

TIME OUT OF MIND: STYLE AND THE ART OF BECOMING

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION,
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Frances Bartkowski

The two main themes or theoretical modes characterized in “Time Out of Mind”—*style and the untimely*—are the result of my own desire to imagine for myself and others a kind of inquiry that evades the moral requirements of the very modes of inquiry from which my knowledge and my critical sensibilities emerge. Style is, as Quentin Crisp has already explained, “at its broadest sense, consciousness.” It is the process of dedicating oneself and one’s reading practices to this ongoing process of becoming that characterizes the ways of style and indeed marks my path here as I approach the work of four artists: Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O’Connor, Quentin Crisp and Bob Dylan.

Style is, above all, invested in matters beyond the present; as an aesthetic cosmology, style is an ethics rooted in the ontology of being and committed, in practice, to the art of becoming. Becoming, as I will soon define and explain in detail, is a conscious aesthetic process that revels in the coeval coming-to-be and passing away of the world. In art and philosophy, becomings are always in a combined pursuit of pleasures and sensations that exist prior to and beneath knowledge and representation as well as poised towards visions of futures not-yet-seen and not-yet-known. The untimely, as I will call it and that I will also deal throughout “Time Out of Mind,” is the quality produced by this kind of consciousness of ontology. An untimely artist is, then, an artist consumed with, as Nietzsche has described it, the triumph of the will over morality and an overcoming of the history of knowledge: “*becoming* alongside a radical negation of the concept of being.”¹ In the end between an ethics of the untimely art of becoming is at the heart of what I would like to propose we call the practice of style.

“Time Out of Mind: Style and the Art of Becoming” should be of interest to scholars in: American Studies, Literature, Gender Studies, Continental Philosophy and Queer Theory.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Hammer of the Gods: Apocalyptic Texts for the Criminally Insane*. London: Creation Book. 1996: 79-80

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This Dissertation is Dedicated to Taylor Black

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Introduction

Prologue: Style, an Aesthetic Cosmology

All the best images and parables should speak both of time and becoming: they should be a eulogy for and a justification of all that is transitory.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Hammer of the Gods* (45)

What is a dissertation if not an opportunity to judge the merits of the scholar-to-be? And what is a dissertation but the attempts by a scholar-in-the-making to articulate a system of judgment that will not only guide his attempts at writing in the present but also forecast a way of being in and seeing the future world? My attraction to the two main themes or theoretical modes characterized in “Time Out of Mind”—*style and the untimely*—is the result of my own desire to imagine for myself and others a kind of inquiry that evades the moral requirements of the very modes of inquiry from which my knowledge and my critical sensibilities emerge. Style is, as I will explain and display again and again throughout this dissertation, and as Quentin Crisp has already written into the stars, “at its broadest sense, consciousness.” But consciousness of what, and to what degree? While I cannot promise a clean answer to this question here or in the pages to come (pages, indeed, not only devoted to this present work but also, with luck, to all of my work-to-come as well), I will say that it is the process of dedicating oneself and one’s reading practices to this ongoing process of becoming that characterizes the ways of style. Style is, above all, invested in matters beyond the present; as an aesthetic cosmology, style is an ethics rooted in the ontology of being and committed, in practice, to the art of becoming. Becoming, as I will soon define and explain in detail, is a conscious aesthetic process that revels in the coeval coming-to-be and passing

away of the world. In art and philosophy, becomings are always in a combined pursuit of pleasures and sensations that exist prior to and beneath knowledge and representation as well as poised towards visions of futures not-yet-seen and not-yet-known. The untimely, as I will call it and that I will also deal with presently, is the quality produced by this kind of consciousness of ontology. An untimely artist is, then, an artist consumed with, as Nietzsche has described it, the triumph of the will over morality and an overcoming of the history of knowledge: “*becoming* alongside a radical negation of the concept of being.”² In the end between an ethics of the untimely art of becoming is at the heart of what I would like to propose we call the practice of style.

Style is to be studied for its imperceptible and untimely qualities. The “consciousness” that style represents, or is perhaps eternally in search of, is not a fixed, moral, nor even a transcendental consciousness; style is to be understood as a desire for the intoxicating, if unrecognizable and not immediately knowable, elements of the world that encloses the world, those causes behind all causes and the ways of becoming in spite of the necessities of being. The work of style is to be judged, in material terms, for its *intensive* values that, as opposed to *extensive* properties, cannot be subtracted from the whole or taken apart to benefit scientific—or, in this case, literary and artistic—inquiry. Intensive properties of science—temperature, density, hardness—are, like style, recognized and recognizable while at the same time being too vast and mysterious to account for. Be that as it may, “Time Out of Mind: Style and the Art of Becoming” is my first attempt in a succession of attempts to think through and to account for artistic modes of expression and ways of being

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Hammer of the Gods: Apocalyptic Texts for the Criminally Insane*. London: Creation Books. 1996: 79-80

in the world that are invested in the intensive qualities of creativity and becoming, in ontology.

From here, I will introduce my operative key terms: style, becoming, the untimely, ontology and intensity. From there, I will introduce and situate my cast of stylists—Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O’Connor, Quentin Crisp and Bob Dylan—and explain what their works and what my current approach to them contribute to a theory of style. While I am certainly invested in the charms associated with the admittedly oblique and mysterious nature of this inquiry it is my hope that, in the process, I will have made a clear case for style as a way into untimely figures and precepts and towards an ethical ontology of my own.

On the Genealogy of Style

In spite of my attraction to the untimely—or simply to artists marked by out-of-time and out-of-placeness—the emphasis that I place on “style” here does have a kind of genealogy in modern thought and artistic production. While the term itself is not always used or indeed held up theoretically as I do in my work, the main component of all stylists and of all scholarly interest in the productions of what I term style has to do with the supreme value placed on the production of *difference* as an very material, ontological force against what I will henceforth refer to as “the arrow of time.” Central to my understanding and usage of this concept is an aphorism provided to us by Quentin Crisp in his 1979 book *How To Have A Life-Style*³. Calling attention to what he terms “Dr. Jacob Bronowski’s first law,” Crisp maintains, “The arrow of time points always in the direction of diminishing difference...Style stands facing the other way; this is mine” (26). The “Dr. Bronowski” in question here is Polish-Jewish mathematician and biologist whose work on physics, time and

³ Quentin Crisp, *How to Have a Life-Style*. New York: Routledge, Kegan & Paul. 1979

evolution brought him fame in the United Kingdom and saw the 1973 production of the BBC television series *The Ascent of Man*. Taking his research cues, and certainly the title of his television series and subsequent book, from Charles Darwin's second book on evolutionary theory, *The Descent of Man*, Bronowski's vision of the future of the world and of mankind is one where science comes to provide more and more knowledge of how life is maintained and is elaborated over time leaving a vision of a future where all natural oddities and differences are both understood and eventually erased. The stylist's stance against this "arrow of time" is more than just a cause held up and occupied by Quentin Crisp, it is the cause unto which this dissertation finds its ethics and from which a more vast genealogy of writers and artists display and continue to display an ongoing dedication to the projection and cultivation of difference. Or, in other terms, a dedication to mystery, to what Poe terms, "the imp of the perverse."

Of course, as I have said, this campaign (what I call style, but that has been referred to as the will to power in Nietzsche, becoming in Deleuze and transfiguration in broader religious terms) has taken on different terms in different times. For Nietzsche—perhaps, at least in this present work, the theoretical starting point of this genealogy of style—a lifelong campaign against the culturally deadening effects of what he termed "nihilism" and "decadence" represents his own noble efforts to maintain and nurture creative dignity against the arrow of time, just coming into being and taking hold over the world during the time in which he wrote. In the same ways that Crisp shows an awareness of the dangerous effects to be anticipated from Bronowski's "first law," Nietzsche spent much of his energy cautioning against the ideals of Darwinism that reduced humans and all other animals to immediately knowable and, for Nietzsche, undignified states. Working, also like Crisp, through aphoristic means, Nietzsche's writings negate and even undermine the power of

systematic thinking and knowledge and display, instead, a capacity to think through the problems of being and time in ways that defy easy explanation or utilization. This is an aesthetics of the aphoristic wherein concepts are given (or phrased) in such a way that, in their easily separable quotability, they work against systems in language and science that ask to be taken for granted. These taxonomies are modes of knowledge that base their superiority over their very claims over truth that, in the end, Nietzsche considers to be a symptom of modern decadent thought. “The will to a *system*,” Nietzsche argues, in a philosopher or scientist is “a disease of the character; amorally speaking, his will to appear more stupid than he is...I am not bigoted enough for a system.”⁴ The aphorism, for Nietzsche, is a will to immortal life and an escape route from the decadence of modern taxonomies; it is, he maintains, an opportunity for the writer “to create things on which time tests its teeth in vain; in *substance*, to strive for a little immortality”; “[t]he aphorism, the apothegm...are the forms of ‘eternity.’”⁵ The difference that style is invested in is this “little immortality” that Nietzsche romances here. What qualities and affects are produced by self-conscious acts of style are varied and disparate; the ethical commitment to a negation of the equalizing and deadening effects of time and knowledge are, however, always at the heart of any act or work of style. So, with this understood, I will continue to elaborate and populate my own genealogy of style with the idea that mine will be of figures who have attempted to exist in an untimely realm, thinkers and writers who do their good work while being weighed down by a common, unifying “time out of mind.”

⁴ qtd. in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Walter Kaufman. New York: Vintage Books. 1950: 80

⁵ Ibid 87

The Untimely

What I am today, where I am today—at a height where I speak no longer with words but with lightning bolts...I beheld a land...The great calm in promising, this happy gaze into a future that is not to remain a mere promise!

Nietzsche, “The Untimely Ones”⁶

While both Crisp and Nietzsche performed critical negations of the scientific concepts of time and evolution presented by Bronowski and Darwin, it is not as if their stylistic overcomings of these systems are the result of an ambivalence or nihilism on the part of either of these men. The case is, in fact, quite the opposite: as stylists who value the qualities of the untimely, Crisp and Nietzsche show an investment in and attraction to matters relating to eschatology, the philosophy of beginnings and endings. Crisp, in his first television interview in 1968, summarizes his notorious definition of Bronowski’s “First Law” and concludes his statements about the difference-ending arrow of time, with a wistful glance at his interviewer, saying, “Isn’t that a wonderful thing to have said?”⁷ The concept of the arrow of time that, in Crisp’s summary, provides Bronowski and his scientific peers a capacity to envision a future where present forms of difference (sexual, class-based, racial, provincial, etc.) will converge and eventually become annihilated, also provides Crisp with the theoretical starting-point of his own discourse on style. The critical difference between the two modes of thought, and indeed the beginning of Crisp’s untimely vision, begins with

⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* included in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufman. New York: Random House. 1967: 281

⁷ “Bernard Braden Interviews Quentin Crisp (1968),” for BFI Television. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFPqDUQKmt8> viewed 08/20/14

a divergent approach to matters of time and becoming. For both Crisp and in the case of Bronowski's "First Law," the material elaboration of difference is at the heart of the project of time; in each instance one looks backwards in order to look ahead at the future. The key difference, however, is in Crisp's approach to time, which, for him, provides an *opportunity* for the cultivation of difference rather than its eventual dilution and convergence into dominant forms of matter and life. The arrow of time provides Crisp, and, I argue, the stylist, with a clearly defined ideological point at which he may turn his toes in an opposing direction. This effort that I will term "the untimely," or "untimeliness" is the most recognizable quality of any elemental projection of style. It is, in Nietzschean terms, a will to power that is drawn to the virtuous cultivation of the self and of self-knowledge as an art form, as art.

Nietzsche's own quibbles with Darwin may also be considered to be more generative and reactive. In her 2004 book, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*⁸, Elizabeth Grosz brings together the philosophical work on time and survival present in both Darwin and Nietzsche and finds between these two men a strong, if uncanny, ideological alliance. As for Darwin, Grosz proposes that writers in the social sciences and humanities look first to his work in order to develop a more precise and robust theory of time that, until now, has been the domain of physicists and others working in the natural sciences. Recognizing in Darwin, above all, a concept of life that is "essentially linked to the movement of time," Grosz argues that Darwin "transformed the concept of life, in quite dramatic but unrecognized ways, from a static quality into a dynamic process" (7). Like Nietzsche, Grosz determines here, Darwin is concerned with a transformative understanding

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*. Duke University Press: 2004

of material (as well as human and animal) becoming that replaces a fixed and ultimately negative notion of merely being; essence replaced by existence; and, most strikingly, a programmatic transfiguration of the past and the present which are “rendered provisional in light of the force of the future” (7). Darwin’s theories contained within *On The Origin of Species* provide Nietzsche—who Grosz aptly claims is “perhaps more Darwinian than he wants to admit” (10)—with an ideological groundwork on which he becomes able to project his own untimely philosophies of the will to power and the overman onto the future. Just as Darwin executes in his writings, Nietzsche provides a privileged position in his descriptions of time and becoming for the unpredictable in his visions of futurity and temporality as well as an ethical commitment to the noble self-overcomings bound up in what he refers to as the will to power which, ultimately, provide him with a way of transforming life and imagining a future in spite of the present.

The focus in Nietzsche’s work on temporality and the update that Grosz describes him offering to Darwin’s work on evolution has to do with this concept of the will to power as a creative and inventive overcoming of time itself. At play in this concept of becoming is a critical emphasis on what Grosz describes as “the-out-of-place, that which marks itself as beyond or outside, the unaverage, the overman, the *untimely*” (11). This, as she puts it, “dynamic Darwinism” is a way of being in time that transforms being into an art of becoming, at the expense of the present and the present-self, and toward a “becoming-other and becoming-more” (113). Time, and history itself, far from simply signaling the end of difference, can provide the untimely man with an opportunity to become, of “placing ourselves outside the constraints, the limitations and blinkers of the present” (113). The past and future matter a great deal to eschatologists, both scientific and creative. For the life-scientist the past is a resource for studying and predicting a future that takes into account the

ideological and political needs of the present; while, for the stylist, invested in cultivating the untimely in their modes of being and becoming, the past is a resource that provides difference and the future, not indebted at all to the present, is an opportunity for the continued elaboration of difference in the form of art, as style. The untimely is a process of being in time that prepares for and fiercely protects a vision of the future centered on an ethics of difference. It is an “out-of-stepness,” a, to borrow from Grosz, “dis-ease” in the present marking every practice of style. It is to speak, as Nietzsche once put it, in lightning bolts and to not only conjure up but somehow, imperceptibly, materialize a future that is more than mere promise. The untimely is also, as this dissertation will make clear, constitutive of the kinds of artists and philosophers that seem to defy traditional histories and genres: figures whose works always appear anachronistic in whatever present they find themselves, works that seem forever poised toward some future time and some unimagined audience-to-come.

Becoming

Art is not communicative, art is not reflexive. Art, science, philosophy are neither contemplative, neither reflexive, nor communicative. They are creative, that's all.

Gilles Deleuze

As a methodology, style constitutes a creative, rather than systematic or representational, mode of inquiry dependent upon the notion that its attendant concepts (both present in the primary work of stylists as well as in its reconstitution via scholarly writing on style) are active, inventive and creative in nature. This mode of research relates, in this work, to the reading and writing practices proposed by Gilles Deleuze, who has argued that literary, artistic and philosophic concepts are active, that they *create*, *invent* and *do*

more than they represent, relate to or imitate. The notion of becoming is at the core of Deleuze's proposition here, as, he argues, in his description of an ontology of becoming: "to become is never to imitate, nor to 'do like,' nor to conform to a model."⁹ This notion that concepts are always inventive is a philosophical approach to the concept as a becoming, as an art form in itself. Thus, the direction in which concepts-as-becomings move is toward pure difference. This is a cosmic, or metaphysical, dimension wherein the only healthy and lively concepts are those not based on or in reference to any pre-existent category or idea: the invention of pure difference in itself.¹⁰

So, while the untimely is characteristic of an act of style or that which marks and weighs down the stylist in the present, this notion of becoming rooted in the idea that all concepts are invested in the elaboration of difference is the path through which style makes its untimely journey toward the future and in the path of a cosmological aesthetics. This becoming, or this movement, of style is neither based in teleology nor in a fixed concept of history; "a line of becoming," according to Deleuze and Guattari, "has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination...A line of becoming has only a middle."¹¹ With this in mind, while becomings are creative and consist of only pure middle, and since acts of style are always out-of-step, out-of-time and out-of-place, the task of the scholar interested in style and its effects is to focus in on this cosmic activity without the aid of finite or discrete modes of temporality. Any attention paid to style's becomings must always endeavor to negate the illusory qualities of representation and determination normally

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*. Translated by Tomlinson and Habberjam. London: Continuum Press. 2002: 2

¹⁰ see *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition*, James Williams. Edinburgh University Press. 2013: Pgs. 13 and 60

¹¹ Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Massumi. London: Athlone Press. 1987: 293

involved in criticism and look instead toward a more boundless, imperceptible act of creativity at play in the creation of pure difference. This act of inventing difference is becoming.

Unlike the critic or scholar of literature, the philosopher of style indebts him or herself to reading and creating alongside the work of literature rather than interpreting it. There are, Deleuze argues, two kinds of reading: the kind that sees literature as containing meanings and interpretations for the analyst or reader to exhume and bring to light; the other kind, as he describes here, is “a reading in intensity”:

A book is considered as a little a-signifying machine; the only problem is ‘does it work and how does it work?’ How does it work for you? If it doesn’t work, if nothing comes through, then take another book. This other type of reading is a reading in intensity: something comes through or it doesn’t come through. There is nothing to explain, nothing to understand, nothing to interpret...This other way of reading is opposed to the former one because it relates a book immediately to an Outside. A book is a small cog in a much more complex eternal machinery.¹²

The assemblage is the desired object in Deleuze’s concept of becoming: it is the physical and viral product and production of the work of art. Reading, in this case, is keeping your eye on the lines of flights and deterritorializations that the work contains and creates. Becoming is about reading and seeing, building and expanding. The “a-signifying” aspect of the literary machine to which Deleuze guides his explanation is a work of art, or a concept, made up of intensive values rather than extensive qualities. As I explained briefly in the prologue, intensity, in this case, refers to those imperceptible, yet very real and material forces that (like temperature, hardness, etc.) cannot be subtracted from the whole or

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers*. Paris: Minuit. 1990: 17

measured in any partial way. The literary machine is not made up of metaphors, characters or symbolism but is instead an entire block of sensation, a complete becoming in constant elaboration of difference in a time and space not bound by a formalistic vision of “reality,” or of what “already is.” Style, in this way, focuses on the act of writing as a form of invention—an art of improvisation and experimentation that makes becoming possible. That is, style is the art of writing and imagining the not-yet-possible, and becoming is the act of building and expanding it; while becoming deterritorializes, style marks out and formalizes its own territory into the future. “Writing,” Deleuze maintains, “operates the conjunction, the transmutation of fluxes, through which life escapes the resentment of persons, societies and reigns.”¹³ My goal in this dissertation is to both imagine and display a manner of reading literature, of writing with and alongside canonical writers in a way that is something other than critical or interpretive.

Stylists work to create concepts rather than social criticisms or personal confessions—concepts which, Deleuze and Guattari link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their contours, articulate their respective problems, and belong to the same philosophy, even if they have different histories.”¹⁴ By testing the limits of literature and of the words that make up a literary work, the stylist-author creates an assemblage whose life is neither indebted to nor a part of the time and place from which it emerges; the work of the stylist becomes and is a becoming in and of itself, one that exists—like Poe's beating heart—beneath and behind the floorboards of history and knowledge.

“Literary works,” Ronald Bogue argues in *Deleuze on Literature*, “do not mean so much as they function. When properly constructed, they are machines that make something

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*. Paris: Flammarion. 1977: 62

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* University of Minnesota Press. 1991: 96

happen.”¹⁵ In that spirit, then, “Time Out Of Mind: Style and the Art of Becoming” emerges out of an intellectual history connected to Deleuzian becoming and Nietzschean overcoming that sees texts as creative works that, in order to maintain their vitality and artistic live-ness, must always experiment, improvise and take chances at growing themselves into futures not-yet-known. Style, to point to Deleuze and Guattari’s own definition of it, is “the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says, but by what it causes to move, to flow...a pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds—art as ‘experimentation.’”¹⁶

My own insistence on the subject of style and on the example of these four writers is in understanding it as an irreducible, yet parallel, process of becoming that makes itself responsible for building, formalizing and knowing concepts, affects and worlds-to-come. As a process, style demands encounter rather than recognition; it asks for and produces bewilderment at the expense of clarity; it produces multiplicity instead of metaphor; it is ineffable; it defies the very hungry needs of critical investigation. Like any form of becoming, style imagines a world other-than-the-one given unto us. It seeks out pleasures not permitted in the present; it expresses only in order to constantly construct and expand the limits of its own, limited territory within the “real” world. It is writing “as experimentation.”

Time Out of Mind

Rather than attempt to argue, conjecture or suggest what important themes, ideas or histories the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O’Connor, Quentin Crisp or Bob Dylan have within them, my writing will attempt to gesture towards what thoughts, ideas and

¹⁵ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Literature*. London and New York: Routledge. 2003: 187

¹⁶ qtd. in Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*. University of Minnesota Press. 1997: *li*

concepts might be products of their individual processes and practices of style. Their texts will not matter to me for what they already say or what I can argue, but simply for what I will or will not be able to say about them. This is, I will add, as much a result of my encounters with these writers and their works as it is with Deleuze's philosophical concepts; indeed, the primary reason for my interest in and devotion to style is because of my own faithful attempts at doing these very skilled stylists' work justice. While, as Colin Davis argues in his critique of Deleuze's own reading practices¹⁷, reading in this manner defies Derrida's infamous maxim that there is no outside the text ("il n'y a pas de hors-texte")¹⁸, in Deleuze's readings of literature, there is no inside the text, only a literary machine capable of producing untimely concepts and becomings. That is, avoiding the deconstructive tendency towards interpretation and description, reading for and writing about style necessitates a certain degree of formalism, of prescriptive behavior. This formalism, however, is not a formalism attached to any already established genre or field of study, but is instead a formalism based on an individual stylist's own body of work.

As a way into studying literature and of doing literary scholarship, the subject of style unites the writer with his or her words and works and asks what each member of this assemblage can do in service of a greater cause and image—of the author-as-stylist. While much discussion and analysis of American literature in academic discourse has focused on considering the various contributing factors—whether historical, cultural or psychological—that surround and help produce a body of work, my dissertation will consider the literary work—whether in the form of short story, novel/la, song, performance or spoken word—as existing in and of itself. Once the authors featured in this dissertation put words onto a

¹⁷ Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell*. Stanford University Press: 2011, 57

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Paris: Minuit. 1967, 227

page, the works become objects of their own—not independent of their creators, but neither indebted to them, their psychological state or the customs marking the time in which they wrote. As stylists, the authors I will approach write in order to create art; more untimely than historical, the works of fiction and presentations of artistic personality from Poe, O'Connor, Crisp and Dylan are all meaningful in the ways that they reveal, and continue to reveal, mysteries and realities that work more on the contemporary reader's life and sense of self than offer some glimpse into the past or into a social critique of American life-gone-by.

