker side, the side that forces us into a vortex of consumption wherein we must pursue *objets petit a* without end or satisfaction? And if it cannot be saved, is there an exit ramp that can be deployed? While it is quite difficult to say that any of these questions has been settled, by Wallace or anyone else, they will remain before us and guide our reading of the Don Gately sections of *Infinite Jest*.

The first mention of Don Gately in the text is an extremely cryptic allusion made by Hal Incandenza in an interior monologue as the latter is carried on a stretcher from his collapse in the middle of a college interview: he thinks of a friend and fellow tennis player "standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (17). Hal is, at this point (very early in the novel but chronologically among the very latest recounted events), unable to speak, an eventuality that may be the result of his use of the fictional and incredibly potent drug DMZ (Boswell 133; Burn 34-5). However, the gap between the physical end of the novel and these later events is not closed sufficiently to be certain of what

has happened; in other words, we do not know exactly how Hal and Gately may have come to meet (they are not previously acquainted) or why they might be digging up James Incandenza's head, although Stephen Burn convincingly suggests that they could be seeking an original copy of *Infinite Jest*, and that Hal may have been forced to watch the film by Canadian insurgents (37-8). This very Hamlet-like episode would then keep Hal as analogue to Hamlet, replacing Yorick, the "man of infinite jest," with James Incandenza (who appears as a ghost to Gately, like Hamlet's father) and a film *called* "infinite jest"; the joke is irresistible, and probably what Wallace intended. Burn also speculates that Hal was hospitalized in the same emergency room as Gately when Gately is recovering from his gunshot wound, giving them the chance to meet—this would also unite two of the novel's otherwise largely disparate plot threads (the story of Hal's descent into addiction and of Gately's ascent from it) and perhaps even a third, since one of the operatives in the Québécois struggle for the film *Infinite Jest* has written for a magazine that also published an exposé of DMZ (Burn 34-5).[6] In any case, this tiny hint shows that Wallace meant for Gately's story to continue and to intersect somehow with Hal's, but this intersection (like two non-parallel lines that clearly *will* intersect, but only in a very long time) is known to happen, but not directly observed; it is deliberately withheld from the main channel of the narrative.

[6] Hal may also have actually viewed the film *Infinite Jest*, in whole or in part, which would tie *other* plot threads together but leave Gately out (Boswell 139). It could still easily explain a hospitalization and encounter with Gately, however.

His more conventional introduction[7] comes just a bit later, on page 55, where he is described as

> a twenty-seven-year-old oral narcotics addict (favoring Demerol and Talwin), and a more or less professional burglar […] a gifted burglar, when he burgled—though the size of a young dinosaur, with a massive and almost perfectly square head he used to amuse his friends when drunk by letting them open and close elevator doors on […] As an active drug addict, Gately was distinguished by his ferocious and jolly élan. He kept his big square chin up and his smile wide, but he bowed neither toward nor away from any man. (55)

His "ferocious and jolly élan" is eventually transformed into a single-minded will to overcome addiction, but at this point, he is still committed to his life of crime and addiction. However, this first scene also describes how he inadvertently causes the death of Guillaume duPlessis by gagging him when he has a severe head cold (58-9); DuPlessis, as it turns out, is "the right-hand man to probably the most infamous anti-O.N.A.N. organizer north of the Great Concavity" and "general leash-holder for the half-dozen or so malevolent and mutually antagonistic groups of Québecer Separatists and Albertan ultra-rightists" (58). Unfortunately for the world, the Incandenza family has also held (probably through its matriarch, Avril) a "sordid liaison with the pan-Canadian Resistance's notorious M. DuPlessis" (30); this enables him to acquire a disc of the film *Infinite Jest*, presumably an original, which Gately steals and releases to the underworld at large (Burn 32-3). The consequences for Gately are described

[7] It bears mentioning that Don Gately has a real-life model, known to the public for confidentiality reasons only as "Big Craig." Big Craig was a resident of Boston's Granada House at the same time as Wallace and later his roommate in a transitional house, and was a "burglar and Demerol addict" just like his fictional counterpart (Max 141). Even the recovery-sans-opioid story has historical precedent—Craig "had his wisdom teeth out with only Novocain" (Max 318 n13). Big Craig even read *Infinite Jest*, and told D.T. Max that he thought initially "Holy crap! The bastard was just looking for information" (320 n10).

by Wallace as "the sort of a hell of a deep-shit mess that can turn a man's life right around" (60).

That turnaround eventually leads him to recovery, and to the novel's central Ennet House, where Wallace spends a good deal of time on Gately's struggles with the tenets and requirements of Alcoholics Anonymous (these struggles mirror Wallace's own in many cases). The way Gately works through his difficulties and comes to accept the life-changing rigor of recovery amounts to a fictional presentation of a kind of recovery-as-religion; this association of persistence and difficulty with transcendence and even a kind of faith remains in Wallace's fiction and was clearly still of interest to him as he drafted sections of *The Pale King*. Again, as we have already seen Boswell argue, Gately's story transforms the "pop psychology" of AA into "a genuine and viable Kierkegaardian religion" that can "solve the problems of irony"; accepting the often "banal, clichéd, or vapid" slogans of AA is "the first gesture toward genuine openness, which Kierkegaard identifies as the primary feature of ethical existence" (143). Indeed, Gately has tremendous difficulty with the AA slogans, even after he has been sober for quite some time. He tells his Ennet House sponsor, Ferocious Francis G., that he "often feels a terrible sense of loss, narcotics-wise, in the A.M., still," and Francis "doesn't give Gately one iona [*sic*] of shit for feeling some negative feelings […] on the contrary, he commends Gately for his candor in breaking down and crying like a baby" (272-3). Francis also tells him that, when he feels narcotic cravings, he should just "Ask For Help and like Turn It Over, the loss and pain, to Keep Coming, show up, pray, Ask For Help"; Gately feels that this is "a lot of clichés," but comes to understand that "the clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*" (273). That

the reductive, Zen-like nature of these clichés conceals tremendous depth is a central claim of the novel.

One of these clichés that Wallace spends some time on, and that Gately wrestles with mightily, is that of the Higher Power (366). This concept is introduced perhaps a quarter of the way through the novel, but by page 442, Don Gately reveals that he

> still as yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power. It's suggested in the 3rd of Boston AA's 12 Steps that you to turn your Diseased will over to the direction and love of 'God as you understand him.' It's supposed to be one of AA's major selling points that you get to choose your own God. You get to make up your own understanding of God or a Higher Power or Whom-/Whatever. (442-3)

Gately wishes that one of his sponsors would simply tell him which Higher Power to worship, thereby relieving him of the duty; he envies those who came in with "*some* idea of Him/Her/It, whether fucked up or no," feeling that he "has no access to the Big spiritual Picture" (443). Indeed, the best he has been able to do so far is to proceed via negation:

> He says but when he tries to go beyond the very basic rote automatic get-me-through-this-day-please stuff, when he kneels at other times and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing—not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he Came In with. (443)

Gately expresses that he is terrified of the God-concept, and that he is all right with "something you can't see or hear or touch or smell," but not with "something you can't even *feel*" (444). What he feels instead is genuine "Nothingness," and when he imagines his prayers leaving him, they go "out and out, with nothing to stop them […] and never hitting Anything out there, much less Something with an ear. Much *much* less Something with an ear that could

possibly give a rat's ass" (444). On the one hand, this is just an expression of the sense that the universe is not caring or hospitable; on the other hand, Gately's and the narrator's tendency to capitalize "Nothing" is telling—Wallace is, I believe, offering something deeper than just the idea of an atheistic prayer.

Nothingness is always a fascinating concept (one with which Barthelme was preoccupied), and it is particularly so in a novel of this length, because it takes on the quality of a sort of diametric opposite of the excess of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative structure, a structure which is unquestionably still of the postmodern age—maximalist, satirical, full of strange names and bizarre futuristic predictions. This passage is quite brief, but it is heterogeneous with the rest of the novel, so crammed as it is with detail, so resistant to any sort of creeping nihilism or "nothingness."[8] It also raises a passage which is ostensibly nothing more than a standard Jamesian account of one variety of religious experience, to be tested only according to its fruits (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* 237) into something more like classical apophatic theology. This is not necessarily the opinion of all critics; Boswell, for example, writes that "Gately […] clearly understands God to be a fiction, for he doesn't even really 'believe' in the God to which he prays" (146); later, he quotes Wallace Stevens in the *Adagia*, declaring that "It is the belief and not the god that counts" (147). This Jamesian approach is not *in*accurate. Indeed, Gately himself is shocked, wondering how "some kind of Higher Power he didn't even believe in magically let him out of the cage when Gately had been a total hypocrite in even asking something he didn't believe in to let him out of a cage he had like zero hope of ever being let out of" (468).

[8] The same is true for another long novel not entirely unindebted to Wallace – Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, whose dense text is typographically "penetrated" by a blank window midway, clearly meant to represent a Nothingness similar to Gately's AA deity.

James himself even noted the potential for religion of *any* stripe to replace, in a direct and fungible way, chemical addiction: he quotes "some medical man" with whom he was acquainted who said, "the only radical remedy I know for dipsomania is religiomania" (268). I do not deny that this is all an adequate description of Gately's experience with recovery; however, I believe that more remains to be said beyond the simple Jamesian equivalency of dependence on opioids and dependence on a (totally fictional) Higher Power. Rather, there is a properly theological point to be made (though hardly an orthodox one).

We might turn here to thinkers like Pseudo-Dionysius, the great early exponent of apophatic (or negative) theology, who wrote to his friend Timothy that "we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being […] Since the unknowing of what is beyond being is something above and beyond speech, mind, or being itself, one should ascribe to it an understanding beyond being" (49). He says further that the only way to achieve union with divinity is by "a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge […] by knowing nothing" (137). Later in his *Mystical Theology*, he describes—or rather, refrains from describing—God as "not a material body, and hence [it] has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible" (140). Gately, for all his naïveté, is not far in his conclusions from apophatic theology; he comes to his unconventional means of prayer through desperation and despair, not reflection, but his ultimate conclusion is not perhaps as nihilistic as it might seem. Many philosophers and theologians have found no better way to describe that which is outside the pale of ordinary being and experience through the difficult *via negativa,* the way that denies being

instead of affirming what really cannot be known by *anyone*. The same point is made perhaps even more directly by Meister Eckhart, the medieval German mystic preacher: he claims that "in that Nothing God was born; He was the fruit of nothing. God was born in the Nothing […] he has the essence of all creatures within him" (140). There is really nothing that Gately says that could not fit plausibly in the apophatic theological tradition, beginning in old Byzantine theologies and continuing through the mystics of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

If the narrative ended at this point, it would be quite easy to categorize Wallace as a fictional exponent of apophatic theology as interpreted by Jacques Derrida, the early influence whom he found so compelling for fiction writers. Derrida saw the *via negativa* as a path that, in reality, is forked: it can lead either to "a logic of the *sur*, of the *hyper*, over and beyond," which would make it just a back-door expression of traditional theology, with all its pomp and logocentricity (*Derrida and Negative Theology* 102). There is in negative theology, Derrida notes, an "oscillation" between "the Babelian place (event, […] history, revelation, eschatology, messianism) and 'something' without thing, like an indeconstructible *Khora*" (*Sauf le nom* 81). Thus, a contemporary and postmodern expression of the *via negativa* would be "the passage of the idiom into the most common desert […] the chance of a promise and of an announcement in any case […] It holds desire in suspense, and always saying too much or too little, each time it leaves you without ever going away from you" (81, 85). This is a fascinating exposition of the latent aporetic nature of apophatic theology, but for Wallace, particularly at this point of his career, it poses a grave problem: the suspension of desire that Derrida finds in negative theology is just the same

Lacanian, frenzied pursuit of the (commercialized and televised) *objet petit a* that Wallace means for *Infinite Jest* to move away from, to provide an alternative to. Emphatically, though, he does *not* do this simply be repatriating apophatic theology to its "Babelian" or "eschatological" roots, as Derrida fears might happen; he does not just supply a transcendent God who is always "there" beyond and above being as a safety valve to protect the negative theologians and mystics from heresy charges. Instead, he still must find another way out, something that builds upon but is not exactly negative theology, oscillating between a conservative religious orthodoxy and the sort of purely postmodern "voyage into the desert" or "suspension of desire" that is the crux of Lévinassian ethics and which finds such clear expression in the works of Donald Barthelme and Jennifer Egan.

Ghost Stories: The Wraith of Postmodernism Haunting Sincerity

As the narrative progresses, Don Gately is, indeed, given a chance to develop ethically beyond his frustrated attempt to be grateful to "Nothing." After one of his recovery housemates, Randy Lenz, gets back into the world of cocaine-dealing and ends up being chased by two Canadian hit-men, Gately immobilizes two of the men but is shot in the shoulder in the process (608-13). "He never got shot before," the narrator tells us, and Gately imagines a headline reading "SHOT IN SOBRIETY" (613)—the *in sobriety* part turning out to be a serious theme of the remainder of the novel (which, at the time of the shooting, is only about half over). His fate is held in suspense for quite a long time; the next detail about him that is revealed is via the thoughts of Joelle van Dyne, the erstwhile star of the film *Infinite Jest* and the former lover of Orin Incandenza,

who by this time is also checked in to Ennet House for cocaine addiction and has begun to show a romantic interest in Gately, particularly after his heroism protecting the house and Lenz from the would-be assassins: "She thinks with fearful sentiment," we are told,

> of Don Gately, a tube down his throat, born by fever and guilt and shoulder-pain, offered Demerol by well-meaning but clueless M.D.'s, in an out of delirium, torn, convinced that certain men with hats wished him ill, looking at his room's semi-private ceiling like it would eat him if he dropped his guard. (707)

Although conveyed indirectly, this is indeed Gately's real dilemma: having succeeded at maintaining his sobriety for so long, he knows now that he has to either refuse oral narcotics entirely (thus enduring his gunshot wound without sufficient pain management) or return to addiction. It is another hundred pages, though, before the narrator beings to really plunge us into Gately's consciousness and struggle: "Gately lay on his back. Ghostish figures materialized at the peripheries of his vision and hung around and then dematerialized. The ceiling bulged and receded. Gately's own breath hurt his throat" (809). These sections of following Gately into his personal hell begin to dominate the end of the novel, to the point that Boswell says that the reader of *Infinite Jest* is "trapped inside the infantilized and *therefore* unimaginably brave, feverish, and naked interior of Don Gately. Nothing soothing about this at all" (177).

Thus begins, I submit, the ethical core of the novel, for Gately is (aside from Mario Incandenza) the least veiled, least ironic, most obviously non-postmodern figure in the whole work, and unlike Mario, he does not seem to be congenitally unironic. Instead, he must struggle to get there, first and most simply to get himself out of the world of mindless narcotic entertainment, commodification, and irony and into the world of authenticity (i.e. the clichéd

slogans and worship of a "Higher Power" that we have already seen him wrestle with upon admission to rehab), and second to remain on that path in a way that is almost irrational, against medical advice, and most of all just profoundly, horribly difficult. We continue as readers to follow this struggle, off and on, for the remainder of the narrative. First, as Joelle had imagined, the narrator eventually says explicitly that he "has been offered Demerol twice by shift-Drs. who haven't bothered to read the HISTORY OF NARCOTICS DEPENDENCY NO SCHEDULE C-IV + MEDIC. that Gately'd made Pat Montesian swear she'd make them put in italics on his file" (814). The bullet turns out to have "fragmented on impacting and passed through […] meters of muscle"; thus, the Trauma Specialist who treats Gately has to warn him that "the pain after the surgery's general anesthetic wore off was going to be unlike anything Gately had ever imagined" (814). This pain remains a constant theme in the novel; a bit later, Gately's side "hurts so bad he can barely hear," except that "from deep inside he can hear the pain laughing at the 90 mg. of Toradol-IM they've got in the I.V. drip" (828). Wallace's descriptions of Gately's dreams and hallucinations also take up a good deal of this section, interspersed with visits from friends from Ennet House and the monologues and stories of his hospital roommates.

One of the longest, and undoubtedly the most interesting, of the visits and/or hallucinations that Gately experiences is that of the "wraith" of James Incandenza. The narrator first calls this experience "an unpleasantly detailed dream where the ghostish figure that's been flickering in and out of sight around the room finally stays in one spot long enough for Gately to really check him out" (829). Then the "dream" begins to take on much more realistic qualities: Gately "considered that this was the only dream he could recall where even in

the dream he knew that it was a dream, much less lay there considering the fact that he was considering the up-front dream quality of the dream he was dreaming" (830). It becomes, in other words, a self-aware dream, and therefore a kind of postmodern dream, characterized as it is by the figure of recursion or the *mise-en-abîme*. The wraith is visible to Gately in an almost humorous quantity of detail; he notices, for example, its too short trousers and its "impressive thatch of nostril-hair" (829-30), which happen also to be among the first clues that this wraith is an apparition of the Incandenza family patriarch.[9] The wraith makes it clear that "Wraiths by and large exist […] in a totally different Heisenbergian dimension of rate-change and time-passage" and that they have to "use somebody's like internal brain-voice" to communicate (831). And communicate they do, although at first the dialogue is rather one-sided. The wraith somehow plants words "into Gately's personal mind […] with roaring and unwilled force" that Gately is certain he does not know, words like "*ACCIACCATURA* and *ALEMBIC*, *LATRODECTUS MACTANS* and *NEUTRAL DENSITY POINT*," etc; the narrator describes the experience as "not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape" (832). The bizarre scene accomplishes at least two goals: on the literal level, it posits the wraith as something "real," exceeding even the reach of the lucid dream, and on a more figurative plain, it associates Incandenza's ghost with the ever-present post-structuralist, Derridian/Lacanian world where *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. The ghost is emphatically academic, textual, and

[9] There are other hints about visits from Incandenza's "wraith" in the narrative; it is implied, for instance, that he is the "beneficiary or guardian ghost that resides in and/or manifests in ordinary physical objects" that moves objects in Ortho Stice's room in the Enfield Tennis Academy (942; Boswell 166).

postmodern (this is accentuated yet again by the fact that "Latrodectus Mactans" is the name of Incandenza's film production company [987]).

This postmodern wraith denies (unsurprisingly) that he is any "sort of epiphanyish visitation from Gately's personally confused understanding of God" (835), instead talking to the (at the moment totally voiceless) Gately about his desire to *establish* communication, to give a voice through his films to the so-called "figurants," actors who "could be seen (but not heard) in most pieces of filmed entertainment" (834-5). He goes so far as to claim that his "entertainments" were vehicles for a "radical realism," rather than "some self-conscious viewer-hostile heavy-art directorial pose," as most critics assumed (836). As Boswell points out, "Ironically, the art Incandenza's wraith describes, and which he affirms he never managed to produce, sounds much less like his own work and much more like the work that contains him [i.e. Wallace's own *Infinite Jest*]" (169). After all, in the footnoted filmography of James Incandenza, it is clear that many of the man's films are postmodern jokes, like *Cage*, which is a "Soliloquized parody of a broadcast-television advertisement for shampoo, utilizing four convex mirrors, two planar mirrors, and one actress" (986); another is a silent film presenting "closed-caption interviews with participants in the public Steven Pinker—Avril M. Incandenza debate on the political implications of prescriptive grammar" (987). This humorous, hyper-textual, self-reflexive body of work thus sounds like nothing other than the sort of vacant postmodern art whose ironic stance has been "absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 68). It seems, then, that either Incandenza's work did not entirely live up to his pure intentions (which seems unlikely, given that he is a largely unreformed alcoholic and suicide—a living

representation of the vortex of addiction and the nihilistic path that contemporary culture can take), or that the Incandenza-wraith has a new perspective on his pastiches.

Joelle van Dyne also assesses Incandenza's work quite damningly, saying that it is "amateurish," "the work of a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication"; it had, she recalled, "no emotional movement toward an audience" (740). Rather, it was (again, van Dyne seems to channel the Wallace of "E Unibus Pluram" here) "mordant, sophisticated, campy, hip, cynical, technically mind-bending; but cold, amateurish, hidden: no risk of empathy" (740). The situation is not entirely hopeless, because Joelle also noticed "flashes of something else" when he "tried to make characters move […] and showed courage" (740-1). Nevertheless, again, the overwhelming tendency is for Incandenza's work to show up as the almost exact analogue of sterile postmodern irony, the sort that Wallace saw as a hold-out and a carry-over from work that had once been socially and aesthetically relevant but had since been superseded and hegemonized by televisual entertainment culture and advertising (recall that parodies of television commercials are among Incandenza's *oeuvre*). This, then, places the incredibly destructive *samizdat*, Incandenza's unfinished deadly entertainment *Infinite Jest*, at the exaggerated apex of the man's filmic career: a sterile and infantilizing film that is paralyzingly addictive is both the ultimate expression of the deadening and narcotic state of popular culture, and also, projecting backward, an indictment of all postmodern pastiche: it all points to *Infinite Jest*, anticipates *Infinite Jest* as the point of consummation for non-communicative, insincere art. But the wraith claims that he made the film as

> a medium via which he and the muted son [the uncommunicative Hal] could simply *converse* […] something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life […] A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it *heard*. A life-long dream. The scholars and Foundations and disseminators never saw that his most serious wish was: *to entertain*. (839)

This is not an easy section of the novel to get right, especially because the wraith is maddeningly elusive: is he "real"? How much of his dialogue might be the fevered product of Gately's pain-wracked mind? And how much does he represent the "real" James Incandenza? But assuming we can take his words largely at face-value, this is a very interesting story of the genesis of *Infinite Jest*: it was really made with slightly warped good intentions, originally meant as a means to *open* communication, not to narcotize and destroy. If this is the case, then we must look further in the wraith-scene to understand why Incandenza failed so miserably.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer points us back to Recovery—Wallace's perennial symbol, at least in this novel, for sincerity and redemptive openness, his substitute (perhaps superior) for religious faith. Gately's reaction to hearing about *Infinite Jest* is to "recognize gross self-pity […] As in the slogan 'Poor Me, Poor Me, Pour Me A Drink'" (839). He doubts that the wraith could ever stay sober, and although the wraith claims that he was "sober as a Mennonite quilter for 89 days, at the very tail-end of his life," he also says that he found a "humorless evangelical rabidity" in the Boston AA meetings he attended, and "could never stand the vapid clichés and disdain for abstraction. Not to mention the cigarette smoke. The atmosphere of the meeting rooms had been like a poker game in hell" (839). Notably, this is the same struggle that Gately himself once had (which raises the possibility that, *pace* the introduction of

impossible lexical chains into Gately's head, that the wraith is at least partly a figment of his imagination), and which drove him deeper into Recovery, and drove him onto his knees to pray and give thanks to Nothing—the deity of his do-it-yourself apophatic theology that may not have quite been the perfect answer to addiction and entertainment, but was certainly a superior response to Incandenza's creation of *Infinite Jest*—the ultimate addiction. So in this particular *mise-en-scène*, the wraith and Gately are set up as opposites, all because of their disparate reactions to the slogans and requisite commitments of AA (aside from this, they are similar in many ways, including a healthy skepticism and a proclivity for substance abuse).

The wraith thus stands for a complex set of cultural realities and byzantine artistic dead-ends that miss sincerity despite their best efforts. His art is, for all that can be told through the extensive footnoted filmography at the end of *Infinite Jest*, full of fractured and incomplete works, sterile cul-de-sacs of self-referentiality and in-joking, and quite nearly all of the Mark-Leyner-ish techniques that Wallace excoriates in "E Unibus Pluram." And, thanks to the futuristic and somewhat dystopian setting of the novel, Wallace is able to extend this trend that he saw in American television (and the postmodern fiction that was always-already outflanked and outdone by television and advertising), taking it to its *reduction ad absurdum*: a film that leaves a man early in the novel in his own excrement, unresponsive, and yet "the expression on his rictus of a face nevertheless […] very positive, ecstatic, even, you could say," to the point that his wife "follow[s] his line of sight to the cartridge-viewer" (78-9). This is the ultimate nightmare of connectivity and entertainment, a film that ultimately becomes weaponized, so powerful is its addictive potential. But again, it is

important to remember the wraith's explanation for making the film: he sought "a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*"—he meant it as a gesture of apology and reconciliation, or, in short, as a *sincere* work of communicative art (839). This paradoxical effect—a *corruptio optima pessima* situation in which the most sincere effort should degrade into the most destructively addictive entertainment—strengthens the connection to "E Unibus Pluram," where Wallace actually praises the early postmodernists as prophetic social critics, but then traces the degradation of their work past its expiry and well into the terrain of reflexive pastiche. There is evidence, too, that Wallace had the same fears about *Infinite Jest*, writing to his editor that it absolutely had to be a "failed entertainment," as a successful one would itself simply recapitulate the addictive nature of the pastiches and advertising-riddled diversions it sought to critique (Max 183, 93).

The line dividing a true "entertainment"—with its addictive and insincere qualities—from a "failed entertainment," which mounts a real critique of society, is quite thin; the authentic artwork is not wholly heterogeneous with the addictive one, but instead, the attempt to create the authentic always runs the overwhelming risk of slipping into its destructive doppelgänger. The differences can be subtle; for example, the ending of the work can deeply influence the addictive or destructive potential of the work, and there is ample evidence that Wallace meant his "Artaud-ish ending" to provoke and disturb the reader, to remain with him or her in a productive way (Max 196, 193). The alternative, of course, is the perfectly hermetic, self-reflexive loop of the film *Infinite Jest*—a work of art that is meant to be repeated *ad infinitum*, or at least provokes in its viewers an insatiable desire to initiate such a repetition. A trajectory that is not

closed off, then, militates against the narcissistic and narcotic entertainment, which is a serious reason that Wallace leaves the end of his novel, and the fate of Don Gately, suspended in ambiguity. The other serious factor in keeping an attempt at authenticity from devolving into sterile pastiche is the one big difference between the wraith and Gately—the response to the cliché injunctions of Alcoholics Anonymous. A sort of absurd commitment and a willingness to risk everything for a contingent and not very convincing shot at redemption, regardless of how sentimental one comes across, is vital to authentic life and artistic endeavor. The intellectual resistance of James Incandenza to such risk, and his decision to hide in irony, distance, and academic sterility, are what prevent him from being able to break out of his addiction, and also what lead him to create the ultimately addictive entertainment.

There is no question that a specter is haunting the pages of *Infinite Jest*, but it is not primarily the specter of old traditions or religious archetypes, as in Barthelme, nor the specters that come from the future, as in Egan. Instead, Wallace locates his own work as pivot point between postmodernism and whatever lies beyond the postmodern, or more accurately, as a way out of the postmodern condition as it has come to be—a self-parody, a once-potent critique now reduced to the subaltern of televisual culture. Therefore, it can only be that the specter—represented most clearly by James Incandenza's wraith, but present everywhere in the novel—is late-stage postmodernism itself. The logic of haunting remains, and it continues to be just as productive a force as it has been in earlier works; the possibility of a fictional space beyond the postmodern, of a post-postmodern ethic of authenticity, does not put an end to hauntology, even if hauntology itself is posited primarily by deconstructive thinkers whose heritage

is itself postmodern. As always, the re-presentation of a weakened and spectral form of an old mode of thought is not the same thing as a denial or rejection of that thought, and the presence of the specter, however uncomfortable it might be, elicits a response that is greater than it would have been had the specter not haunted the fictional process. It is now to this response that we must turn; and since *Infinite Jest* attempts to be a "failed" postmodern entertainment that will subvert the ills of late-stage postmodern thought, it makes perfect sense to read it through the lens of the explicitly anti-postmodern philosopher and ethicist Alain Badiou. This excursion will not only shed light on the aesthetic and ethical thesis of *Infinite Jest*, but it will also give us a clear view of what happens to hauntology at the limits of the postmodern milieu that was its midwife.

Badiou and the Tunnel out of Postmodernity

Don Gately as a Figure of Ethical Fidelity

Alain Badiou is a Moroccan French philosopher and sometime Maoist revolutionary who has written extensively on metaphysics, mathematics and set theory, and ethics (Depoortere 5-6). Peter Hallward, in his preface to the English translation of Badiou's *Ethics*, describes him as "one of the most significant and original philosophers working in France today, and perhaps the only serious rival of Deleuze and Derrida" (viii). In his lecture series collected in English as *Infinite Thought*, Badiou argues that much of contemporary "philosophy" is not philosophy at all, because it does not contain the four dimensions of true philosophy: revolt, logic, universality, and risks (29). He attacks Anglo-American analytic philosophy (which ultimately descends from Wittgenstein's circle), Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy, and (most importantly for our

purposes), the language-centered philosophy of French postmodernists and deconstructionists—in other words, the same tradition that gave rise to hauntology and that informs so much of the fiction considered here (including, by his own admission, that of David Foster Wallace) (*Infinite Thought* 31-3). And, indeed, Badiou's *Ethics* could not be more explicit about its objections to postmodern, post-Lévinassian ethics of difference (of which Derrida's and Caputo's ethics, so important to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, are eminent examples). Badiou, in his preface to the English edition, calls the work "a political attack against the ideology of human rights" and a "defense of […] antihumanism" (liv). The ethical system "that proposes a radical, primary opening to the Other," he writes, has "neither force nor truth" (19-20). The reason for this is that "the real question" posed to the ethicist is "that of *recognizing the Same*" (25). The discourse of sameness is more important than that of alterity because "[i]nfinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences […] There are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself" (25-6). Truth cannot simply be the basic state of affairs, but instead must stand out as exceptions thereunto (26-7).

This has a clear bearing on Wallace's concerns both inside and outside of *Infinite Jest*. Just as Wallace frets about advertising and televisual culture in "E Unibus Pluram," so Badiou worries that a philosophy grounded in alterity or in the deconstructive potential of language—one that "institutes the passage from a truth-orientated philosophy to a meaning-orientated philosophy" (*Infinite*

Thought 34)—will never be capable of mounting an effective social critique of the current regime of commerce. "[I]f the category of truth is ignored," he writes,

> if we never confront anything but the polyvalence of meaning, then philosophy will never assume the challenge that is put out to it by a world subordinated the merchandising of money and information […] If philosophy is to sustain its desire in such a world, it must propose a principle of interruption. It must be able to propose to thought something that can interrupt this endless regime of circulation. Philosophy must examine the possibility of a point of interruption—not because all this must be interrupted—but because thought at least must be able to extract itself from this circulation and take possession of itself once again as something other than an object of circulation. (36)

In short, since contemporary philosophies based on language, communication, and chains of deferred semantics formally imitate the chains of deferred payment and currency exchange in the marketplace, they are caught up in the same circulation and the same system, which puts them at a disadvantage when they attempt to critique that same circulatory regime, that "society of the spectacle" that Guy Debord writes is so overwhelming as to pronounce chiastically that "that which appears is good, that which is good appears"; it obliterates perspectives from which it can be judged or other systems to which it could be compared (¶12). This is quite like what Wallace writes of postmodern fiction—it does not sufficiently distinguish itself from the commoditized society it ostensibly objects to, so it cannot condemn it or initiate a process of change from a vantage of any serious prominence.

As an alternative that can escape the dull round of capitalism, Badiou proposes instead what Peter Hallward calls an "'evental' break with the status quo, a break sparked by an event that eludes classification in the situation" that "can continue only through a fidelity guarded against its Evil distortion" (*Ethics* xiv). Badiou himself defines truth, or rather "*a* truth" as "the real process of a

fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity *produces* in the situation" (42). These concepts of fidelity and truth are not posited as a part of a universal system, but as contingencies that arise from specific, and often quite fragile, situations: "there is no abstract Subject," Badiou writes, "who would adopt [ethics in general] as his shield. There is only a particular kind of animal, convoked by certain circumstances to *become* a subject" (40). This is not only quite a fascinating definition of the ethical subject—a very ordinary animal that is somehow called to a higher, ethical plane of existence—but it is also vital to understanding the way Don Gately's "subjective" perseverance constitutes the ethical backbone of *Infinite Jest*, serving as a model for the book's troubled exit from the more narcissistic and tainted forms of postmodernism. Badiou develops his theory of the ethical subject further, in a way that bears an increasingly strong resemblance to Wallace's presumptive hero: this subject "is simultaneously *himself*, nothing other than himself, a multiple singularity recognizable among all others, and *in excess of himself*, because the uncertain course of fidelity *passes through him*, transfixes his singular body and inscribes him, from within time, in an instant of eternity" (45). The ethical injunction to which such an individual must subject himself is adapted by Badiou from Lacan, who revises the latter's dictum *ne pas céder sur son désir* ("do not give up on your desire") to "do not give up on your own seizure by a truth-process" (47). This is perhaps not quite as mellifluous as the Lacanian original, but it is closer to the experience of Gately, who is quite literally transfixed in "an instant of eternity," and makes every attempt to "[s]eize in [his] being that which has seized and broken [him]" (47).

The parallels between Badiou's theory of the ethical subject, and Wallace's description of Gately's experience, are too obvious to ignore. In one particular

passage, coming after the encounter with the wraith, Gately dreams that a new doctor has arrived to try to convince him to accept the painkiller Dilaudid, the same drug to which he was previously addicted, to help him recover from his gunshot wound: "Surrender your courageous fear of dependence and let us do our profession, young sir," say the doctor (888). Gately's sponsor, Ferocious Francis, leaves him alone and ready to capitulate, only saying that Gately "[m]ight want to Ask For Some Help, deciding" (889). When Gately wakes up, accidentally lashing out at his hospital bed and skinning his hand, he realizes that he has found a way to deal with the pain by a very Badiouan, almost accidental, dogged persistence:

> Gately brought his skinned hand gingerly back inside the railing and felt to make sure there really was a big invasive tube going into his mouth, and there was. He could roll his eyes way up and see his heart monitor going silently nuts. Sweat was coming off every part of him, and for the first time in the Trauma Wing he felt like he needed to take a shit, and he had no idea what arrangements there were for taking a shit but suspected they weren't going to be appetizing at all. Second. Second. He tried to Abide. No single second was past enduring. The intercom was giving triple dings. (890)

Later, the narrator's free indirect discourse continues to take us into Gately's consciousness: "He heard the singsong voice promising about increasing discomfort. His shoulder beat like a big heart, and the pain was sickeninger than ever. No single second was past standing" (890). This idea of second-by-second Abiding, in which no single second is intolerable even though all seconds combined clearly would be, is carefully embedded into a passage that is manifestly pedestrian, dedicated as it is to hospital sounds and bodily functions. This should prejudice us to consider Gately just "a particular kind of animal," as Badiou would have it, who is called to a radical fidelity to a contingent event: in

this case, the event of resistance to narcotic addiction (*Ethics* 40). He comes incredibly close to betraying the event, finding even his attempts to rely on "the protection and care of a Higher Power" frustrated by a "bitter impotent Job-type rage": "why the fuck say no to a whole rubber bulbful of Demerol's somnolent hum," he wonders, "if these are the quote *rewards* of sobriety and rabidly-active work in AA?" (895).

Later in the same passage Gately begins "to mentally recite the Serenity Prayer,"[10] but despite its religious overtones, this passage shifts its emphasis from more patently religious ideas of Asking For Help and into a very Badiouan process of dogged fidelity without transcendent justification (895). The question, though, is this: what has changed? First, Gately is now *in extremis* much more so than he has been elsewhere in the book, constantly menaced by well-meaning medical staff, in easy reach of narcotics, and in excruciating pain. Second, though, it is possible to consider Gately's entire experience in AA, including the vexed prayers to the apophatic deity of Nothingness, as the kind of "encounter" that Badiou insists must precede any process of truth and fidelity (51-2). Badiou distinguishes the "communicable" from the "encounter," arguing that "[t]he Immortal that I am capable of being cannot be spurred in me by the effects of communicative sociality, it must be *directly* seized by fidelity […] broken, in its multiple-being, by the course of an immanent break" (51). Still, "communicative sociality" itself might be an accurate descriptor for the Ennet House. It is not

[10] This prayer is itself brief and, since "recite[d]" here, it is not too conjectural to assume that it is repeated as well. Repetitive prayer lends itself to a kind of perseverance through difficulty which in itself can become "evental" and persistent; this prayer need not be sectarian in any sense. As Michael Raposa notes, "the element of redundancy is ubiquitous in religious practices," (109), and an Italian study once showed an identical beneficial cardiovascular effect stemming from the Ave Maria and a "typical yoga mantra" (Bernardi *et al.* 1447). Gately's prayer life has always smacked of Jamesian syncretism, but in this passage it becomes clear that his persistence is not classically theistic, though it is haunted by theism at every turn.

entirely possible to decide what "encounter" might have spurred Gately on to his radical fidelity (although I shall suggest what I believe is the best one immediately below). What is certain, though, is that he fits, right up to the end of the narrative that contains him (and, imaginatively, beyond it) the *contingent* nature of "the fidelity" that Badiou insists upon: fidelity, he writes, "is never inevitable or necessary"; rather, "since the sole principle of perseverance is that of interest, the perseverance of some-one in a fidelity—the continuation of the being-subject of a human animal—remains uncertain. We know that it is because of this uncertainty that there is a place for an ethic of truths" (69). Indeed, as Trevor Parfitt writes, in Badiou's ethics, "[t]he challenge of keeping faith with an event disrupts the process of living a normal life and can call one's survival into question" (683).

This idea is certainly striking—Badiou takes the regime of uncertainty itself as the *precondition* for the "ethic of truths," not simply as a potential stage for its appearance. We know that Wallace fretted that the end of his novel, if too kind to the reader and too possessed of finitude, would lead to its becoming a perfect entertainment of the very sort that he meant to rail against. The Badiouan explanation, though, one has to imagine, would be that undecidability itself is the only sphere of ethics, so to remove Gately from his inconclusive ending and re-inscribe him into the mere communicative and linguistic world of circulation would be to deprive him of his heroism. As it is, he is trapped in a kind of amber, always in motion, always making his asymptotic approach to perfection but never quite at a stable point of arrival: the infinite extension of time for him thus becomes the sole way in which he becomes the hero of *Infinite Jest*. The way in which time distorts for him is particularly reminiscent of Agamben's discourse

on messianic time in *The Time That Remains*, a text that is also important to consider when analyzing Egan's use of futurity in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a novel whose use of a quasi-dystopian American future and the inconclusive conclusion are surely indebted to Wallace (62-5). This does not make Gately a messiah—not hardly—but it does capture him at a moment of non-being; he is, through consistent fidelity, "becoming" a hero. He is transfixed by his haunting, and he in turn haunts the novel's conclusion by hovering in undecidability between past and future, between addiction and sincerity. This is also an accurate depiction of the entire novel and of Wallace's career, which hovers on the cusp between classic postmodernism (which I have already described as "haunted" in the preceding chapters) and its future forms. It lives in a space haunted, in short, by both past and future, a sign pointing the way out of postmodernity as spectacle and toward a more critical and authentic articulation of the experimental and spectral forms.

Hamlet, *the Incandenza Wraith, and the Necessity of Ghosts*

We cannot be content just yet with this explanation, because a case must be made for the importance of the "wraith" in the novel. It is my contention that the irruption of this specter into Gately's consciousness and hospital bed is what could most clearly be called the "encounter" that sets off the process of fidelity in which Gately is transfixed at the end of the novel; and in spite of numerous other instances of haunting in the work, this is the single movement that most convincingly allows us to call it *hauntological*. Once visited by the wraith, Gately is implicated in spectrality, and the encounter (although it does not really impress him at the time) does seem to raise the stakes somehow: it places him

into the stream of postmodern production and spectacular entertainment that overwhelms the Incandenza family and whose excess creates such urgency that it produces a specter: the spectacular, in short, yields to the spectral. Strikingly, it is the apparition of Incandenza's explicitly Hamlet-like ghost, which recalls the opening of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and its close reading of *Hamlet*'s own ghost scene, that seems not only to imbue Gately with evental purpose and fidelity, but also to associate him with Hal and the remaining Incandenzas enough to help dig up Incandenza Sr.'s body (not ghost) in yet another *Hamlet*-like scene. In other words, the long and slow dénouement of this novel brings into collision ideas of spectrality that filiate from deconstruction and the Lévinassian tradition and from the more orthodox-Marxist Badiouan and Žižekian tradition that accuses the former of complicity with capitalist spectacle. Harmonizing them is outside the scope of this chapter, for certain, but Wallace's text may already gesture toward such a reconciliation.

The short and cryptic first mention of "Donald Gately" in *Infinite Jest*, narrated by Hal, who characteristically and somewhat formally avoids Gately's nickname, is overwhelmingly inflected by *Hamlet*, as Gately helps Hal "dig up [his] father's head" (17). Prince Hamlet does not dig up his own father, of course, but rather Yorick, the "man of infinite jest." However, Hamlet's father does indeed come to visit him dramatically, to the point that this visit (visible to others besides Hamlet) sets the entire drama in motion. Derrida makes a great deal of this in *Specters of Marx*: "[t]he one who says 'I am thy Fathers Spirit' can only be taken at his word," Derrida writes; "[a]n essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of his origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction" (7). The strange fact in *Infinite Jest*'s recapitulation of *Hamlet*, though, is that the

wraith of Incandenza does not treat Hal as his own child so much as Gately: he appears to Gately, perhaps to use him as a go-between to establish channels of post-mortem spectral communication with Hal. By appearing to Gately, the wraith inscribes Gately into the chain of postmodern filiation, but *in order to break it*: by seeking as his proxy heir the only character in the novel who evinces genuine, non-ironic sincerity, the wraith admits the utter futility of his "spectacular" and sterilely postmodern project, and he appears to recognize that only a persevering "hero" can re-establish real communication (*not* just the circulating language games of the spectacle). In order to do this, he irrupts (unwelcomed) into Gately's theater of persistence and treats him like a surrogate son. As Derrida predicts he will, it appears that he obeys: he takes the wraith at his word and helps Hal to dig up the head in search (we can only presume) of the original copy of *Infinite Jest*, which is narcotic postmodernity's ur-text.

Indeed, it would not be surprising, under Derrida's rubric, to find the original *Infinite Jest* inside the skull of Incandenza: he writes, in *Specters of Marx*, that "one cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits […] except on the condition of language—and the voice, in any case of that which *marks* the name or takes its place ('*Hamlet*: That Scull had a tongue in it, and could sing once')" (9). The skull is indeed the locus of the voice, insofar as sounds produced by the tongue and larynx resonate inside the bones of the skull; it is the chamber that amplifies the voice and makes it audible. But the great fact of Incandenza's life—illustrative of the postmodern society of the spectacle as well—is that he *could not* communicate, with Hal or others (Boswell 162-4). Thus, while we do not know *exactly* what is found in the exhumed skull because the only description of the scene comes in a proleptic dream of Gately's, this source does indicate that

nothing was found there; it had already been absconded with, presumably by the Québécois separatists against whose terroristic dissemination of *Infinite Jest* the wraith of Incandenza means to warn Gately and Hal (Boswell 166-7).[11] In this dream, Gately is with "a very sad kid […] in a graveyard" and that they have to dig up someone's head "before it's too late," but eventually he sees the kid holding "something terrible up by the hair" and mouthing the words "*Too Late*" (934).