The Poe Machine

The first chapter of this dissertation approaches the work and the enduring figure of Edgar Allan Poe. In many ways, Poe represents the ultimate man out of time in the history of American letters. Beginning with the announcement of his death written by fair-weather-friend and literary executor Reverend Rufus Griswold, who attempted to sully Poe's name and reputation more than he even desired to claim his own fame and success in relation to his control over Poe's posthumous career, Chapter One, "The Poe Machine," traces the afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe through the mid-nineteenth century into the late twentieth century. Poe's reputation, as Griswold aptly, if condescendingly, puts it is as one of America's "most brilliant but erratic stars."¹⁹ While it was Griswold's intention to label Poe as a literary talent weighed down by various emotional and psychological traumas—a qualification of Poe that no doubt has followed him in his afterlife vis-à-vis popular biographical representations of him that never seem to overcome Griswold's original well-

¹⁹ Griswold, Rufus. "Death of Edgar A. Poe." *New York Tribune*, October 9, 1849: p. 2, cols. 3-4

shaded dismissal—the notion that Americans have of Poe is also the result of his enduring mystery as a literary artist.

Having professed to be writing for audiences living in the future, Poe's artistic visions are always untimely ones, carrying with them concepts and sensations intended to live on through the years and into the eventual destruction of the entire planet. "The Poe Machine" operates chronologically, on the one hand, as it follows Poe into various trends in literary scholarship, while it also calls attention to the capacity Poe has built into both his body of work and his own image to evade popularity and timeliness in order to forecast and, ultimately, absolve the accuracy of dominant forms of inquiry waiting to dissect his work in a world-to-come. Each stage of this drama is organized around a historical representation of Poe and his critics in each of these stages of official literary analysis and a concurrent unfolding of a Poe story, poem or essay that undoes ultimate authority of his writings, giving the power of/to affect and effect always back to Poe himself.

Looking at the second half of the nineteenth century in America and finding what I will refer to as a "biographical mania," the first act of this drama sees the immediate results of Poe's sullied reputation that resulted from his somewhat embarrassing and notorious death in Baltimore in 1849. A national obsession with the "inner-lives" of great men led to the production of many official and unofficial biographical works that sought to base American understandings of and appreciations for its cultural stars on a universal appraisal of their personalities, reputations and moral dispositions. Poe, without doubt, was and is forever cast as a troubled, insane and, more often than not, drunk and drug-addled figure who was able to create popular, yet somewhat distasteful, works of literary and poetry. Poe's story "The Man Who Was Used Up" is offered here as a grotesque prediction of this national biographical mania, as it describes one journalist's attempts at locating and

interviewing a great man in the history of the American military and who ends up coming face-to-face not with the noble, dignified creature of popular dreams but instead a prosthetic man, assembled in a threadbare fashion by his wooden legs, his glass eyes and his wig. Poe's elaborate joke here is one that predicted his country's eventual obsession with fame and notoriety; his piece-meal man is his own vision of himself, the man that so many would want to get to know and present to the country and the man that would so often confound and confuse both admirers and naysayers to come.

In the next section, I present the development of psychoanalysis and see its development in American culture and, subsequently, in the form of psychoanalytic literary criticism. Freud's great influence, as I argue, on a national culture already obsessed with character judgments and anatomizations of the inner-lives of great men, is vast, as it provides a scientific and more precise approach to the kinds of judgments and qualifications already set-in-motion by the "biographical-mania" that constituted late-nineteenth-century scholarship. Here Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition" works to constitute his own vision of artistic control, as he maintains that the art of writing is also an art of developing and maintaining consciousness: an act of style that, as I show, can and will evade any official attempts at dislodging this capacity of intention and this method of becoming.

"The Modern Poe," as I refer to the next phase of this story, finds Poe as he is interpreted by the New Criticism. Here, a concerted effort is made to move past biographical considerations of authors and into a text-based analysis focused on formal literary effects. In this instance, the text is viewed, in and of itself, as a kind of free-standing architecture to be valued and interrogated for its own internal qualifications and strengths. The problem here, and indeed even in the case of the New Criticism's valorization of Poe as an author focused on the significance of textual unity flattened Poe; his Literary Machine is

understood to be capable of producing affects and *concepts* as well as formal literary effects. Here, I present Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" as another grotesque send-up of this moment of literary analysis. In many ways similar to the journalist's search for the great General A. B. C. Smith in "The Man That Was Used Up," the search, in this story, for the once great House of Usher finds a house already dying and falling in on itself. Once again, Poe's use of the grotesque and the gothic are vehicles for his artistic deterritorialization of dominant forms of criticism-to-come.

The last section deals with Roland Barthes' infamous declaration of "the death of the author," as the New Criticism's injunction against biographical matters in criticism are made even more extreme in Barthes' own suggestion that works be read totally independent of any suggestion of the author and his or her biography, historical context and intention. The last work presented from The Poe Machine in response to this is his novella *The Tale of Arthur Gordon Pym*, a story that follows a young man as he sails to the South Pole, in search of the center of the earth and, ultimately finds nothing. Poe's untimely vision of the future is that, beyond here lies nothing.

The Terrible Speed of Mercy: Flannery O'Connor's Grotesque Vision of Grace

In literature and the other creative arts, style is a realization that the artist is always in a state of becoming. Against teleology, the stylist's work is always marked by a pervasive untimeliness. While the focus is, for the stylist at work, always on movement, this becoming is not one that is easily recognizable in its time and that always appears before us in a strange, bewildering manner. This untimeliness means that the work of the stylist both imagines and belongs in some very foreign time and not-yet-conceived of place. For O'Connor, this occurs in her literary adaptations of Catholic dogma and is formalized

through the cultivation of her style. O'Connor's style may be characterized by the ways her stories and novels effect and materialize the Christian vision of the universe—and the visions she manages to create that bring the revelation of Christian mystery into direct, material view.

The exaggerated, grotesque forms of life shown to us in O'Connor's work do indeed appear to be moving in some direction that is not immediately recognizable or justifiable. As she presents the main characters of her stories confronting these mysteries, O'Connor depicts them as being filled up with some kind of totalizing vision that escapes immediate or timely recognition. Born again in this way, these characters, and implicitly her readers-to-come, are overtaken by her artistic escape behind the empty "arrow of time," toward material visions of Christian mystery and into the dust and the sediment of earth's history and of the solid rock of the future.

This backwards, or untimely, movement is a spiritual becoming that, like all becomings, is based in the admirable and mysterious self-recognition of life; and O'Connor's style is the vehicle through which she materializes this becoming, positioning herself and her work to achieve a sense of the universe that is justified in its solidity, that understands that the spheres of the universe which are endowed with thought and feeling cannot exist without a material principle of *spiritual* coherence and energy. In this respect, we may understand style to be a refashioning of essentialism and development and deepen our understanding of the creative habits that cultivate and materialize untimely becomings.

The formalist and holistic Christian vision that articulate her style are violently unsentimental and anti-transcendental: O'Connor's very odd way of being in the modern American world did not, and still does not, seem of its time and place. Untimely creations, however, do not look around themselves for justification, instead choosing to cast out a

strange vision of what *is* in order to chart a course towards an unknown world-to-be.

Writers who operate with a mythic, Christian vision, O'Connor argues, possess "the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable"²⁰, and, in doing so, speak to their imagined audience with a kind of intense, violent fervor that demands disbelief even as it confidently speaks of a future-to-come. By "draw[ing] large and startling figures," as she does, O'Connor's work fulfills its own task of shouting to the hard-of-hearing and emblazoning the violent image of God's grace onto the eyes of capable yet ontologically damaged, par-blind, reprobate human beings (34).

The Arrow of Time: Quentin Crisp and the Cultivation of Difference

As a stylist, Quentin Crisp developed a very stoic, untimely way of living his life in and as an active state of living *in spite of* the future and the past. While he saw modern society moving towards a future without difference, Crisp took on the campaign of style as a stubborn and untimely form of purifying and producing difference. In order for this to happen, according to Crisp, style must be cultivated in order to transform being into an art of becoming, a constant elaboration of an unchanging view of oneself into the future. The means and mechanisms by which style is acquired and maintained must, as each of the figures of this dissertation show, be self-enforced and self-isolating. The stylist's place in the future may be secured, but their occupation of the present is always on shaky ground.

Crisp's autobiography, *The Naked Civil Servant*, was published in 1968, the same year that, ironically, has come to mark the beginning of the "gay rights movement" in the United States and, arguably, the entire western world. Without knowing it, Crisp's document of his absolute sexual failure and his eventual acceptance of style as a form of overcoming

²⁰ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1969: 36

homosexuality works against the progressive logic inherent in what I call in this chapter the “gay stock narrative.” In this narrative, homosexual subjects, before the onset of political movements that began in the late 1960s, suffered under the oppressive regime of cultural isolation and political invisibility. According to the teleology of the gay stock narrative, more freedom comes with more recognition and alongside the solidification of discrete homosexual cultural and political identities. These particular sexual identities asked, almost as soon as they were brought into being, for space within the dominant culture as well as recognizable spaces within their proscribed minoritarian communities. For Crisp, who saw himself as nothing more than a “hopeless case,” homosexuality was not identity and certainly not style. As *The Naked Civil Servant* spends most of its time describing Crisp’s life in London as an egregiously effeminate homosexual decades before the coalescence of the “gay movement” into which his book would be released in 1968, homosexuality is, for Crisp, one of many inborn deformities of personality that he is forced to confront totally and that he in turn develops into a *personal*, as opposed to a political or community-oriented, style. It is this striking difference between Crisp’s concept of style and the gay stock narrative’s insistence upon identity and representation as forms of recognition and freedom that makes his book, and indeed his entire presence throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, so very queer. The untimeliness of the release date of his memoir is more than ironic in its immediate disavowal and undoing of the gay stock narrative: it is a testament to his significance as a philosopher of style standing against not only the arrow of all human time, but also the arrow of his own homosexual kind.

Far from being a more natural way of existing in the modern world, style is actually a process of constructing an artificial sense of time and of the future against logic and against the proper order of things. Style is, in Crisp’s terms, “never natural; its nature is that it must

be acquired” (*How to Have a Lifestyle* 31). As such, though style must always be self-taught, the need for it must be communicated and instructed from those in the know. While there are no leaders of style, there have been missionaries of style. Chapter Three, “The Arrow of Time,” looks into Crisp’s writings and his public persona for directions into how style is confronted, acquired and honed. In the end, as Crisp shows, style is simply a matter of becoming more and more like yourself: an untimely form of difference that makes itself known by resisting cultural adaptation, representation and time itself.

Through Crisp, it becomes clear that difference stands apart from uniqueness and diversity.²¹ Differences in degree are measured within a given, proscribed frame of reference; pure difference exists in and of itself. In advocating the need for style, and indeed by dedicating his own life to that practice, Crisp has provided a very noble and instructive example of how one might transform being into becoming, and focus one’s energy on producing difference on its own terms. Having the strength to possess and communicate his style, Crisp shows the kind of hubris and strength required of the noble man of the future once imagined by Nietzsche, one who finds joy in extremity and sees a vision of themselves beyond the limits of natural time. Untimeliness, in this regard and certainly in the case of Crisp’s writings on style, is at the heart of this procedure. By writing, like Nietzsche himself, in the form of aphorism, Crisp’s ideas appear not in the form of arguments or critical dictates, but as puns, jokes, and knotty truisms cast off from his position in the universe into some future time and for some future audience for whom an ounce of truth may one day make itself known. The art of being and becoming oneself on purpose is at the heart of Crisp’s presentation of style.

²¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1995: 30-45

World Gone Wrong: Bob Dylan's Time Out of Mind

Chapter Four presents Bob Dylan as an untimely artist whose work takes him on simultaneous journeys through the past and future, between and into genres of American folk and popular music and into the cosmological territory reserved for all stylists working against time. As I present the various stages of his career and aspects of his cultivated artistry and persona, “World Gone Wrong” brings together a cohesive understanding of the many crossovers Dylan has orchestrated in his work. Behind a multitude of masks and wrapped in his self-enforcing mystery, Dylan has been, as Deleuze once rightly remarked, successful in overcoming the position of folk musician and developing for himself a way of becoming an “an astonishing producer rather than author” (*Dialogues II* 8-9).

An artist always on the move from one genre to the other, always attempting to forge a creative escape from the very lofty titles and distinctions bestowed upon him as a Voice of a Generation or the king of folk rock or the poet laureate of rock and roll, Dylan has taken hold of the reigns guiding the future steps of his music and driven his image and his sound off the road and off of the rails time and time again—changing even the tracks underneath the train. From his earliest efforts to escape his reputation as the blue-eyed darling of the folk music revival movement, he armed himself with an electric guitar and stared down the disappointed masses of folk purists as he delivered his new sound, slippery and loud, singing “I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s Farm no More” as they, like many audiences to come, scratched their heads and whimpered aloud that he had changed his sound. And when—following the success of *Bringing it all Back Home*, *Blonde on Blonde* and *Highway 61 Revisited*—he had finally won his campaign to transfigure himself into the great dandy hipster singer, brandishing songs like “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” “I Want You” and “Like a Rolling Stone,” Dylan made another quick transition into Americana and

Country Music, releasing the sickly sweet *Nashville Skyline* and then *Self Portrait*, an album of covers that returned Dylan to his responsibilities as a folk music historian and performer but that was delivered with such slick production values and affected (or as some said, affect-less) vocal performances that both critics and admirers scoffed. “What is this shit?” as Mr. Marcus spoke for the times in 1970 in *Rolling Stone*.²²

Dylan, as Marcus aptly underscores, in a 1979 review of one of Dylan’s Holy-Roller performances following his evangelical turn, is always drawing “a line across his career—he’s been a prisoner of the history he made for too long” (99). And so it is true that Bob Dylan’s cross-overs into different musical realms and genres have been important in his historical campaign to separate himself from his contemporary audience; indeed, to separate him from himself. But, in spite of all his lines in the sand and track jumping and isolating, we cannot with any seriousness say that Bob Dylan is a “cross-over artist,” or that his cross-overs should be understood in terms of genre, content or representation. The cross-over artist is, conventionally a popular figure who finds success—and, usually, even greater and more varied success—by appealing beyond their “natural base audience” into new territory and by expanding their work into a new sound or a new groove. Seeing, however, that Dylan’s experiments with musical cross-over have always indicated his desire for less popularity and for less clear journalistic representability, we have to ask ourselves to what end these moments of cross-over direct themselves? Always performing, as Deleuze points out, behind a “clown’s mask,” Dylan’s songs, writings and his persona all succeed at displaying “a technique of contriving, and yet improvising each detail” (8). Moving in and out of a series of long-forgotten times with their attendant images, personalities, ways-of-speaking-and-sounding and moral compasses, Dylan’s art is one that becomes through his own formalized

²² Greil Marcus. *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968-2010*. New York: PublicAffairs. 2010: 7

process of “finding, encountering, stealing instead of regulating, recognizing, and judging (8). Recognizing, Deleuze insists, is instead of encountering. In Dylan’s body of work, the listener and the audience member are forced to reckon with their own encounters with his resurrected past. This history that Dylan inhabits is a strange and oblique history: the kind not only forgotten by those of us inhabiting the present, but also so far out and unbelievable that it seems to come from a time that has never been and might never be.

What sorts of feelings, truths and histories has Dylan tried to move towards (or away from?) in his never-ending campaign to deterritorialize his image and his sound while, perhaps, crossing over into and claiming histories and temporal realities whose rhythms are always out of synch and out of time? The aim of the final chapter of this dissertation is to confront, encounter and think through Dylan’s own stylized time out of mind, or his own artistic methods of being on the move behind, within and beyond history itself.

Chapter One

The Poe Machine

“Edgar Allan Poe is Dead”

An Introduction

What I have here propounded is true:—therefore it cannot die; or if by any means it be now trodden so that it die, it will ‘rise again to the Life Everlasting.’

Poe, *Eureka*²³

Since his death in October 1849, Edgar Allan Poe has, in spite of himself and his sullied reputation in this country, remained one of America’s most enigmatic and significant authors. His bad reputation, it seems, followed him closely to the grave, arriving steps and bounds before whatever accolades we might now bestow upon him. An ornery professional and failed man in many respects, Poe must have had a keen understanding of his precarious position in the public life of the United States even at his most successful moments as an author, critic and poet. His “friend” and literary executor, Reverend Rufus Griswold (who was, in fact, more of an enemy in disguise), penned an obituary for Poe that was released two days after his death, on October 9, 1849, in the *New York Tribune*.

Edgar Allan Poe is dead.

He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday.

This announcement will startle many,

But few will be grieved by it.²⁴

²³ Edgar Allan Poe. *Eureka: A Prose Poem*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. 1997: 4

²⁴ Griswold, Rufus. “Death of Edgar A. Poe.” *New York Tribune*, October 9, 1849

Marking not so much the *end* of Edgar Poe's life as much as the *beginning* of his considerably more successful and powerful afterlife, Griswold's notoriously unkind words ought to be understood as igniting the flames of mystery and complexity that keep Poe and his artistic endeavors alive to this day.

As an American literary genius, Poe's status among his countrymen was and still is on shaky ground. Well read and respected, according to Griswold, in England and continental Europe, Poe's fame in the United States was broadly based on its common perception of his personality and reputation as a disturbed yet creative man. "But," Griswold writes, "he had few or no friends; and the regrets for his death will be suggested principally by the consideration that in him literary art has lost one of its most brilliant but erratic stars."²⁵ A good example of well-shaded contempt, on the one hand, Griswold's obituary must still be given credit for providing a starting point for the feedback-loops-to-come of biographies, literary criticism and popular cultural adaptations of Poe's life and work. In America, almost no proper introduction to Poe—whether in the most sophisticated of scholarly treatises or, as most people first greet him, in the most banal grade school textbook versions—refute, in some major way, the claims made by Griswold marking the news of his friend's death. That Poe's work has allowed for this negative publicity to become both part of his charm and his poetic authority is a testament to his style. His death, as Arthur Hobson Quinn attests to in his *Baltimore Sun* obituary for Poe, "will cause poignant regret among all who admire genius, and have sympathy for the frailties too often attending it."²⁶ Changing not only the degree to which the American public of his time understood his tormented genius, Poe's critical legacy has been, to a large extent, based on debates over his

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1998: 644

problematic reception in the United States. Friendless and helpless, as Rev. Griswold would have us believe, Poe's ongoing status as a man cast out by his own family, orphaned by the scholars controlling the literary world of his home country and patronizingly belittled by his biographers is, in the end, part of the power of his mystery and, to be sure, the impetus for his sustained life as a significant writer and literary stylist.

While this chapter will not focus squarely on Poe as a tormented man and professional failure, it will take from these examples a cue to his broader abilities to control the destiny of his work's reception and his graven image even, and especially, beyond his actual death. Since I will be using style as the centerpiece to my presentation of Poe and his writings, my focus will be on the literary techniques he uses to implement visions and frameworks for living that hold up more than the worlds which his tales, stories and poems envision and contain, but that build up a whole network or infrastructure of the greater assemblage that we now know as "POE." Poe built a literary and poetic machine that worked to formalize the creation of his own literary effects, which appeared in fatuously outdated and complicated forms that we might call baroque in order to articulate for himself the ways in which his haunted visions would produce fields of insanity in the reading public of his day and of days-yet-to-come. Moving against the grain of nineteenth-century culture that was so thoroughly soaked in sentimentality, Poe honed his creative skills in order to give life to carefully orchestrated works of terror and the grotesque. As many nineteenth-century critics claimed, Poe, while brilliant, "denied that he possessed the human sympathy to make his work live,"²⁷ his strength—or, in another word, his *style*—as an enigmatic figure is based on the capacities of his literary machine to formalize and produce specters of terror and tales of disgust and woe that haunt and hector, year after year and literary movement after literary

²⁷ Scott Peeples. *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*. Rochester, NY: Camden House. 2004: 2

movement. The Poe that will greet you here will be Poe-the-stylist: Poe, the natural aristocrat of talent; Poe, the self-consciously mechanical gothic formalist; Poe, the anti-sentimental madman; and Poe, the public author of, as he said of idealized readers of his book *Eureka*, “two thousand years hence.”²⁸ His style will be presented here through a combined examination of his personality and his written work: both part-and-parcel of the same Poe Machine. The critical dividing line drawn between biography and text, author and work and, certainly, marking the space between the “inner” or “real” Poe and the one he fabricated will, as the next section of my discussion will explore, will be removed in order to attempt a more comprehensive study of Poe as a stylist employing all these blocks of personification and intensification each in their own place within the greater literary machine, as intended effects of the project and projections of his style.

My method for characterizing and analyzing Poe’s style will be done through an ongoing presentation of the “Poe Machine,” which amounts, in the end, to the always expanding and becoming assemblage of Poe’s literary voice: the capacity of his stories and poems to create sensation and the presence of his own hand in the future consumption of his work. Moving through four periods of literary criticism in which official approaches to Poe found themselves evolving, this essay will offer works from the Poe Machine that represent his enduring mutability as untimely author armed with the capacity to predict and outlive shifting modes of analysis and readership. I will also intersperse my discussions with testaments to Poe’s historical and continuing unpopularity among other writers and critics in order to present Poe as an everlasting perverse figure and stylist set on having his way not only with his contemporaries but also with his contemporaries-to-come.

²⁸ qtd. In N. Bryllion Fagin, *The Histrionic Mr. Poe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1949: 23

The Many Masks of Edgar Poe: Critical Thresholds and the Expansion of his Style

The ‘real’ Poe (to take an invidious adjective from the titles of a modern kind of biography) is a simple, intelligible, and if one may dare to say it, a rather insignificant man. To make a hero or villain out of him is to write fiction.