Why too late? On the literal level, it must be because the Québécois terrorists have already obtained the *samizdat* from the skull of Incandenza, meaning that the process of dissemination can begin: the terrorists now have a weapon of ultimate entertainment by which to spread the society of the spectacle to the entire nation (notably, Agamben in *The Coming Community* says that "[t]oday," i.e. the late nineties, is "the era of the complete triumph of the spectacle") (XVIII). Not incidentally, James Incandenza's method of suicide—by placing his head in a microwave—was grisly specifically insofar as it implicated his head: Hal explains later that the "field pathologist who drew the chalk lines around [Incandenza's] shoes on the floor said maybe ten seconds tops. He said the pressure build-up would have been almost instantaneous. Then he gestured at the kitchen walls. Then he threw up" (142, 253). In other words, his head explodes literally in his suicide, and figuratively when it is emptied of its contents by the Québécois and the copy of *Infinite Jest* is granted the potential to

[11] Boswell conjectures that "Incandenza's postmortem appearances seem to be motivated by a desire to warn those still alive of Avril Incandenza's possible involvement with the Quebecois terrorists" and more generally "to save both the country from the film and Hal from his own brooding solipsism" (166, 169); this would imply that his revenance is not focused primarily around revenge, but meliorative action. This parallels, perhaps, Wallace's own contention in "E Unibus Pluram" that postmodernism was *at one time* an effective tool of social critique, thus coming across as well-intentioned but pre-empted and obsolete.

"explode" to the entire world. The implications for deconstructive thought are obvious: the pursuit of the utterance, text, or work of art takes one not to that work itself, but to a place where it *was just located* but that is now a vacancy; the pursuit is deferred and asymptotic, just like the pleasure granted by the video disc of *Infinite Jest*. It leads to a process of continuous circulation and frustration; as Debord writes of the spectacle, what it "offers as eternal is based on change and must change with the base" (¶ 71). The skull could perhaps have resonated once, or made an attempt to house an authentic voice, but even that small chance is now gone. It is only vacancy, and instead of the skull, the ghost itself must speak. And this is surely why Derrida highlights the *face* of the Hamlet ghost, wearing "his Beaver up" (8).

If we continue to take the life and work of James Incandenza, with its hip irony and its ultimate failure to communicate meaningfully, as typological of the postmodern, then the patchwork of dream-scenes that constitute this grave-digging scene is key to understanding the whole novel, and point clearly to a post-postmodern landscape that is *not* a reversion to an ersatz modernism, Victorianism, or any other archaic form. By putting forth a vision of the empty skull deferring and disseminating narcotic entertainment, Wallace continues his critique of postmodern and televisual sterility. But by separating Incandenza's wraith from the blunt and hopeless reality of his corpse, Wallace also shows how the logic of haunting will continue beyond, in spite of, and through the postmodern era understood as a series of techniques and attitudes of irony and skepticism. It is only when postmodernism itself, that supremely haunted literary and critical form, itself passes into the chain or filiation of specters that it (like all forms that haunt *it*) loses its destructive potential and works toward an

opening and a process of liberation and personal heroism. This means that the inevitable end of postmodern fictional style will not spell the end of haunting as a way to understand the inheritance of religious and ethical meaning. Best of all, though these fragments of plot would seem to un-freeze Don Gately from his status of fossilized fidelity, they are always presented as dreams or recollections, and Wallace never directly gives them the force of reality. The fragments strongly hint at a positive outcome for Gately as a man and a negative outcome for society as a whole, and this pessimism should not be discounted; however, by remaining fragments and mediated visions, they do not actually destroy the effectiveness of the supremely ambiguous ending, and therefore they leave Gately in his position of suspended heroism—the ultimate Badiouan subject.

Agamben, Language, and the "Way Out"

The situation at the end of *Infinite Jest* is, as mentioned above, not particularly positive: considering that the televisual society of the spectacle that Wallace decries in "E Unibus Pluram" has become literally weaponized and is, as far as can be told from the ambiguous plot, under the control of terrorists, it would seem that Wallace considers the diffusion of postmodern irony to be complete, and art's complicity in this spectacle to be virtually total: as Debord writes of spectacular society, "the reality of time has been replaced by the *advertisement* of time" (¶ 154); this total triumph of commodification is something Wallace makes abundantly clear by naming the very calendar years after corporate sponsors, as in "Year of Glad" or "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment." Giorgio Agamben, in *The Coming Community*, makes a similar point: when Debord's work on the spectacular society was published, he notes,

"the transformation of politics and of all social life into a spectacular phantasmagoria had not yet reached the extreme form that today has become perfectly familiar" (79). He also argues that "it is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity of linguistic being of humans" (80), which further unifies Wallace's depiction of the *Infinite Jest* film's impending distribution—it is a textualized and displaced signifier, soon to bathe the world in spectacle. The possibility for optimism, or for authenticity, seems deeply circumscribed and increasingly less real.

Still, amid all this pessimism, Agamben sees an opportunity, and he re-imagines the society of the spectacle as something that, while certainly not *good*, contains within itself the germ of a possible solution:

> The extreme form of [the] expropriation of the Common is the spectacle, that is, the politics we live in. But this also means that in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted. This is why (precisely because what is being expropriated is the very possibility of a common good) the violence of the spectacle is so destructive; but for the same reason the spectacle retains something like a positive possibility that can be used against it. (80)

He compares the spectacle to "Shekinah," a way of speaking of the glory of God, and how Shekinah can become a force of destruction when human beings "isolate" it from the other Sefirot (or "attributes of the divinity"); Shekinah, he argues, is very much the "word," the linguistic manifestation of the divine. "*The risk*" when we attempt to divorce language from the rest of truth, he says, "*is that the word – that is, the non-latency and the revelation of something (anything whatsoever) – be separated from what it reveals and acquire an autonomous consistency*" (81, emphasis author's). This is the society of the spectacle: "this very communicativity, this generic essence itself (i.e., language) […] separated in an autonomous sphere" (82). This is also most certainly a good description of the

society that Wallace critiques in "E Unibus Pluram," and whose *reduction ad absurdum* is expressed through the *Infinite Jest* film: postmodernism insofar as it mimics and recapitulates consumerist estrangement is spectacular and destructive. However, these conditions also make it "possible for humans to experience their own linguistic being—not this or that content of language, but language *itself*," and only those who can resist the nothingness this implies and bring "language itself to language" can "enter into the paradise of language and leave unharmed" (83).

The thought here is not easy to follow, but bringing "language itself to language" while forestalling the capacity of semiotic spectacle to annul all meaning is powerful stuff that would clearly appeal to Wallace:[12] Agamben seems to argue that it is not enough for language to be self-conscious, self-referential, or deconstructive; it is further necessary to learn how to be conscious of that fact *without* being trapped in it. We must be self-conscious of self-consciousness in our world, or, put more literarily, able to handle irony without ourselves lapsing into a wholly ironic modality. As for Wallace, it is necessary to find a middle ground—recall that Wallace never expressed a desire to undo literary or philosophical history, or to wallow in nostalgia, but to navigate a path from the worst articulation of postmodernism into a new rebelliousness (*A Supposedly Fun Thing* 81). Wallace himself is almost indisputably a postmodern novelist, which means that he absolutely did participate in much of what he criticized about the literary landscape; that he knew this is fairly clear from his worries to Michael Pietsch about *Infinite Jest* becoming mere "entertainment" and

[12] Indeed, Boswell makes almost this exactly claim: *Infinite Jest*, he argues, "does not refer back to itself solely to call attention to its artificiality but rather to create a free space in which the language can exist 'simply [as] language.' Yet it is language that 'lives'" (171).

his desire to make sure that it "failed." And yet, at the same time, he makes use of every technique at his disposal—overwhelming chains of footnotes and endnotes, self-referential prose, tongue-in-cheek names, playful irreality, etc.—in order to further his goal of achieving authenticity.[13] Perhaps this is because only a postmodernist can transcend the postmodern, just like only an addict (Don Gately) can face Nothingness directly (through his prayers to the apophatic God-without-being) and emerge as a hero in the struggle *against* addiction, both on the literal chemical level and in the sphere of entertainment. This is why I have characterized Wallace's (tentative) solution to his problem with postmodernity as a "tunnel": it passes *through* the postmodern and only by the grace of postmodernity does it provide a contrast, a new kind of anti-ironic being.

In this sense, then, while Badiou's philosophy provides a more than adequate (indeed, perhaps the best) understanding of Don Gately's heroism and perseverance, as a general ethical system, it is more extreme than Wallace in its attitude toward the postmodern, and I believe that Wallace actually articulates the more sophisticated response. Whereas Badiou wants to reject and bracket off the entire realm of differences (*Ethics* 19-20) and set philosophy in diametric opposition to the "regime of circulation" (*Infinite Thought* 36), Wallace augments the overall web of postmodern techniques that pervade *Infinite Jest* with a plot thread that contrasts with and exceeds it. He *accommodates* his own former postmodern, ludic, and metafictional tendencies, but does not allow himself to be lost in them. Again, I think he is following Agamben here, or at least in remarkable sympathy with him. Speaking of "the coming being" (something like

[13] Which is to say that Wallace himself is haunted by postmodern ghosts, of course—as Boswell points out, the wraith Incandenza "also acts as Wallace's own postmodern father. Incandenza is Pynchon, Barth, and Nabokov all rolled into one" (164).

the spectral Other in Derrida), he argues that it "relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property […] but only in its being *such as it is*. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal" (1). The important quality of the coming being is not just a random sea of differences, nor is it an absolute universal claim, but "being-*such*, belonging itself" (2). A bit later, in the same vein, he notes that "[t]he passage from potentiality to act, from language to the word, from the common to the proper, comes about every time as a shuttling in both directions along a line of sparkling alternation on which common nature and singularity, potentiality and act change roles and interpenetrate" (20). Interpenetration is offered here in lieu of one absolute or the other, purely differential-Lévinassian ethics or purely universalist-Badiouan. And since Debord calls the society of the spectacle "an official language of generalized separation," it would seem that the fight against separation is the good fight here (¶ 3).

"Being-*such*" and "interpenetration" are processes—Agamben exalts process and becoming over being and identity, and Wallace also saw the process of readership as more important than the artifact of the book itself, and certainly than the identity and intention of the author: "Once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead," he notes (qtd. in Boswell 171). Instead, as Boswell argues, "the text is […] a 'form of life' that exists *only* as an exchange between [Wallace] himself and a reader" (171). It is up to the reader, in other words, to realize or to balance the dynamic alternation between postmodern circulation and evental fidelity that transfixes the heart of *Infinite Jest*. It is also up to the reader to resolve (or fail to resolve) the ambiguity of the final

lines of the novel. Gately remembers an early experience with heroin in which he blacks out after a drug deal gone bad and awakens "flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (981). Boswell points out that we still do not know if Gately "might have just been injected with Dilaudid," in which case the whole scene of heroism would be nullified; it is therefore at once "a death and a birth, an exhaustion and a replenishment" (178-9). Even the last two words are riddled with ambiguity: "way out" could just be a flat and purely descriptive term for the tide, for the neutral and blank scene in which Gately awakens (or remembers himself awakening), or a foregrounding of the words "way out" to emphasize that Gately *is* the way out, the exit, the tunnel out of the televisual spectacle. Like so much else in this novel, it is textually undecidable; therefore, the task of interpretation lies with the interpretive community that gathers around the text—in other words, with a process that alternates between possibilities, and not with a single, stable meaning.

The polyvalent ambiguity of the novel's ending, which leaves us hanging between resolution and openness, between pessimism and optimism, is characteristic of the logic of haunting, which we have considered as the operation of a cause that "[…] insists […] without […] existing" (Fisher 20). Virtually everything about this novel that we have discussed has clear effects—creates ripples that extend beyond the individual passage or effect—but very few of them can be said to have a guaranteed existence. Therefore, even beyond the obvious "ghost story" that is the visit of the wraith to Don Gately, this novel is a greater ghost story: it is haunted not so much by modernist or pre-modern discourses, but by its own immediate postmodern forebears: in order to exorcise

the demon that is the televisual spectacle, the novel opens itself to the ghost of postmodernism (virtually indistinguishable from the former); Satan casts out Satan, and is divided against himself. This is because, as Agamben reminds us, the point is not actually to regress to a naïve point of imagined origin, but to bring language to language, to pass *through* the fire of detached language and nihilism without being singed. The only chance Wallace has of forming an authentic and anti-ironic message is by taking the tremendous risk of writing a postmodern novel, a grand entertainment that *shares its very title* with the very fetishistic object that it dreads: the perfect (and therefore lethal) entertainment. And remarkably, despite his fears, it works: he blends this thoroughgoing postmodern novel with a thread of incommensurate Badiouan rigor, belonging to a character who is perhaps the only one in Wallace's *oeuvre* to be able to pass through the fire without being singed—i.e., to survive postmodernism's compromised wasteland and discover a *way out*.

This way out is nothing more than pure contingency, however. As with everything else in the spectral novel, we do not and cannot know if it "works," or if anything really changes as a result. Wallace always maintained that the effectiveness of *Infinite Jest* is predicated upon its inconclusive ending, because that ending is supposed to "hum and project" in the space created between text and reader. The work was written at a time when Wallace was supremely concerned about the dominance of television, advertising, and the general conditions of spectacle; *Infinite Jest* is in many ways a doom-laden projection of that culture into the future. Comparing it naïvely with the history that we now know has actually followed it is not particularly instructive, although it is quite certain that spectacle still holds itself forth as definitive in contemporary America.

However, this is not the point: the point is that, at a time saturated with imagistic culture, Wallace struggled to find, and (I argue) actually did find a fictive form and a delicate balance that both honored and presented postmodern technique while also subverting it and pointing to a *topos* beyond it: in the briefest possible terms, *Infinite Jest* is *haunted by the postmodern*. The meaning of this for our purposes is clear: haunting and postmodernism are clearly caught up with one another, but hauntology does not live or die with the postmodern. Hauntology continues presenting fragments from past formulae and disseminating them in ghostly form throughout their filiations. We have seen already that Barthelme's classically postmodern fiction is haunted by a religious kind of excess derived from a collage of old forms; Wallace, troubled by postmodernism but not at all free of it, is haunted by the specters of Barthelme's generation while at the same time catapulting fiction into a new, vivid present tense that collides and synthesizes postmodern and universalist ethics. In the next chapter, I will argue that Jennifer Egan bears the torch of the hauntological novel into the twenty-first century, this time with a focus on haunting that comes from the future instead of the past or the troubled, self-undermining present.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Those Who Weren't Aware of Having Any Left": Eschatology and Anagogy in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

Introduction: A Novel for the Future

That Jennifer Egan's work bears a close relationship to futurity and prolepsis is hardly controversial: indeed, it is almost a commonplace in surveys of her fiction. L. Timmel Duchamp, for example, is clearly thinking of Egan when he speaks of the need for more "fiction that lives in the future," and he credits the success of her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* with heralding the death of "the novel of psychological 'realism'" (3-4). Similarly, Elissa Elliot, writing for *Paste*, says that Egan "is one-and-a-half steps ahead of the crowd" and, beginning with her third novel *The Keep*, "has taken the current novel form and cheerfully turned it on its head." Most strangely of all, critics have picked up on an apparent clairvoyance—coincidental, perhaps, or simply the work of an extremely observant author—in her earlier novels, especially 2001's *Look at Me*: Sarah LaBrie, writing for *This Recording*, notes that Egan's work can read like "gonzo reporting from a parallel universe. But what separates her from other post-modern satirists like Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace is that sometimes the impossible situations she dreams up actually, creepliy come true." In particular, LaBrie highlights a passage in which a terrorist named Aziz contemplates the best way "to saturate the airwaves with images of devastation," even mentioning the first World Trade Center bombing; the catch is that *Look at Me* was published *before* the September 11th attacks (*Look at Me*, author's note).

Likewise, LaBrie insists that characters "sound wildly Zuckerbergian" while describing Facebook-like databases and become celebutante "reality-television" stars "years before anyone knew who Lauren Conrad was."

Even though these eerie correspondences between Egan's fiction and reality help drive home just how perceptive she is, they are not the only, nor the most important, reflections of futurity or eschatology in her *oeuvre*. Indeed, futurity is an inherent, pervasive feature of her narrative, which tends to skip back and forth between different temporal locales, thereby "giving away" the eventual fates of characters and, invariably, providing a vision of the increasingly technological (and, at least in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, catastrophic) fate of the world and the human race. Sometimes, the fixation on future outcomes seems almost gratuitous; for instance, in the fourth chapter of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a "Samburu warrior" appears very briefly, interacting with a group of characters on a safari. He does little more than "exchange shy glances" with a teenage girl, but the next paragraph gives a detailed, proleptic biography of the young man: "Thirty-five years from now, in 2008, this warrior will be caught in the tribal violence between the Kikuyu and the Luo and will die in a fire. He'll have had four wives and sixty-three grandchildren by then […]" (47). The paragraph continues on for a considerable space in this vein, and it is far from the only such passage in this novel, or in Egan's work as a whole. Its strange blend of bleakness (announcing the early death of the man) and consolation (his great number of grandchildren signifying a kind of hope and fullness of life) is also characteristic of Egan's manipulation of time and prolepsis in her narratives. There is, on the one hand, a great sense of looming catastrophe (ecological, technological, etc.), which usually correlates to Egan's use of detailed,

omniscient predictions. On the other hand, when she is deliberately vague about what the future holds, there is instead a sense of profound, though contingent, hope and expectation for the fate of humanity.

Similarly, she displays a recurrent preoccupation with the way technology changes human characters and relationships. Technology, for Egan, is certainly not an unqualified good, but she is not content to write of it with the kind of pure dystopian negativity so commonly encountered in speculative fiction. Certainly she is not blind to the destructive potential of technological change; as mentioned above, the conclusion of *Look at Me* certainly gives a bleak and amoral vision of something like reality television and self-promoting websites like Facebook, and the character of Danny in *The Keep* is presented as a kind of technology addict, tragicomically helpless without his satellite phone. Still, in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, technology appears as a two-edged sword. In the passage quoted above, she goes on to note that one of the warrior's grandchildren "will go to college at Columbia and study engineering, becoming an expert in visual robotic technology that detects the slightest hint of irregular movement (the legacy of a childhood spent scanning the grass for lions)" (47). One of his inventions, designed in New York, becomes "standard issue for crowd security" (47). The reference to "crowd security" in New York City ties this passage in with Egan's post-9/11 landscape; although she does not write specifically about the event, it is always haunting the edges of her fiction (presciently in *Look at Me*, and rather pervasively in *Goon Squad*). Thus, in one short paragraph, Egan shows the pace of change in twenty-first century society, from African savanna to urgently contemporary and technology-riddled New York City. She presents a vision that is at once almost deterministic in its fatalism—the outcome of any life, one must

assume, is equally predetermined—but strangely consoling in its open-endedness (what becomes of the other grandchildren?). The very globalized nature of the passage, and its strictly unnecessary interpolation of prolepsis, makes for an excellent encapsulation of Egan's fictional program.

Considering how pervasive the futural themes are in Egan's fiction, and how consistently they have been deployed in all of her novels to date, it is virtually impossible to truly understand these works without a convincing theory of the role that time and futurity play for her characters. The title of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* itself refers to time—specifically, its depredations—and the book is full of bittersweet reflections on the passage of time and how unkind it is to the majority of the characters. This could, of course, be the theme of nearly any work of art; only in context is it possible to see how original and compelling Egan's narrative is. Specifically, the personal and individual manifestations of the work of time's "goon squad" are always placed in the context of a more general, social account of time and its passage. This perspective is not necessarily consoling or hopeful; indeed, it tends to look more like general catastrophe. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is quite explicit about the likelihood of an impending environmental collapse, something that Slavoj Žižek considers to be among the ontological threats to human existence that demand a radical solidarity among human beings, as they are structurally outside the capabilities of the (late-capitalist) establishment to conquer or even meliorate (*First as Tragedy* 91-3). For Žižek, the only possible response to such catastrophe is a renewed emphasis on "the commons"—in short, a collectivization of property coupled with a return to greater human solidarity. Egan's response is not so objective or definite as Žižek's communist one, but it is certainly

motivated by a similar diagnosis of the problem at hand. While Egan's earlier work, particularly *Look at Me* and *The Keep*, tends to implicate technology directly in the dismantling of civil society (even associating it with terrorism and violence), in *Goon Squad*, the focus shifts to ecology as well (notably in the final two chapters). Thus, all of the individual visits from time's goon squad in the novel are referred to, and encompassed by, a more general threat to human existence as we know it. This is frightening, of course, but it also demands a greater sense of solidarity and interconnectivity, in which technology, suspicious though it always is to Egan, can theoretically play a role.