John Macy, in an introduction to a 1908 textbook.²⁹

Part of the problem—or, for our purposes here, the appeal—of Poe’s afterlife as an object of critical attention is the many faces, or masks, that have been affixed to his image and that shadow appreciation of his work. Poe’s notoriety as a madman and a genius has been both the cause of public disparagement toward his work while as well as its continued interest into the mystery that is Edgar Allan Poe. While no other attribute has been able to shadow these two notions of Poe since then, approaches to and characterizations of him have evolved wildly, and the evolutionary process by which Poe gets branded with this or that characteristic is significant in understanding not only the complexity of his mystery but also the strength of his style that continues to produce his allure through the various critical thresholds that have come and gone since his death. As Scott Peeples argues in his book *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*, it is this process, this “enterprise of understanding ‘Poe’...not in terms of fixed, eternal schools or methodologies but rather in terms of historical evolution” (xi), that must be understood as a testament to Poe’s great style and the veracity of his untimely visions of literary futures.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, we have seen Poe described in terms beyond simply madman and genius, terms that seem to contradict one another almost as soon as they are decided upon: the adolescent writer obsessed with cryptology and the expert and ratiocinator who invented the science fiction and crime novel genres; the overly emotional

²⁹ qtd. in Peeples: 24

and confessional poet and the purely mechanical, professional writer whose works harken back to the baroque era more than they bow to pressures of nineteenth century American civility and literary culture; the example of American literary genius and an author adored only by the French forced upon the United States as a result; the natural aristocrat and the down-and-out drunken man who struggled to pay for his meals and boarding with cheap and quickly drawn out stories and tales; an expert concerning matters of neurosis and a perfect case study for early psychoanalytic literary critics; a racist who sympathized with the Southern cause to maintain slavery as an economic tradition and a critic of racism who, in stories like “The Black Cat,” “The Gold-Bug” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, anatomized the mind of the white American driven mad by pathological ideas of race and racial superiority; the sexist and the queer; the idiot and the savant.

Once again, it will not be my aim here to chart each of these competing visions of Poe and his legacy in order to materialize their claims over him or to decide in which direction scholars ought to point their judgments in essays, biographies and anthologies to come. It is the writing machine that Poe constructed, combining his personality and his mysteriously charted literary works, that characterizes his style and that seems to have already envisioned these oppositional and problematic approaches to his work. As I briefly move through the major trends of literary criticism—and, especially, American literary criticism—my goal will be to display Poe as flexible and resilient, finding his work and his image to contain a certain timeless quality, always on the lips of academic writers and in the pages of their critical tomes, but also a capacity to keep moving, to aid in territorializing the various fields with which his work comes into contact and then pushing them to their own critical thresholds, deterritorializing them in the wake of his expanding style.

The Nineteenth Century Poe

While Poe would come to be more fully appreciated in the twentieth century as an artist and creator rather than a new dead man of whom many friends, associates and enemies still lived to recount their own memories, the American Poe of the nineteenth century was still tethered to his ongoing biography and his professional reputation. In an 1899 article written for *The Dial*, a Chicago-based literary magazine, entitled “The American Rejection of Poe,”³⁰ Charles Leonard Moore admits that while Poe was “the greatest intellect America has produced,” he—again, echoing Rev. Griswold’s primary statements on these matters—had few friends and didn’t make much sense to his peers in the literary world. “Poe,” Moore explains, was “a logic machine...absolutely incapable of those pleasing flaws and deficiencies which allow other people to have a good opinion of themselves.” Poe’s reputation preceded him in his nineteenth-century afterlife: a nationally recognized genius, on the one hand, but the man behind works that seemed forever out of place and out of time. Too cold and calculating to satisfy the tastes of his fellow Americans during his time on earth, yet also too histrionic and fatuous in his melodramatic tales to find any serious appreciation among the literary intelligentsia of the nineteenth century. In his remarks following the public reburial of Poe’s bones in Baltimore, Walt Whitman personalized the broader trepidation with which Poe’s fellow writers, critics and countrymen had come to accept and understand his significance:

For a long while, and until lately, I had a distaste for Poe’s writings. I wanted, and still want for poetry, the clear sun shining, and fresh air blowing—the strength and power of health, not of delirium, even amid the stormiest passions—with always the

³⁰ Charles Leonard Moore, “The American Rejection of Poe.” *The Dial*, January 16, 1899, 47: 40-41

background of the eternal moralities. Non-complying with these requirements, Poe's genius has yet conquer'd a special recognition for itself, and I too have come to fully admit it, and appreciate it and him.³¹

Whitman, in the same way as Moore, characterizes wider rejections facing Poe's work in the American public, developed a belated and precarious appreciation for Poe, who, it seems, is easier to be gracious toward in death than in life. As an American artist, Poe fails, on the one hand, to meet Whitman's idealistic need for literary works to carry with them a spirit of optimism and hope; at the same time, Whitman, like many others, is, in spite of himself, attracted to Poe's grotesqueries. In the end, however, this does not constitute a critical dilemma for Poe; the characteristic unease combined with perverse interest that Whitman displays here is, after all, only an intended effect of the Poe Machine.

"Why is it," Moore pleads, "that America has always set its face against Poe? What defect was there in his life and art, or what deficiency in the American character and aesthetic sense, or what incompatibility between these two factors in the case, to produce such a result?" His literary and poetical works aside—and, indeed, very much in spite of his literary and poetical works—Poe was, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a victim to what Scott Casper has termed a widespread "biographical mania," wherein biography "was not simply a genre of writing...[but] a medium that allowed people to learn about public figures and peer into the lives of strangers."³² The lives of men and women caught

³¹ qtd. in Sidney Kaplan, "An Introduction to *Pym*." *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Regan. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967: 147

³² Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth Century America*. The University of North Carolina Press: 1999: 2

up in and covered by this surge of biographical writing came to serve, in the context of nineteenth century culture, as instructive or cautionary tales more than as studies of craft, technique or genius. Poe's now notoriously sordid life and, more significantly, his tortured inner-life came under the microscope of this growing field of biographical exploration and discovery. As a result, and to answer Moore's questions with regard to Poe's tarnished reputation as an American author, the public memory of Poe was largely concerned with the cautionary tale of his life as a failed man and author weighed down by a certain time out of mind; trailing this somewhat hostile form of pity—or, perhaps, downright contempt—accompanying American perceptions of Poe came a salutary recognition of his significance in the outer world and in the reading practices of foreign lands. Poe's writings still did not seem to satisfy the desires of his reading public in the United States, who, much like Whitman, saluted his great powers but perhaps held judgments that they were never used to any recognizable, good ends. Beguiled but still bewildered, nineteenth century and early twentieth century American descendants of Poe seemed to recognize the honor due to him but did not know in what ways, and through which texts, his genius might one day bestow itself upon them.

“The Man That Was Used Up: A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign”

If one without forewarning begins to read any life of Poe, one feels that a mystery is about to open. There seem to be clues to suppressed matters, suspicious lacunae.

³³ The nineteenth century interest in spiritual mediums is also resonant here: another pathway through which public desire to peer into the unknown made itself a part of the popular culture.

The lives are written, like most novels, with hintful rows of stars. A shadowy path promises to lead to the misty mid-region of Weir. But Weir proves to be a place that Poe invented [in the poem “Ulalume”]. He himself was the first foolish biographer of Poe.

John Macy, 1908³⁴

So in what ways did Poe foresee and prepare himself for the vast criticism of his genius and his character that preceded him in death and pestered his image through the second half of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century? While there are many stories from the Poe machine one could point to that might provide a grotesque anatomy of the heroic American figure, there is one satire, published first in 1839 for *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, that gets right to the heart of the matter. “The Man That Was Used Up,” sometimes printed with the subtitle or alternate title “A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign,” is a sadly underrepresented Poe story that offers a hilarious and disgusting view of an American hero who, like Poe, is a product of public attention and private chaos. The story follows a journalist, who also serves as the narrator, on a quest to seek out and report on a General A.B.C. Smith, who has national acclaim for being a veteran and personal champion of the United States Armed Forces. While many see General Smith as a send-up of a General Winfield Scott of the War of 1812 and, later, the Mexican-American and American Civil Wars, the story really does more to personify the nature of heroic manhood in nineteenth-century America and predict the gruesome futures to come for men of popular interest: men who, like Poe himself, become part and parcel of the ‘charnel-house atmosphere,’ to borrow a popular term of the time brought to our attention by Peebles (11), of the country’s biographical mania. All heroic figures are, in the end, liable

³⁴ qtd. in Peebles: 24

to be chopped up into bits once the more realistic and seedy aspects of their lives and personalities come to public light; it is only a person's style that can live on and find the light of day in some untimely future waiting beyond the horizon and off in the distance.

The story begins with the journalist-narrator attempting to recall his first meeting with Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith, "that truly fine-looking fellow," notorious not only for his bravery and valor in combat, but also for his entire commanding presence: "There was an *air distingué* pervading the whole man, which spoke of high breeding, and hinted at high birth" (68).³⁵ The entire back-story of General A.B.C. Smith is not entirely given in this short story, yet the context for his greatness seems not only self-evident but also totally realized in the physical person that is General Smith: an American hero materialized and complete. "His head of hair," the narrator explains, "would have done honor to a Brutus...nothing could be more richly flowing, or possess a higher gloss" (68); even his stubble appears noble and worthy, colored the same "jetty black" as that atop his head, providing the General with "the handsomest pair of whiskers under the sun" (68). In his mouth sit "the most brilliantly white of all conceivable teeth," and from his lips pour forth "a voice of surpassing clearness, melody, and strength" (68). Even his eyes represent wisdom and respect: two ocular organs described here as being "of a deep hazel, exceedingly large and lustrous...[containing] just that amount of interesting obliquity which gives pregnancy to expression" (68).

The level of intensive care with which Poe's narrator focuses on the physical properties of valor and respect should immediately bring to mind the mechanical nature of the hero industry first taking root in American popular culture in the mid-nineteenth century. The story, as Peeples has argued, "literalizes the 'making' of a hero," and satirizes

³⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man That Was Used Up" *Broadway Journal*. August 9, 1845, 2:68-71

more than a specific or even general icon of American power, as the term “used up” was commonly understood in Poe’s life as poet and magazine writer to mean being professionally attacked, chopped up in public discourse and figuratively “murdered, in print” (25). The handsome hero of this story, like so many handsome heroes before and so many to come, soon finds himself under the spotlight of journalistic inquiry and, as Peebles might have had it, sliced and diced, and left for dead.

As the narrator continues his recollection of General Smith and his subsequent meetings with him, he finds himself approaching a mystery and unraveling secrets about the real nature of this great man. Men and women in close contact with the General are, the narrator reports, reticent to speak in any indiscreet manner about their knowledge of him and find it easier simply to provide grandiose accolades about his history in battle and the “wonderfully inventive age” with which they all found themselves (69). Finding something queer about all of this, the narrator continues still in his search for the “real” General A.B.C. Smith, meeting along the way banal comment after banal comment—like that of Smith acquaintance Doctor Drummummup: “Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live: he cometh up and is cut down like a flower!” (69)—and truism after truism, that eventually seem to speak something in a tune more honest than oblique. The air of nothingness surrounding this search is, as in so many other Poe stories, more telling than it is confounding, as the narrator eventually finds himself closer and closer to the real and actual General A.B.C. Smith, presented in all of his disembodied glory.

“Mr. Sinivate,” the narrator implores in one of his last dead-end interviews regarding General Smith’s personage, “*is* he the man in the mask?” “No-o-o!,” Sinivate replies, “nor the man in the mo-o-on!” (70). Sensing that his quest has been damned from the start, and not yet sensing the collective truths which all of these non sequiturs are in fact pointing him

toward, the narrator prepares himself to confront the man in the mask—or perhaps the man on the moon—and call upon the General himself, “the fountain-head...[the] solution of this abominable piece of mystery” (70).

Finally at the home of General Smith, and led into his dressing quarters by one of his “old negro” servants, the narrator leads himself right into the heart of this story’s mystery, as he finds himself searching the bedroom for a glimpse of the remarkable man, but finding only “a large and exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something that lay close by my feet on the floor” (70). Giving the strange bundle a kick, the narrator is surprised when it produces sound: “ ‘Hem! ahem! rather civil that, I should say!’ said the bundle, in one of the smallest, and altogether the funniest little voices, between a squeak and a whistle, that I have ever heard in all my days of existence” (70). As he gets his bearing on the situation, the narrator immediately comes to understand that the odd-looking bundle on the floor producing that squeaky sound is in fact our dear General Smith, who is presently in the process of attaching one of his prosthetic legs, a display that is here compared to “the drawing on of a stocking” (70). All the while, the General seems sufficiently prepared to wax monumental regarding his historic leadership on the battlefield, assembling himself:

“And a bloody action it *was*,” continued the thing, as if in a soliloquy; “but then one mustn’t fight with the Bugaboos and Kickapoos, and think of coming off with a mere scratch. Pompey, I’ll thank you now for that arm. Thomas” [turning to me] “is decidedly the best hand at a cork leg; but if you should ever want an arm, my dear fellow, you must really let me recommend you to Bishop.” Here Pompey screwed on an arm.

“We had rather hot work of it, that you may say. Now, you dog, slip on my shoulders and bosom! Pettitt makes the best shoulders, but for a bosom you will have to go to Ducrow.” (70)

As the scene moves along, the General’s memories of battle continue as he calls for his wooden teeth, his glass eye and finally adjusts himself into what the narrator refers to as “a somewhat singular-looking-machine” (70) that eventually comes to look, act and sound like the Brevet Brigadier General A.B.C. Smith familiar to his memory and good sense. Baffled and disgusted as his readers, no doubt, the story ends rather quickly as the narrator, now finding himself standing in front of his hero, thanks him for his time and finds a quick exit. Leaving, though, the entire series of confounding events and grotesque displays reveal themselves to the journalist, now in possession of “a perfect understanding of the true state of affairs...[and] a full comprehension of the mystery which had troubled me so long” (71). The dignified man he had come to greet and report was not, in the end, any man at all; rather, the heroic icon of bravery and duty, General A.B.C. Smith, was a prosthetic process of man, a heaving hulk of honor pieced together with false limbs, wooden teeth and glass eyes, an “odd-looking bundle” of a hero made up of a complex machinery of tat.

The narrator’s excursion is, of course, a fool’s errand and this story about General A.B.C. Smith—“*the man that was used up*” (71)—is one of many Poe tells of false journeys and misguided enterprises into and beyond the depths of nothingness. General Smith, as the materialized example of the American hero, is an icon of nothingness, the end of the story of the country’s fool’s errand into its own complex system of cultural icons and national heroes. National figures are, in the logic of this satire, made up, phantasms of the American public that are as sure to crumble into disgusting little bits as they are to be revered as

representatives of the greatest and the wisest among us. In the process, then, Poe has not only produced a send-up of hero-worship in the United States, but also a predictive joke on the biographers and critics to come interested in getting to the bottom of his own personal story and his own artistic genius. The search for the “real” Poe is as befuddling and unnecessary as the search for the actual General A.B.C. Smith: either way, the fool-as-expert or as-reporter is forced to confront the reality of nothingness in order to tell their tale. It is to the strength of Poe’s comic-grotesque vision that we should attribute this very small and seemingly childish satire of biographies and critical tomes to come. In the end, Poe’s style, unlike General Smith’s manhood, is able to remain in tact as the truth of the stories continues to reveal itself generation after generation, and century after century of American media and literary culture. The machine here is a machine of style, which is more than nothing: it is the material production of nothing.

The Psychoanalyzed Poe

An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection.

Henry James³⁶

Formal criticism of Poe and his body of work were, as we have seen, subject to the prescriptions of nineteenth-century American culture that focused squarely on his character, reputation and personality as clues to his lasting worth as a national author and potential icon in the growing pantheon of U.S. Literature. Poe’s notoriety has been based primarily on a combined understanding of his disposition toward the grotesque and the horrible in his poems and tales as well as a self-evident conception of his own personal battles with mental illness and spiritual strife. While popular records of the story of Poe’s inner self promoted

³⁶ Henry James, “Charles Baudelaire.” *The Nation*, XXII, 1876: 280

ideas that he was indeed congenitally suffering from various mental and behavioral maladies—among them, ‘cerebral epilepsy,’ alcoholism, tuberculosis and outright insanity³⁷—it wasn’t until the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic literary criticism that his pathologies took on a clinical tone and began to attach themselves to the public’s readings of his texts. The popular interest in the submerged and secret lives of public men was made official in the development of psychoanalytic theory, which ultimately worked to provide precise scientific methods and a new language for the same practices taking place during the period of “biographical mania” in the United States.

Visiting America in 1909, Sigmund Freud himself is reported to have whispered to his traveling companion Carl Jung, “They don’t realize we’re bringing them the plague,”³⁸ meaning that his psychoanalytic theories would, as is certainly clear today, colonize the minds of individuals living in the twentieth century and beyond. Freud’s studies of madness, the unconscious and of mental health in general defined and stratified a whole series of explanations for personal deficiencies, “turning,” as he famously said, “hysterical misery into common unhappiness.”³⁹ Psychotherapeutic management, in other words, promised to serve its populations by detecting and treating their various states of neurosis and mechanisms of defense. As Freud’s theories entered the popular cultural arena they also found a comfortable home within the halls of the literary establishment in, especially, Europe and the United States. Psychoanalytic literary analysis soon offered its own ways of reading texts and, as Peebles argues, while it “at first must have seemed like nothing more than a new set of tools that could be used to perform the same old tasks of author study,” it,

³⁷ See Peebles, 29-30 and *Evermore: Edgar Allan Poe and the Mystery of the Universe*. Harry Lee Poe. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press. 2012: 11- 12

³⁸ qtd. in Peebles: 29

³⁹ Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*. 1895

in fact, provided a model of close reading that, “[enabled] critics to make bolder claims about, in this case, Poe’s ‘mind’ and ‘character’” (29-32). Reading soon became part of the analytic process and, as Henry James once opined, the majority of Poe’s audience would come to fully understand that he was in fact an author of insanity and an author that was insane.

The remark that an appreciation for Poe’s work insinuates a “decidedly primitive stage of reflection” makes a strong connection between the personality of Poe-the-author and the affected work left behind for readers to decipher and to judge. While James’ remark was given in the context of a nineteenth-century culture obsessed with its negative impressions of Poe’s character—Poe the charlatan, Poe the drunk, Poe the reactionary critic, Poe the mentally ill and spiritually diseased, Poe the author of adolescent literature—its core sentiments found clinical confirmation within the context of psychoanalytic literary criticism. In her 1933 book, *Edgar Poe: Etude psychoanalytique*, Marie Bonaparte reads Poe’s texts in order to determine the general neuroses affecting each of them and, in fact, telling the “detailed case study of a highly neurotic man who *happened to be a writer*” (Peeples 41). Poe has since been taken up by psychoanalytic critics as a neurotic, a psychotic and someone clinically insane—the author, in this case, is tethered to their work and also to the clinician’s official report. Artists are *treated* the way any patient is treated within the context of the psychotherapeutic conversation and, as a result, “the text” at hand is this official report, which pays less attention to the formal attributes of literary creation and more to the cohesive vision created of the author and his work.

What I have been calling “The Poe Machine” is nothing less than what Gilles Deleuze envisioned in his description of the Literary Machine which, against the grain of psychoanalysis, understands the work from the viewpoint of the creator and the process of

creation and values its subsequent production of affects, intensities and signs.⁴⁰ The “literary effect” brought to life here is the result of a more intuitive set of qualifications given to the work, which pay more attention to the Literary Machine’s attempts at experimentation than its capacity to be clearly interpreted; the sets of questions guiding this kind of approach tend less toward “What does the text mean” than “What does it do?” and “How does it function” (xxii). “The modern work of art,” Deleuze argues, “has no problem of meaning, it only has a problem of use” (xxii). This kind of reading is one dedicated to style as a notion of adherence to the artist’s own ethics of being-in-the world and not to the prescriptions of criticism. Reading, in this case, as Deleuze and Guattari explain in their *Anti-Oedipus*, “is never a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified, still less a highly textual exercise in search of a signifier. Rather, it is a productive use of the literary machine, a montage of desiring machines, a schizoid exercise that extracts from the text its revolutionary force.”⁴¹ The task at hand here, then, will be to look into the Poe Machine for its creative response to the kind of psychoanalytic prodding that was soon to confront its tales and poems. The grotesque effects and affects it produces will be useful not for ways of interpreting Poe, but instead of characterizing the virility of his own Literary Machine and committing to his own creative attempts at surviving critical inquiry and investigation.

The Philosophy of Composition

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement*

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. University of Minnesota Press, 1993: xxi

⁴¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 106

constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition”⁴²

The first step in an artist’s development of his style is a commitment to becoming conscious—conscious of the effect of his personality on the work, conscious of the affective capacities embedded within his body of work and conscious of the processes through which its various attributes combine and form a unified mode of expression. In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe imagines and formalizes the components of his Literary Machine and, in expressing his opinions regarding poetry and its necessary dedication to the projection of Beauty, articulates his own writerly focus on the self-conscious formation of literary and poetic effects in his work. While this document is and could be significant regarding any number of critical debates waiting to face him in the future of literary criticism, “The Philosophy of Composition” is significant here in responding to the regulations set in place by a kind of psychoanalytic analysis that neglects the artist’s ability to control and foresee the effects their writings have, and that Poe’s style was indeed focused on the self-conscious production of grotesque imagery and literary sensations having to do with the neurotic, the deranged, the horrible and the insane. “The Philosophy of Composition” is Poe’s intuitive response to forms of critique-to-come that might neglect his own hand in guiding readings of and responses to his poems and tales in the future; regarded, still, by many as a kind of hoax, I want to present the arguments in this piece and in other short

⁴² Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition.” *Graham’s Magazine*, vol. XXVIII, no. 4. April 4, 1846, 28:163-167

pieces of its kind from his broader *Marginalia* as totally sincere efforts made by Poe to announce the formalization of his Literary Machine.

The “unity of effect” is the prized possession that Poe prescribes for anyone wanting to enter into the business of writing literature or poetry, and “The Philosophy of Composition” is, above all else, Poe’s most direct address on the development and cultivation of writerly style. The writer should, in Poe’s mind, begin “with the consideration of an *effect*,” “[k]eeping originality *always* in view” (163). Style is, as always, never a matter of accident or improvisation; it is, rather, the formal process through which an individual takes control over his image; for an artist, style is the very logical and mechanical procedure by which effects of personality and created work combine themselves into a unified Literary Machine. It is the only system available to artists concerned first with *effect* and secondly with *originality* of content, expression and intensity. While often viewed as, in part, an exposition *against* the role intuition comes to play in the creation of literature and poetry, intuition is, for the stylist and indeed as elaborated by Poe here, itself a self-governing process that involves artistic codes, mannerisms and intentions. The objective is much more than merely writing literature, for instance; Poe’s goal was to himself *become* literature, to make a place for himself in the ongoing history of literary culture wherein the “Poe” style of literature would remain self-evident and self-enforcing. Thus, the name “Poe” has come to signify more than an author’s name, but also an entire subfield within the history of American literary culture. The unified components of his Literary Machine accomplish this and form “the figure in the carpet.”⁴³

“An artist,” Poe explains in a piece entitled “A Genus Irritable” from his *Marginalia*, “*is* an artist only by dint of his exquisite sense of Beauty—a sense affording him rapturous

⁴³ Fagin: viii-ix

enjoyment, but at the same time imploring, or involving, an equally exquisite sense of Deformity or disproportion.”⁴⁴ A writer’s talent, then, is based upon his or her initial recognition of a particular sensibility or proclivity to life that Poe terms “the poetic irritability,” which in turn is utilized by and transformed into productions of Beauty in the creation of their work. Only “one thing is clear,” Poe argues, “that the man who is *not* ‘irritable,’ (to the ordinary apprehension,) is *no poet*” (36). In other words: an artist, or indeed a literary ‘genius,’ as Poe would have it, is always someone marked by a certain set of mysterious and antisocial attributes that both set them apart from other members of their generation and also secure a place for them in the future as a great artist both out of place and out of time. In fact, as Poe continues to elaborate this idea: “What the world calls ‘genius’ is the state of mental disease arising from the undue predominance of some one of the faculties. The works of such genius are never sound in themselves and, in especial, always betray the general mental insanity” (37-38). The labor that Poe has put into the creation of his Literary Machine, then, should be seen as his own project of cultivating this kind of genius that strives to make poetry out of insanity and Beauty from general decay. His *Marginalia* writings speak to his own self-consciousness about the ongoing development of his style and “The Philosophy of Composition” is the document that finds Poe formalizing his untimely undertaking. It is in many ways also Poe’s ontological response to psychoanalytic criticism of his work, as it charts a clinical logic to his artistic procedures and literary effects.

Like any earnest attempt at elaborating one’s style, “The Philosophy of Composition” finds Poe in a tone both earnest and clear and prescriptive in nature. The

⁴⁴ *The Unknown Poe: An Anthology of Fugitive Writings by Edgar Allan Poe with Appreciations by Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, J.K. Huysmans & André Breton*, edited by Raymond Foye. San Francisco: City Lights Books. 1980: 36

relatively short article is as much a set of instructions for writers-to-come as it is Poe's own challenge to himself to refine his image of himself as a literary artist and to define for critics of the future how his works ought to be judged and categorized. In short, Poe suggests three main ideas here regarding works of poetry and literature having to do with length, method and what he terms a desired "unity of effect." There is, for instance, "a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting" (*Graham's Magazine* 164). The point here, for Poe, is extracting from the work the ultimate effects of sensation, perception and reason and the reason he prescribes literary works able to be consumed in a single setting has to do with his desire for readers to be consumed totally by the work and not by the outer world or even themselves. The degree to which a work of literature or poetry is able to maintain a capacity to effect this set of attributes, and the extent to which it can affect and subliminate its reader is, for Poe, a matter of almost scientific precision, especially as it pertains to his own creative endeavors.⁴⁵

Poe's concept of artistic method, then, clearly diverges from any conceptions of works that arise from bouts of disorganized artistic intuition or emotional frenzy. The writer, in this latter instance, is deprived of his own ability to predict or ensure the quality of their own vision of Beauty and therefore vulnerable to whims of critics to come—critics who will feel invited to have their way with determining for themselves the motivations guiding works of literature and poetry as well as, in turn, their momentary worth. "When," Poe writes, "men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer...just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul*—*not* of intellect, or of

⁴⁵ "Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste, I reached at once what I conceived the proper *length* for my intended poem — a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight." *Graham's Magazine*. 164

heart” (164). By outlining a precise method through which writers and poets dedicated to Beauty and to the Beautiful might formalize their literary effects, Poe is also poising toward a vision of the self-conscious artist who has developed a process of creative intuition, or style, that combines the “intense and pure elevation” of the soul, the intellect and the heart. Poe’s method is really an ethical commitment to artistic overcoming: an artistic will-to-power that gives the literary creator the capacity not only to maintain his sense of dignity as it pertains to the reception of their bodies of work but also to formalize this untimely effort into their own artistic methods and their own machinic rituals of style.

Before commencing to write, an author should reach, and indeed the state of proficiency at which they ought to arrive before releasing their works to the public, has to do with a commitment to the overall “unity of effect” built into literature and poetry. Before commencing upon writing a story or a poem, the writer should, in Poe’s view, already confirm for himself or herself what the end of the work will be and what exact effects and affects it would produce. Readerly response, then, whether registered through emotion or critical inquiry, is an irreducible component of the work of art. Just as Poe suggests stories only long enough to be consumed in one sitting so that there can be no space outside of its consumption, the unity of effect is important in ensuring that there be no response outside the vision of the originary vision, of the creative artist himself. All other matters that are normally considered primary in the process of literary criticism—plot, tone, characters, color, conflict, theme, etc.—are secondary in this instance, as the writer insists on his or her own authority over not only the text but its future import as well. Applying this logic to himself, Poe provides an elaborate explication of his own execution of perhaps his most well-known and revered works, “The Raven.” First confirming that Beauty would be the ultimate province in which his poem would remain, Poe explains his secondary writerly

decisions having to do with tone, length and application. The tone, Poe writes, would be “one of *sadness*,” explaining that, “Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears” (165). Sadness, then, would become the emotional register of “The Raven,” which Poe intended to operate as a kind of ongoing refrain of melancholy. A certain repetition of delivery and spirit characterize any reading of “The Raven,” which remains in the musical space of sadness, never resolving or finding an outside to the intended unity of effect. Even the phrase “Nevermore,” which finds its way into the poem as the Raven’s own solitary refrain, is intended here as a material enforcement of Poe’s melancholy effect; the word, he explains, embodies the sound of melancholy, and “at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem” (165). The sound of the word, its musicality, its very material signify more than meaning here, as “Nevermore” operates as the refrain of the poem’s unity of effect. It is the tone of sadness, and in its material weight and sound the production of unresolved sadness. “Nevermore” (much like “Lenore,” published two years before “The Raven” in 1843) is Poe materialized for readers-to-come as “emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” (167). While certainly open to (and, indeed, a victim of) literary criticism to come, “The Raven,” and certainly “The Philosophy of Composition” as a whole, contain within them Poe’s predictive efforts at maintaining his own artistic control and securing for himself a significant role to play in future revelations of his works’ mysteries. Artistic vision, for Poe, comes before artistic production, and there is no way to play a part in consuming a work from the Poe Machine that does not involve playing into his hands.

The Modern Poe

The substance of Poe is refined; it is his form that is vulgar. He is, as it were, one of Nature's Gentlemen, unhappily cursed with incorrigible bad taste. To the most sensitive and high-souled man in the world we should find it hard to forgive, shall we say, the wearing of a diamond ring on every finger. Poe does the equivalent of this in his poetry; we notice the solicism and shudder...It is when Poe tries to make it too poetical that his poetry takes on its particular tinge of badness.

Aldous Huxley, 'Vulgarity in Literature,' 1930⁴⁶

As we have seen, from the biography-crazed nineteenth century criticism of Poe came a more refined psychoanalytic form of inquiry and readership that read into his texts clinical examples of madness and hysteria, forming official understandings of Poe that combined his personal notoriety and his famously dark and histrionic tales and poetry. As Poe's work continued to be read in the twentieth century, it found itself subject to new forms of critique that attempted to move past considerations of an author's biography and the historical circumstances in which a work of literature was written and into a text-based practice of evaluating and analyzing *texts* in and of themselves. The New Criticism, as it is commonly referred to in the American academy, personified this shift in analysis and, thought to have begun officially following the 1941 publication of John Crow Ransom's *The New Criticism*, it prescribed methods that, on the surface, seem more in line with the ones Poe might have referred in his nineteenth-century dreams of a readership-to-come. According to the doctrine of the New Criticism, readers should maintain an air of objectivity as they move into a text, focusing less, as I have said, on the particulars of an author's background, intentions or context and more on the effects a text contains within it. The

⁴⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Collected Essays*. London: Chatto and Windus. 1967: 161

New Criticism's manner of approaching literature contains within it a formal procedure for investigating the nature of any text's literary effects, emphasizing, among other things: syntax, word choice, tone, setting and sound. In this case, the text is seen as an architecture-in-itself and is to be considered only for the world it creates and enforces, detached from any subjective consideration of anything that may lie outside of it (the author, the author's other works, intertextual conversations between this work and other works, etc.).

Poe's place in all of this is complicated. On the one hand, as "The Philosophy of Composition" implies and as Peebles argues in his chapter "Out of Space, Out of Time: From Early Formalism to Deconstruction," "Poe has been regarded as a forefather of critics who emphasized textual unity and whose readings demonstrated how various elements in a poem or short story work together to produce a subtle but ultimately coherent meaning" (63-64). His emphasis, in other words, on the unity of effect in a literary text signifies his prediction of and desire for the kind of analysis that New Criticism embodies: a system of analysis that point toward the text in order to ascertain its vitality as a living, breathing Literary Machine producing effects and affects.

Still, though, the match made between Poe and the American New Critics cannot be seen as perfect. Tied up in broader nationalist movements in U.S. culture to determine a "respectable" and "dignified" canon of American Literature, Poe's reputation as the author of seedy and disreputable tales and poems—which already preceded him in his official biography (even in spite of the objective distance New Critics attempted to place between their own reading practices and those harkening back to the nineteenth century)—remained an issue for many. As Peebles reports, Poe's work—and especially his poetry, seemingly ready-made for grade school recitation—was seen by many New Critics as "embarrassingly popular" and, at best, only a somewhat elevated example of juvenilia (64). And, as Huxley's

quote from his essay “Vulgarity in Literature” attests⁴⁷, Poe’s bad reputation as a poet and story-teller that was at once overly stylized and mechanical and messy and overly dramatic deepened when subjected to the kind of “objective” analysis and evaluation that became a standard of mid-century New Criticism.

The problem here, and indeed even in the case of the New Criticism’s valorization of Poe as an author focused on the significance of textual unity, is that Poe is flattened, that his Literary Machine is not understood to be capable of producing affects and *concepts* as well as formal literary effects. A philosopher as much as an author or poet, Poe’s body of work shows his desire to participate in “the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.”⁴⁸ Poe’s various literary effects (or, perhaps, literary becomings) relating to the hysterical, the horrible, the grotesque, the Gothic and the sublime are not merely thus: they are also the products of Poe’s Literary Machine, which, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, we should consider a “conceptual personae” [*personnages conceptuels*], or the inventor of concepts in philosophy. For Deleuze and Guattari, there is an already living, ongoing list of conceptual personae in existence: a group of writers/philosophers who accede to the idea that the only concepts which make their way into the work should be the product of the author’s own imagination and creation. They write: “Every creation is singular, and the concept as a specifically philosophical creation is always a singularity” (6-7). In this sense, then, the literary effects produced by Poe’s Literary Machine must also be understood within the broader context of his own philosophical project to create singular concepts and blocks of sensation that relate back to his own self-conscious creative processes and, indeed, his style.

⁴⁷ I realize that Huxley’s comments are made a good fifteen years before the “official” commencement of the New Criticism, but I think they embody the level of criticism aimed at Poe in the decades to come.

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press. 1991: 2

A purely objective analysis of any Poe tale or poem is incomplete—and not because it lacks the contextual specificity of Poe’s biography or his the socio-historical context of his work, but because it neglects the more important ontological work contained within and still being elaborated by the Poe Machine. In this next section, I would like to look at Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” to see how he deals with and ultimately overcomes the trappings of official, objective literary concepts relating to the uncanny and the sublime. Here, I will show Poe to have created concepts that would be nothing without his mark, and formless without his ongoing projection of literary style.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” and Poe’s “Imp of the Perverse”

The intimate and uncanny relationship between the house and the Ushers parallels that which exists between the clock and the hands that ‘dwell’ within it and are wholly governed by its mechanisms.

Jean-Paul Weber⁴⁹

Everything in Poe is dead: the houses, the rooms, the furniture, to say nothing of nature and of human beings.

Alan Tate⁵⁰

First published in 1839, Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher” is both a text cathected to and overcoming of the form of the literary sublime. The action of the tale follows the lead of the speaking narrator, a friend of a certain Roderick Usher, a man for whom the narrator holds great esteem both for his aristocratic upbringing and his worldly disposition. Having received a letter from Mr. Usher informing him that his entire family

⁴⁹ qtd. in Hoffman: 157

⁵⁰ Allan Tate, “Our Cousin, Mr. Poe.” *Essays of Four Decades*, Chicago: The Swallow Press. 1968: 398

had fallen ill, the nameless narrator is invited to pay an extended visit to the House of Usher so that he may provide some solace. When he arrives at the House, the narrator finds, as Tate has aptly described, that everything is dead or dying: the family itself, its house, its furnishings and the whole surrounding atmosphere. The narrator describes in minute detail the fatuous display of death and decay foisted upon him by even his first glimpse of the House of Usher, likening the sensation to some “hideous dropping off of the veil”:

I had been passing alone, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher...With the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit...I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape feature of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon the rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul.⁵¹

The description given not only sets the stage for this grotesque tale, but also signals Poe’s thorough participation in tropes related to the sublime and, as critics would come to know it, the uncanny. Common effects of Gothic or grotesque works of literature, the physical manifestations of doom and gloom here are, in one sense, part of Poe’s artifice of sadness, his architecture of terror. Much of the vulgar tone here—and, certainly, of the kind of vulgar literary devices about which Huxley was snobbish—is meant to create a double sensation for the reader who, at once, shares the narrator’s desire to shield himself from the manifestations of decay in the story and, at the same time, finds themselves drawn into the intensivities and affective realities of Poe’s grotesquerie. Pre-imagining theories of the Uncanny and, ultimately, overcoming the trapping of the Gothic narrative form, “The Fall

⁵¹ *The Tell-Tale Heart and Other Writings by Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Bantam. 1982: 25

of the House of Usher” is indicative of a will-to-power inherent in the Poe Machine: one inspired by his overwhelming dedication to perversity and to the sublimation of literary forms of the past and also from the future.

While many readers, as Hoffman has argued, “are put off from Poe by the *décor* of his writing,” Poe has nevertheless proven a capacity to force his readers into close proximity with the beating heart of insanity that unfolds and blossoms within his poems and tales. Sublime indeed, Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” is a product of his devotion to the power of horror in the name of the horrible itself; his vision of the House of Usher built upon an aesthetics of decay: it is, Hoffman explains, “a function of Poe’s theories of both poetry and fiction that so many mannerisms be interposed between reality and the reader” (xiii). “The Fall of the House of Usher” is thus more a product of Poe’s own “Imp of the Perverse” than a clear-cut example of his abiding by the literary styles relating to the sublime. All humans are, according to Poe, drawn to an innate sense of perverseness that constantly couples itself with the coeval desire to be well and to maintain a level of sanity. Still, Poe writes in his essay “The Imp of the Perverse,” “We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from danger. Unaccountably we remain” (*The Unknown Poe* 61). With “The Fall of the House of Usher,” readers are invited into a perverse journey by the narrator who, like us, stands dizzy and scared at the precipice of disaster, yet somehow lured, romantically, by “a cloud of unnamable feeling” (61), by Poe’s “Imp of the Perverse.”

“The Sublime man,” Deleuze argues “subdues monsters, poses riddles, but knows nothing of the riddle and the monster that he himself is” (*Essays Critical and Clinical*, 100). In Poe’s story, readers are met, arguably, with the narrator as the embodiment of this figure of “the Sublime man,” who is subject to the wicked game of perversity played out in the action

of plot but still an object of Poe's greater strategies of not only exploring sublime terror but producing intensities that make it a reality. The nature of this game is not, admittedly, unique to Poe in the greater category of Gothic literature. Characterizing tales of this sort as "a descent into disintegration," Chris Baldick, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, explains that Gothic stories are "already half-way to sending themselves up," resisting precise canonization by a strange double performance: both parodying and occupying their place within Western literature.⁵² The architecture of the Gothic story is much like that of the Gothic building: it memorializes and is ultimately ruined by ornate and peculiar remnants of the past. However, unlike Gothic structures that still stand in all of their haunted gory, the Gothic story folds in on itself, always in the very middle of telling its story. Neither totally nostalgic nor entirely removed from the ways of the past, the Gothic narrative builds and is built upon what Baldick calls "a kind of homeopathic principle" wherein Gothic writers "[borrow] the fables and the nightmares of a past age in order to repudiate their authority" (xii-xiv), intent on conjuring up ghosts of history that their stories only seek to escape and steal away from.

While supernatural spooks in traditional ghost stories are nothing more than ghosts, the spirits that lurk within the confines of the Gothic narrative are more charismatic ones that reveal much more than our fear of the dead, but also of our fears of being alive and embodied in the present. Moreover, as a genre and a way of thinking that has, as I have already described, historically occupied a subterranean position in Western literature and discourse, the Gothic effect is one that reveals itself the way a ghost does in a dream, or the way anxiety and regret creep in and behind human consciousness itself. Freud's descriptions

⁵² Chris Baldick, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*. Oxford University Press 2009: xi-xxiii

of "The Uncanny"⁵³ are, of course, exactly resonant with and productive of this structure of Gothic feeling and the addled modern imagination mind that it plays on. Like Poe's prophetic and proto-psychoanalytic description of "time out of mind" in "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a "peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art,"⁵⁴ uncanniness operates, in the Gothic story, as a strange presence remembering the past and decaying into the future. The structures holding together, living inside of and reading into the Gothic story are all haunted by submerged and subterranean fears that reveal themselves in fleeting, often imperceptible moments of displacement and bewilderment that produce a sense of being out of step, out of time and out of place. Like Poe's House of Usher, the Gothic narrative is built on and embodies the *insufferable* and absurd presence of the everlasting Uncanny.

Poe's story is, in fact, partly a send-up of the critical history of the sublime. The character Roderick Usher is often considered to be Poe's own vision of himself, as Roderick bears a striking physical resemblance to his author—"A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin...[and] an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple" (Bantam Classics, 29)—as well as an emotional air of melancholy befitting the most familiar caricature of Poe. The name "Usher," on the other hand, is also Poe's own joke on the name of James Ussher: a man, along with Edmund

⁵³ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny' (1919)." First published in *Imago*, Bd. v., 1919; reprinted in *Sammulung*, Fünfte Folge [Translated by Alex Strachey]: 1-21

⁵⁴ Edgar Allan Poe "The Fall of the House of Usher," in *Complete Tales & Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Vintage Press. 1975: 232

Burke and Immanuel Kant, with whom we might associate the infrastructure of traditional theories relating to the sublime.⁵⁵

Arguing that the tale “performs a dramatic negation of the architecture of sublime theorizations inherited from European intellectuals,” Sean Moreland has made a compelling case for reading into Poe’s character Roderick Usher a more direct—though, for today’s audiences, perhaps only a well-shaded reference—parodying and, ultimately, overcoming of the tropes associated with the literary sublime. While it certainly attends to many of the most obvious sensibilities associated with the sublime, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” in this regard, also participates in a kind of ‘negative sublimity,’ which, according to Moreland, overcomes the critical and aesthetic binaries inherent to any dominant form of the kind, including: Burke’s ideological separation of matters of beauty and sublimity, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s distinction between fancy and imagination and Anne Radcliffe’s division of terror and horror (54). The Usher house itself is the manifestation of all of these traits. Upon entering, the narrator describes a building bursting at it seems with overwrought Gothic metaphor and tat: “Its principle feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great...In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old woodwork which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air” (Bantam Classics, 28). Overindulging in stereotypical Gothic trappings, the House of Usher is both an exceedingly familiar image of a building marked by a sublime time out of mind as it is a ridiculously histrionic and overdetermined dramatization of all of the collected elements of the sublime,

⁵⁵ Sean Moreland, “‘Torture[d] into aught of the sublime’: Poe’s Fall of the House of Burke, Ussher, and Kant.” *Deciphering Poe: Subtexts, Contexts, Subversive Meanings*, edited by Alexandra Urakova. Bethlehem PA: Lehigh University Press. 2013: 53-65

with their binaries and distinctions torn in half and melded into one great piece of rotting flesh.

Taken as a send-up not of itself, but of the Gothic story and the conventions of the Sublime literary production, “The Fall of the House of Usher” seems like Poe at his most perverse and mordant state of being. Sublimity, for Burke, contains within it the power to “anticipate our reasonings” and “hurry us onward,” “even,” Moreland claims, “in opposition to them” (56). The fact that the story repudiates, as Baldick would have it, the authority of theorists of the Sublime by simply mocking them and presenting the architecture of their official logic as already decaying and dead at the core, makes “The Fall of the House of Usher” a recognizable piece of Gothic story-telling. The reality, on the other hand, that the story presents is representative of Poe’s immense and very strange “Imp of the Perverse.” The collapse of the House at the end of the story and the fall of the familial “House” brought about by Roderick’s demise—leaving him, in the words of the narrator, only “a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated” (43)—signify Poe’s successful figuration of Gothic and Sublime tropes and his literary transfiguration of them into the greater work of the expanding Poe Machine, which, again, longs to create terror for terror’s sake and grotesquerie in the spirit of the grotesque, providing a horrible image of a sublimity that does not produce reason or distance from insanity but rather beckons its readers into the ever-populated fields of blossoming chaos that Poe has built into his vision of the future.

The Undead Poe: Postmodernity and Beyond

"I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock"

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (379)⁵⁶

In 1967, Roland Barthes famously announced the extinction of the author. In his essay "The Death of the Author" [*La mort de l'auteur*]⁵⁷, Barthes continued and expanded upon the initial notion popular amongst American New Critics that the literary work be dislodged from any consideration of its author's biography, political background or historical context. Taking this a step further, Barthes also argues for a literary criticism so focused on the work-at-hand that even authorial motivation or intention be cast aside in order for a more text-base form of analysis to take place. Describing literature as being written by a multitude of indiscernible voices, Barthes claims here that the space of literature is in fact "that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that creates" (142). A "disconnection" happens in the writing of literature and, in the development of his or her own literary voice, the author experiences a loss of subjectivity: "writing begins," he says, once "the author enters into his own death" (142). The information provided by an author's official biography and indeed any critical attention paid to their professed aims in the creation of their *work* is, for Barthes, an obstacle for any valid criticism of the *text*. The solution, he maintains, is to develop texts without authors, recognizing that the opposite scenario inherently works to "impose a limit on that text" (147). The habit often taken by literary critics to "uncover" or "find" the truth of the author lying beneath the text is too easy for Barthes, who wants to recognize the ways in which this academic "discovery"

⁵⁶ Included in *The Tell-Tale Heart and Other Writings* (Bantam): 212-379

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Hill and Wang. 1978: 142-148

disallows deeper analysis of the text, unburdened by identity and prescriptive subjectivity. Literature, which Barthes points out would better be understood as “writing,” needs to be liberated from critical practices which seek to establish originary “meanings” in literary texts. Comparing this semiotic approach to an “anti-theological activity,” Barthes’ ethical claim here is directed towards a kind of criticism unmoored from the “truth” of history, and from the cult of truth itself: a “truly revolutionary” stance, he argues, that, in the end, is a way of refusing “God and his hypostates—reason, science, law” (147).