Furthermore, the future in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is inextricably caught up with the *desert*. Advancing climate change, by the time of the speculative final chapters, has rendered the world hotter and more desert-like than before, and in the infamous PowerPoint chapter, the middle-school aged narrator spends a lot of time thinking about, and visiting, the solar panels that are being used to harvest the now-strengthened power of the desert sun. This is, once again, an eschatological vision: on a literal level, the desertification of the planet is not a positive or hopeful thing, and it is quite possible that the only ghosts haunting this novel are those of the future dead (i.e. all of humanity). As Jacques Derrida notes in *Specters of Marx*, hauntology "would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves" (10). Indeed, by dwelling on the desert, Egan is not far from Derrida, for whom John D. Caputo tells us that the desert "is a kind of placeless, displacing place – or a place for the displaced […] an *open* place, without borders" (154). In *Specters of Marx*, the desert brought about by the *Un-fug* (time being "out of joint") is itself the pre-condition of the messianic: without this, one

"loses the chance of the future, of the promise or the appeal […] of this desert-like messianism […] in the waiting or calling for what we have nicknamed here without knowing the messianic: the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*" (33). So the desertification of the world – that which empties it of program and certainty – is indeed what enables there to be hope in the first place. This hope is profoundly present in the chapters where Egan writes about the future, despite the ever-growing threat of catastrophe; for example, the solar panels themselves are made possible only by the encroachment of desert land. Likewise, near the very end of the novel a character notices children in the increasingly devastated city of New York, and describes them as "an army of children: the incarnation of faith in those who weren't aware of having any left" (267). Very much as in the short paragraph quoted above, the presence of children, all with different potentialities and trajectories, acts as a physical manifestation of open-ended hope in the face of time's depredations.

The word "faith," in the quotation above, is virtually the first serious mention of religion in the novel, and certainly the only expression of a personal orientation toward the sacred. Indeed, aside from an early passage in which Bennie Salazar recalls (with great shame) a time when his younger self visited a convent and kissed the mother superior, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is virtually denuded of religion; the name of God appears only eleven times, always in idiomatic expressions such as "thank God" (66) or "God help me" (131). "Religion" never appears, and "faith," which appears three times (and was the highly programmatic name of the main character's sister in Egan's first novel, *The Invisible Circus*) is used two of those times to denote delusional or excessively

optimistic confidence. In short, this book does not go out of its way to accommodate religious interpretation; instead, it deliberately excludes any content that would easily prejudice us toward such a reading. As we will see, this most recent novel mentions religion far less than Egan's prior works (although it is hardly a major force in any of her novels). But this thinning out of explicitly religious content does not at all mean that the novel is silent on other concepts of the sacred or the transcendent; it simply goes about dealing with these subjects independently of organized religion. Egan's characters are not so much anti-religious as simply post-religious; put another way, they are in a desert-like landscape vis-à-vis the sacred, a space that is devoid of traditional signs and structures, but not therefore meaningless or nihilistic in any sense.

Instead, by pursuing disenchantment (in a general sense—here the missing referent is often youth, rock and roll, etc. instead of religious or patriarchal authority) to a point of absolute crisis—the eschatological moment when the world itself appears to be bound for destruction—Egan forces the question of eschatology and the future of the human race. What emerges from this proleptic fiction, fiction that "dwells in the future," as Beauchamp so tellingly writes, is a kind of postmodern variant on the anagogical mode of exegesis in the Medieval "fourfold method." Whereas the anagogical mode traditionally considered a story insofar as it related to the more general end of humankind (the goal of eventual union with God, or the achievement of eternal life) and asked how it was "good for eternity," the anagogical mode Egan uses refers more to itself: futurity for the sake of futurity, or futurity because there is nothing else. Put another way, this is not a future with a definite endpoint: while medieval exegesis assumes a stable *terminus ad quem*, Egan, in her postmodern

milieu, has no such luxury. So the "eternal meaning" of a text is not something that can be fixed and found out, but rather, something that is continuously developing. And this is, one must presume, why her texts refer themselves so pervasively to the future: the future exists for its own sake, or the future is created in the present as the narrative unfolds. Egan is capable of a great deal of prescience, and when she does choose to employ an omniscient narrative voice (as is the case in only a few of *Goon Squad*'s chapters), she is more than capable of a kind of mimesis of the divine: like a prophet, the omniscient voice seems to have hindsight all the time. But she limits herself, typically, to minor details or minor characters, which serves to remind us that the big future—the fate of the entire human race—is open-ended and contingent.

Ultimately, then, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is structured around proleptic passages that all refer, however definite they might be, to an open future. It is thus explicitly anagogical, but the endpoint is replaced with yet *more* futurity: the future exists, here, for its own sake. No explicit content exists, and no explicit promise is made; it is only possible to focus upon the hope for the future that one can have in children, in "faith" (which is mentioned seriously only once, at the end of the book), and in the indefinite. Derrida also echoes this revision of the medieval anagogical mode of interpretation in his writings on the desert, which is also the site of much of Egan's speculative PowerPoint chapter. The desert is also the proper sphere of the messianic for Derrida and others, and so it will be necessary to consider the relationship among anagogy, the desert, and messianism as they relate to Egan's manipulation of time. For this reason, this chapter will consider *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in light of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and *On the Name*, John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*,

Giorgio Agamben's discussion of messianic time in *The Time That Remains*, and the *Apothegmata Patrum*, or writings of the desert fathers and mothers, who were among the earliest to really establish the connection between the desert and a radical vision of religion. The desert and the future also connect Egan's work to specters and ghosts: one thinks not only of Derrida's insistence that ghosts come from the future as well as the past and demand future justice, but also of the legends of the temptation of St. Anthony, in which the desert is filled with terrifying creatures that do not really belong to this world.

This legendary episode is worth considering in order to help us comprehend the sacred significance of the desert. In Grünewald's version, for example, the desert itself is virtually invisible, represented only by distant crags visible above the hybridized creatures that surround the prostrate saint; in the distance, the figure of God appears in the clouds. By contrast, Dalí's more contemporary version strongly emphasizes the vast, planar nature of the desert, using long shadows and flat perspective lines to show that it plays host to, and even contributes to, the terrors that torment St. Anthony. Indeed, the stilt-legged creatures that process through the landscape are so dream-like and detached from it that one is tempted to think (in contrast with Grünewald's busy rendition) that another viewer might see only desert, and that those of us viewing the painting are privileged to share the saint's perspective: the emptiness of the desert is *really* empty, but it can also play host to images and presences that are not *present*, but still, in a (perhaps mystical) way, "there." Hieronymus Bosch's triptych, probably the most famous treatment of the subject, lies somewhere in between the two extremes, rendering the desert landscape with clarity, but again, filling it to the brim with strange and paradoxical

apparitions. Just as in Egan's work, the possibilities represented by the desert's vacuity are undefined: they could just as well be good as bad, just as the future ecological collapse could either provoke a new, unified effort at survival, or simple extinction. Similarly, saints who undergo temptation are made stronger when they successfully endure it; as in Žižek, it is the *response* to the coming catastrophe that is most important.

In *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, John D. Caputo writes that the effect of trying to expurgate faith is simply to produce more faith (158). This has been the essential progression of Jennifer Egan's work; as it is emptied of its specifically religious preoccupations novel-by-novel, such that one finds far more talk of Catholic school and early experiences with organized religion in her early works *The Emerald City* and *The Invisible Circus* and virtually none in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, still, it is perhaps the latest novel that has the most original comment to make on the reality of faith and the sacred at the most extreme point possible. Sometimes it is precisely a sideways maneuver away from specific religious content that makes it possible to say something of value about the sacred. However, this does not mean that this dissertation will read Egan as a "religious writer"—far from it. She is fairly obviously a "post-religious" and postmodern writer, and there is no need to deny such an obvious fact. Instead, as is the case with the other writers here, her very postmodern preoccupations reveal the way in which her fiction is haunted by ghosts that come from the future in an anagogical mode that exists solely for itself: the future itself, with its desert-like openness, and messianic potential, actually replaces the more obviously theological preoccupations of previous writers.

This contingent and postmodern sacred space bears a close relation to that found in the works we have considered so far, by Barthelme and Wallace, but it is also distinguishable from both. As is the case with Barthelme's fiction, the theology at play here is very weak, more concerned with what is potential than with what is actual (i.e., with the hauntological). The contrast is that Barthelme is much more explicit in identifying and including religious tropes and terminology, but also opens the real possibility for an anti-theistic interpretation; his characters can be overtly hostile to the divine, while Egan's tend to be simply indifferent. Wallace, similarly, is much more willing to discuss the apophatic God of Don Gately and to insert bona fide wraiths into his narrative structure, whereas again, Egan is more reticent: her fiction is, above all, human, although this also extends to the machines and technologies that humans build to understand and shape the world. Not all specters are religious, however, and many represent the supernatural in unconventional ways, so if we consider the spectral characteristics of postmodern literature as a whole, then Egan's novel forms the perfect end to this triad. While Barthelme tends to look backward to older forms for his ghosts, and Wallace transforms postmodernism itself into a ghost to get past the crisis of irony and sincerity he perceived in his culture, Egan looks directly into the future, working to show an inevitable link between the present and the future—not the moment-by-moment extension of the present into the *futur*, but rather the staggering potentiality of *l'avenir*, the unknown thing to come (c.f. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* 134). The intense focus on time and how time comes to end in the novel is also itself, according to Giorgio Agamben, "messianic," since messianic time is actually the name of the process by which we understand our own time and its ending (*The*

Time That Remains 62-8). Thus, by creating a purely secular space, Egan is able to invite unknowable *future* faiths and messianic descriptions of futurity to half-dwell within her pages, as outlandish and frightening as the figures that appear in the various paintings of St. Anthony's temptation.

Egan's Career: Early Work, Religion, and Haunting

In an essay for the *Reading Group Center* called "How Jennifer Egan Put the Goon Squad Together," Egan writes

> I was born in Chicago, of young parents whose marriage ended when I was two. My only memories of my parents together involve one of them delivering me to the other before or after my Sunday visits with my father. Those visits began with Mass: my father was Irish American and devoutly Catholic […] my mother was Protestant […] my mother remarried, and at age seven I moved with my new family to san Francisco, where I grew up […] but even after all that had become normal to me—after years when my exposure to Chicago was limited to the three weeks I spent with my father and his new family each summer—a shadow version of me remained in the Midwest.

This leads her to speculate on the origin of her fiction: "Sometimes I wonder if my need to occupy two opposing worlds is what led me to write fiction in the first place." The passage is interesting, not only as a theory of the author's own genesis as a fiction writer, but also in the way it deliberately highlights religion, inheritance, and doubling. There is no particular reason, apart from local color, to highlight the Mass in this autobiography, but Egan does it anyway: the Catholic heritage is, for her, something far off enough to be rather misty (ghostly?), but very much still there; indeed, it would have had to be the Midwestern "shadow version" of the young Egan who was attending Catholic services with her father. This is, of course, not far from how I have argued in this dissertation that religion haunts and plays about the margins of postmodern

fiction (and San Francisco is certainly among the more postmodern of cities), and this kind of doubling and religious haunting has appeared in most of Egan's novels.

Oddly, though, one is forced to notice a sharp decrease in explicit religious language in each of Egan's novels, with much of the language gone after her very first attempt in the genre, *The Invisible Circus*. It is as though she has exorcised this particular specter early on, and moved to other concerns. However, this does not mean that these novels become commensurately less *haunted*: as John D. Caputo argues, "Disenchantment, the risk of disenchantment, is the very resource of the religious […] So the *Aufklärers* should be very careful in speaking of our times as an era of secularization or disenchantment, for that will only precipitate more faith!" (158). So, in some sense, we can expect more of this particular strain of postmodern spectral religion in the later books—and, I argue, this is precisely what we get. However, *The Invisible Circus* deserves the early praise it received, and it is vital for understanding the way Egan has experienced religion, as much of what it has to say on the subject aligns closely with Egan's own autobiography quoted above. Most obviously, it is the story of a young woman named Phoebe and her search for clues about her sister, Faith—a name that perhaps comes across as a bit too programmatic—who has died in Europe under mysterious circumstances (13-4). Phoebe's father, like Egan's, was a Catholic (and a would-be seminarian), but he has also died before the action of the novel begins, and it is Phoebe's grandparents who take her to Mass: "As Phoebe watched the priest break the Host, she would think, That could have been my father […] Phoebe imagined his strong arms lifting the golden chalice to drink the blood of Christ, placing a pale Host on the tongue of each parishioner,

murmuring 'Amen' to their 'Body of Christ'" (35). This rather face-value Catholicism should not be taken for the author's own, as Phoebe here is quite young and literal, but it is important to see how much Catholicism colors Phoebe's imagination: she remembers the hippie-like Faith's room, full of "blue batik" and "incense burners," and describes Faith's wind chimes as "peach-colored discs reminiscent of Communion wafers" (27). It is impossible to ignore these associations, or to fail to take the book as, in some sense, a record of the pursuit of lost "faith" (with both a minuscule and a majuscule "f").

Perhaps inevitably, Phoebe does lose her faith later in the book—or, more accurately, she suddenly regains it, and just as suddenly abandons it again. As Phoebe travels through Europe, retracing Faith's steps, she recapitulates the disenchantment and secularization of all of Western Civilization at high speed, doing what the newly non-religious have always done: looking for an acceptable substitute for religion. She recalls, just after meeting Pietro Santangelo, a Spanish Catholic missionary, the disappointment of her first communion: "as for the promising wave of intensity she'd felt while coming away from the altar, it proved no more than the dizzying power of her longing for something to happen. By the time she left the church, it had already passed" (141-2). The feeling comes back, though, when she joins the missionary in a Spanish cathedral, feeling herself "dissolving, melting into [the cathedral's] oceanic sigh, and what bliss—to be absorbed, to give herself up!" (144). In a sense, she re-accesses her own childhood: "each prayer" is "like a glimmer from a splendid, holy pageant that had vanished when her sister died," a pageant which included "Faith arranging her rosary in the shape of a heart on the same glass table where barely a hear later she would tease through her fingers a soft green heap of marijuana" (145).

This is something of a presentiment, as drugs will soon serve Phoebe as well as her first substitute for religion, once it becomes clear "that nothing she did would revive the spell cast by Pietro Santangelo and the Reims Cathedral" (149). In the very next chapter, she takes a "tiny square of acid and set[s] it on her tongue"—a description that cannot be separated entirely from the descriptions of lying Eucharistic hosts on tongues from earlier in the book (150). She even takes the LSD in the Notre-Dame cathedral (150). "Something is going to happen," she thinks; "some tremendous thing is on the verge of taking place," (153) and she ends up having a vision of Faith that quickly becomes distressing (155-63).

Phoebe does, at least to a certain extent, find out what happened to Faith, who appropriately turns out to have placed a good deal of faith in another of the grand systems which postmodernism refuses to accommodate—violent, revolutionary Marxism—shortly before her untimely death. But it is difficult to get around the fact that, along the way, Phoebe certainly loses her *religious* faith; this does not, of course, leave her disenchanted in a simple way, but drives her all the more to seek replacements for literal interpretations of religion. This same loss of faith plays around the edges of Egan's next two books, *Look at Me* and *The Keep*, although (as is the case for Phoebe), the actual trappings of religion, such as hosts and rosaries and incense, are gone for good. We have already noted the eerily "prophetic" style of *Look at Me*, but it is much more than that—a fantastically "busy" novel, impressively ambitious, and a work that makes as strong a contrast as possible with its more restrained predecessor. Much as Egan claims to have been raised alongside a parallel "shadow version" who lives in the Midwest, so *Look at Me* contains two women named Charlotte, one in early middle age and the other still in high school; the younger Charlotte was raised in

Rockford, Illinois, a town that the older Charlotte, now a model in New York, left as soon as possible. The novel remains obsessed with shadows and doppelgängers throughout; the older Charlotte, Charlotte Swenson, feels she can tell something about the history of a character simply by paying attention to "his shadow self: that caricature that clings to each of us, revealing itself in odd moments when we laugh or fall still, staring brazenly from certain bad photographs" (34).

This doubling and shadowing comes back to haunt Charlotte at the end of the novel, when a sort of proto-reality show about her life runs, called *Accidental Charlotte*, and spawns lines of clothing, fragrances, and so on (412-13). "I had undergone a kind of fission," she recalls, "and the two resulting parts of me reviled each other. I was a ghost sealed within the body of a frame-obsessed former model" (413). To resolve her persistent problem with doubling, she invokes a "Transfer of Identity" clause in her contract and "[sells] Charlotte Swenson for a sum that will keep [her]self and two or three others comfortable for the remainder of [their] lives" (414). This passage has been highlighted more for its cultural-predictive value, but it is also interesting to see how closely Egan associates the ghostly with the digital; to enter the interactive world of reality TV and Web 2.0—in short, to enter the postmodern condition—is to enter the world of the spectral. While faith itself is nowhere near as prominent as it was in *The Invisible Circus*, the word is still important, although it refers more to a general credence, a tacit contractual acceptance of identity at face value that makes society work (even if it is not necessarily a well-founded credence): this is how the novel's terrorist figure, variously known as Z, Aziz, and Michael, hypothesizes that he has managed to avoid capture as he travels through

America plotting the country's demise (238). Again, the figure of the terrorist-in-our-midst has gotten a non-literary sort of attention after the 9/11 attacks, but it is just as important in showing Egan's increasingly subtle conception of faith as she begins to understand it as separate from, but not unrelated to, religion *per se*.

The Keep, Egan's most recent novel besides *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, continues in the experimental vein of *Look at Me*, with multiple narrative layers creating a disorienting effect and blurring the lines of "reality" for the novel's characters. It fixates, via the principal character Danny, on digitization and global interconnection as much as the previous novel, too; Danny is obsessed with voicemail, satellite phones, and remaining in touch with others, feeling while in Washington Square and talking on the cell phone to a friend in Machu Picchu that he was in "*both places at once*. Being somewhere but not completely: that was home for Danny" (64). In short, the spectral existence is his natural milieu. Religion is marginalized again, in favor of more contemporary and esoteric expressions of the preternatural, although a few characters express a general feeling that a deity exists. For example, Holly, the prison writing coach who helps bring the novel about (it turns out to have been "written" almost entirely by the murderer of another character), recalls her mother saying "Forgiving yourself is one thing. Getting God to forgive you is something else" (220). However, here the real haunting is narrative: whereas *Look at Me* spends a lot of time *describing* spectral modes of communication and entertainment, *The Keep* (in keeping with its pseudo-gothic style) presents *itself* as the spectral story, quite literally dictated by the murdered Danny from beyond the grave to his incarcerated murderer Mick, now a budding *littérateur* and the narrator of around ninety percent of the novel. Just after Mick kills Danny, Danny

reappears to him and says "You didn't really think I was going to leave you alone […] Let the haunting begin […] We're twins. There's no separating us […] I hope you like to write" (209). And then, Mick recalls, "he started to talk, whispering in my ear" (209).

Nothing could be more gothic than a story that is also a kind of séance, narrated by a ghost, but the point extends to Egan's other fiction as well, and even beyond—the idea that writing in the postmodern condition is itself a kind of "automatic writing," a channeling of the compromised and ghostly "presence" of formerly stable and authoritative forms of discourse, is a powerful one, and constitutes the principal argument of this dissertation. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, even more than these past novels, suppresses any explicit mention of religious faith, but it certainly extends and transforms the themes of all three: loss and aging, childhood and the loss of innocence, doubling and parallelism, spectral digitization of all culture, connectivity and atomization, and so on. It does so, for the first time in Egan's novelistic output, through interconnected chapters that are almost as independent as short stories. Thus, in order to maintain continuity from one end to the other of the sprawling, temporally dislocated work, Egan foregrounds a concern with the future: the individual futures of each character, how they interact with other futures, and the general future of the human race. This tracing of lines over a long period of time binds the stories together as a novel, but it also opens a new dimension of spiritual reflection and potential transcendence. As we will see, the suppression of religion leads only to more faith, as Caputo predicted, even if it is faith of the most emptied, raw, and denuded sort.

A Visit from the Goon Squad*: Anagogy and Eschatology*

When it won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* cemented its position as Jennifer Egan's best known, and most highly praised, novel. The Pulitzer committee, justifying its decision to give her the award, called the book "an inventive investigation of growing up and growing old in the digital age, displaying a big-hearted curiosity about cultural change at warp speed." This opinion serves only to emphasize the futural fixation of the novel, and echoes Duchamp's identification of *Goon Squad* as "fiction that lives in the future." Egan herself expressed surprise that a work with such an experimental edge was received so well; in an interview with Julie Steinberg shortly after winning the prize, she said "It's absolutely nutty to win something like this […] You can get all that for this type of book? Amazing. I'm sort of stunned that this book has moved so many people so deeply. I definitely thought it would have a narrower appeal." Aside from surprise about how the reading public accepted the work's unusual structure, Egan also questioned the wisdom of those who, in Steinberg's words, "have called it post-post modern." "Isn't post-post modernity just convention? Just plain verisimilitude?" Egan asks. The answer is relatively evasive, giving surprisingly little idea of exactly where Egan stands on the validity of postmodernism and the possibility of exceeding or accommodating it, issues which so plainly vexed David Foster Wallace in "E Unibus Pluram" and *Infinite Jest* just a generation earlier. However, she certainly does not consider the work to be conventional, or just about "plain verisimilitude." Rather, it is, even by the standards she set in *Look at Me* and *The Keep*, a novel that strikes out in new directions, mirroring its futural content with a form that is fractured, at times difficult to follow, and always up-to-date. As little as Egan seems ready to

announce its revolutionary and futuristic nature, a close analysis shows that it is indeed a fascinating and hauntological projection of fiction in its closest possible relation to *l'avenir*.