An important aspect of Barthes’ ongoing dedication to the death of the author is implied in his efforts to shift critical discourse as it concerns literature: doing away with notions of the literary “work” in place of a more subversive analysis of the “text” of literature. A work, for Barthes, is a fixed piece, a bit of creative iconography always related back to its creator and therefore tethered to critical “truths” relating to the author’s identity and historical background. Engaging in this kind of discourse in his “Death of the Author” piece, Barthes elaborates this shift in meaning in his essay “From Work to Text” (*Image, Music, Text* 155-164) where he makes the claim that, as it has been understood and disseminated, the literary work is not only always already caught up in the truth-making claims about its proper meaning and analysis, but also, as a direct result, only a commodity to be consumed in particular ways and to prescriptive ends. “The Text,” on the other hand, symbolizes the “revolutionary” intentions behind deconstructive criticism, and, according to Barthes, “is not to be thought of as an object that can be computed” or consumed, but rather a potential space of *jouissance*, or pleasure, for the reader who is invited to collaborate with, rather than be governed by, the text-at-hand. Barthes’ recalculation of the critical language associated with literature—or, as he would have it, “writing”—expands further as he would replace the “reading” of a work with the “playing with” of a text. “The text itself,”

he argues, “*plays* (like a door, like a machine with ‘play’) and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it, but, in order that that practice not be reduced to a passive, inner *mimesis*” (162).

In the context of the author’s death, then, the little games of literature are, for Barthes, to be played only in the reading, or recreating, of literature. This would be sad news indeed for Poe who, as we have just seen, imagined himself the ultimate stylist and perverted genius, designing tales and poems that not only conjure up immediate and palpable sensations for their readers, but also lead them deeper and deeper into the chaotic landscape of the Poe Machine, sublimating and consuming them in the process. Still, though, Barthes’ essay should be recognized for its significant role in bringing about and announcing a shift in official literary criticism, away from the formalisms of the New Criticism and toward the new formalisms of the postmodern age. Even though Poe has in many ways provided predictive arguments against Barthes’ fantasy of a text-based and author-absent criticism, Barthes’ arguments in “The Death of the Author” were not without their own contemporaneous critique. Widely assumed to be a friendly form of sending up Barthes’ famous essay, Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?”⁵⁸ appeared in print as a conspicuous response. While skillfully not ever naming Barthes or his essay in this piece, Foucault’s first joke seems to be that, in spite of himself, Barthes managed to gain a kind of notoriety for his “Death of the Author” arguments that, in the end, were and still are always neatly tied to his name. Unable to escape its own *author function*, Barthes’ essay is elaborated by Foucault who argues for a less apocalyptic critical understanding of the author of literature: “The Author is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses...[it

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books. 1984: 101-120

is] therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (119). Barthes’ dream of a culture of readership set free from the chains of authorial intention or meaning are, for Foucault, a kind of “pure romanticism” wherein “the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state,” able to live and develop on its own without ever having to harken back to or again “passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure” (119). Foucault’s prescribed concept of the “author function” opens up the conversation Barthes initiates in his declaration, allowing for a more fluid and open-ended discursive relation to occur between text and work, author and text. In order to call for a more developed theory of the work—as opposed, in Barthes’ case, a doing away with the entire idea and history of the work itself—Foucault playfully asks how and in what ways critical conceptions of an author’s body of work might be expanded, asking what the impact might be of the future publication of Nietzsche’s marginal notes, his scribbles, his laundry list, his date book (103-104). Foucault’s essay, in the end, is useful for poising itself toward a recalibrated analytics of literature and criticism wherein the author, the work and even the deconstructive “text” might deterritorialize the very limits disconnecting them from their potential creative power.

This theory of the work—which Foucault recognizes is, at the point of his own writing, an underdeveloped field (104)—is in fact imbedded within the Poe Machine. Writing, for Poe, was not merely a personal matter, but part of his ethic commitment to the vitality of his Literary Machine, to its ongoing health and affective capacities to continue its labor into a world-to-come. As Deleuze has argued, for certain writers, there exists “an attempt to make life something more than personal, to free life from what imprisons it” (*Clinical and Critical*, xv). As a conceptual personae, Poe’s visions of time and place operate within the space of the untimely and therefore construct works whose lives are

unencumbered by the truth of life, that are free, as we have seen, even from the evolving “truth” of scholarship and criticisms of the future. In the next and final section of this essay I would like to propose Poe’s novella *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* as a predictive response to this debate about the death of the author. Another kind of hoax in and of itself, the story not only undoes Poe’s own relation to his own author function, but also opens mysteries relating to the truth of authorship that still hang in the balance. This deterritorialization pushes Poe’s vision towards a space where nothing exists but intensities and imperceptible forms of aliveness. The mystery of nothingness is at the heart of Poe’s labor in *Pym* and also an abyss left wide open and unresolved in the conclusion of the story, somehow securing Poe’s place at that nothingness toward which we all move and into which we all perish.

Beyond Here Lies Nothing: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

These three compendia of his themes—*Pym*, *Eureka*, ‘Usher’—each edges inexorably toward apocalypse, the unavoidable condition of wisdom, by a different route. In *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* we go clear around the earth, upon the sea; this is the Total Voyage of Discovery, hinted at and sketched in earlier journeys into maelstrom and in the journal cast adrift in a bottle. Here is the discoverer exploring the body of this world, exploring it with his own body.

Daniel Hoffman (259-60)

The first publication of Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* occurred in 1838 for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Serialized in two sections, *Pym* is Poe’s only novel or novella-length piece and is thought by many to have been completed under financial duress as Poe was, at the time of its release, suffering a series of professional failures as a working short

story author and poet. Even though Poe himself later dismissed *Arthur Gordon Pym* as “a very silly book,” it has somehow—and strangely—remained one of his most enigmatic and significant creations. Similar in many ways to his philosophical treatise on time and space *Eureka*—which he states would be properly read and understood “two thousand years hence” (40)—*Pym* is an untimely masterpiece attempting to represent and ponder the mysteries of the universe. While, in *Eureka* Poe addresses cosmological concerns in a more direct, scientific manner, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* dramatizes exploration, pushing it to its most grotesque and deranged degree. *Pym* and *Eureka* also set themselves apart from the other works comprising Poe’s opus in that they seem to summarily defy any clear or conventional analysis—a fact that, considering both stories deal squarely with matters of exploration and discovery, we must agree amounts to another of Poe’s ongoing jokes with his audience of the future. *Pym* itself is, as Peebles has argued, “at once a mock nonfictional narrative, adventure saga, bildungsroman, hoax, largely plagiarized travelogue...spiritual allegory...[and] one of the most elusive texts of American literature.”⁵⁹ In his own sordid way, Poe has succeeded at territorializing and deterritorializing literary forms and concepts of authorship in the construction of his *Narrative*. Borrowing from the various genres that Peebles mentions, Poe’s stylized relation to the novella works at the same time to disaggregate their discursive power. Distancing himself from this “very silly book,” on the one hand, and overtly plagiarizing—tracing the format of his work on top of a series of travelogues⁶⁰, scientific treatises on discovery⁶¹ and classic works of prose and lyric⁶², Poe’s

⁵⁹ Scott Peebles, *Edgar Alan Poe Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers. 1998: 55

⁶⁰ from Captain James Cooks’ tour on the *Resolution*; Benjamin Morrell’s *A Narrative of Four Voyages* (1832)

⁶¹ John Cleves Symmes’ Hollow Earth hypotheses;

⁶² Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798); Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); folklore associated with “The Flying Dutchman”

critical ambivalence toward his duties as a professional writer and public literary figure constitutes a desire on his part to toy with, and ultimately overcome, his reputation and sense of obligation to Literature. Further, while the story is meant to be a direct representation of Arthur Gordon Pym's experiences onboard the whaling vessels the *Grampus* and then the *Jane Guy* toward the South Pole, Poe has created a fictional "Poe" whose responsibility it is to write down and report the action of this story and, ultimately, announce the sudden death and disappearance of *The Narrative's* protagonist. Here, the "death" of the author is only a doorway through which Poe confirms his creative control over the telling of Pym's story, which, in the end, is a discovery narrative based on the themes of misreading, miscalculating and blindly sailing into disaster.

As for the general plot of the book: *Pym* begins in ways recognizable to the genre of the literature of discovery and adventure on the high seas, a familiar and also adolescent form of story-telling that, in this instance, finds a young Arthur Pym of Nantucket stowing away on a whaling vessel called *The Grampus* that is headed south. Encountering disaster after disaster, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* provides gross details of mutinies, rotting corpses, cannibalism and general decay along Pym's journey to the South Pole. As the story reaches its end, and as Pym eventually meets his doom, the *Jane Guy* ultimately encounters an island called Tsalal inhabited by a strange group of black natives for whom the appearance of whiteness signifies pure evil and death incarnate. Through a presentation of Pym's discovery of a series of hieroglyphs written on stone that are translated from a blend of Hebrew, Arabic and Egyptian letters into the words "To be shady," "To be white" and "Region to the South," the appearance of a terrible void of whiteness is foreshadowed, bringing about the apocalypse as Pym and the inhabitants of Tsalal are engulfed into the white cataract of the sea (375-379):

And now we rushed into the embrace of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

While the details of Poe's *Narrative* are deserving of their own chapter-length analysis, I would like to focus on the ways in which *Pym* operates as a cautionary tale of misreading and the misadventures associated with discovery in order to display the Poe Machine's logical disaggregation or deterritorialization of the very literary genres and forms it passes through. It is difficult indeed to find just the right term or even set of descriptive words that suit Poe's very strange *Narrative*. It, on the one hand, cannot be aptly or simply characterized as what we know as a "Poe" story—which is to say that, in exactly the ways that his stories are *known* and can be referred to in historical and canonical terms as such, *AG Pym* constitutes both a confounding and mysterious moment in the trajectory of his life as a writer. In spite of this, however, the piece remains as a definitive and singularly significant text in the whole story of American literary production—not only in terms of the ways in which Poe himself gathered together and recast histories and narrative tropes made by writers before him, the piece, while critically disrespected in a sense and certainly not as widely or well read as others in his own canon, became a model and a source for American stories and histories to come (Melville's *Moby-Dick* is, of course, among the most notorious of *Pym*'s intertexts-to-come).

Frankly, the problem of situating and properly describing Pym's story is not merely about its mischaracterizations in American literary criticism and American historicism, but about the very nature of the work itself, of the wicked games Poe himself plays in his writing of it. Beyond the obvious, or at least already documented, issues facing readers of *AG*

Pym—Poe’s use of a fictionalized author his presentation of the novella, it being the product of a practical move made by Poe-the-writer surviving the capitalist economy, the lack of seriousness that he seemed to take in producing and formulating this “very silly book”—its queerness has to do with this wickedness Poe operates through as an author, but also with the very unsettling futures and unfounded histories the stories carries within and with it. In this brief response to *Pym* I would like to introduce a way of reading the story as a joke—a joke that carries truth along with it which, as we have all come to understand, doesn’t quite make sense in its delivery and almost never causes laughter in anyone except its teller. Poe, in this sense, appears as an author only to have a laugh at its audience, and a literary historian and scholar who is really a thief (a foreshadowing, of course, of Bob Dylan who would take up this mode of artistry in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries).

Critical readings of *AG Pym* or of Poe’s perverse method of writing are a mistake—not because what we say about the stories and narratives contained and displayed within the world of this literary production are unfounded, but that miss the truth of Poe’s punch line. As a text that steals from and recapitulates all the texts that came before it, *AG Pym* introduces us to Poe as the artist-thief; as one that is both widely copied and also markedly unread in the world of American literature, we also have to understand Poe as an artist who is both genius and idiot. At the heart of all its histories and through *Pym*’s descriptions of the future lies the matter of Poe’s great joke: beyond here lie’s nothing—nothing done and nothing said.

My description of this story is, I will admit, a whole lot of set-up: this is because close readings and textual references to the text appear to me to be both critically fruitful and also ontologically impossible. In other words, it is not so much that Poe did not take his writing of *AG Pym* seriously, but that he seems more concerned with humoring himself than

with producing something fit for a respectable literary audience. Pym is introduced to us in the “Introductory Note” as a stoic, but sheepish teller of his great story—he is induced to speak the American public only at the belligerent and incessant encouragement of his peers, whose “ruse,” as he calls it here:

...induced me to undertake a regular compilation and publication of the adventures in question; for I found that, in spite of the air of fable which had been so ingeniously thrown around that portion of my statement. . .the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as a fable, and several letters were sent to Mr. P.’s address, distinctly expressing a conviction to the contrary. (213-214)

The modesty characterized in the “Introductory Note” works as a ruse: it gives us a narrator whom we are skeptical of and a sense of historical and scientific authority we are too confident about. This very queer way in which Poe moderates his readership is his own joke on reading—his romantic, or Gothic, irony. The search for metaphor and historical representation in the text is, on the one hand already neutered by his insistence on an untrustworthy and psychically displaced narrator, and on the other Poe’s stylized dismissal of the very ways in which Americans, and the western mind in general, have sought to account for the past and record life as it occurs.

There is, of course, no such being in history as Arthur Gordon Pym, and so the modesty with which he introduces himself and his telling of his own story we have to accept as false. Poe, as the perverted producer looking to amuse himself, is the one inducing his audience’s attention and readership of Pym’s story only so that he may disappear into the distance and have his laughs. While we read and respond critically to the text and look for historical clues and cues within it, we either take what is false and perverse about the story as fact or record or we dismiss the seriousness of Poe’s joke. We don’t get accurate or honest

histories or methodologies in Poe's writing of *AG Pym*—only grotesque, ironic and unsettling representations of the false hopes and bad consciences wrapped up in modern existence. Critical approaches to the text are, in this way, difficult because they seem to give into Poe's desire for a reader that is, like Pym, too confident and equipped with a sense of themselves in the world that we take as our throne, but that, in the end, nothing we can call our own.

Scientific interest at the time of his writing of the story was influenced with ideas of finding the ends of the earth, of reaching the final terrain of human exploration of the world. The Antarctic and North poles operate in this story as two sides of a discreet earth, containing, according to what was called the Hollow Earth theory (which imagined that the North and South Poles provided entry-ways into the center of the earth), the insides of our planet: a discrete, mysterious but imminently knowable object. *AG Pym* finds its tragic hero and our narrator moving after midnight in his already broken-down vessel towards these very ends: of history, of territory and of human desire and knowledge to know itself on earth. Poe asks his readers to listen to Pym's story, who in turn asks God to bless his journey and lay a divine hand upon his head as he searches for and comes to find the answers to these modern questions only to be greeted with the vast and horrible weight of what's to come and of what is: of nothing done and nothing said.

For all of its scientific romance and its obvious invocations of discourses concerning the Sublime, *AG Pym* actually summons up the natural world itself as filthy and disgusting. In search and desiring it, Pym, the Platonic scientific wonderer and modern wanderer, appears senselessly in the world: dreaming of what's to come, but dead to the very lively truths waiting just around the bend, lying right in front of his face. Feeling his journey to be a noble, or at least compulsive one, Pym makes a "terrible oath" (215) with God and charts a

plan with his friend Augustus. The oath is a mistake and the plan is a stupid one, but Pym makes it anyway. The great story we are asked to take in is hatched by our young explorer in the dead of night: one boy lying next to the other: one asleep and planning the future, the other wide-awake and dreaming. The story of his great desire to see the beyond is really only the catalyst and the presence of the misery of his existence on earth. The joke here is about the confidence of the modern, and also post-modern, mind in its depictions of the past and of its visions of the future. Through scientific inquiry and historical method the modern reader has found definitional freedom but lost sense of the truth—that that which has already passed and which has already been forgotten gets recapitulated as metaphor and as fact.

Literary criticism has given context to its readers, but has limited the scope of our analysis to what the text of a story says or ought to say rather than what it is saying and what we are saying about it. Poe's readers, fixated on their histories and with their modes of consumption, can see part of the picture—we can, like Pym himself, read one side of the page, but we are limited to just one half of the story. Poe's joke about exploration is not a commentary on the modern condition—it *is* the modern tradition. With his ship in the harbor and its sails spread, Poe's explorer goes off into the distance in search of something that is almost in perfect sight, but that is, in the end, always nothing.

The experience of living in the present is one of anxiety and trepidation; the experience of being in and knowing the modern world is, as Pym so willfully displays to us, being part of a joke you just don't get. The tragedy of his journey doesn't say or prove anything in particular about scientific exploration or colonialism in the world of the Poe's nineteenth century, but it does make painfully obvious the grotesque and, at least for Poe, hilarious nature of modern existence: that while seek to define and pin all of our hopes on

that which seems just off in the distance and pray to God watch over and love us as we go off in search of it, the answers to questions we think we are asking are always and already perverted truths which nature and reality create for us.

The Bible tells us, in much the same way Poe does in his discreet and wicked manner: “No one knows the future, and no one can tell another person what will happen. Just as no one has power over the wind to restrain it, so no one has power over the day of his death.”⁶³ The American defines itself as an eagle who soars through the sky and who becomes the distance; in truth, Poe’s story, like God’s covenant to those living on earth, tells us that all we can hope for is an albatross pecking away and hanging over the flesh of our already dead and decaying hopes and dreams. All the future represents for our poor sailor and explorer is that terrible white cataract of the sea and the dusty mountains of the past containing the eternal message on their walls that beyond here lies nothing.

⁶³ *Ecclesiastes* 8:7-8

Chapter Two

“The Terrible Speed of Mercy”: Flannery O’Connor’s Grotesque Vision of Grace

What shall we say, then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?

—Romans 6:1

Clashing in the Wilderness: An Introduction

Any literary criticism concerning the slim, but no doubt great body of work Flannery O’Connor contributed to American letters in the 1950s and 60s—left behind after her slow and painful battle with *lupus* that ended with her death in the summer of 1964—must immediately confront in her work a stark, orthodox vision of Christianity that charts the strange and terrifying journeys taken by characters existing within her stories and indeed dictates the moral import that she envisions. A product, no doubt, of the emerging New Criticism in American literature, O’Connor, following her early graduation from Georgia State College for Women in 1945, left her hometown and went north, first as a member of Paul Engle’s esteemed writer’s workshop at Iowa University, then on to New York City, the Connecticut home of Robert and Sally Fitzgerald and the writer’s retreat at Yaddo. Heavily influenced by and benefited, in part, from the New Critical injunction to writers to “show, instead of tell,” O’Connor’s approach to story-writing is, as a result, fixated on the visual and concrete manifestations of sin and grace impacting and upending the lives of her characters.

The terse, economical prose of O’Connor’s first novel, *Wise Blood*, was received by the literary world of the United States and, to an extent, England, as a formidable, if queer production of Southern grotesquerie. A May 1952 review in the *New York Times Book Review* sums up popular sentiment regarding *Wise Blood* in this way:

Written by a Southerner from Georgia, this first novel, whose language is Tennessee-Georgia dialect expertly wrought into a clipped, elliptic, and blunt style, introduces its author as a writer of power. There is in Flannery O'Connor a fierceness of literary gesture, an angriness of observation, a facility for catching, as an animal eye in the wilderness, cunningly and at one sharp glance, the shape and detail and animal intention of enemy and foe. The world of *Wise Blood* is one of clashing in the wilderness.⁶⁴

The plot that *Wise Blood* details follows a young Hazel Motes, a wild-and-woll-eyed young man from the remote mountains of East Tennessee. Just returning home from two years of military service, Motes at the beginning of the book rides a train into Taulkinham, a town close, but surely distant enough to his own hometown to seem as far as the foreign theaters that painted the backdrop of his time in the second great World War. The physical representative of modern man, Hazel Motes himself embodies all of man's sins. Filled with angst and driven by an overwhelming sense of needing to find himself somewhere outside of himself, Motes' mission will be to found and preach the gospel of "The Church Without Christ Crucified." As an itinerant, carnie street preacher, Motes encounters Asa Hawks, a preacher pretending to be blind who is also busking on the corners of Taulkinham, competing for its denizens' eternal souls. In this dialectic, *Wise Blood* provides a clear chart of modern man's sins. Motes is, like Hawks, bound up in and marked by sin, professing only a glib, modernized vision of Christ and His Redemption.

Along the way, Motes finds himself in the constant company of another young man, Enoch Emory, a half-witted, and probably mentally retarded, boy from Taulkinham who follows Motes around, seemingly unaffected by or ambivalent to the message that he is

⁶⁴ "Unending Vengeance." William Goyen, *New York Times Book Review*, May 18, 1952: 4

preaching. Obsessively and, of course, eventually, Enoch spends most of his time in the story luring Haze to an abandoned warehouse located in a part zoo, part circus where Enoch works part-time as a security guard. Inside this building lies a shriveled carcass of a pygmy, thought to have been brought from the ancient Middle East and now lying in purgatory inside this Taulkinham circus warehouse, a mummy that, O'Connor herself explained in two successive letters to friend Betty Hester in the summer of 1960, "was an idol to Enoch," but, "[f]or the book as a whole, it was the figure for the new Jesus—a shriveled man."⁶⁵ Motes, Enoch and the mummified Christ are far from metaphorical characters or a symbolic critique of modern humanism: O'Connor maintains her vision here in a way that is representative of her strict and seething style:

There doesn't have to be any connection between Enoch and a criticism of humanism. As a fiction writer, I am interested first in Enoch as Enoch and Haze as Haze. Haze is repulsed by the shriveled man he sees merely because it is hideous. He has a picture of his new Jesus—shriveled as it is. Therefore it certainly does have meaning for Haze. Why would he throw it away if it didn't? The meaning is in its rejection. Haze, even though a primitive, is full of the poison of the modern world. This is in part responsible for some of the comic effect.⁶⁶

While certainly based in the concrete and working through the New Critical law of showing instead of telling, O'Connor's corrective here is important in understanding the full weight of her literary work, and, more pointedly, the authority she develops and hones in her writing that supersedes the limits of literary symbolism and the laws of the New Criticism from which she was emerging. The vision of the shriveled man, stark and seemingly-

⁶⁵ Letter to Betty Hester, June 25, 1960

⁶⁶ Letter to Betty Hester, July 9, 1960

obvious enough in its grotesqueness, is, for O'Connor, more than just a gross symbol or an over-determined metaphor. It is, in its total emptiness, a material reference to the endless emptiness that fills up the modern world and that drives the characters of her novel. The moral compass guiding *Wise Blood* is, like all of O'Connor's work, already charted and materially present in the orthodox vision of the Church. Unreal for Haze, and, no doubt, for all of the characters living in Taulkinham, the world of *Wise Blood* is the world unaware of or in direct conflict with the truth of Christ's Redemption. The responsibility of the author, in O'Connor's worldview, is a sacred one, handed down from God and to be nurtured daily as a practice and, as St. Thomas of Aquinas described, *a habit of being*. The spirit of the artist's work is left in the hands of the artist is who blessed with a vision of the world; the life of his work, then, will be dictated by his dedication to capturing that vision, inching closer to its unending distances in each of his works. "The more fully human this vision is," O'Connor wrote, "the more it will include, and the more it includes, the more it will require of the writer a descent, through the darkness of the familiar, into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking."⁶⁷

This is just a beginning of vision, and this is but an introduction deeper into O'Connor's grotesque, terrible vision of the modern world, but this does well to characterize the nature with which I shall present her stories and attempt to characterize and embody the true weight of her literary style. Symbols and metaphors will be treated ambivalently in this study of her work, as I try to capture and represent a glimpse of what forms of eternal truth I can see in the shadows and far-off places of O'Connor's opus. Engaging in what O'Connor constantly refers to as a kind of realism of distances, the grotesque will be the

⁶⁷ Box 249a at FO'C Archives, GCSU. An alternative discussion of the grotesque in Southern literature, delivered at Troy State College on April 24, 1963

most significant and literal manner of literary production this essay will follow. I will also speak to the power of O'Connor's formalism as a matter of style and a way through which her distant visions make themselves real and draw themselves near. Her literary formalism is not a product of her training as a writer, but of an ongoing attempt at revealing the mysteries of Christ's redemption, something only possible through "a belief in fixed dogma," which, according to O'Connor, "cannot fix what goes on in life or blind the believer to it," instead, adding "a dimension to the writer's observation which many cannot, in conscience, acknowledge exists" (MM 150). Any glimpse of grace, or of this fixed vision to which she refers, for O'Connor as a Catholic writer, must contain itself to the prescriptions of the Church, "limiting," in the end, the writer's "freedom to observe to what man has done with the things of God" to those material truths already laid down and framing human existence (MM 150). The self-contained nature of O'Connor's stories and novels will be reconstituted in this chapter, as I deal, more than in any other discussion in this dissertation, with her primary texts. In doing so, I will present what I refer to as O'Connor's Catholic materialism: her style of writing that is characterized by her ability to fully conceptualize mortal tragedy and the ongoing dramatic battle between good and evil in fully formed characters and material visions of mercy and of grace.

A Realist of Distances: O'Connor's Grotesque and the School of Southern

Degeneracy

Beyond the grotesque lies...the grotesque.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque*

While mostly confined to Andalusia, the family farmhouse she and her mother occupied in Milledgeville, Georgia from the time she returned home with *lupus* until her

eventual demise, O'Connor did manage to work the college and writer's club lecture circuit on a fairly regular basis. A kind of suitcase preacher herself, O'Connor, like Hazel Motes, found herself explaining the true nature and aim of her work to her bewildered reading public. In the mainstream press, O'Connor was introduced as a member of the emerging "School of Southern Degeneracy," a group of authors—like Carson McCullers, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams—whose novels and stories tended towards a kind of scandalous realism. The notoriety this group of writers gained in the national press was a result, O'Connor regularly explained in a talk entitled "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," of intrigue regarding the lives and worldviews of poor white Southerners, whose crooked images were finding themselves in newspapers and on television as the great antagonist of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement taking place in the South. Works of fiction coming out of the School of Southern Degeneracy seemed to satisfy the urge more civilized citizens had to both understand and gawk at the ways of the dilapidated and fatuous manners of Southern culture. *Tobacco Road*, in particular, read like a Southland version of *Peyton Place*, signaling in gory and profane details the end of what O'Connor called the era of the "Magnolia novels of Southern history," and the beginning a new kind of Southern realism that would instead "describe how a whole family goes to town to buy a collective toothbrush."⁶⁸ Disconnected in time and genre from works like *Gone With The Wind* that suggested a rebirth of a once ruined Southern nobility, the new School of Southern Degeneracy's popularity benefited, no doubt, from the nation's more recent desire for bad publicity regarding life in the South.

Uncomfortable with the idea that she be considered part of this new literary movement, O'Connor's lectures consistently argued that her work be better understood as

⁶⁸ 236a Lecture on Southern writers (May 1955). Delivered to Macon's Writer's Club

both a product of Christian orthodoxy as well as more in line with the grotesque tradition in art and literature. As she explains, the root of the issue facing popular consideration of her work, and certainly causing the negative publicity underlying postwar Southern literature, was caused by a critical blindness: “When we look at a good deal of serious modern fiction, and particularly Southern fiction, we find this quality about it that is generally described, in a pejorative sense, as grotesque. Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (MM 40). In other words, a book like *Tobacco Road* (to which *Wise Blood* was heavily compared in the national media) satisfied the popular desire to see, smell, touch and feel Southern profanity and disrepute, a desire that ended, successfully combined regionalism and realism to produce a very banal, journalistic kind of literature.

The tradition of the grotesque, however, provides O'Connor with a way out of the trap of Southern degeneracy, and her arguments about its significance in her stories were the sticks and stones with which she fought against the nation's attempts to situate and explain her work. A tradition in art and literature dating as far back as 1500 in Italy and found most notably in the appearance of gargoyles and other kinds of Gothic statuary that were popular across the continent in the next two centuries, the grotesque in literature is marked by the introduction of some sudden, violent and strange occurrence in a story that, rather than merely disrupting it or functioning antithetically to its due course, becomes a part of its very structure.⁶⁹ In most cases, grotesque stories produce a world that looks both intimately and grossly realistic and terrifyingly foreign and strange; the tension here is thus forced upon the reader, who has to find a way to cope with the presence of such an uncanny hybrid and

⁶⁹ Connie Ann Kirk, *Critical Companion to Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Facts on File, Inc. 2008: 334-335

behold the sight of objects and characters who seem both near and far. The aim of the grotesque story-teller, then, is to try and capture the effect of things that seem both recognizable and those that are awesome and horrible off in the distance. “In these grotesque works,” O’Connor explains, “we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life...[producing, as a result] fictional qualities [which] lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected” (*MM* 40). O’Connor’s stories, in this way, should be understood as distinct in kind and also in degree from those coming out of the School of Southern Degeneracy.

Far from being mere pornographic visions of the stereotypical Southerner, O’Connor’s stories are filled with characters whose forms of freakishness, meanness and dilapidation are as unbelievable as they are painfully singular and visible to the reader. The aim, then, of her work was one having more to do with forcing readers to identify themselves in her awful characters—to realize some prophetic vision of the freak as universal. To be able to do so, however, she accepted as truthful and real that “To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man,” upon whom the forms of sin and humanity both “cast strange shadows” and show that he has been created in the likeness and image of God (*MM* 44-45). A prophet of distances and an architect of stories that build themselves on the dilapidated structures of human civilization, O’Connor’s manner of approach in her work is one focused in on the shadows covering the earth, the ghosts haunting modern consciousness, proving, in the end, both the real presence of sin and mortal danger in the world as well as the violent and terrifying presence of God’s grace from the beginning until the end of time.

In a 1955 review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor's second major publication following *Wise Blood*, *Time* magazine described this collection of "ten witheringly sarcastic stories" as being the product of yet "another Southern lady whose work is highly unladylike."⁷⁰ While it is hard to conjure up unladylike ladies living in the South and contemporaries of Miss O'Connor (surely not the very stately Eudora Welty or Harper Lee, the author, in O'Connor's words, of that very popular "child's book"⁷¹ to which her own work was often compared unfavorably), the author of the *Time* magazine only offers up yet another reference to McCullers in describing the effect of the text on its readers: "Her instruments are a brutal irony, a slam-bang humor, and a style of writing as balefully direct as a death sentence. The South that simpers, storms, and snivels in these pages moves along a sort of up-to-date *Tobacco Road*, paved right into town."⁷² Just like the characters filling *Wise Blood's* sordid pages and populating the fictive Southland Babylon that is Taulkinham, the characters that O'Connor creates in her *A Good Man Is Hard to Find Collection* also appear just as they are and as they will always be. Stripped down in this way, O'Connor is able to shine the violent light of God's grace upon them in order to reveal the plain and noisy nature of their individual forms of sin; in the end, as *Time* magazine complains, "Nobody is noble in these stories. 'These are the 'maimed souls' and the ferociously maternal types whose footless magnanimity seems unfailingly to destroy those around them."⁷³

But if, as I have been trying to clarify, journalistic comparisons of O'Connor's work to other Southern regionalist writers like McCullers, Williams, and even H. Lee and Welty, miss the mark, then what literary traditions might suitably make suitable company for her

⁷⁰ "Such Nice People." *Time*, June 6, 1955: 114

⁷¹ Letter to Betty Hester, October 1, 1960

⁷² *Time*, 06/06/1955

⁷³ *Ibid*

work—strange and untimely as it is? As far as writers working during her own lifetime, the best and most obvious lines drawn lead to Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh in England and, to some extent, Franz Kafka.⁷⁴ Like each of these men's work, O'Connor's fiction is marked by an uncanniness that is constitutive: a combined sense of her immense and solitary knowledge of the customs and people of the world around her, as well as an overarching, definitive sense of alienation and isolation in her own nation. As a Catholic writer living in not only the South, but in the heart of the deep, secluded South of "Middle Georgia," O'Connor's religious worldview sets her apart in the Southern cultural landscape—not only in terms of sheer theological difference between Protestantism and Catholicism, but also resulting from her relation to the belief system and orthodoxies of the very foreign Catholic Church. As Catholics themselves, both Greene and Waugh share a sensibility with O'Connor concerning the revelation of eternal mystery through a creative, and often comic, satiric presentation of their own social worlds. In her own terms, O'Connor has compared her work to these men in relation to St. Thomas' injunction to the artist to be "to give an image of man in his time." Recognizing that, for its own purposes, "fiction is not a very serene art," O'Connor sees the story-teller's way of being as eternally conflicted, stating that, "[a]s soon as you attempt to do that, you run into all those with whose image your image

⁷⁴ To be sure, when I say that these comparisons make the most sense in terms of how these authors may have directly had an influence on O'Connor's writings, I am determining this first and foremost upon the fact that these were the contemporary authors whose fiction she spent the most time reading during the years of her life as a public literary figure. Based on extensive research in the O'Connor Library, held at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia and Emory University's special collections, it is clear—through investigation of her many letters, published and unpublished book reviews, as well as her personal library—that O'Connor's interest in popular fiction waned significantly following her return to Milledgeville. Most likely this was the result of her own intense focus on her work, combined with the isolating effects of her adherence to Catholic dogma, which tended to wax in the years when her own existence was waning.

conflicts, and this felt contact with an audience very definitely affects the way one writes.”⁷⁵

This lecture, entitled “The Freak in Modern Literature,” spells out the problems, but also the motives and manners, of the author concerned with forcing upon his contemporary world this kind of immediate and uncomfortable image of itself in its own sin; as Catholics, in this case, the grotesque’s preference for descriptions of distorted, freakish worlds help increase the author’s ability to make something greater than mere social critique, to do something more like paint a horrible, comic picture of what is in order to prove truths more eternal and lasting than those which are always fleeting and conveying themselves in our time.

While many reviews of O’Connor’s stories consider her interest in poor, white Protestant folk to be glib or condescending, her interest is actually the product of a deep, morally-conscious dedication to creating an artistic response to the world that she knew—foreign and intensely provincial as it always was. “The religion of the South,” O’Connor wrote in a letter to her friend John Hawkes, “is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic.”⁷⁶ Like Hazel Motes, who had to blind himself at the end of *Wise Blood* to finally realize what he had made plain throughout the entire novel: that he was obsessed with and direly needed Jesus, all of O’Connor’s characters assume that they can help themselves out of their situations and predicaments, not realizing, until their eventual meeting with the violent intrusions of grace, that they were the substance as cause of their own situation and predicament in the first place. If O’Connor had lived in New York City, she would have written of the same situations that city-folk find themselves in; if she were in Antarctica she’d write about self-sustaining and self-defeating penguins and sheets of ice. Isolated, as she was, in the Bible Belt of Baldwin

⁷⁵ **234a** Lecture, “The Freak in Modern Fiction” (May 1958)

⁷⁶ Letter to John Hawkes, 1959

County, Georgia, she wrote about the people she encountered everyday, who, like all other persons on earth, only specify and prove the eternal truths of her Catholic Church. As she continues to explain in her letter to Hawkes, this isolated business of characterizing local life as part of the more eternal drama of life on earth was part and parcel of O'Connor's business as an artist blessed with talent and creativity: "I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times."⁷⁷ This seriousness that O'Connor invests in her work will be the spirit with which this chapter shall continue: deep into the worlds her stories and novels create, with a critical eye affixed to the staggering and profane images of man to which she has given material life.

Beating the Devil: Distortion and the Violent Mysteries of Revelation

The martyrs do not underestimate the body; they cause it to be elevated on the cross.

In that they are at one with their enemies.

Kafka, "Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way"

In the preface added to the 2nd edition of *Wise Blood*, O'Connor reflects on the work's significance ten years following its initial publication as well as summarizes the tradition and responsibilities associated with her form of grotesque literature. The book, she says, is "a comic novel about a Christian *malgré lui*, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death."⁷⁸ Like Kafka's fiction, in particular, *Wise Blood*, and indeed O'Connor's entire body of work, plays on the ridiculous and the

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Author's note to second edition of *Wise Blood*, 1962

horrible in order to glean from her stories and her characters some clear, definitive, and usually violently introduced message that, following the established formula of the grotesque, defines its story, charting the action of the plot to its eventual introduction and marking the protagonist with its eternal truth. Like the senselessly transformed protagonist of Kafka's "Metamorphosis," Hazel Motes exists in a world where the truth is distorted, but not absent; in each case, the stories build themselves on the nature and the presence of these distortions of truth as vehicles toward a violently clear vision of the truth that has been there all along. The artist who deals in this kind of created distortion has a responsibility in this case is, according to O'Connor, to "remember that what he is rearranging is nature, and that he has to know it and be able to describe it accurately in order to have the authority to rearrange at all."⁷⁹ Far from performing the sensationalist or journalistic qualities tethered to popular critical responses to O'Connor's sordid stories about life in the South, her prescribed mission is to enrich and widen the depth of her writerly vision, even while the world she articulates and conjures up appears in more grotesque, unbelievable forms. In *Wise Blood*, as well as in "The Metamorphosis," the truth is not distorted, but a bit of it is offered up in a distorted fashion to lead the action of the story toward the truth. The artist's responsibility, in this case, is in formalizing this process and organizing this vision of the truth and of its distortion in order to indicate the mystery that truth itself has always to reveal.

As for Hazel Motes' reception by the popular American reader, his *integrity*, she maintains, "lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind" (*WB*). As a Christian writer, however, concerned with confronting the sins of the modern world inside its own cultural arenas and forms of contact, O'Connor is well aware that her own moral compass alienates her from her

⁷⁹ **236a** Lecture on Southern writers (May 1955). Delivered to Macon's Writer's Club.

audience; for her, Motes' integrity is in his ability *not to* overcome himself, in the reality of a ragged Christ moving in the back of Motes' mind and on the surface of his actions. "Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do?" she asks in closing her introduction to the second edition of *Wise Blood*. She confirms that it does: "For free will does not mean one will conflicting in one man." Freedom, for O'Connor, only comes from a confrontation with one's eternal and material limits, a mystery that can only be revealed by the creative, violent interactions with grace that all humans are guaranteed to meet at some point in their lives, even if just once. The grotesque form, then, allows O'Connor her vehicle for making this mystery known and the distorted visions and stories she tells are the paths by which knowledge of this mystery is made clear. To a reading public for whom belief in the mysteries of Christ's Redemption are, at best, problematic, and at worst markers of an suspicious and un-American practice of Catholicism, O'Connor envisioned herself an author endowed with an ability and a responsibility to confront them with a problem, that for her and for all of us, is one of life and death.

For O'Connor, there can be no healthy or believable literature without the presence of and real belief in the devil. Main characters like Hazel Motes, the Misfit of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Parker from "Parker's Back," Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" and, to name just a few, *The Violent Bear It Away's* Rayber each prove the existence of mortal sin on earth and, in their earnest and dogged attempts at being unbelievers, also find themselves unwitting accomplices in God's great battle against Satan. Her subject in fiction, she claims, "Is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil" (MM 118). As a Catholic, O'Connor works with a thorough belief in the presence of original sin as a universal given and in the significance of man's free will in orchestrating the great theological drama of his own time. While much has been said about O'Connor's critical opposition to the tenets of

existentialism—Hazel Motes, for instance, could just as easily been a character in Sartre’s *Nausea*—her belief in original sin makes her, as an author writing in America, especially queer and untimely. The American belief in personal freedom and the basic set of beliefs imbedded in the American Dream that base individual failure or success on one’s own actions and concerted efforts, is in direct opposition to the determinism and dogma at work in O’Connor’s literature and indeed forming her worldview. A relative of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who hated Transcendentalists and claimed to have written Romances instead of novels, O’Connor considered Emerson and Thoreau more treacherous than even Sartre’s existentialism or Nietzsche’s proclamation that God was dead⁸⁰: “When Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the Lord’s Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken, and the spirit of that step has continued apace. When the physical fact is separated from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable” (*MM* 163).

The distorted reality that populates O’Connor’s fiction is the “America” she refers to here—one where God is merely a metaphor and the presence of the supernatural are ignored and isolated from its original home alongside the natural. Seated silently at a dinner hosted by American author Mary McCarthy, O’Connor is said to have made only one contribution to the evening’s conversation: in response to McCarthy, a “recovering” Catholic, who admitted that the Holy Eucharist was, for the writer, a “useful symbol,” O’Connor raised her head from her plate and proclaimed: “If it’s only a symbol, then I say

⁸⁰ For a book-length discussion of this very topic, see Brian Abel Ragen’s *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus: Innocence, Guilt & Conversion in Flannery O’Connor*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1980

to hell with it.”⁸¹ In materializing the Church’s vision of the universe, O’Connor finds herself constantly imposing limits upon the vision of transcendental freedom that Americans hold so dear; she beat the devil by attacking the profane worship of freedom that was infecting the souls of her fellow countrymen. McCarthy’s refusal of the materiality of Catholic liturgy and dogma resonates in the Misfit’s obsession, in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” with the act of Christ having raised Lazarus from the dead, a deed which, in his own words, “Thrown everything off balance” (CS 132). The grandmother in this story, the last of a family of victims of this Misfit and his henchmen, finds herself, in the moments before she is to meet her final doom, staring up at the Misfit, who has become incensed and overtaken with his protest of Jesus’ off-kiltering miracle (“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead...and He shouldn’t have done it....If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness”); faced with the option of accepting his worldview or denying him, the old woman concedes, “Maybe he didn’t raise the dead” (132). Reaching up in a final moment of humanity to touch the face of the man who she says could have been “one of [her] babies...one of [her own children!”, the old woman is shot in the head, violently meeting her ultimate moment of divine intervention and left half sitting, “in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (133). The violence of the story is an inevitable outcome, inevitable as the grandmother’s own demise and as real as the miracle Jesus committed over poor Lazarus. Looking down on her corpse,

⁸¹ “Remembering Flannery O’Connor,” published in *America* September 8, 1979 Fr. McCown

the Misfit sums up the grandmother in what may have been her own epitaph waiting to be revealed: “She would have been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (133). Her encounter with grace comes, after all, from an encounter with a man dressed as a thief and murder but carrying with him the terrible, divine mercy of God. This violent act is constitutive of O’Connor’s Catholic materialism and her style, which preaches the word of God by making His mighty power real, intense and completely fulfilled.

“The Life You Save May Be Your Own”: Freedom and Original Sin

The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Freedom is itself perhaps the most significant theme found in O’Connor’s work. Only, running against the grain of American culture and sentiment, freedom in an O’Connor story is only ever presented as part of a dialectical struggle between free will and original sin. Her characters, then, are not strictly or totally determined; their individuality, indeed how the reader senses them as real, believable creatures, is based on her ability to present them as being in mortal conflict with their own free will and in spite of the hold that sin has on them. Even though she writes about characters who are not completely free, and who seem to weigh themselves down in their own sin, O’Connor maintains that, in her stories, “It is the sudden free action, the open possibility, which he knows is the only thing capable of illuminating the picture and giving it life” (*MM* 115). While often utterly predictable, or pre-determined, the direction that the plot takes in any given O’Connor story is bound, as we all are, towards an inevitable moment of grace, wherein each character finds themselves, most

often through some violent or terrible act, being offered a way out of their situation. As a Catholic writer, O'Connor holds that "you destroy your freedom by sin" (*MM* 117); for the modern American reader, the equation only holds in the opposite direction: freedom is absolved of its responsibilities to God and transformed into a secular concept. "To ensure our sense of mystery," she writes, "we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit who must be made to name himself, and not simply to name himself as vague evil, but to name himself with this specific personality for every occasion" (*MM* 117). The moral disease facing the modern man is, for O'Connor, in his disavowal of the presence of the devil in world and an ignorance of sin. In this next section, I will explore a selection of O'Connor stories in order to lay out this drama of freedom and sin that she claims tethers her stories to the teachings of the Church and, more importantly, to the greater unfolding of the story of Christ's Redemption. In doing so, I hope not only to point out how her vision of the South holds particular significance in setting and characterizing her stories, but also how her work, as a whole, actively works against the logic of freedom and the lack of belief in original sin that characterizes American civilization. O'Connor's Catholic materialism will remain in view as I present these stories as self-contained and fully elaborated visions of mortal tragedy. "The fiction writer," she maintains, "presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula" (*MM* 153). Through freaks and grotesque figures of many degrees as her protagonists, O'Connor uses her stories to tell her audience who it is and what material forces of good and evil exist in its world.

Writing at a time when the United States felt itself to be strong and fulfilled, shot in the arm with the steroid of military success following the end of World War II, the backdrop upon which O'Connor's stories of dilapidated landscapes and freakishly handicapped heroes

emerged was certainly not well timed. Her own body crippled and feverish with the side effects of *lupus* and the attendant medical treatment she constantly underwent, she was certainly in no place to imagine and lionize mobility or overcoming in her stories. Limits, in her literary world, are not opportunities for individual struggle or pathways toward freedom; for any O'Connor character, limits are hard and cold, and freedom is something only experienced or realized within its confines. The automobile appears in a number of her stories as a representative of the spirit of American mobility and freedom against which her characters find themselves struggling. Hazel Motes, in his first step towards establishing his "Church Without Christ Crucified," buys himself a beat up rat-colored Essex, a moving deathtrap that, he feels, will take him anywhere he wants to go. "No good man," he famously repeats throughout the novel, "needs to be justified." Haze's Essex, it goes without saying, doesn't get him too far, and, like his plans to become an anti-Religious prophet, his car ends up beat up, broken down and pushed into a great big well.