Clearly, the Pulitzer committee found this attempt to be successful, and the majority of the literary press has agreed. While there is, as of the time of writing, not even one peer-reviewed article on *Goon Squad* (as is indeed the case for most of Egan's work, even works published more than a decade ago), there are numerous reviews, and nearly all of them are almost unqualifiedly positive. Will Blythe, writing for the *New York Times* Sunday book review, notes that although the book's plot "feels as freely flung as a bag of trash down a country gully," still "everything hangs together, connected by a tone of simmering regret arising from love's wreckage and time's relentless devouring." Blythe is impressed by the wide range of success Egan has in "this mash-up of forms," and while he does agree that the book is "relentlessly savvy about the digital age and its effect on how we experience time," still, it is also "remarkably old-fashioned in its obsession with time's effects on characters." He is not entirely comfortable with her portrayal of the future, however, noting that the futuristic last chapter "is perhaps the only shortcoming" since it "literalizes" the fast rate of cultural change "perhaps a little too much."

For *The Guardian*, Justine Jordan is likewise impressed, calling the work a "sparkling novel of change and decay." She finds that "Egan's chronologically jumbled structure is the perfect vehicle to express […] time and its effects on the flux of personality." She is also careful to note how the work sets up "a nice tension between authorial omniscience—Egan often steps back to make casual reference to future events—and the doubts and confusion of [the] cast." Whereas

Blythe was less than impressed with the final chapter, Jordan takes exception to "Selling the General," set in a foreign dictatorship, which she says "jars with the rest of the book, in which daily life is colourful enough already." Another positive review, from Pankaj Mishra in the *London Review of Books*, places Egan in the ranks of "Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo," whom he considers more "quintessentially American" than more traditional writers like Roth and Franzen. *Goon Squad*, he writes, realizes Egan's "vision of the impersonal tyranny of a mass, technicised society" and "ends with a bleak vision of gadget-addicted infants and toddlers driving popular culture and business." Its huge cast of characters, major and minor, "opens up new possibilities for the polyphonic novel." However, he is unsure of the "artistic merit" of the PowerPoint chapter and Jules Jones's heavily footnoted celebrity profile.

The acclaim for the work was nearly universal, and it is difficult to find a review that is primarily negative (most, like those above, include only a perfunctory quibble or two). The *A.V. Club*'s Gregg LaGambina, for instance, much more tentative than the majority of the press, still gives the novel a grade of B, noting that while "novels about rock 'n' roll almost always suck," still "Jennifer Egan […] almost bucks the dispiriting trend." Much like Blythe, though, LaGambina is unimpressed with the finale: "the abrupt shift to speculative fiction in the last act," he writes, "slightly bungles what is supposed to be the triumphant closing number." Indeed, so monochrome is the critical landscape that Matthew Davis felt obliged to call his *American Literary Review* piece "The only negative review of 'A Visit From The Goon Squad' ever written." He says the book is not only "not great, it's not even good"; it "presents us with a string of flat characters based on clichéd types," a "lack of character

development" which results from "the novel's gimmicky structure." Quite unlike Mishra, he finds the large cast of characters to have no value in "enhanc[ing] or complicat[ing] our understanding of Sasha and Bennie" (whom he takes, justifiably, to be the central protagonists). Again, he is almost alone in finding "nothing innovative" in the novel; indeed, "the only chapter that could rightfully be called inventive—the power point presentation—is a flop," he writes, because it "serves no purpose, diminishes the affect of the information it conveys, and stretches our willing suspension of disbelief." Interestingly enough, while Mishra finds writers like Egan more convincing than, among others, Philip Roth, Davis specifically recommends Roth's *American Pastoral* as an alternative "Proustian reflection on the U.S. in the second half of the twentieth century."

I have already suggested that understanding Egan's preoccupation with proleptic narrative and predictive writing is central to a reading that really gets at the heart of her fictional program, but this seems even more vital in the face of criticism, however limited, that appears to have a real issue with these parts of the book, often pointing them out as the narrative's only weakness. Even some of the most positive critics find the last chapter to be an "abrupt shift" out of the tone of the rest of the work (true in a sense, although each chapter tends to break off rather abruptly from the previous), and many were not convinced either by Egan's depiction of technology (the "handsets" of the last chapter coming in for particular criticism) or her handling of what appears to be inherently futural narrative technique (such as the use of Power Point slides to tell a story). It is not enough simply to point out the eerie predictive force of her earlier works like *Look at Me*, as Sarah LaBrie does in her review. After all, the test of speculative fiction is not necessarily that it come true in any one-to-one fashion, and the fact

that her virtual world has come to resemble the real world at many points probably only reflects how often she *does* make predictions and seek to extend the boundaries of her fiction away from the tyranny of the present tense. The ultimate goal is, of course, something beyond just a lucky guess. Instead, there is (or at least it is the presumption of this chapter that there must be) a compelling reason for Egan to seek to refer her works to an imaginary future reference point—in other words, for her narrative to enter the anagogical mode. Finding and thoroughly explaining this reason may not be enough to make the above critics feel entirely convinced by the fictional handling of the future in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. However, at the very least, it will show that she is doing something more than a simple literary stunt by writing in a mode that approaches science fiction in its thoroughly re-imagined mise-en-scène.

"What You Should Be Aiming For": Traditional Anagogy

Understanding the anagogical style Egan uses here first requires an understanding of traditional anagogical interpretation, how it informs *Goon Squad*, and how the conditions of postmodernity have forced it to change and adapt—indeed, to weaken, to pass out of ontology and into the ghostly—to conditions that are radically different from those of the Patristic and Medieval worlds where it was first developed. It will be clear, I argue, that although these conditions are indeed highly divergent, the response to crisis and to thoughts of apocalypse are remarkably similar at heart. One of the great expositions of anagogy (and the rest of Medieval hermeneutics) comes from Henri de Lubac's work *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. In the first introductory volume, he quotes a "distich" from the "Latin Middle Ages" that is meant to

describe all four senses of interpretation: "The letter teaches events, allegory what you should believe, / Morality teaches what you should do, anagogy what mark you should be aiming for" (1). Although certain Catholic "historians, theologians [and] exegetes" have been "less favorable" to the method, still, "this doctrine of the fourfold sense has long been classic and unquestioned," and de Lubac argues that it is "a framework that is so solid and, at the same time, so common that it can be seen fleshed out, as it were, and pressed into service as a classification system for books" (9, 12). And, indeed, it has been just such a system, and has been applied most commonly to biblical criticism; under this rubric, any biblical passage will have a literal and historical meaning, a meaning that can be allegorized to speak to Christian doctrine (for instance, the Exodus through the Red Sea has often been read as typological of baptism), a moral sense that can be applied to daily ethical conundra, and finally, an eschatological sense that speaks to ultimate goals (this can be an individual's destiny, viz. union with God, or the entire world's destiny, viz. destruction and renewal).

In the second volume of *Medieval Exegesis*, de Lubac expands considerably on the meaning of the anagogical sense, arguing that it can be derived from the fact that after the advent of Christ, when "the Messiah came and his work was accomplished and he was himself resurrected, time continued its course upon the unchanged earth […] a gap opened up between the first and the last coming" (182). So anagogy itself was not really a mode, or interpretive sense, that was expected from the very beginning of Christian history. This is how de Lubac distinguishes it from Hebrew prophecy, which "proclaimed a final order of things that was to be substituted for the present order […] this final order was conceived at the same time as transcendent" (182). Once the first few generations

of Christians realized that the end of the world did not actually come before "this generation" passed away (Luke 21:32), anagogy developed as a sort of contingent response to the externally uneventful tenure of the Christian messiah on earth. The situation cannot have been particularly hopeful, but hope is itself a highly prized theological virtue. This, for de Lubac, is the motivation for anagogy: "after allegory which built up faith and tropology which built up charity, there is anagogy which builds up hope" (181).

Anagogy is further split into two types, or two subject matters, both of which, as we shall see, can be found in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The "first of the two anagogies teaches that part of Christian dogmatics called 'eschatology'—which itself is further subdivided into two parts, according as the ultimate end of each person of that of the universe as a whole is concerned" (181-2). The "second anagogy […] introduces us here and now into the mystic life" (182). These doublings can be seen time and again, as Egan refers personal prolepses, like the ultimate fate of the young warrior on the safari, to global concerns, such as the constant threat of terrorism (47). Arguably, were it not for this pervasive division in Western thought—the heritage of both Jewish and early Christian contemplations of the end of time—a contemporary novel like Egan's would be less able to operate on two levels in such a consistent manner: the personal and individual, and, in a mirroring fashion, the social and eschatological. This parallel between the smaller apocalypse of the individual and the greater of the earth or humanity in general is also, famously, a building block of Frank Kermode's thesis in *The Sense of an Ending*, to which we shall have occasion to return: individuals are born and die, he argues, "*in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as to

give meaning to lives and to poems" (7). Thus, at least in cultures still haunted by theologies which present "rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world," anagogy is a tool of urgent existential necessity (5). It does not just teach something about the *eventual* end of time, which any given individual is unlikely to see; it also gives a shape to each individual beginning and end, helping to explain the successes and failures of a given life.

De Lubac, always following patristic writings, also stresses the way in which anagogy can transport the individual believer out of poor circumstances and remind him or her of the better circumstances to come: it is, he writes, "the sense that lets one see in the realities of the earthly Jerusalem those of the heavenly Jerusalem" (180). This should not be read as simple escapism, tempting as it can be to look at religious doctrines of heaven, the new Jerusalem, nirvana, etc. in such a way; instead, with anagogy, one gets both the simple and linear expectation of a new order that will replace the current, unsatisfactory one, and also a kind of analogizing between the current order and its potential, such that the "real" and flawed world really does seem to be better: "by faith, the believer is not wrested from the 'night' which indiscriminately covers the whole of present existence; but he can paradoxically say 'night is illuminated as day,' 'night, the illumination of my delights' (183, quoting Rupert of Deutz). Thus, it is not even the case that anagogy is the fantastic dream while the literal sense remains grounded in human, contingent reality; anagogy itself never actually "wrests" us from reality. Rather, it *lends* reality, by contemplating its end, a paradoxical resemblance to its own opposite: to the fulfillment of time. Even this fulfillment, though, is partial and contingent in its own way, for de Lubac: "It is in traditional eschatology that the doctrine of the four senses is achieved and

finds its unity. For Christianity is a fulfillment, but in this very fulfillment it is a promised hope […] true anagogy is therefore always eschatological. It stirs up the desire for eternity in us" (197). Likewise, "however high anagogy leads, it always leaves something to look for and always with greater fervor, because it still does not uncover the Face of God" (193). In short, anagogy is never a simple, pat answer to complex questions. It is, too, complex and productive, and should not be understood as a discourse that shuts down questions, renders the future in photorealistic detail, or worst of all, imposes by force a single, dogmatic view of the end of time.

Still, de Lubac sees no room for an anagogy that could "pretend to lead beyond the faith," no matter now "high its 'flight' may lead" (194). As is the case with Derrida's reading of negative theology (discussed in chapter 2), it is necessary to think of anagogy a bit more broadly in order to understand the way that it has changed over time, passing into modernity and then postmodernity, if we are to understand the ways in which the concept, with its antiquated, Medieval overtones, has come to haunt and control a novel in which religion goes almost without mention. Kermode gives an excellent account of the way in which eschatology has changed historically, from the "characteristic apocalypse-crisis" of the year 1000 C.E., after which no less a patristic figure than Augustine believed "the events of the Apocalypse […] were to ensue" (9) to the contrary (and profoundly anagogic) trend, already there "in St. Paul and St. John," to "conceive of the end as happening at every moment; this is the moment when the modern concept of *crisis* was born" (25). In the era of modernism—the era from which Kermode wrote *The Sense of an Ending*—people became accustomed, almost with a sense of ennui, to "the mood of end-dominated crisis" (98).

Although one may "simply nod and proceed calmly" when informed "that ours is the great age of crisis—technological, military, [and] cultural," the concept of crisis is still "inescapably a central element in our endeavours towards making sense of our world" (94). Nowhere is this sense of impending crisis and reorganization of all of life more clear and important than in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Anagogy in the Novel

From the very first of the interconnected stories that make up Egan's novel, her strong tendency to make proleptic, authorially omniscient asides is established. This is a significant factor in how her plot, which Will Blythe called "far flung," is kept architecturally sound, and it also demonstrates a loose handling of temporality that allows for such a richly nuanced view of the future. For instance, the first chapter, "Found Objects," which introduces Sasha (arguably a protagonist, or perhaps *the* single most central character), describes a photograph in Sasha's apartment "of Rob, Sasha's friend who drowned in college" (11). The narrative is silent about Rob until chapter 10, "Out of Body," which tells his story and mentions his plunge into the East River. However, even this story does not describe his death; that is reserved for another comment in chapter 12, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," where we learn that "Rob drowned" because "he wasn't a strong swimmer, and he got caught in a current," and that Drew Blake, the man who eventually marries Sasha, "tried" to "rescue him" (214-15). In other words, these small temporal correspondences are scattered throughout the novel, from beginning to middle to end, and they hold true even when a given chapter is not narrated omnisciently (as is the case of the second-

person "Out of Body"). The passage about the African warrior in the fourth chapter, "Safari," has already been noted, but it is not the only such episode in that chapter: later, the narrator notes of the safari group "have gained a story they'll tell for the rest of their lives. It will prompt some of them, years from now, to search for each other on Google and Facebook, unable to resist the wish-fulfillment fantasy these portals offer: *What ever happened to . . .*?" (53-4). She even makes note of the outcomes of the social-media reconnections: "Dean […] will meet for an espresso with Louise […] who will Google him after her divorce. Postcoffee, they'll repair to a Days Inn of San Vicente for some unexpectedly moving sex, then to Palm Springs for a golf weekend, and finally to the altar" (54).

The remarkable thing about a passage like this is that it is pure ornamentation, pure gratuity: while many of the predictions and prolepses in the text refer directly to previous or future chapters, thus helping to link the "far flung" narrative into a convincing novel, ultra-minor characters like Dean and Louise simply disappear from the narrative, never to be heard from again. Thus, it is possible to draw a distinction between two types of predictive writing in *Goon Squad*: the programmatic style, which links disparate plot elements across time and space, and the gratuitous style, which presents the future simply for the sake of doing so, either for technical pleasure in an omniscient style, or (more likely, in my estimation) to make a broader point about fiction's need to refer itself to a reference point outside itself. As has been discussed in chapter 2 relative to Donald Barthelme's work, Rowan Williams has spoken of excess and gratuity in art and literature as a way of representing the sacred: "awareness of a depth in the observable world beyond what is at any moment observable is close

to what seems to be meant by 'the sacred' […] the element of gratuitous energy in the world's life […] corresponds to what we can call the sacred" (154-5). In the case of Barthelme's *Snow White*, this effect can be found in its busy, collage-like narrative; Egan's work has a more recognizable plot thread and relies less on juxtaposition, but it approaches excess anagogically: indeed, a "depth […] beyond what is at any moment observable" is precisely the kind of interpretive technique that would render night bright as day—which is, for de Lubac, the exact function of anagogy. This concern with the future almost for its own sake, without any specific motivation derived from plot, is a characteristic that makes Egan's fictional style immediately recognizable—it certainly shows up in *The Invisible Circus*, her first novel, and continues in *Look at Me*—but it reaches a particularly high pitch in *Goon Squad*. This is particularly true in the last two chapters, which will be discussed at length below.

However, as we have seen, the entire narrative is scattered with predictive passages, and in the chapter "Out of Body," coming around the middle of the novel, Egan has included a number of meditations on the end of the world and an indefinable future change or reorganization—in other words, a foretaste of the coming foretaste of the final chapters. This unusual chapter is narrated in the second person, the "you" in this case being Rob, a closeted gay college student who is the close friend and confidante of Sasha, one of the book's "major" characters (Rob's death, as we have seen, is foretold by the omniscient narrator of chapter 1). He had become very close to Sasha at the beginning of their freshman year, but now feels he is losing her to her boyfriend Drew; the situation is further complicated by Rob's undisclosed, but relatively obvious, crush on Drew. The very title of the story, "Out of Body," carries a sort of mystical overtone, being

used of spiritual and saintly experiences on a regular basis, but one of the most striking elements of this chapter is the use of the Last Judgment—both its artistic representation and the real possibility of a fundamental change in the way the world works—as an organizing motif. Rob spends much of the chapter smoking hash in an apartment rented by Bix and Lizzie, two of his and Sasha's college friends; Egan says of this apartment that "the walls are covered with Bix's collection of Last Judgment posters—naked babyish humans getting separated into good and bad, the good ones rising into green fields and golden light, the bad ones vanishing into mouths of monsters" (141). Immediately after noticing the picture, Rob "climb[s] out onto the fire escape," making his friends "nervous" because of a prior suicide attempt (142). This connection between finality and judgment and Rob's own self-destructive potential—it is never entirely clear whether his drowning death is intentional or not—gives to the last judgment concept an openness in the novel that is not really shared by the original concept (where, after all, judgment is strictly binary and entirely final).

The poster is later identified as the Last Judgment "from the Albi Cathedral," and the narrator says, addressing Rob (as always) in the second person, "you remember it from your Intro to Art History class last year, a class you loved so much you added art history to your business major. You wonder if Bix is religious" (144). The fresco around the altar of the Albi Cathedral does indeed depict a massive Last Judgment, one with a sharp division between right and left, saved and damned. However, the center of the fresco is interrupted by an arch that leads back to the altar itself; the arch does not extend all the way to the ceiling, leaving the upper part of the sanctuary room itself totally obscured from the perspective of one viewing the fresco. The way in which the Medieval,

doctrinal finality of the judgment is pierced by an aperture leading to an obscure "elsewhere" is actually a very fine way to think of the reinterpretation given to the last judgment by these college students in the 1990s—one that is clearly naïve in a sense, but which Egan seems to take seriously. The reinterpretation begins as a feeling: Sasha and her boyfriend (later husband) Drew "took a Greyhound to Washington, D.C. for the inauguration (of Bill Clinton) and stayed up all night and watched the sun rise over the Mall, at which point (they both say) they felt the world start to change right under their feet" (145). Rob is skeptical at first—as any reader would be, a decade into the twenty-first century—but he remembers her words: "ever since, you find yourself watching strangers' faces on the street and wondering if they feel it, too: a change having to do with Bill Clinton or something even bigger that's everywhere—in the air, underground—obvious to everyone but you" (144).

By the end of the story, Rob does begin to feel what he fears is accessible to everyone except him. After wandering the streets of New York under the influence of Ecstasy, Rob, Drew, and Bix stand at the edge of the East River, wishing to "swim in it" (152); this itself is a proleptic moment, since Drew and Rob will just a few pages later. The narrator says of Rob: "you look over at Drew, squinting in the sun, and for a second the future tunnels out and away, some version of 'you' at the end of it, looking back. And right then you feel it—what you've seen in people's faces on the street—a swell of movement, like an undertow, rushing you toward something you can't quite see" (152). This passage is technically remarkable on a number of levels. First, Egan is here giving a limited vision of the future, of the sort usually reserved to omniscient narrators, to a character. Second, this character sees himself in the second person

("some version of 'you'"), thus again entering into concert with the narrative voice. Finally, the feeling of "change" is metaphorized as an "undertow" and a "swell," also words used of water currents, precisely the natural forces which will kill Rob just a few pages later in the text. It is as though he has been given a mystical vision in anticipation of his own death, and this is something Bix echoes when he finally ties all of these ambiguous feelings in with the Last Judgment: "The days of losing touch are almost gone," he says, and by way of explanation, adds

> "We're going to meet again in a different place […] everyone we've lost, we'll find. Or they'll find us […] I picture it like Judgment Day," he says finally, his eyes on the water. "We'll rise up out of our bodies and find each other again in spirit form. We'll meet in that new place, all of us together, and first it'll seem strange, and pretty soon it'll seem strange that you could ever lose someone, or get lost." (152-3)

Considering that this vision is presented through the voice of Bix, a minor character, it is best to take it as simply another way to metaphorize the ambiguous sense of "change" that Rob feels elsewhere in the story. Still, the chapter is called "Out of Body," and it is precisely an experience of this sort that concludes it: as Rob flails in the East River, about to drown, his mind "pulls away as it does so easily, so often," and he finds himself subjectively outside of his (dying) body, entering Sasha's room to be with her and to apologize to her for revealing secrets about her past to her boyfriend (155-6).

Visions of the Last Judgment or the end of the world are quite often pessimistic, complete with Boschian torments, religious terrors, and the thunderous timpani of the Dies Irae from Verdi's *Requiem*. Indeed, Bix's Albi Cathedral print contains just such torments, and Egan implies that he has other prints with even worse fates for the sinners. However, the ultimate conclusion of

the chapter, while far from optimistic (ending as it does with an early, tragic death that may have overtones of suicide), is not cataclysmic in the usual sense. Indeed, just as Bix imagines, Rob is able (in a contingent and imaginary way) to project himself outside of himself, into a realm of excess and extremity, where he is able to be with his closest friend, Sasha. This concept is not entirely unique to Egan; after all, as we see above, de Lubac makes much of stressing the hopeful nature of anagogy, how it can render a terrible landscape, through the power of the religious imagination and reference to a future terminus, into something beautiful. And this kind of hope is reflected, in a secular way, in Slavoj Žižek's recent writing about the "end times": "when our natural commons are threatened" by "a global cataclysm," he argues, "neither market nor state will save us, but only a properly communist mobilization" (*Living in the End Times* 334). Žižek's talk of "communist mobilization" is easy to misinterpret, especially in the American political sphere, but as he makes clear in other works, he is primarily thinking of a renewed emphasis upon common ownership, common goals, and human solidarity in the face of disaster (*First as Tragedy* 90-100). It is the true categorical break that must be made between the Last Judgment and any other possible catastrophe which makes it so dire, and which calls for such a dramatic reorganization of the entire human race. In a traditional schema like de Lubac's, this reorganization comes from above; the hope contained in anagogy is the hope for a coming reign of Christ, of the exaltation of the miserable of the earth into heaven and eternal, spiritual bliss. In a leftist-secularist schema like Žižek's, the reorganization is our responsibility, as the story of the incarnation and crucifixion places the work of the Holy Spirit squarely upon the shoulders of individuals—in the post-Christian world, they do not hope for the second

coming, but they must realize it on earth by political and social action that leads to a greater justice and forestalls global ecological catastrophe (*The Monstrosity of Christ* 73).

Egan's own understanding of the Last Judgment, hard as it can be to distinguish it from that of her characters Bix, Rob, and Sasha, appears to lie somewhere in between a traditional and revisionist understanding; none of these characters ever mentions God, but neither does any insist that individuals can bring about the "change" by their own action. It appears to be a kind of excess, something that comes from outside and surprises the subject who is in extremis. But either way, the idea of Last Judgment—whether it is interpreted in a classically sacred, or a revisionist and secular manner—serves as a generalized symbol of total change, beyond which nothing can ever appear the same again. Specifically, the change it brings about is the kind that divorces bodies from souls; as can be seen in artistic depictions of the event, full as they are of souls, angels, demons, and other supernatural phenomena, this divorce implicates the Last Judgment in spectrality. What could be more ghostly than individuals at the very moment of separation between soul and body? Similarly, the ghostliness of the ending of "Out of Body" is fully in accord with its title. Indeed, Rob only finds a measure of peace in his life and his friendships when he feels himself—i.e. some kernel of his essence, his "soul" or spiritual component—leave his actual body behind in the East River and make a kind of peace with Sasha, whose deepest secrets he has spitefully revealed to Drew (156). Put another way, he has to become a ghost to find the peace that has eluded him in the world of purely solid shapes and prejudices (interestingly enough, Bix himself, an African-American, is the victim of prejudice from his girlfriend's

Texan parents; identity-based discrimination is a common thread connecting these two prophets of the Last Judgment) (142). This ghostly transformation is not *literal*, but has to do with a shift in consciousness; thus, it is not necessary to take the Last Judgment entirely literally, either—even if the world does not come to a fiery end, it can change in such a way that people become more aware of the ghostly and incorporeal world, or become more open to the world of haunting in the midst of the world of harsh realities. This is a way to preserve anagogy in the postmodern, post-Christian milieu.

The "sense of an ending" that is somehow forestalled or deferred, or simply one end within a larger framework, is something we have already seen from Kermode—inventing small apocalypses inside our own limited milieu that echo the larger apocalypse, perhaps literally "to come" or purely metaphorical—and it can be construed as self-aggrandizement and escapism, or alternatively, as a type of anagogy, a fostering of hope by referring one's own life to the End. And in fact, both of these possibilities are represented in Egan's text. For instance, the other point at which language of the Last Judgment is foregrounded is in the chapter "Selling the General," in which a once-successful publicist, Dolly (formerly known as La Doll), meets her demise and is forced to represent a genocidal dictator somewhere in the unspecified global south in order to support her daughter. Her fall from public grace comes after a party she throws, one that she hopes will "rival Truman Capote's Black and White Ball" and even "define the new world" in which she and her American colleagues, who "had never been richer," were living (107-8). Her idea is to decorate with "broad, translucent trays of oil and water suspended beneath small brightly colored spotlights whose

heat would make the opposing liquids twist and bubble and swirl"; perhaps inevitably, the trays melt, burning the guests:

> something shut down in La Doll as she stood there, away from the burning oil: she didn't call 911. She gaped in frozen disbelief as her guests shrieked and staggered and covered their heads, tore hot, soaked garments from their flesh and crawled over the floor like people in medieval altar paintings whose earthly luxuries have consigned them to hell. (107-8)

Fascinatingly, the image of the "medieval altar paintings," here utterly negative, is identical to the *positive* image set forth by Bix a few chapters later. Aside from the general truth that a good literary image ought to embrace both positive and negative connotations, this contrast makes it clear that Egan is no naïve idealist about the Last Judgment, the way Bix can appear to be: the end, of an epoch or of the world, is neither a good or a bad thing, categorically, but simply important.

Even this party of Dolly's, for all its Boschian torments, turns out to be a double-edged sword: after the party, she is left feeling that she "had conceived of an event crystallizing an era that had already passed," and "wondering what sort of event or convergence *would* define the new world in which she found herself […] she had lost her power to judge" (108). However, many years later, when she ends up employing failed actress Kitty Jackson in a publicity coup that restores the General's reputation, Dolly notices "a scatter of raw pink patches" on Kitty's arms, much like the scars left by the torments of her party: "I made them myself," Kitty tells her; "lots of people have […] you can't find a person who wasn't at that party […] and they've got proof. We've all got proof—who's going to say we're lying?" (113). In short, Dolly is enabled to take some measure of solace from the way her party really *has* come to "define" the generation that attended, and as so often in Egan's work, this solace comes through a revelation

that belongs to the future. Only anagogical references—first to the religious Last Judgment, and next to the actual future of the partygoers—can enable Dolly to understand her party, and therefore her own role in the modern world. Similarly, Jules Jones, the journalist-cum-felon related to Bennie Salazar by marriage, has a series of revelations about "the end" in chapter 7, "A to B." When he is first released from prison (for sexually assaulting Kitty Jackson, the same actress who works with Dolly in the subsequent chapter), he is terrified and disgusted by how much the world has changed:

> "I go away for a few years and the whole fucking world is upside down […] Buildings are missing. You get strip-searched every time you go to someone's office. Everybody sounds stoned, because they're e-mailing people the whole time they're talking to you. Tom and Nicole are with different people …" (94)

This passage is recognizable as a kind of inverse of Rob's sense, in "Out of Body," that a groundswell of change is coursing through the world; this change is palpable, very post-9/11 and characteristically (for Egan) technological, and it is by no means welcome. However, by the end of the chapter, after he and his sister visit the decrepit rock star Bosco and plan to promote his world tour, Jones's perspective has begun to improve. His former, almost stereotypically Egan-esque pessimism about the fast pace of cultural change morphs into something more sophisticated, something Kermode would recognize as rather profound wisdom about "the sense of an ending": "If you'd asked me this morning," he tells his sister, "I would have said we were finished […] all of us, the whole country – the fucking world. But now I feel the opposite […] Sure, everything is ending […] but not yet" (100).

Indeed, things are not quite ending for Jules Jones, nor for Bosco, the cancer-riddled rock star who intends his final tour to result (at least indirectly) in

his own suicide. In the penultimate chapter, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" (the well-known "PowerPoint chapter"), as so often in these interconnected narratives, small details about Jules's and Bosco's futures leak out—or rather, since the chapter itself is projected so far into the future, these "futures" are already past. Sasha's daughter Alison, who "narrates" the chapter, picks up a book called *Conduit: A Rock-and-Roll Suicide*, by Jules Jones, and describes it as a book "about a fat rock star who wants to die onstage, but ends up recovering and owning a dairy farm" (199). This touch—particularly the "dairy farm"—masterfully mitigates some of the direness of "A to B," where Bosco really does seem to be at death's door and where the ailing rocker himself first explains the book's title as he and Jones plan his "suicide tour":

> Let's document every fucking humiliation. This is reality, right? You don't look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you've had half your guts removed. Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression? […] Would you disagree? (96-7)

It would be easy to read this passage—and, of course, the novel's title—as pure pessimism, and it is certainly true that much of the book is shot through with regret, compromise, and the depredations of time. However, as always with Egan, one has to look a hundred pages further to find out that things were not quite as awful as they seemed for Jones or Bosco. A visit from the goon squad is not necessarily the same thing as a visit from the Grim Reaper (it can be, as in the case of Rob or, especially, the corrupt impresario Lou, whose last illness is described in detail in chapter 5). Thinking about the end gives some shape to these characters' lives, but just like the "real" end of the world, or Judgment Day, these ends are postponed and deferred. But neither is this mitigation simply there for the sake of a happier ending. Instead, it is simply anagogy: after all,

anagogy and eschatology are not precisely the same thing, though it is probably impossible to understand one without the other. Anagogy does not study or discuss the actual end of the world, but rather relates any given individual's life, experienced *in medias res*, to the *awaited* end. It "builds up hope," as de Lubac has it (181). Even the final chapters of this work do not describe the end of the world or Judgment Day, and so the whole work remains anagogical rather than eschatological. However, these chapters do bring the narrative much closer to the end, and into a projected fictive "future" far beyond the novel's 2012 publication date, and it is to these chapters that we must turn for a fuller understanding of Jennifer Egan's anagogical "fiction that dwells in the future."

The Future, Ecology, and the Desert in A Visit from the Goon Squad

The final two chapters of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" and "Pure Language," both explicitly present a fictionally-imagined future, and because of their predictive nature and insistent formal innovation (the former is arranged like a PowerPoint slide, while the latter is full of imagined futural text-messages), each has been the subject of a great deal of critical attention. As noted above, this attention has not always been positive, a reaction perhaps to be expected given the very individual natures of one's predictions about the near future. However, what is important about the dénouement to Egan's work is not its truth-value as a prediction, but rather its function as a general narrative statement about how humans can and must relate to their own futures, and that of the planet. While the majority of the novel handles time by a system of correspondences among major and minor characters and their own futures and pasts, coupled to a recurring interest in the senescence

and decay brought on by time and how this relates to the ultimate Last Judgment, the end of the work takes on a far more ecological and apocalyptic tone. It accomplishes this end not by any particularly explicit echo of the standard religious tropes of apocalypse, but instead by reference to metaphorically charged climate types, situations, and losses: in particular, desert climates, thermal excess, ice-cap destruction and resultant increased sea levels, and the technological occlusion of the sun and sky.

The apocalyptic mode and ecological writing have been bedfellows for quite a long time; for obvious reasons, the threat of imminent destruction has always been a potent motivational tool for environmentalists, and ecocritics in the literary world have taken the trend under consideration as well. As Greg Garrard argues in his book *Ecocriticism*, "eschatological themes and language […] escaped the discipline of theology long before the twentieth century," passing from chiliastic or anagogical concern with the dispensations of God into concerns over, first, "the fate of human culture" and then, starting with D.H. Lawrence, "a congruence of environmental themes and apocalyptic rhetoric" (89). He also draws on the work of Kenneth Burke and Stephen O'Leary to draw a distinction between "tragic" and "comic" visions of the apocalypse; in the former, the world is "careening towards some final, catastrophic conclusion," while in the latter, time is "open-ended and episodic," and there is a more general possibility for flaws and errors to be amended and for individuals to change, rather than be delineated beforehand as good or evil (86-7). The tragic mode, while it can be effective as a scare tactic, can have a "propensity […] to turn ugly," particularly "in relation to population growth," and while journalists tend "to interpret every drought or ice storm as a 'sign' of catastrophic global warming […]

climatologists consistently adopt a comic apocalyptic rhetoric that denies the possibility of linking specific weather events to climate change" (105-6). In short, the best way to deal with the potential ecological catastrophe on the horizon is not to make direct, millenarian prophecies which expose the prophet to devastating embarrassment, but rather to "frame" environmental problems with "comic apocalyptic narratives that emphasize the provisionality of knowledge, free will, ongoing struggle and a plurality of social groups with differing responsibilities" (107).

By contrast, some critics see a greater urgency on the horizon and a greater need to alter the way human society is organized in order to forestall complete ecological collapse. As we have already seen, Slavoj Žižek speaks of "global cataclysm" when arguing for the urgency of a communistic restructuring of human politics (334). He writes in even stronger terms in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, arguing that the capitalist system has, by enclosing "the commons," initiated "a process of proletarianization of those who are thereby excluded from their own substance" (92). In the face of truly global catastrophe and loss of ecosystems, we are all proletarian:

> What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletariat who have "nothing to lose but their chains," we are in danger of losing *everything*: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being renders us all proletarians, reduced to "substanceless subjectivity" […] If this sounds apocalyptic, one can only retort that we live in apocalyptic times. (92)

What Žižek means when he speaks of "apocalyptic times" is that we are no longer defined by either of the two classic (and doubtless oversimplified) concepts of time as either cyclic and eternal or linear and progressive (93-4).

Rather, it is "the 'time of the end of time,' the time of emergency, of the 'state of exception' when the end is nigh and we can only prepare for it" (94). Žižek identifies several modes of apocalyptic thought, but eventually argues that the two with the greatest potential are "Christian fundamentalist apocalyptism" (which reads the Bible literally and expects a genuine Last Judgment relatively soon) and "secular ecologism," with its post-humanist vision of the "self-destruction of humanity" (94). "The task" is to bring these two "into closer contact […] thereby conceiving the threat of annihilation as the chance for a radical emancipatory renewal" (94). In short, where Garrard sees primarily a potential for extremism in the apocalyptic mode, Žižek sees perhaps the only remaining possibility of hope and of real popular, collective action in the direction of a renewal of the world.

It is particularly interesting to consider *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in light of Žižek's recommended union between Christian fundamentalist apocalyptism and secular environmentalism; I have already argued at length that much of the work, especially the early and middle chapters, makes use of an anagogic focus on the Last Judgment, and on futures and endings in general, that is explicitly derived from the Christian (and particularly Medieval) tradition of exegesis and theological hope. The end of the work swerves from this focus, and precisely in the manner that Žižek advocates: by projecting itself into the temporal future of roughly the middle of the twenty-first century, it consciously transfers its more generalized apocalyptic tone (c.f. Jules Jones's assertion that "everything is ending […] but not yet" [100]) to a specific concern with ecology and the real end of the world through climate change, warming, rising sea levels, and so on. In a sense, then, the book appears to do little more than what modernist fiction, and

even Romantic poetry, has been doing for a long time: secularizing the religious.[1] However, as we will see, much more is at play than the kind of simple one-to-one substitution that Egan uses in early work like *The Invisible Circus*; by introducing the desert in chapter 12, she catapults the narrative into what is indisputably a ghostly and rich religious and metaphorical landscape. While it is true that desertification can be seen as nothing more than a shift in the Köppen classifications of various regions, the desert climate has always been richer than its surface would indicate. Indeed, a whole set of Catholic and Orthodox religious mystics have been named after the desert—the Desert Mothers and Fathers—and its importance is clear as it persists in religious iconography and art, and more recently, conservationism, nature writing, and the radically deconstructive messianic religion of Jacques Derrida. It is this nexus of images, more than anything else, which most clearly reveals how Egan's work is haunted by a sense of the religious that remains authentic, even as the processes of secularization carry on apace.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the desert makes its debut as a significant force in a chapter whose title, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," apparently has nothing to do with landscape or climate. It is notably written not in blocks of text, but spatially-arranged "slides," complete with arrows, word-bubbles, borders, and shading, much like a PowerPoint presentation; the narrator is Alison Blake, the daughter of Sasha, one of the book's protagonists, and her husband Drew Blake (the unrequited crush of Rob in "Out of Body" and the man who failed to

[1] This hypothesis is perhaps detailed most notably in M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*, but its applicability to Modernism is put to question by Pericles Lewis in the second chapter of *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, in which he "explore[s] the limits of the secularization thesis," concluding that "'Secularization' […] is a misleading word for what happened to art's relation to the sacred in the twentieth century" (24).

save him from the East River). It is the first chapter whose temporal center is well beyond the actual calendar year of *Goon Squad*'s publication in 2011, and as such, it is perhaps appropriate that the immediately preceding chapter, "Good-bye, My Love," ends with a characteristically proleptic paragraph of the sort Egan has been using throughout the book. "Good-bye, My Love" is a very polished and self-contained chapter about Sasha's early life abroad in Naples, and as it introduces characters who never appear otherwise, and its events are only briefly referred to otherwise, it could probably be mistaken for a self-contained story without this final passage. But ending the way it does, there is no mistaking this for a part of a greater whole: in short, it is classically apophatic (without being actually religious). "On another day, more than twenty years after this one," the paragraph begins,

> after Sasha had gone to college and settled in New York; after she'd reconnected on Facebook with her college boyfriend and married late […] and had two children, one of whom was slightly autistic; when she was like anyone, with a life that worried and electrified and overwhelmed her, Ted, long divorced—a grandfather—would visit Sasha at home in the California desert […] and for an instant he would remember Naples: sitting with Sasha in her tiny room; the jolt of surprise and delight he'd felt when the sun finally dropped into the center of her window and was captured inside her circle of wire. (175)

This is the first time that the future and the desert are explicitly associated, an association that will grow stronger. It is also a particularly sustained apophatic passage, perhaps one intended to give comfort (the troubled Sasha actually will be all right, will turn out normally after all), but most remarkably, it is the first such passage to be followed immediately by the future it describes. Finally, the future is not just a theoretical concept accessible only to the omniscient narrator; the readers of the narrative finally get to glimpse it from a similar position of

privilege. In other words, it is at this point that Egan passes the baton from one kind of anagogic, apocalyptic writing to another, subtly different style.

Each slide in "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" has a title, and the one appearing on page 184 is called "Desert Landscape," and it is in this slide that Alison Blake's narrative begins to reveal something of what has happened to the world by the time Sasha has reached her forties: "When I was little," she writes in discrete text boxes, "there were lawns. / Now you need a lot of credits for a lawn or else a turbine, which is expensive. / Our house is next to the desert" (184). Alison connects this dramatically hotter, transformed California desert she calls home to the pauses in rock music that her autistic brother Lincoln has become obsessed with: in a slide called "What I Notice During the Looped Pauses," she lists "A whisper of orange on the horizon," "A thousand black turbines, and "Miles of solar panels like a black ocean I've never seen close up" (193). Later, in the fourth subdivision of her PowerPoint, she says even more explicitly, "the whole desert is a pause" (229). The desert begins "three steps down from [the Blake family's] deck," at which point it "surrounds" them (228). When she takes a walk with her father out into the depths of the desert, her description continues to reveal the dread she feels at the desert and the solar panels, at the possibility of being moored out in the exposed desert and never being able to return home (which is, itself, possibly a concealed metaphor for returning the entire world to a state of innocence, pre-climate-disaster) (238-41).

In other words, on a very literal level, living in the desert is less and less of a choice in this world of climate change. But something else is going on here, especially in light of Alison's metaphorical link between the desert and the pauses in music; on both a literal and a metaphorical level, the desert becomes an

emblem of openness and possibility—a place that is vacant, but yet not a simple void, as it is quite pregnant with meaning. Literally, when Alison walks out with her father to see the solar panels, she notes that "they look evil," but that "they're actually mending the earth. / There were protests when they were built, years ago. / Their shade made a lot of desert creatures homeless. / But at least they can live where all the lawns and golf courses used to be" (233). Letting her imagination run wild, she fears "that the solar panels were a time machine" that will prevent her from ever returning home to her family (241). Of course, they are not "time machines" in the conventional sense, but they are machines that are implicated in time, in the saving of time, or the time of apocalypse when one can do nothing but prepare (Žižek 94). If they are time machines, they are machines of the future, meant to preserve the future so that other generations can live in it. Beyond this literal level, however, Alison's metaphorical link tells us something else about the desert: when she says "the whole desert is a pause" (229), she links it to the "great rock and roll pauses" of the chapter's title. These pauses, she argues in a graph, bear a more-or-less direct relationship between length and "haunting power" (247). Thus, since the "whole desert" is to be taken as a pause, and the desert is vast and surrounding (and presumably more vast than ever before), the future itself is characterized by the same features as a rock and roll pause—primarily, "haunting power" (247). This recalls Derrida's and Caputo's insights about the desert—that it is a place of openness, expectation, and the very real possibility for specters, messiahs, and futuristic injunctions to appear.

In light of this—and the general thesis that postmodern fiction can be characterized by its haunting by not-fully-present figments of metaphysical religious claims—it is worthwhile to consider the religious import and

iconography of the desert, and the ways in which the climate has changed in the cultural imagination. Perhaps the earliest exhaustive account of the importance of the desert to the Christian world is the Apothegmata Patrum, or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Of the individuals who are featured in this work, Benedicta Ward notes that they "withdrew from ordinary Christian society" and "went further rand further into the solitude of the desert" (*The Sayings* xviii). The most extreme of the desert hermits, the Syrian monks, "chose to live at the limits of human nature, close to the animals, the angels, and the demons" (xix). In his separate preface to the work, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh writes that in the Desert, "the experiential knowledge which God in His infinite Love and condescension gives to those who seek Him with their whole heart is always a gift; its essential, abiding quality is its gratuity" (*The Sayings* xiv). Again, Sr. Ward writes, "the desert itself was the place of the final warfare against the devil, and the monks were 'sentries who keep watch on the walls of the city'" (xxvi). The picture that emerges, then, is one of "haunting power," just as Egan puts it (247). The desert is indeed a place of vacuity, but this does not mean that nothing happens in it, or that it is insignificant, much as it might seem so when compared with the places more favorable to human habitation, activity, and life. Indeed, its very emptiness serves as an invitation: only here, in this metaphorical space, is the remarkable and ghostly given a chance to develop. As Br. Columba Stewart puts it in an explanatory note in *The World of the Desert Fathers*, "the desert provided a stark backdrop for the actions of unhealed personality, and gave a dramatic edge to the work of recovering a sense of wholeness"; this is why the monks had an "apparent obsession with demons" and used them "to explain otherwise inexplicable human behavior" (25).