The story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" also tells of one man's complicated and elaborate mission to land himself a car and a path towards his own freedom and independence. The title of the story is, of course, in honor of the same phrase that appeared in AAA maps and on roadside billboards across American interstates in the mid-20th century and its central drama is between an elderly mother, her retarded-mute daughter and a traveling one-armed handyman named Mr. Shiftlet who finds himself living and working on their farm. As the story opens, we find the old woman, Lucynell Crater, and daughter, also Lucynell Crater sitting on their porch, watching Mr. Shiftlet as he slowly emerges from the distance. Asking for a proper introduction, the old lady says to the one-armed man before her: "I don't know nothing about you," to which he replies, "The best I can tell you is, I'm a man" (CS 148). The only thing missing from the Crater farm, which, as

the old woman points out again and again, is bought and paid for into eternity, is a man. In this shaky spirit of common benefit, Mr. Shiftlet agrees to live and work on the farm, finding respite in an old, broken-down car “like the monks of old [who] slept in their coffins” (*CS* 149). As the days pass, and even with his one arm, Shiftlet seems to have brought some genuine improvement to the surroundings of the Craters’ farm, there emerges another situation by which both Shiftlet and the old lady may find favor in each other’s company: he fixes up the dilapidated vehicle and, with the old lady’s money and blessing, also finds himself in possession not only of it but also of her daughter Lucynell’s hand in marriage. Though the bride-to-be is in a state of chronic disrepair, the old lady reminds Mr. Shiftlet that, in his state, he should consider himself lucky to find any woman to marry and any place to call his own; besides, the old lady reckons, where else will he find an innocent woman “That can’t talk...can’t sass you back or use foul language” (*CS* 151). With a full tank of gas and enough money for a honeymoon, Shiftlet and his innocent bride set off down the highway. As they drive, Shiftlet feels the tingle of success, realizing that, in his whole life, all he had ever wanted was an automobile and now he had one. About an hour from Mobile, their eventual honeymoon destination, Mr. Shiftlet stops at a roadside café to get a bite to eat; as he finishes his meal, his new bride falls asleep on the counter, providing him with an opportunity to pay for their meal and leave her behind, explaining to the boy behind the counter that she was a hitchhiker and that he couldn’t carry her any further.

As he drives away, unencumbered and with his real prized possession finally in his own care, Shiftlet grows more and more depressed, occasionally noticing the signs on the side of the road reading “Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own.” Like the dragons who, in St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s vision, sit by the side of the road watching those who pass, these billboards and Shiftlet’s growing sense of rage and discontent begin to

devour him as he travels along his road toward freedom and independence. As the story ends, a dark, turnip-shaped cloud descends in the sky, hovering over Mr. Shiftlet, who finds himself fully aware of “the rottenness of the world [that] was about to engulf him” (156). Raising his one arm, and then letting it fall at his breast, he finally cries out: “Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!” (156). As the cloud continues to move from the distance, descending on Shiftlet, a huge thunder roars and terrible drops of rain beat down on his car; the final image we get of Shiftlet is of him traversing this great storm, stepping hard on the gas pedal “with his stump sticking out the window [racing] the galloping shower into Mobile” (156).

Far from being a villain or a character overtaken entirely by a spirit of meanness, Shiftlet is, like the old lady in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the story’s protagonist. O’Connor asks her readers to identify with Mr. Shiftlet who is, after all, the only character in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” with any amount of depth that may provide any sort of personal comparison or sympathy. Avoiding the trap of sentimentality that the young girl may provide, O’Connor’s very dark dedication to the mind and outcome of Mr. Shiftlet is a result of her belief in original sin, that is, in a universal fall from innocence. “Sentimentality,” she argues, “is a skipping of this process,” which, like pornography, disconnects a figure or character “from its meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake” (*MM* 148). Compassion for the young girl seems to be a compulsion, and, in the case of American sentimentality, a particularly immediate one; O’Connor’s very dry and seemingly wicked dedication to the plight and the ethical mindset of Mr. Shiftlet is constituted from her dedication to proving man’s fall from grace and, in his freakish meanness, offering a vision of the whole, free American man in all of his impending mortal doom. Mr. Shiftlet, a freak, is less able to ignore this violent fate than the modern man,

whom O'Connor forces in direct comparison with this wicked, pitiful soul. Penetrating Shiftlet's soul and investigating his senses, O'Connor finds, at the bottom of this empty shell of a man, depth in his brokenness, the ultimate image of his creator shadowing his half-cocked existence. The road to Damascus, like Shiftlet's road to Mobile, Alabama, travels in the direction of our meeting with God's grace, whose mystery waits and looms in the distance, appearing in lightening-bolt fashion at our eventual point of arrival to announce our eternal freedom from sin.

The Lame Shall Enter First: A Revelation

Look, he is coming with the clouds, and 'every eye will see him, even those who pierced him'; and all peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him.' So shall it be!

Revelation 1:7

The action of O'Connor's plots as well as the movements of her characters towards realizing themselves follow a parallel, unifying path towards revelation. What has always been will, as I have shown, always be in O'Connor's view of the world; individual characters are constantly at battle with forces in the world beyond their grasp and outside their means of realization and, in the end, it is their own personalities, their own forms of being that weigh them down through life and wait for them to meet at their given moment of grace. Figures, like Motes, the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and Mr. Shiftlet each tread this path, battling, in each their own way, against the truth of their own personalities and attempting to overshadow or overcome themselves at their own ultimate peril. Like the protagonist in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man Who Was Used Up," who, although a stately, great and handsome man in his own regard, comes home at night and, removing his wooden leg, his glass eye and his wig is eventually reduced to his own ugly self

before going to sleep, all of O'Connor's characters reveal within and in spite of themselves some form of disfigurement that renders them, at their very core, freaks and grotesques. Surely one of O'Connor's most significant influences, the horrific images found in Poe, resonate in the development of her characters, who all wear their own mortal dissolution on their sleeves and bear the scars and physical characteristics of their soul's deformity on their faces and bodies. Perhaps himself the first American author to take advantage of the grotesque tradition to paint his horrific and violently comic tales, Poe's shadow can be seen casting itself upon the action of O'Connor's stories and in her predilection for the maimed and mangled manifestations of human depravity among us. Still, in ways that Poe himself was not necessarily able to do, O'Connor often features protagonists who, at first glance, do not appear to be freakish in any overt manner, characters whose decadence and sin lie instead in their pieties, their senses of pride and the crippling sin of conceit ensnaring them within their own middling view of the world. A trick that O'Connor plays on her audience, characters like these work to reveal the grotesque nature of the modern reader, who finds themselves confronting their own complicity in the downfall of the characters they are asked to identify themselves with.

Mrs. Ruby Turpin, the main character in "Revelation," perhaps the most hilarious and cruel story in O'Connor's entire oeuvre, is presented to the reader as a woman with a satisfied mind. Married, a land-owner, forty-seven, fat and "not a wrinkle in her face except from laughing too much" (CS 490), Mrs. Turpin sees herself blessed in many ways, both materially and, thanks to the grace of God, with a good disposition at that. In the story, we find Mrs. Turpin and her husband Claud seated in the waiting room of a doctor's office, passing the time until he could have the ulcer in his foot looked at. As soon as she sees to it that Claud is comfortably seated, Mrs. Turpin squeezes her ample frame into a corner of the

packed waiting room, and, “with her little bright black eyes” commences to take in her social surroundings (488). On one side of the room sits, to her great chagrin, a “white trashy” family, consisting of “a blond child in a dirty blue romper who should have been told to move over and make room for the lady” by his mother, “a lank-faced woman [wearing] a yellow sweat shirt and wine-colored slacks, both gritty-looking,...[and with] lips stained with snuff...[and] dirty yellow hair tied behind with a little piece of red paper ribbon” (490). These people, Mrs. Turpin immediately thinks to herself, are “Worse than niggers any day” (490).

Lucky for her, a vacant chair presently becomes available and Ruby finds herself seated across from a nice, “stylish lady,” upon whom both her gaze and her terrible attention settle agreeably. Engaging in the kind of innocuous conversation that “stylish ladies” are apt to engage, Mrs. Turpin and the woman trade banal pleasantries to one another, meant not only to recognize a connection in manners and temperament, but also to ward off the encroaching attention of the trashy boy’s mother, who can’t seem to keep her mouth shut. The whole scene actually suits Mrs. Turpin fine, seeing as she confines most of her thoughts and concerns to the great social order of the world, dreaming every night before bed of all the different races and classes of people that she could have been had Jesus not made her a nice white lady, with some land, a good husband, a little too much weight perhaps, but a nice disposition withal: more than enough for anyone to be grateful. Fancying herself a kind of mystical sociologist, this vision of the world that populates her thoughts each night drives Mrs. Turpin’s consciousness and confirms for her the way that things are and should be:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just

away from—were the white trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged.

Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. (491)

By the time she found her senses affixed to this great conundrum, and before she finally falls asleep, her vision takes a different, more grotesque and modernized turn for the worse, seeing above her all the classes and races “moiling and rolling around in her head...all crammed together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven” (492). Back in the real world, the significant message that this daily vision holds for Mrs. Turpin is that, with God’s grace, she was not born poor white trash, or even a nigger—though, in her own mind, she would rather be a “clean nigger” than the kind of white trash peopling the doctor’s office she and Claud currently found themselves occupying: yes, Mrs. Turpin hums, whimpers and eventually begins to proclaim throughout this story, “There’s a heap of things worse than a nigger” (495).

Pleased with herself, for sure, and certainly in her element, Mrs. Turpin’s contentment is, unfortunately, interrupted by a living force in that waiting room, one that bothers her and falters her actions on a deeper, more existential level than the white trashy family off in her peripheral vision. The daughter of the “stylish lady,” is silent for most of the story, occupying herself with a textbook entitled *Human Development*, and, whenever Mrs. Turpin fills her lungs with enough air to speak, shooting the worst kinds of glares of

contempt in her general direction. Wearing “one of the ugliest face[s]” Mrs. Turpin had ever seen, the girl looks at her “as if she had known and disliked her all her life—all of Mrs. Turpin’s life, it seemed too, not just the girl’s life” (495). The drama between the two is foreshadowed and heightened by the physical surroundings in the waiting room, as “A grotesque revolving shadow” passes behind the office curtain and is “thrown palely on the opposite wall” (494). And then, just as she was in the middle of a sermon thanking Jesus for making Mrs. Turpin the way she was and indeed “for making everything the way it is!”, overtaken, eventually, with “a terrible pang of joy,” the girl’s book flies across the room and strikes Ruby Turpin hard directly over her left eye (499). With narrowed vision and lying prone now on the waiting room floor, Mrs. Turpin finds herself face to face with the ugly girl, who sets her gaze directly into Mrs. Turpin’s and delivers the message: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (500).

The girl carried off on a stretcher for the sanitarium, and a shaken, silent and cold Mrs. Turpin brought back home by her ailing husband Claud, she finds herself, for once and for the first time in her life, without comment, without regard for what had just happened to her. Upset, surely, by what would otherwise have been seen as a random act of violence perpetrated by an insane girl upon herself, Mrs. Turpin, in her stony anger and shock, seems to realize that perhaps the girl had known her in some deep, everlasting way, that she might have been sent by the devil to beckon her back to hell where she came from, that the blow of the book itself could have been the intervention of grace into the life of an empty woman who had tried, and failed, at filling her cup with good deeds and the best of intentions, only to walk the earth empty-handed and loud-mouthed. Silent and almost in a sleepwalk, the story ends with Mrs. Turpin standing outside the gate of her paved “pig parlor,” holding a garden hose directed at the squealing and confused swine below her feet. Above her, though,

the sky, like the shadow in the waiting room before, descended, carrying in it a great vision of all the classes and races of the world marching across the distance, “a vast horde of souls rumbling toward heaven” (508). Dumb and, for once, silenced, Mrs. Turpin’s attention is fixed above her, as she witnesses a procession, trailed by people “she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right” (508). Leaning forward, she glimpses the hordes of souls marching ahead of them, “Whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs” (508). In the presence of these souls climbing toward heaven and under the weight of their voices, shouting hallelujah, we leave Mrs. Turpin by her pig pen, her small black eyes fixed and forever set “unblinkingly on what lay ahead” (508-509).

The Violent Bear It Away: Conclusion

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away.

Matthew 11:12

Flannery O’Connor received her first bit of fame when the London-based outfit Pathé News visited her family farm in Milledgeville Georgia and recorded a short story about Mary Flannery, the little girl who taught her chicken to walk backwards.⁸² The news reel, entitled “Do You Reverse?” features, primarily, a member of Mary Flannery’s growing population of fowl—a hobby and ongoing avocation of hers until she died—moving backwards across the dry, red Georgia clay and, for a brief moment, a glimpse of our girlish author, holding court. The event, she told a reporter from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in

⁸² <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/do-you-reverse-1> Viewed 08/26/14

1959, “was the highpoint of [her] life. Everything since has been anticlimax.”⁸³ While we may permit O’Connor her right to self-effacement, the anecdote is, beyond simply being amusing, quite a significant metaphor of things to come for this developing visionary and revelator. Even before she found her knack for story-telling, O’Connor was known, to friends and relatives in Milledgeville, as possessing a unique and uncanny ability to notice the strange side of life in her hometown. Known in her college years at Georgia State College for Women as the campus cartoonist,⁸⁴ exhibiting a talent not only for her depth of vision, but for a perceptive understanding and use of social satire as a way of being in the world. Alumnae from GSCW, interviewed by Jean Cash for her book *Flannery O’Connor: A Life*, all remark on the fact that they did not know O’Connor was a fiction writer until she began to garner national attention; her work as a cartoonist, one woman remarks, remade the campus and its community into a work of O’Connor’s own creativity and insight: “She was such an amusing cartoonist who patterned her cartoons after an exaggerated physical picture of herself. She could make us all look like her—yet keep her own special identity that she emphasized in her cartoons.”⁸⁵

As a stop along the way to becoming the story-telling artist she was bound to be, this information about O’Connor’s cartooning habits is instructive in our effort to understand the true elements and nature of her style. A formalist of her own design, the vision that O’Connor exhibits in her work is, like the cartoons she drew characterizing life at GSCW, one that reduces the world and its living figures to their most basic, immediately knowable

⁸³ Interview with Betsy Locheridge (Fall 1959), appeared later in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine* as “An Afternoon with Flannery O’Connor,” November 1, 1959: 38-40

⁸⁴ Many of these cartoons drawn for GSCW’s *Spectrum* can be found in the recently published *Flannery O’Connor: The Cartoons* (Fantagraphics, 2012)

⁸⁵ Interview with Sarah Rudolph Miller, Jean Cash Collection, GCSU Library.

elements. If, as her classmate suggests, the world that O'Connor creates looks and sounds more like her than anyone else, we may assume her approach to be one based purely on her own instincts, her own version of the world dictated by the knowledge that her nature inclines her to believe. In the stories-to-come, O'Connor's literary gestures mark themselves with the kind of untimeliness evident in any great stylist: writing in the popular medium of the day, but not in the interests or according to the sentiments of her contemporary public. The exaggerated, grotesque forms of life shown to us in O'Connor's work do indeed appear to be moving in some direction that is not immediately recognizable or justifiable—walking away and moving backwards from the great arrow of time that points towards diminishing difference as a marker of human development. Her style and attendant formalisms affixed to the doctrines of the Church, O'Connor's very odd way of being in the modern American world did not, and still does not, seem of its time and place. Untimely creations, however, do not look around themselves for justification, instead choosing to cast out a strange vision of what *is* in order to chart a course towards an unknown world *will* be. Writers who operate with this kind of mythic, Christian vision, she argues, possess “the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable” (*MM* 26), and, in doing so, speak to their fellow countrymen with a kind of intense, violent fervor that demands disbelief even as it confidently speaks of a future-to-come. By “draw[ing] large and startling figures,” as she does, O'Connor's work fulfills its own task of shouting to the hard-of-hearing and emblazoning the violent image of God's grace onto the eyes of the nearly-blind (34).

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor second, and last, novel, she sets up a great drama of distorted vision and embattled Biblical prophecy that characterizes the strange conflict between the ancient and the modern world which constitutes the entire scope of her moral approach to fiction and, indeed, the real nature of her style. The book begins and

ends with death: the first, old Mason Tarwater and the second, young Bishop. In between these two events is the novel's main character, Francis Marion Tarwater, a young boy who has lived with his great-uncle Mason in Powderhead, the name given to their shack in the woods, sequestered away from the modern world and in constant hiding from the public school system and social services department of the neighboring city. Endowed with a prophetic mission by his great-uncle, himself a prophet of the Lord, young Tarwater has been raised with an understanding that his mission would be to "set out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its savior" (*TVBLA* 5). Far from being a willing accomplice in this great mythical duty, Tarwater comes to hate his great-uncle and also detest the responsibilities given to him, eventually learning to accept his fate while still burning with the knowledge that his only hope would be in his ultimate compliance with his great-uncle's prophecies. Born into the bondage of original sin, and baptized with the burning mercy of God, Tarwater cannot deny his congenital hunger for the bread of life, a diet which he accepts with sullenness, "a slow warm rising resentment that this freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord" (20-21).

Upon the death of his great-uncle, Tarwater imagines that he might escape Powderhead and somehow creep from under the weight of his prophetic responsibilities. At the end of his journey to the city lies his primary and ultimate missionary challenge: the conversion of his cousin Rayber, an agnostic schoolteacher who was once under the thumb of Mason Tarwater and who had escaped to an independent adult life in the city, and, more significantly, the baptism of his mentally-retarded son Bishop. Unaware of their own mortal desire for the sustenance of the Lord, Mason Tarwater affixed all of his energies on this ultimate act of grace: "The Lord Jesus Christ sent me to baptize that boy!...That boy cries out for baptism, precious in the sight of the Lord even an idiot!" (33). The day of Bishop's

baptism would come, according to Mason Tarwater, be it in his lifetime or in someone else's; facing his own freedom and setting fire to Powderhead and his uncle's rotting corpse, still sitting at the breakfast table where he met his own demise, young Tarwater sets off for the city, awkwardly and unhappily accepting his duties, beginning "to feel that he was only just now meeting himself" (35).

Hitchhiking his way to the city and to the doorsteps of his cousin Rayber's house, Tarwater's destiny seems tarnished and stained with the blood of some impending doom, foreshadowing the eventual violence that grace offers him and his family. Upon learning of his uncle's death, Rayber is, primarily, relieved of the "Goddam backwoods imbecile," whose last written message to him had read "THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN" (147). Face-to-face with young Tarwater, the personification of his uncle's threat, Rayber accepts him into his home, even though the act seems to play into a greater drama that he has come to believe only existed in the twisted, sinister mind of his now-dead uncle Marion Tarwater: "His feeling of oppression was cause now by the certain knowledge that there was no way to get rid of him. He would be with them until he had either accomplished what he came for, or until he was cured...The sentence was like a challenge renewed" (147); "The old man *bad* transferred his fixation to the boy, *bad* left him with the notion that he must baptize Bishop or suffer some terrible consequence" (146).

While most of the action that follows this initial meeting appears almost comic in its back-and-forth between the wild-eyed young prophet and his reprobate agnostic cousin, it becomes clear, as the eventual baptism of the ever-silent Bishop begins to loom on the horizon of the story, that the battle between the two is as old as time itself, and as mortally significant as the violence awaiting the earth upon God's eventual confrontation with Satan

and the subsequent scorching of the earth. "Baptism," Rayber cries, "is only an empty act. If there's any way to be born again, it's a way that you accomplish yourself, an understanding about yourself that you reach after a long time, perhaps a long effort. It's nothing you get from above by spilling a little water and a few words" (194). Blaspheming the sacramental symbolism of the Bible and also calling Tarwater on his bluff, he continues: "What you want to do is meaningless, so the easiest solution would be simply to do it" (194). Exhibiting meanness not only toward Tarwater and the ghost of his great-uncle, but also exuding with perfect clarity a pure hatred for his dependent son Bishop, who he understands will always be "at his command like a faithful dog" (197).

As the intensity of his negativity becomes more apparent, Rayber appears to be undone by the company of young Tarwater, who, at the same time grows more and more sure of the baptism-to come. Each of them, in turn, begins to undertake the presence of the signs that seem be writing themselves on the wall. As the days move on, and the book nears its end, Tarwater is overtaken with his prophetic mission, developing "a peculiar sense of waiting, of marking time," sensing at "any moment that the city would blossom in an eternal Powderhead" (200). Waiting, in spite of himself, for the great cataclysm, Rayber finds himself witnessing his own dissolution, "[waiting] for all the world to be turned into a burnt spot between two chimneys" (200). Tarwater's resentment, however, still lurks in the back of his senses, forcing him to understand that the only way to rid himself of it would be to comply with the directives laid out for him by his great-uncle. On a trip with Rayber and Bishop to the lake, Tarwater finally is granted a moment's freedom in which he is capable of going through with the baptism. Sitting before the idiot child, Tarwater concentrates his entire attention on the figure of his prophetic conversion, sensing, in their communion, "some magnetic field of attraction" (199). Underneath a purple sky, pregnant with storm

clouds and “about to explode into darkness,” Tarwater lures the boy to the lake and, with a sudden and momentarily overpowering sense of clarity, baptizes and then drowns him. Staring out over the empty, shivering pond, Tarwater is finally given his spiritual freedom from his duty, fulfilled somehow that Bishop was finally moving off “to meet his appalling destiny”: “He knew with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart that he had baptized the child even as he drowned him, that he was headed for everything the old man had prepared him for, that he moved off now through the black forest toward a violent encounter with his fate” (203).

Flannery O'Connor's concern with the plight of her characters' souls—be it Rayber, Tarwater's, Bishop's or any of the rest of them—is what drives her stories, and is indeed motivated by her ability to employ violence as a way of revealing the shocking and awesome mysteries of grace. “If hats occasionally take on meaning in my fiction,” she has explained, “it is only as they become part of the character's personality and become active in this larger drama with which I am concerned.”⁸⁶ Understanding fiction to be an incarnational art, O'Connor makes it her duty as a story-teller to make the different parts of this spiritual drama plain, seeable and concrete. The most rudimentary of the different forms of artistic expression, fiction, for O'Connor, “begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses” (*MM* 42). In the construction of her characters, it is the combined effect of their visible forms of human conflict and the invisible, but impending actions of grace characterizing the distant parts of their own vision that O'Connor produces a sense of God's mystery. This mission, she argues, is not of her own choosing, but part of the responsibility of the Christian artist indebted to an abiding concern with what is eternal and absolute: “The

⁸⁶ 249a Alternate version of her lecture on the grotesque in Southern literature—delivered at Troy State College on April 24, 1963

writer can choose what he writes about but he cannot choose what he is able to make live, and so far as he is concerned, a living deformed character is acceptable and a dead whole one is not” (MM 27). Her careful orchestration of the events in *The Violent Bear It Away* are true to this assignment, presenting before us the minds and the manners of different characters who individually battle against the wages of the devil, a fight that attempts at every level and down to every sensual aspect of being to make a living man a corpse of himself, still walking and talking, but disconnected from those aspects of nature which offer him eternal life and fulfillment. Rayber’s sense of his own consciousness, and indeed his overweening pride and agnostic self-confidence only indicate the ways in which he has become undone by his own sense of himself, by his professed dedication to a life lived logically but cut-off from the possibility of one also lived truly and spiritually. It is only in young Tarwater’s dementia, and as a result of the idiot Bishop’s violent sacrifice to God, that the cold logic of God’s prophecy is able to make itself known in the text. The mercy of the Lord, as Marion Tarwater promises at the beginning of the text, burns; indeed, when the violence of God meets with the souls of errant, reprobate human beings, his “Judgment may rack your bones” (10). Committed to the artistic representation of grace, O’Connor understands here, as she does in all of her work, that it cannot be made real or appear literally if it is cut off from its own divine nature. Violence, and the grotesque forms by which it travels and eclipses her stories, is the way the truth is able to emerge, racking the bones and scorching the eyes of those to whom its grace and mercy were once denied.