Thus, the desert is a backdrop, a kind of theatrical space, against which not only the personal healing that Stewart mentions, but also a more general social drama, can be enacted. And just as the desert's very emptiness invites filling by some other, so the metaphorical processes which take place in it do not work without haunting—the non-metaphysical "presences" which are "there," but not perceptible as real in the ordinary earthly sense. Similarly, according to David G. R. Keller, the fathers and mothers went to the desert to seek *hesychia*, "a physical solitude and quietness, that became an environment for solitude of the mind, heart and soul and the possibility for transformation of self" (2). Thus, the Greek word for desert, *heremos*, becomes the root of "hermit" and "eremitic," because "it is the desert, whatever its physical location, that provides the hesychia or solitude for prayerful transformation" (4). This desert can be "within or on the periphery of the inhabited world or in a more desolate and uninhabited location" (4). What is required, then, is the possibility of a contrast between inhabited and uninhabited, society and wilderness. Indeed, just as Sr. Ward has noted before, Keller argues that "[t]he power of the austere, yet beautiful desert landscape was a sign of [the monks'] dependence on God and what the desert could provide to support their lives" (39). In their case, the provision came through fasting, austerity, and careful cultivation (38-41), whereas in Egan's technological vision, it comes through the receptivity of massive batteries of solar panels. As is always the case in postmodern fiction, the variables change while the underlying equation remains essentially the same: while *Goon Squad* almost seems to avoid religious terminology, it sets up almost the same relationship between the desert and the reception of grace. In both the ancient mystical tradition and the postmodern vision of ecological collapse, the openness of the

desert provides a chance for the unexpected and the other to enter. And what was that other, for the desert fathers and mothers? According to Keller, "the surprising gift of the desert was renunciation, because its endless horizons baptized the elders in a new vision of human life. Its searing silence embraced the elders with the presence of God, their only source of life […] the risen Christ became their constant companion in the work of love" (156). He argues that, for the monks, really there were "two deserts"—one literal, which they embraced and endured, and the other the desert of "the futility of the inhabited world" (156). Thus, fleeing to the desert is not an unrealistic flight from problems, but a mindful rejection of the moral desert in favor of the literal one of spiritual discipline and openness (156-8).

It is striking to note how much this contrast can persist in the thought of ecocritics and environmentalists. In "Revaluing Nature," for instance, Glen A. Love speaks of the way in which "urbanites" like Jack Schaefer, Edward Hoagland, and Gretel Ehrlich "slough off their New York or L.A. skins when they confront western landscapes," finding "the tug of eco-consciousness" to be "a corrective to ego-consciousness" (233). Arguing that "a society itself can be sick," or deluded into taking "an ecologically suicidal path," Love says "the means for curing a communal neurosis cannot come from those afflicted by the neurosis. Rather, it must come from elsewhere […] the literature of the American West constitutes that sort of an alternative" (233). Likewise, in *"Desert Solitaire*," Don Scheese speaks of Edward Abbey's time in the western American desert as "intimate participation in the cycle of the seasons"; he calls the desert "a desiccated Eden" and places Abbey in "a relatively brief tradition of desert appreciation" (306). Clearly, when one takes the desert fathers and mothers into

account, or even Plato's *Timaeus* (as Derrida will when speaking of *khora*), one cannot call the tradition "brief" in any meaningful sense. Still, despite the rather limited view that Scheese takes, he is right when he speaks of desert life as an alternative to "conspicuous consumption" and that the western desert has become "one more sacred space in American culture" (317-18). What the ecocritics perhaps miss is the more profound resonance of the desert. While it is emphatically a real place, and one that ought to be conserved and protected from the encroachment of society, it is more than that. It is, indeed, one of the most powerful metaphors that are at the disposal of both theology and philosophy, ancient and modern.

Indeed, perhaps nowhere since the patristic era does the desert play a more important role in theological and philosophical inquiry than in the work of Jacques Derrida. When discussing (and perhaps to a degree re-interpreting) deconstruction in *Specters of Marx*, he argues that justice itself depends on "the irreducible excess of a disjointure or an anachrony," a concept he derives from Heidegger's *Un-Fug* (a term he tends to translate with Shakespeare's "out of joint")—in short, a disruption of metaphysical presence and Being (30-4). This dislocation or disruption can also be conceptualized as the irruption of an other, something *tout autre*, which is also a gift, a thing characterized by pure gratuity:

> This is where deconstruction would always begin to take shape as the thinking of the gift and of undeconstructible justice, the undeconstructible condition of any deconstruction, to be sure, but a condition that is itself *in deconstruction* and remains, and must remain (that is the injunction) in the disjointure of the *Un-Fug*. (33)

And then, the necessary jump into the desert: if justice were not thus dependent upon disjuncture and pure alterity, it otherwise "loses the chance of the future, of the promise or the appeal, of the desire also […] of this desert-like messianism

(without content and without identifiable messiah), of this also *abyssal* desert, 'desert in the desert,' […] abyssal and *chaotic* desert" (33). He describes this desert as bearing "the immensity, excessiveness, disproportion in the gaping hole of the open mouth—in the waiting for what we have nicknamed here without knowing the messianic: the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*" (33). This is formidable stuff, but the overall import is clear: the desert is the locus in which disjuncture and chaos become receptacles for the gift—just as the desert monks saw the desert as the place to which one retreated from a "world out of joint" and into pure receptivity and grace.

Derrida, though, swerves from the desert fathers when he argues that there are "two messianic spaces […] under the same name"—the first being the traditional "figures of Abrahamic messianism," and the second a vaguer one that "belongs properly to a universal structure, to that irreducible movement of the historical opening to the future" (210). He suggests that we conceptualize "an atheological heritage of the messianic," even if it does not appear "natural," since "one may inherit more than once, in different places and at different times, one may choose to wait for the most appropriate time" (211). We have already been told of the ascetic life of the desert hermits; now Derrida turns ascesis on its head, arguing that it "strips the messianic hope of all biblical forms, and even all determinable figures of the wait or expectation; it thus denudes itself in view of responding t that which must be absolute hospitality, the 'yes' to the *arrivant(e)*, the 'come' to the future that cannot be anticipated" (210). This is, indeed, an excellent way to characterize the entire manner in which Egan "inherits" the Christian traditions of eschatology, anagogy, and desertification: it is indeed, a

heritage, but one that is not entirely continuous either with the alternate heritages of traditional fundamentalism or pure secularization. It is certainly "atheological," as it suppresses all but a very few explicitly religious terms, but for all that, it owes a debt to, and is haunted by, the very sort of immaterial presences that the ancient anchorites believed to haunt the desert. He had already argued a similar point in the essay *Sauf le nom*, where he points out that negative theology (which is also caught up in the emptiness of the desert) has to be both "historical and a-historical," and the deconstructive critic must practice a "simultaneous negation and reaffirmation of Greek onto-theology and metaphysics, uprooting and expansion of Christianity" (*On the Name* 78). And above all, one turns one's hospitality to the future; Derrida speaks of the "pre-deconstructive […] seismic events" that "come from the future [and] are given out of the unstable, chaotic and dis-located ground of the times. A disjointed or dis-adjusted time without which there would be neither history, nor event, nor promise of justice" (*Specters* 214).

One the one hand, all of this is worlds away from the desert hermits; many of Derrida's examples actually come from Marx, a manifestly anti-religious thinker. Still, Derrida seeks to rehabilitate Marx in part through pointing out the contradictions implied by his critique of specters; they are not only "spooks" that deceive, but they (specters, the *unheimlich* in general) may indeed be "the Thing itself, the cause of the very thing one is seeking and that makes one seek" (218; see 213-8). Derrida may not be *theological* when he speaks of the messianic and the meaning of the desert, but he is certainly *spectral*. Again, we think of the specter here as simultaneously presence and absence, as both there and not-there at the same time—some "thing" that cannot be denied to be "there," but is not

metaphysically *present*. This tension or oscillation of the specter is already there in *Sauf le nom*, though Derrida is not yet speaking directly of specters; instead, he notes that "to let passage to the other, to the totally other, is hospitality […] The desire of God, God as the other name of desire, deals in the desert with radical atheism" (*On the Name* 80). Indeed, "*desert* is the other name, if not the proper place, of *desire*" (80), but the thing desired must, when located in the desert, radically oscillate between God and atheism: in short, a specter. This God is unknowable, "the ignored or unrecognized God" of whom "nothing is said that might hold […] save the name that names nothing that might hold, not even a divinity […] 'God' 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language" (55). Here, Derrida almost equates God with deconstruction and the structure of deferral in language,[2] but more importantly, he associates divinity with the process of stripping away, of emptying, that is the most salient characteristic of the desert.[3]

The "chance of the future"; events that "come from the future" (Derrida 33, 218): these are intimately wrapped up with the concept of hauntology, of understanding the world as a place characterized by more than simply Being, but also by traces of the past *and the future*. Derrida could not be more emphatic that

[2] According to Caputo, Derrida equivocated during an interview on the question of whether *différance* could be called "the God of negative theology," saying "it is and it is not" (*Prayers and Tears* 2).

[3] This desertification is given an explicitly spectral and political reading by Derrida's follower and sometime apostle, John D. Caputo; he notes that in this passage negative theology "becomes […] a kenosis, or self-emptying, which empties itself of every predicate or attribute of God […] for God is safe in the bottomless abyss of nothingness, this desert place, leaving but His trace on language, burning and scarring language as He leaves the world" (*Prayers and Tears* 45). God is leaving the world (perhaps sequent to secularization), but "scarring language" on the way out—haunting it, in other words, and leaving a trace. Later, he says that "returning apophatic theology to the trace" keeps it from the "determinable faiths," which "are uncommonly dangerous to everybody's health, that of their own members as of everyone else […] precisely because they forget that they are faith and not intuitive knowledge" (47).

haunting involves the future just as much as the past, even though it is common to assume that ghosts always and only seek to avenge prior events, and this is the primary way in which Egan's work enters the world of haunting, and *becomes* haunted by a religious past that, on first glance, is largely suppressed in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. She gradually builds a connection between futurity and the ghostly or supernatural by attending first to the future alone, then by linking it to the Last Judgment, and then by introducing the powerful trope of the desert. The desert is traditionally a place of receptivity, characterized in religious mythos by almost casual encounters with angels and demons, and in Derrida's postmodern hauntology, it is the abyssal locus of the messianic (i.e. absolute hospitality with respect to the future, and for Agamben, the name of time that concerns itself with how time will end); thus, an interpretive triad emerges, consisting of future-orientation, the presence of spectral (non)entities, and the contrast between desert/wilderness and human society. Each is caught up with the other: when Egan writes proleptically, she refers to some future point in her own narrative (i.e. she is anagogical on a localized scale), with the ultimate endpoint being the time of the final two chapters, which are characterized by increasing temperature, impending ecological catastrophe, and desertification. Similarly, the future is also the secularized Last Judgment when (perhaps) there will be a great reordering of consciousness and/or human society. Thus, each predictive passage anagogically refers itself to the haunting power of the future, of the ascesis of the desert, and the potential end of all humanity.

It is only in the final chapter, however, that all the pieces begin to fit together. Although the narrative space is once again New York City and not the desert (at least not a Köppen-classified desert), the same basic condition obtains.

The chapter, called "Pure Language" and featuring Alex, a man who plays a very small cameo role in chapter 1, does indeed focus considerable attention on language, its limitations, and the ways it might change over time (Egan's portrayal of SMS-messaging in the future has certainly divided critics). It also contains more crucial bits of information about the imaginary ecological situation in this vision of the future. For instance, the narrator almost casually mentions that "the warming-related 'adjustments' to Earth's orbit had shortened the winter days, so that now, in January, sunset was taking place at 4:23" (261). A "water wall," evidently built to contain the oceans and preserve Manhattan, has been "exuberantly branded" the "Waterwalk!," and it is "always jammed […] with people who probably (like Alex) had barely noticed sunset before the wall went up. Now they craved it" (261-2). Alex helps to advertise an outdoor concert in New York City in January, when it is "eighty-nine degrees and dry" (265). Natural depredations are not the only things to have gone quite obviously wrong with this world, either: construction of a new skyscraper next to the apartment where Alex and his family live is about to "seal off their air and light," making the apartment "impossible to sell" (255). Indeed, this man-made problem is a remote cause of the chapter's plot—Alex's claustrophobia and financial woes help persuade him to compromise his own principles and join a faux-"word-of-mouth" advertising campaign for pay (255-61). We are told of other cultural horrors, such as aggressive marketing toward infants and toddlers who download electronic content merely by pointing at ubiquitous "handsets" (254); strollers are "prohibited at public gatherings," since "they hampered evacuation" (265). Helicopters are constantly "flogging the air with a sound Alex

hadn't been able to bear in the early years […] but over time he'd gotten used to it: the price of safety" (267).

All of this is fairly easily recognized as an extrapolation of current trends: the increasing importance of social media renders people more able to communicate through "handsets" than in person; climate change has dislocated seasons and forced cities to build seawalls and become ever more dense and unlivable; and terrorist attacks have led to a kind of police state in which individuals are, as Giorgio Agamben would have it, in the "state of exception"—reduced to bare life, not subjects in the proper sense but totally vulnerable, at the disposal of state power (or even, we might add here, natural power) (*Homo Sacer* 65-7). There is a remarkable sympathy here, too, with Keller's concept of "Two Deserts" in *Oasis of Wisdom*: he argues, we recall, that the "futility of the inhabited world" with its "over-abundance of activities, possessions, and irresponsible pleasures" is a desert just as much as the physical wilderness (156). This is not true only of the ancient world; indeed, he specifically mentions "international conflicts, terrorism, economic instability, clashes between religious ideologies, materialism, and major transitions within well-established institutions" as part of the desertification of the twenty-first century (157). Thus, we have to navigate between two separate "deserts": one "an empty world of our own creation," the other a "desert where the monastic virtues of humility, purity of heart, and love of neighbor offer more lasting solutions to the challenges we face than weapons of mass destruction" (158).

In essence, what Keller does here is to highlight the eschatological element inherent in the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers; in a world that is always somehow dooming itself, or hastening its unpleasant end, the real desert

of humble receptivity is always an emblem of hope—even if the rest of the world is rendering itself more and more inhospitable. Of course, this is also almost exactly congruent with Egan's own vision of the future: in a world watched over by helicopters, threatened by destruction both natural and intentional, the desert and the future (at certain points, almost the same concept) provide anagogical hope. They can always be referred to simply by the choice of a future-oriented narrative practice. Indeed, recalling the chapter "Out of Body" and its characters' vision of the Last Judgment as a great "change" when "we'll rise up out of our bodies and find each other again" (144, 152-3), it is remarkable how close this is to Keller's writing about humility in desert monastic life: "the 'answer' to modern conflicts and a just sharing of the world's resources requires a change in human consciousness. We are being called to replace rigid self-assertion and hegemony with humility" (146). Once again, this is more or less the same insight that can be found Slavoj Žižek's writing on ecology and human behavior in *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*: if we do not "act preventatively," we all risk being reduced to "abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content" (92). The choice is fairly stark here, and it is really the same choice as the desert monks were offered (with some striking technological innovations that make things even worse, if Žižek and Egan are to be believed): either be reduced to the state of exception, stuck in an ever-heating world without air or light, constantly monitored by the security apparatus and diverted by ever more inane entertainments, or go into the desert (literally or metaphorically) to be haunted by the sheer openness, possibility, and hope that only such a vacant and austere space can play host to. Although it is by no means clear that Alex and family—

minor characters promoted to prominence at the very end of the novel—will be able to make such a choice, Egan leaves clues that foster a certain optimism.

The chapter revolves around a polarity of integrity and compromise, highlighted early on when young Alex meets a now sixty year old Bennie Salazar and recalls a story of Bennie being "canned from his own label" after "serving his corporate controllers a boardroom lunch of cow pies"; he is now considered "irrelevant," producing only "raspy, analog" music that suits his own, rather than broader commercial, tastes (253). Bennie is not really as incorruptible as the story might imply, as he now wants Alex to help him advertise an acoustic concert by creating a blind team of "parrots"—individuals paid to fake a seemingly authentic, word-of-mouth opinion (252-61). Ironically, Bennie pitches this shameless commercial fraud as support for true purity—the concert is to be a comeback for his old friend and sometime drifter, Scotty Hausman, whom Bennie describes as "absolutely pure" and "untouched" (253). Alex hesitantly agrees, as he is desperately short of cash, and meets with Lulu (the daughter of Dolly, the PR agent from chapters before who inadvertently made a Boschian tableau out of her party); Lulu, almost a caricature, represents everything that is worst about this civilized "desert" of a future the characters are all obliged to inhabit. When she speaks, she uses a kind of soulless marketing jargon: "those metaphors—'up front' and 'out in the open'—are part of a system we call atavistic purism. AP implies the existence of an ethically perfect state, which not only doesn't exist and never existed, but it's usually used to shore up the prejudices of whoever's making the judgments" (259). She is also much more comfortable sending text messages than speaking, though, and she frets, *apropos* the chapter's title, "all we've got are metaphors, and they're never exactly right.

You can't ever just *Say. The. Thing*" (260). Purity and impurity, corruption and integrity, thus drive the book toward its conclusion, and (perhaps unsurprisingly, in a world that is quite possibly doomed forever) the impurity is much easier to represent. It often shows up in the guise of text messages composed in a tortured, inexplicably mis-capitalized orthography: "*GrAt. Il gt 2 wrk*" (260).

Whether purity—true communication and genuine hope—is representable is the central preoccupation of this chapter, and while Egan seems to answer the question with a qualified affirmative, the truth of the matter is necessarily ambiguous, since, as always, this possibility revolves around the future. When Alex first meets with Bennie at the very beginning of the chapter, Bennie says he believes Alex will overcome his scruples about becoming a "parrot" because of "a feeling […] that we have some history together that hasn't happened yet" (252). This sentence, which just barely falls short of genuine paradox, could work as an emblem for the entire novel: the most important kind of "past" or "history" is the one that has not happened yet (as Derrida would remind us, this "history that hasn't happened yet" is the proper locus of haunting, since the unknown and un-prepared-for is what demands the most radical hospitality and openness to the spectral). Importantly, it is a history *together*—the unknown terrain of eschatology is not something that should, or perhaps can, be faced by individuals all alone. Recall that Žižek sees a full-fledged "communist" reorganization of all humanity as the only possible response to impending ecological disaster. Here, though, this belief is not even quite belief: it is "a feeling," just as Rob and Drew both had a vague sense that a re-ordering was coming in "Out of Body," although neither was really capable of explaining why. Worst of all, Bennie says this to apply pressure on Alex with the

intention of corrupting him, forcing him to abandon his integrity and join the commercialized and fraudulent world of music advertising he himself has also capitulated to. In one sense, this too is a lesson: hospitality and openness to the *tout autre* is not guaranteed to end well. Much as Derrida and Caputo want to associate the specter and the desertified future with justice—and indeed, the very emptiness and humility of the desert help to safeguard against any hubristic "system" that might lead to atrocity and injustice—still, one has to expect the unexpected, and there is no absolute safeguard of a good outcome to history.

In another sense, though, Bennie wants Alex to compromise specifically for the sake of a greater good: the comeback concert of Scotty Hausman, a man who "had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data […] pure. Untouched" (271). Scotty's music is described as "strong, charismatic, and fierce," and the concert becomes so popular that "more people claim [to have been there] than could possibly have fit into the space"; on the strength of this one event, the narrator argues, Scotty "entered the realm of myth" (271). Interestingly, this public reaction (of pretending to have attended a famous event) is exactly what happened after La Doll's infernal party described in "Selling the General" (113), but the two events could hardly be more different: the first is a miscalculated attempt to reflect the contemporary milieu, while the second is such a stark (humble and desert-like?) contrast to the contemporary situation that it nearly functions as an antidote to its poison. Considering how powerfully Scotty manages to communicate something profound to his generation (and the next couple of generations, as well), one has to imagine that he has found a way to "sing the thing," if not "say" it, the impossibility of which Lulu has lamented just a few pages before (260). Amazingly, Lulu herself, who

has been little more than a caricature of a generation lost to amoral jargon, electronic diversion, and complete lack of value, turns out to be the one person who can ensure that the concert will happen at all. Scotty decides just before his performance time that he is going to cancel: "It's too late. I'm too old. I just—I can't," he tells Benny (268). Benny, in only the second passage to use a permutation of the book's title, tells Scotty "Time's a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?" To this, Scotty replies, "The goon won" (269). After Scotty tries to run out of the trailer from which Bennie and Alex are running the concert, Lulu comes to the door, "the slanted winter sun […] making a nimbus around her face […] and in hesitating, looking down for an extra second at this lovely girl blocking his way, Scotty lost" (270). Thus it is the ostensible techno-zombie Lulu's beauty, described in a deliberately classical way (the "nimbus" could just as well belong to Beatrice, or Petrarch's Laura, or one of Botticelli's figures), which ensures the musical performance that "says" what she herself knows she cannot articulate, not for all the metaphors in the world.

The very real possibility offered here is that "pure language"—i.e. a genuine communication and a real ground for hope—can come through compromised means and from sources that formerly offered no hope whatsoever. This is important; recall that one of the complaints Matthew Davis offers in his "only negative review" of the book is that every character sells out in exactly the same way. While he certainly overstates and oversimplifies this feature of the novel to make his case, ultimately, every single character *does* get a visit from the goon squad, and while certainly many of them experience a positive *metanoia*, the change is often not to the character's advantage. The world itself is "visited by the goon squad," too, insofar as it is being slowly destroyed by climate change

and transformed culturally into a shallow arena for consumerism and digitization. Any remedy will have to come *through* and *because*, not just in spite of, this change and depredation—one desert will have to become another, better kind of desert. So it is perhaps appropriate that one of the novel's most important passages comes in part through the same crabbed, garbled text-speak that is used and abused so often in this final chapter. It also comes right after the passage where Alex notes the military helicopters flying overhead:

> Today their military cackle felt weirdly appropriate, Alex thought, glancing around him at the sea of slings and sacs and baby backpacks, older children carrying younger ones, because wasn't this a kind of army? An army of children: the incarnation of faith in those who weren't aware of having any left.
> *if thr r children, thr mst b a fUtr, rt?* (267)

This use of the word "faith," while not specifically religious, is among the only language in the whole of *Goon Squad* that can be taken as a serious engagement with spirituality (the other being the discussion of the Last Judgment much earlier). Children are the future, of course, in a very literal, flesh-and-blood sense: the people who will be alive after our own "sense of an ending" comes to its inevitable culmination; thus, it is only this future, with its endless possibility and its "haunting power," that can provide an alternative "army" to the one that currently patrols the national security state. And, again, the objectively negative presence of military helicopters might protect this very same spiritual "army" of children who will inherit the desertified world and, just maybe, re-align themselves in a way that is ecologically harmonious and aesthetically authentic.

Beautiful as this passage is, it is followed almost immediately by a kind of cautionary allusion: Alex looks at the new skyscrapers, "so much nicer than the old ones," and finds himself thinking of 9/11 (after all, the concert is moved to

"the Footprint," the vacancy that has been left behind on the site of the former World Trade Center towers) (267, 265). "The weight of what had happened here more than twenty years ago was still faintly present for Alex," the narrator tells us; he imagines it as "the vibration of an old disturbance," a "low, deep thrum," and a "hidden pulse" (267-8). Both Alex and his wife Rebecca feel "nervous" and "like something bad is about to happen" (268). Nothing bad does happen, at least not for the remainder of the narrative; instead, Scotty's concert is an unqualified success and the novel is able to end on its bittersweet note of faint hope and ambiguity. However, something bad certainly *could* happen. John D. Caputo notes that "opening to the future" is also "exposure to the absolute surprise" (155). There are many reasons to hope that this surprise will indeed be "a justice and democracy to come" (156), but this is a gamble: it is important to recall that while this narrative is *haunted* by the Judeo-Christian visions of a last judgment and eschatological fulfillment of all time, it is still a postmodern work at heart, and cannot take these visions wholesale as a kind of unbreakable truth (indeed, Caputo says that the true "religion" of the desert has as its goal the termination "of religion as a recurrent cycle of revenge," as it can become in the original last judgment mythos) (156). Indeed, the world could really just end, or everything could start over again and take the same course.

This threat appears at the very end of the entire book, when Bennie and Alex both reminisce about Sasha and go up to her old apartment to see if she still lives there; Alex experiences "a hot-cold flash of recognition, a shiver of déjà vu, as if he were returning to a place that no longer existed" (273). Recalling that a one-time date between Alex and Sasha began the entire novel—during the course of which Sasha steals a purse, although her youthful kleptomania is never

revealed to Alex until the penultimate page of the narrative—we see a nod to cyclic structure and, by extension, to cyclic time. Of course, Žižek has argued that apocalyptic time is neither cyclic nor linear (*First as Tragedy* 93-4), and Frank Kermode notes in a similar vein that "rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world" are required to engender a real preoccupation with end times and anagogy. Once again, Egan seems keen in this last chapter to destabilize everything, almost going out of her way to resist the easy answer. Of course, as it turns out, Sasha is not there (we already know from the preceding chapter that she lives in the California desert with her family and has overcome her kleptomania by resorting to junk-collecting and collage-based styles of art), but Alex is suddenly overwhelmed by "a gradual draining loss" at his perception of the passage of time—quite literally, he experiences the sense of an ending, and starts to refer his own life to a projected endpoint: "I don't know what happened to me," he tells Bennie, who replies "You grew up, Alex […] just like the rest of us" (274). He, too, has been visited by the goon squad; the entire narrative, for all its tendency to stray and accrete, is neatly bookended by a man's youth and middle age—everything that intervenes is precisely "a visit from the goon squad," as the title would suggest. Perhaps time does not collapse back upon itself, though, or devour its own tail like an *ouroboros*: a young woman does come to Sasha's old door, "but it was another girl, young and new to the city, fiddling with her keys" (274). We have no idea whatsoever if this girl's trajectory will resemble that of Sasha, or if she'll even make it to middle age before catastrophe strikes. What we do know is that, to the very last sentence, Egan is propelling us even further into the desert of the future—the only place where hope can lurk,

ready to haunt those who care to wait. The passage of time is—appropriately enough, in tortured text-speak—"*th hum tht nevr gOs awy*" (274).

Conclusion

A Visit from the Goon Squad is an uncommonly complex novel, a tissue of narrative strands that in some cases can be related only through the common future of their common human characters: all of them at some point sense the ending that is inevitable for each and every one of them as they are respectively visited by the "goon squad" of time and decay, and that may or may not be inevitable for the whole world and the whole human race. Like Egan's previous novels, it is concerned with that which is beyond ordinary human experience, and with the ways in which people attempt to find meaning beyond, or through, or in spite of, their own mortality and decline. More so than any of her previous work, it does this without reference to religion, but this does not mean that it is not characterized by a "religious" bearing, only that its "religion" is without determinable content. Instead, it dwells in obscurity, surfacing as untraceable feelings, continuing hums, impending sensations, fixations on death and judgment, and a persistent reference of one's own life to its end, and to the end (whether that be "end" as in destruction or "end" as in final goal) of the world—a technique that owes an obvious and explicit debt to the Christian and largely patristic/medieval conceptions of anagogical interpretation and eschatology.

In other words, the sacred tropes that arise in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are spectral: traces from the past, yes, but most of all from the future. Similarly, time itself, such an important concept in this work (and the concept that gives meaning to its title), is hauntological in character. Time is at once the "goon

squad" that ravages characters and their dreams, dragging them through compromise after compromise, and at the same time, it is the plane upon which the desertified messianic advent can occur. As Slavoj Žižek points out, the future can be merely "the continuation of the present […] the full actualization of tendencies already in existence"; this sort of time, the brute fact of *chronos*, is the sort that should most properly be associated with the "goon squad" (*The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* 134). On the other hand, the future can also mean something almost opposite: "a radical break, a discontinuity with the present" (134). This sort of time is not given a name in Egan's novel, but in essence, I have argued here that this sort of radical time is the time of the ending of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. We have seen that this anagogic time is not precisely a Christian apocalypse with a definite, reassuring, or eternal guarantee; rather, it is much closer to what Giorgio Agamben calls "messianic time," a "contracted time" that is actually "the time we take to bring to an end, to achieve our representation of time" (*The Time That Remains* 63-7). It is *"the time that is left us*," and "the only time we have," not because it is identical to chronological time, but because it is the only way to make sense of chronological time (67-8). This cathected, messianic sort of time is precisely what Egan attempts to describe and evoke through her novelistic structure and conclusion.

Moreover, this obscure messianism takes place in the desert, and an authentic response to it is characterized by a willingness to confront, to live in, and to be defined by the desert. The desert is, as we know from considering the work of the desert fathers and mothers, the reflections of nature writers and eco-critics, and the philosophical speculations of Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, a profoundly religious place, one that calls with its abyssal nature away from

being, business and busy-ness, from the compromised world that human beings have ruined through environmental destruction, war, terrorism, and political repression. Thus, when we find ourselves in just such a world at the end of the novel, it is the desert that provides a way out, the desert that invites us to read the work as pure anagogy, a reflection on the future for the future's sake alone. It is only by assuming an attitude of pure hospitality to the horizon—to the future and whatever sort of unknowable and obscure messiah it brings—that we can make any kind of sense out of our own ending and deal maturely with the ever more frequent and brutal visits from the goon squad of time and decay. Through this ghostly time and through an orientation toward a ghostly messiah, postmodern fiction has survived into the present day by grace of hauntology; this spectral look into the future is eminently postmodern, but by definition, a look into the future is a look at what lies beyond what we have. Jennifer Egan's fiction makes the future as nearly "present" to us as possible, and what makes this prediction accurate is not mere technological anticipation, but the sense that the future can only be understood and accepted in one way: hauntologically.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009. Print.

---. *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.

---. *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans.* Trans. Patricia Dailey. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

Arden, Patrick. "David Foster Wallace warms up." Interview with David Foster Wallace. http://patrickarden.com/DavidFosterWallace.html. Web. 18 January 2012.

Ashton, Jennifer. "Sincerity and the Second Person: Lyric after Language Poetry." *Interval(le)s* 2.2-3.1 (Fall 2008 / Winter 2009): 94-108. Print.

Attridge, Derek. "Ghost Writing." *Deconstruction: A Reader*. Ed. Martin McQuillan. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Bacchilega, Cristina. "Cracking the Mirror: Three Re-Visions of Snow White." *boundary 2* 15/16.3/1 (Spring/Fall 1988): 1-25. Print.

Badiou, Alain. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Trans. Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2001. Print.

---. *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens, Trans. and Eds. London: Continuum, 2005. Print.

---. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Trans. Ray Brassier. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.

Barthelme, Donald. *The Dead Father*. New York: Farrar, Srauss & Giroux, 1975. Print.

---. *The King*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990. Print.

---. *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews*. Ed. Kim Herzinger. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1997. Print.

---. *Sixty Stories*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1982. Print.

---. *Snow White*. New York: Scribner Paperback, 1967. Print.

---. *The Teachings of Don B.: Satires, Parodies, Fables, Illustrated Stories, and Plays of Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Kim Herzinger. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1992. Print.

Barthelme, Helen Moore. *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound*. College Station: Texas A&M UP, 2001. Print.

Bell, Pearl K. "American Fiction: Forgetting the Ordinary Truths." *Dissent* (Winter 1973): 27-8. Print.

Berman, Jaye. "Parody as Cultural Criticism in *The Dead Father*." *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 17.1 (January 1987): 15-22. Print.

Bernardi, Luciano, et al. "Effect of Rosary Prayer and Yoga Mantras on Autonomic Cardiovascular Rhythms: Comparative Study." *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 323.7327 (Dec. 2001): 1446-9. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead, 1998. Print.

Blythe, Will. "To Their Own Beat." *New York Times* (8 July 2010): n.p. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/books/review/Blythe-t.html. Web. 27 November 2011.

Boswell, Marshall. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. Print.

Brooks, Neil and Josh Toth, Eds. *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. Print.

Burn, Stephen J. *David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest*: A Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum, 2003. Print.

Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997. Print.

---. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006. Print.

Caputo, John D. and Gianni Vattimo. *After the Death of God*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Print.

Carlisle, Greg. *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2007. Print.

Cixous, Hélène. "Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4 (Summer 1976): 875-93. Print.

---. *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*. Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.

Coward, Harold and Toby Foshay, eds. *Derrida and Negative Theology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992. Print.

Daugherty, Tracy. *Hiding Man: A Biography of Donald Barthelme*. New York: St. Martin's, 2009. Print.

Davis, Matthew. "The only negative review of 'A Visit from the Goon Squad' ever written." *The American Literary Review* (28 July 2011). Web. 5 July 2012.

Davis, Robert Con. "Post-Modern Paternity: Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*." *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Richard F. Patteson. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992. Print.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak. Detroit: Black & Red, 1983. Print.

Depoortere, Frederiek. *Badiou and Theology*. London: T&T Clark International, 2009. Print.

---. *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, and Slavoj Žižek*. London: T&T Clark, 2008. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *On the Name*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995. Print.

---. *Specters of Marx*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Derrida, Jacques and Geoffrey Bennington. *Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.

Detweiler, Robert. *Uncivil Rites: American Fiction, Religion, and the Public Sphere*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Print.

Duchamp, L. Timmel. Selection from "Who's In? Who's Out?" Mark Amerika, et al. *American Book Review* 32.5 (July / August 2011): 1-7. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. "Post-Structuralism." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 110-30. Print.

Ebert, Teresa L. "Postmodern Politics, Patriarchy, and Donald Barthelme." *Contemporary Fiction* 11.2 (Summer 1991): 75-82. Print.

Egan, Jennifer. *Emerald City*. New York: Anchor, 2007. Print.

---. *The Invisible Circus*. New York: Picador, 1995. Print.

---. *The Keep*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. Print.

---. *Look at Me*. New York: Anchor, 2003. Print.

---. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print.

Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper & Row, 1963. Print.

Elliott, Elissa. "*A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan." *Paste* (2 May 2011): Web. 16 June 2012.

Emery, Amy Fass. "The Zombie In/As the Text: Zora Neale Hurston's 'Tell My Horse.'" *African American Review* 39.3 (Fall 2005): 327-36. Print.

Fisher, Mark. "What is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly* 66.1 (Fall 2012): 16-24. Print.

Flanagan, Kieran. "Liturgy, Ambiguity and Silence: The Ritual Management of Real Absence. *The British Journal of Sociology* 36.2 (Jun. 1985): 193-223. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. NewYork: Vintage, 1990. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979. Print.

Giles, Paul. "Seminal Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace." *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (Fall 2007): 327-44. Print.

Gordon, Lois. *Donald Barthelme*. Boston: Twayne, 1981. Print.

Graff, Gerald. *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. Print.

Gray, Richard. "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis." *American Literary History* 21.1 (Spring 2009): 128-48. Print.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. Trans. Matthew J. O'Connell. New York: Orbis, 2000. Print.

Hering, David. "*Infinite Jest*: Triangles, Cycles, Choices & Chases." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Ed. David Hering. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010. Print.

Hudgens, Michael Thomas. *Donald Barthelme: Postmodernist American Writer*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001. Print.

Hufford, David J. "Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits." *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*. Ed. Barbara Walker. Logan: Utah State UP, 1995. 11-45. Print.

Hungerford, Amy. *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. Print.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Penguin, 1982. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991. Print.

Johnson, Jr., R.E. "'Bees Barking in the Night': The End and Beginning of Donald Barthelme's Narrative." *boundary 2* 5.1 (Autumn 1976): 71-92. Print.

Jordan, Justine. "*A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan – Review." *The Guardian* (1 April 2011): n.p. http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/apr/02/jennifer-egan-goon-squad-review. Web. 27 November 2011.

Juan-Navarro, Santiago. "About the Pointlessness of Patricide: A Lacanian Reading of Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*." *Estudos anglo-americanos* 14-15 (1990): 88-103. Print.

Kamuf, Peggy. "The Ghosts of Critique and Deconstruction." *Deconstruction: A Reader*. Ed. Martin McQuillan. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Karnicky, Jeffrey. "Kinds of Stasis in David Foster Wallace." *Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. Print.

Kearney, Richard. "Eschatology of the Possible God." *The Religious*. Ed. John D. Caputo. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. Print.

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Ed. David Hering. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010. Print.

Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991. Print.

Kristeva, Julia. *This Incredible Need to Believe*. Trans. Beverly Bie Brahik. New York: Columbia UP, 2009. Print.

Kusnír, Jaroslav. "Subversion of myths: high and low cultures in Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*." *European Journal of American Culture* 23.1 (2004): 31-49. Print.

LaBrie, Sarah. "In Which the Dreams of Jennifer Egan Come True." *This Recording* (17 February 2012). Web. 16 June 2012.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.

LaGambina, Gregg. "A Visit from the Goon Squad." *The A.V. Club* (1 July 2010). Web. 5 July 2012.

Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Norton, 1978. Print.

Leland, John. "Remarks Re-Marked: Barthelme, What Curios of Signs!" *Boundary 2* 5 (Spring 1977): 795-811. Print.

Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: MacMillan, 1943. Print.

Lewis, Pericles. *Religious Experience and the Modern Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print.

Marion, Jean-Luc. *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*. Trans. Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.

Masciotra, David. "The Ferocious Morality of David Foster Wallace." *Pop Matters* (20 April 2011). Web. 18 January 2012.

Max, D.T. *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. New York: Viking, 2012. Print.

McAlister, Elizabeth. "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85.2 (Spring 2012): 457-86. Print.

McCaffery, Larry. "Donald Barthelme: The Aesthetics of Trash (*Snow White*)." *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Richard F. Patteson. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992. Print.

McClure, John A. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007. Print.

McVicker, Jeanette. "Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*: 'Girls Talk' and the Displacement of the Logos." *Boundary 2* 16 (Winter-Spring 1989): 363-90. Print.

Mishra, Pankaj. "Modernity's Undoing." *London Review of Books* 33.7 (31 March 2011). Web. 5 July 2012.

Molesworth, Charles. *Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved from Drowning*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982. Print.

Morace, Robert A. "Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*: The Novel, the Critics, and the Culture." *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Richard F. Patteson. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992. Print.

Morris, Jason. "The Time Between Time: Messianism & the Promise of a 'New Sincerity.'" *Jacket* 35 (2008): n.p. Web. http://jacketmagazine.com/35/morris- sincerity.shtml. 22 December 2012.

Nealon, Jeffrey T. "Disastrous Aesthetics: Irony, Ethics and Gender in Barthelme's *Snow White*." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 51.2 (Summer 2005): 123-41. Print.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Noonday, 1969. Print.

Parfitt, Trevor. "Towards a Post-Structuralist Development Ethics? Alterity or the same?" *Third World Quarterly* 31.5 (2010): 675-92. Print.

Peck, Dale. "Well, duh." *London Review of Books* 18.14 (July, 1996): 14-15. Print.

Pickstock, Catherine. *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. Print.

Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. Trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem. New York: Paulist Press, 1987. Print.

The Pulitzer Prizes. "The 2011 Pulitzer Prize Winners: Fiction." Citation. www.pulitzer.org/citation/2011-Fiction. Web. 1 July 2012.

Raposa, Michael L. *Boredom and the Religious Imagination*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999. Print.

Reilly, Charles. "An Interview with Jennifer Egan." *Contemporary Literature* 50.3 (Fall 2009): 439-60. Print.

Rorty, Richard and Gianni Vattimo. *The Future of Religion*. Ed. Santiago Zabala. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. Print.

Ryan, Michael. "Marx and Derrida." *Deconstruction: A Reader*. Ed. Martin McQuillan. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Sokal, Alan. "Truth, Reason, Objectivity and the Left." *Economic and Political Weekly* 33.16 (April 1998): 913-14. Print.

Stanford, W.B. "Ghosts and Apparitions in Homer, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare." *Hermathena* 56 (November 1940): 84-92. Print.

Steinberg, Julie. "Jennifer Egan on Winning the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction." *The Wall Street Journal: Speakeasy*. 18 April 2011. http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/04/18/jennifer-egan-on-winning-the-2011-pulitzer-prize-for-fiction/. Web. 1 July 2012.

Tate, Andrew. *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity*. London: Continuum, 2008. Print.

Trachtenberg, Stanley. *Understanding Donald Barthelme*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990. Print.

Vattimo, Gianni. *After Christianity*. Trans. Luca D'Isanto. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. Print.

---. "The Age of Interpretation." *The Future of Religion*. Ed. Santiago Zabala. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. 43-54. Print.

Vattimo, Gianni and René Girard. *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*. Ed. Pierpaolo Antonello. Trans. William McCuaig. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. New York: Back Bay, 1998. Print.

---. *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. New York: Little, Brown, 2006. Print.

---. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Back Bay, 2006. Print.

---. *Oblivion: Stories*. New York: Little, Brown, 2004. Print.

---. *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. New York: Little, Brown, 2009. Print.

Walsh, Richard. "*The Dead Father*: Innovative Forms, Eternal Themes." *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Richard F. Patteson. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992. Print.

Walshe, Maurice O'C, trans. and ed. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. New York: Crossroad, 2009. Print.

Ward, Graham. "How Literature Resists Secularity." *Literature & Theology* 24.1 (March 2010): 73-88. Print.

Westphal, Merold. "Divine Excess: The God who Comes After." *The Religious*. Ed. John D. Caputo. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. Print.

Wilde, Alan. "Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard: Some Thoughts on Modern and Postmodern Irony." *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Richard F. Patteson. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992. Print.

Williams, Rowan. *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*. London: Continuum, 2007. Print.

Zeitlin, Michael. "Father-Murder and Father-Rescue: The Post-Freudian Allegories of Donald Barthelme." *Contemporary Literature* 34.2 (Summer 1993): 182-203. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London: Verso, 2009. Print.

---. *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso, 2011. Print.

---. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador, 2008. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj and John Milbank. *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Ed. Creston Davis. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009. Print.