Chapter Three

The Arrow of Time: Quentin Crisp and the Cultivation of Difference

The Missionary of Style: An Introduction

There is no way back to Eden; we have eaten the bitter apple of equality to the very core, dragging the gods down to our own mean level. From now on, our lives will consist of a relentless, exhausting pursuit of pleasure instead of a quest for the Holy Grail of Happiness.

Quentin Crisp

While all of the characters in this dissertation are stylists, only Quentin Crisp spent his time explicitly broadcasting the need for style in our lives. As a way of being oneself, but on purpose, style is, as he has said, “in its broadest sense, consciousness.” More than that, as a way of being and becoming in time, style is an ontology of difference, an ethics and a practice dedicated to visions of a future self not yet seen, but instinctively known. Style, as a form of consciousness, is understandable in a historical and critical way; that is, half of the work of style is producing, as Crisp has said, “a consistent idiom arising spontaneously from the personality but deliberately maintained.” Style is, in other words, a very modern way of knowing and properly identifying oneself. In doing so, however, stylists must take great efforts at achieving and reproducing singularity and difference against the arrow of modern time, which diminishes difference by promoting freedom, equality and, ultimately, sameness. So, as much as it produces consciousness, style also governs and enforces an untimely quality in those who choose to follow its directives. While modern society leans further and further towards a future without difference, stylists stand stubbornly dedicated to their own

untimely and persistent visions of themselves. The means and mechanisms by which style is acquired and maintained must, as each of the figures of this dissertation show, be self-enforced and self-isolating. Far from being a more natural way of existing in the modern world, style is actually a process of constructing an artificial sense of time and of the future against logic and against the proper order of things. Style is, in Crisp's terms, "never natural; its nature is that it must be acquired" (*How to Have a Lifestyle* 31). As such, while style must always be self-taught, the need for it must be communicated and instructed from those in the know. While there are no leaders of style, there have been missionaries of style. In this chapter, I will present the life and work of Quentin Crisp in order to outline most explicitly the practices of style. As an ontology of difference, style is the process by which one may produce time out of mind.

Laws of logic, like rules of fashion or etiquette, guide and, I will admit, comfort most of the tenants of the world. Stylists, on the other hand, insist on pointing themselves, as Crisp has said, in the opposite direction. Stupidly, yet still fiercely in this lonely position, the stylist has no choice but to dedicate their every breath, gesture, syllable, word, movement, thought to the cause of self-promotion. Such a stance can only be maintained in a state of constant, tedious refusal of the laws and logic of the trends and truths that cover the rest of the universe in its threadbare protection.

In order to understand the philosophical implications of Crisp's practice of style, I will turn to concepts of becoming and Nietzschean visions of a man of the future, of the untimely practices of pure individualism that transform consciousness and being into an art of becoming. To be sure, the goal of Crisp's style—to be come oneself, but on purpose—is closely aligned to the question Nietzsche poses in his autobiographical work *Ecce Homo*, "How To Become What One Is." At the core of all these philosophies is a desire to

cultivate self-knowledge in the face of ever-broadening bodies of psychological, social and political discourse. To practice style is to dedicate one's ways of living to the preservation of difference in a world that has lost its sense of value for forms of life that are distinct and that defy the need for representation. A tonic to cure the equalizing effects of the arrow of modern time, the kind of untimely becoming at work here is, in Nietzschean terms, a will to power and a vision of living as a constant process of becoming; "Such, men" Nietzsche says, "live in their own solar system. That is where one must look for them."⁸⁷ In order to locate these isolated acts of becoming, it is important to develop an understanding of the worldviews cultivated by untimely individuals; style, in this case, is a way of transforming being into an art of becoming, a will to power over the present expressed in the stylist's unique interpretation of the world and of themselves: "The will to power *interprets*...it defines limits, determines degrees, variations of power"; "[i]n fact, interpretation is itself a means of becoming master of something."⁸⁸ The world that the stylist creates is itself a work of art that must understand and constantly give birth to itself. The "Holy Grail of Happiness" of which Crisp speaks is the untimely vision of his own work of art: a vision of himself created and repeated as a will to power over the modern world waiting to meet him with angry, perplexed and sideways glances. Happiness is, for Crisp, an ethics of becoming. The strength of Crisp's style lies in his ability to understand himself as totally abject and absolutely foreign. It is his strangeness and his very odd way of going about describing and performing himself that makes Crisp an untimely figure worth exalting.

In this chapter, I will look present Crisp's life and work in three ways. First, examining his autobiography, I will show the beginnings of Crisp's process of developing

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Untruth*. Translated and Edited by Taylor Carman
Harper Perennial. 2010: 8

⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufman. Vintage Books. 2011: 411

and broadcasting his style. Especially focusing on the ways in which Crisp deployed his homosexuality and effeminacy as ways of maintaining difference against forms of identity defined as in need of repair and representation, my presentation of *The Naked Civil Servant* will show his initial knack for understanding the value of difference in itself, tracing the moments of development in his story where he chooses paths towards extreme self-knowledge and pure self-expression.

An untimely man if there ever was one, Crisp's memoir shows him resisting the urge to find himself in other people, insisting instead on an intuitive sense of himself that, while isolating, remains true to his instinctual sense of himself as totally unique and absolutely abject. Then, turning to his book *How to Have a Lifestyle*, I will bring forth the specific routes through which he imagines style must be cultivated and practiced. Engaging Deleuze on the philosophy of difference and Nietzsche's concepts of overcoming and the ethics of untimeliness, my second section will outline the need for style in nurturing and reproducing difference against the arrow of time. Following Crisp into his twilight years, the final section of this essay will look to Crisp at his most exalted state: expatriated, living in America, and finally reaping the rewards given to him by his dauntless campaign to develop his style and enter into what he refers to as "the profession of being," or, for my purposes, a state where being is transfigured into becoming. In a broader dissertation on the subject and practices of style, this last portion of my discussion will provide an explicit example of how style might be most profoundly and successfully achieved.

Nearly every sense in which Quentin Crisp felt—and, indeed, characterized—his time on earth can be understood as being the product of a constant elaboration of difference. His autobiography, *The Naked Civil Servant*, begins with a description of his birth not as the beginning of some long evolutionary trail towards self-understanding, but the first

of many successive moments in which he would find himself alone and cast out from the world: “From the dawn of my history I was so disfigured by the characteristics of a certain kind of homosexual person that, when I grew up, I realized that I could not ignore my predicament” (1). Understanding that his homosexuality—nay, Crisp’s difference—marked his body, gestures, personality and social outlook so thoroughly, he adopted, after flopping out of his mother’s womb, what he flippantly referred to as an existentialist stance: “I exercised the last vestiges of my free will by swimming with the tide—but faster...I became not merely a self-confessed homosexual but a self-evident one” (1). So, what Crisp makes clear here is that, though *The Naked Civil Servant* was, when it was finally released to the English reading public in 1968, billed as a story of one of England’s last living eccentrics and one of the first first-person narratives of being a homosexual in the twentieth century, the arc of his story is not actually governed by the logic of social identity, but rather by his own sense of his utter unique-ness, a story told through his own experiences of isolation.

The Naked Civil Servant is remarkable not simply for being an autobiography by and about a remarkable man, but for being an autobiography of Quentin Crisp’s style. This book, like the others that Crisp wrote, is impressive in its ability to narrate a life lived at odds with the governing pressures of change and evolution and in honor of style and pure difference; *The Naked Civil Servant* is a memoir about someone whose sense of himself in time is so thoroughly out of place and out of step that it causes the plot, and indeed his own sense of his life story, to go nowhere and to change almost not at all: “As soon as I put my uniform on, the rest of my life solidified around me like a plaster cast...So black was the way ahead that my progress consisted of long periods of inert despondency punctuated by spasmodic lurches toward any small chink of light that I saw” (2). Crisp’s life story is not subordinated to any narrative, and certainly not to his homosexuality. *The Naked Civil Servant*

carries with it both a frankness and openness regarding sexuality and the lives of homosexuals living in London in the first half of the twentieth century that makes it a very modern work; distinct, however, from other narratives of homosexual autobiography from that period, *The Naked Civil Servant* also elaborates a grotesque and odd story of Crisp's own sense of his sexual persona that seems alien to the gay liberationist story of twentieth century homosexuality upon which Crisp's example in *The Naked Civil Servant* casts a shadow. In this first section, I shall present Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* as an autobiography of style—that is, a book dedicated to the elaboration of individual difference and not governed by the narrative structures of homosexual identity or modern coming-of-age stories/coming-out narratives.

In modernity difference has been subordinated to the logic of identity, which subordinates itself to ideas of equality and resemblance. Identity is only a conceptual difference whereas style is a concept of difference itself. Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* is useful for the ways it insists on and elaborates difference against the grain of identity and equality that so thoroughly pull on and anchor the world against which Crisp lived his life and maintained his sense of style. In terms of developing an understanding of himself as sexually abject, Crisp resists change or epistemological repair; *The Naked Civil Servant*, then, works against the grain of modern homosexual autobiography that hinges upon the initial detection and confession of sexual difference, followed by the inevitable forms by which the individual finds ways to ameliorate, or at least understand, his or her sense of humiliation and social isolation. In light of this distinction of identity from style, my discussion of the book will look instead at the strength of his convictions to produce difference, deploying style as a way of fashioning a form of self-knowledge that is, at once, unchanging in its form and unending in its development. The trappings of the gay stock narrative for which

personal revelation and “coming-out” as confession and a move to pride in self and community will fall by the wayside as I move further into Crisp’s work. According to the logic of representation inherent in that narrative, categorical differences address and attempt to ameliorate social opposition. In the philosophy of difference, however, opposition exists before and behind difference and is the irreducible, constitutive force driving any real concept of difference at all.⁸⁹ Accepting Deleuze’s proposition that “[t]he greatest difference is always an opposition,”⁹⁰ I will present Crisp’s work as truly transgressive—not of or against modernity, but against the grain of the forms of representation that produce modernity itself.

As he calls them, the “crippling disadvantages” that make up Quentin Crisp’s story also make up his style, allowing him to “move with a little more of that freedom which T.S. Eliot says is a different kind of pain from prison” (2). *The Naked Civil Servant*, in other words, frees itself from the narrative restrictions of a teleological coming-of-age story of a modern homosexual by refusing any recognition or repair. The book begins by characterizing Crisp’s birth as a mistake on a cosmological scale—“In the year 1908 one of the largest meteorites the world has ever known was hurled at the earth. It missed its mark. It hit Siberia. I was born in Sutton, on Surrey” (2). It ends in a maudlin kind of loneliness and despair—“I stumble toward my grave confused and hurt and hungry...” (212). The same stroke of stubborn self-recognition that led Crisp to claim that he never made any choices and therefore never knew regret also support and inform his own caricature of

⁸⁹ See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (51): “It is not difference which presupposes opposition but opposition which presupposes difference, and far from resolving difference by tracing it back to a foundation, opposition betrays and distorts it. Our claim is not only that difference in itself is not ‘already’ contradiction, but that it cannot be reduced or traced back to contradiction, since the latter is not more but less profound than difference.”

⁹⁰ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 30

himself as a hopeless case. Released in 1968, sixty years into Crisp's tenure on earth and at the dawn of the sexual revolution and gay rights movements in England and America. *The Naked Civil Servant* would be more expediently understood as a timely book about an elder of the homosexual community at the dawn of its political involvement and cultural recognition; unfortunately, these accolades would only be relevant had *The Naked Civil Servant* been a different book written by entirely different man. The image of a reprobate effeminate man was, on the one hand, hard for swarms of homosexuals to grapple with; the idea that his story lacked any of the heroism or political rancor that would make it translate as a product, if not a proper member of, the gay rights struggle. The New York-based publication *Gay News* joined scores of other critics from this world in complaining of the book's inaccessibility and its political vacuousness, saying that it would have been better for "the Cause" had *The Naked Civil Servant* been published posthumously: "a literary way," Crisp later quipped, "of saying 'drop dead!'" (*How to Become a Virgin* 84). Looking back, the conflict here can be understood historically. Crisp predicted the resistance waiting for him in *The Naked Civil Servant*, writing that he understood himself to be "the survivor they hoped they would not find—something too broken to be restored to active life but not quite ready for decent burial" (210). Behind Crisp's unpopularity with the gay press in this instance—among many, many more future instances—is the strength of his untimeliness and the clarity of his vision of difference in a world-to-come. Accepting his various failures without transforming them into an injured identity, Crisp turned style into his own will to power: "These crippling disadvantages gave my life an interest that it would otherwise never had...In one respect it was a blessing. In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis. In my case this took a very

long time” (NCS 2). As a stylist and, as he often put it a *professional* failure, Crisp developed a very stoic, untimely way of living his life in an active state of living *in spite of* the future and the past.

Before returning to the moment of *The Naked Civil Servant*’s 1968 publication and the beginning of Crisp’s life as an inconvenient and notorious public figure, it will be important to paint this untimely vision of the modern outcast and point to the ways that Crisp’s presentation of his life story tells of the survival and the significance of his difference and of his *style*: as the one in the presence of the many.

One important feature of *The Naked Civil Servant* is its ambivalence towards either placing or accepting responsibility for Crisp’s social status resulting from his homosexuality. While many reviewers of the book complained that it is easy to view the text as extreme in its ostensible self-pity and campy in its performances of desolation, *The Naked Civil Servant* is actually the story of a man who, in spite of the odds, learned to live without anxieties over what the future would bring or regrets over what the past had wrought. This is done, Crisp explains early in the text, by continually recognizing natural limitations and accepting what was plain to see: “In major issues I never had any choice and therefore the word regret had in my life no application. As the years went by, it did not grow lighter but I became accustomed to the dark” (1-2). So, while the modern autobiography—and certainly the modern homosexual autobiography—is so often marked by a subject’s struggles against society or against societal isolation and his or her subsequent attempts at addressing or overcoming those boundaries or obstacles, *The Naked Civil Servant* announces right out that Crisp, on the one hand, takes no credit for the outward events impacting his life and, on the other, that, while he understands himself as a victim of fate, he does not protest his station. Furthermore, if modern autobiography depends, in most cases, on telling a subject’s life

story through the choices they make that somehow ameliorate their situation (vis-à-vis culture, society, political representation, emotional development, etc.), then *The Naked Civil Servant* certainly does present a dilemma. In claiming that he never had any choices in life, and professing, as a result, not to know the meaning of regret, one could accuse Quentin Crisp not only of understanding himself to be a victim, but also of indulging in that fact.

In announcing from the first page of *The Naked Civil Servant* that he was born, and remains, a person *disfigured* by a certain kind of homosexuality that he could neither deny nor resolve in any manner, Crisp sets his autobiography apart from more familiar documents of sexual ambiguity and exception that follow a teleological directive. Crisp avoids the familiar trappings of homosexual memoir, which, traditionally, attempt to ameliorate the position of sexual outsiders with the narrative impositions of sexual identity and community. In this instance, the arc of the life-story of the sexual outsider begins in darkness and confusion and moves cautiously toward the warm light of self-recognition and acceptance provided by the stock narrative of modern homosexuality or queerness, always waiting in the shadows to welcome its wayward victims of abnormality into its ever-growing big tent of sexuality.

A Hopeless Case: The Beginnings of Crisp's Style

Power was what I craved most ravenously...A lifetime of being constantly at the mercy of others left me, even though mercy was undoubtedly shown, crushed and seething with a lust for tyranny.

Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*

“Fashion,” Crisp reminds us, “is *instead* of style.”⁹¹ The apparatuses of the gay stock narrative exist purely in order to *fashion* the disfigured and disparate feelings and gestures presented by sexual perversion into a cohesive identity. In the same way that laws of fashion approach people in order to ascertain and enforce the ways in which they might succeed or fail at being in style, the stock narrative swoops in to save the sexual deviant from its isolation. In order to build up its community of outsiders, it absorbs individual experiences in order to justify its own truth. Here, identity replaces life. Crisp’s mandate, on the other hand, has no teleological *goal* to speak of other than perhaps to survive. Further, as opposed to identity, Crisp turns his failures into a style; his worldview then itself becomes an art form and his survival an ongoing production of difference. Crisp cultivates his various disfigurements into defense mechanisms that he brings with him in his various dealings with the outside world. Crisp’s individual experience defines success on his terms, employing failure not as an injury but as a source of capacity and creativity. As an outsider, Crisp once explained in an interview, he saw himself as lucky, not merely because his isolation brought with it a sense of individuality and self-knowledge, but also because he was forced to take advantage of the animosity existing between him and the rest of the world, transforming that distance into “one, long, tentative flirtation with the world.”⁹²

So, while identity may serve to introduce and even, through various forms of representation, protect the homosexual person in the world, style stands outside of real life and makes what it will of the space between the one and the many. The self-righteous exploration of sexual identity happens at the expense of individual expression, while the freedom that it promises distances itself from the untimely rewards promised by the practice

⁹¹ *The Wit and Wisdom of Quentin Crisp*, 29

⁹² “Interview with Jessica Shuman” (1978), *Pacifica Radio*.
<http://crisperanto.org/interviews/schuman.html>

of style. For Crisp, true happiness doesn't come from a lifelong campaign trying to prove to yourself and to the world that you really matter, but from accepting the fact that you really don't. The sad thing about identity is that it not only obscures the sexual failure's knowledge of this simple fact, but it also, in interpreting it, kills the possibility of any form of expression that might have otherwise survived. It is, like fashion, the opposite of style as becoming.

There are, in fact, key moments in *The Naked Civil Servant* that confirm some of the metaphors set in place by the gay stock narrative: childhood isolation and gender inversion (including a compulsory scene where Crisp masquerades in his mother's clothes); adolescent sexual becomings that bring him to the feet of other homosexuals in their sub cultural communities; and a mature feeling of self-acceptance that arrives sometime in mid-life. However, there is no "coming-out" moment for Crisp, and therefore no positive sentiment attendant to his sexual desires and aberrant personality. Instead of giving an account of Crisp's discovering his identity and becoming a full-fledged member of a gay community, *The Naked Civil Servant* dismisses his sexuality as immediately self-evident right, and instead tells the story of how he spent nearly sixty years attempting to, and succeeding at, becoming more like *himself* everyday. Style is a mode of *being and becoming* while identity employs the gay person in the tragic professions of *doing* and *struggling*. There is no celebration waiting for the reader at the end of Crisp's autobiography. Once he reaches this point, he admits defeat, but he has also survived those things that define the life of the gay person: gender, sex and political, historical contingent oppositional struggle itself.

Still, the world that greets Quentin Crisp seems cold and dark, and his autobiography goes to great lengths to describe his existence as ontologically disturbed, always constituting himself as the one among the many, to use his pun, a "resident alien." As a child, he notes, he began to understand that, "To most children...there is a difference in degree between

their imaginary and their real lives—the one being more fluid, freer, and more beautiful than the other” (10). With this understanding, it becomes immediately clear that Crisp’s own sense of his emotional and social constitution is marked and crippled, not by the scars of homosexuality or effeminacy so much as his inability to experience or see himself as a human being: “To me fantasy and reality were not merely different; they were opposed. In the one I was a woman, exotic, disdainful; in the other I was a boy. The chasm between the two states of being never narrowed” (10). So, in this state of total, constitutive brokenness Crisp begins his own narrative of ambiguity, one that moves towards more and more difference. As a project of style, this description of difference is of a pure difference; homosexuality is, for Crisp an opportunity for developing his own *concept* of difference, as opposed to an identity-based narrative of queerness, which would only offer a story of social, contingent difference. By not submitting his difference to the restrictions and benefits provided by a teleological narrative of sexual identity, Crisp writes his book in such a way that it may be imbued with the agency and vitality required of a work of difference in and of itself. His successive attempts at building and working out his own personal identity, then, are merely adjuncts for his style. His seemingly maudlin acceptance of the fact of his failed sexual state is only a product of his charismatic and untimely concept of his homosexuality as a state of pure difference and absolute social isolation.

Highlights of a social consciousness-to-come emerge in Crisp’s depiction of his life at boarding school. Presenting a pitiable figure of himself as a schoolboy, we envision a young Denis Pratt (Crisp’s name before he “dyed” it) with pale skin, crooked teeth, an unfortunate Cockney accent undercutting his aspirations toward English upper-middleclassness and, overall, an aptitude for unpopularity: “Finding myself the constant object of amused attention was hateful to me, yet I don’t remember feeling the slightest

embarrassment at arriving from time to time at school with my upper half awash with tears and my lower half dripping with excrement” (11). In the transition from identifying himself as the problematic youngest child in his family to a schoolboy on his own, and at the mercy of the crowd, Crisp mitigates his efforts at sustaining himself. Where at home he wrought havoc over his family in an effort to aggrandize the attention of his parents—and especially of his mother—in describing these dauntless efforts, it becomes clear that Crisp’s performances of victimhood carried beneath them an endless desire for power over others:

As soon as I was a few days old I caught pneumonia. I was literally as well as metaphorically wrapped in cotton wool. From this ambience I still keenly feel my exile. When I was well again, I saw that my mother intended to reapportion her love and divide it equally among her four children. I flew into an ungovernable rage from which I have never fully recovered. A fair share of anything is starvation diet to an egomaniac (3).

So, in pitching fits—usually resulting in urinating or defecating on himself and refusing any efforts made by his parents or their servants at disciplining him—Crisp displays a knack for totalizing his exile and transforming it into what he would later define as a “lifestyle.”

Realizing that family dynamics build themselves upon a parent’s coeval desire to shield its child from the world and, in adolescence, begin threatening them with it, Crisp comes to grips with the fact that, upon entering school, his tactics would have to change. Crisp’s father is useful, in part, for providing him with the first lessons in what would come for him in adolescent and adult life, stating that, “My father did not like me. My presence was insistently physical” (10), Crisp’s explanation shows how the dynamic existing between his father and himself would mirror the awkward and often violent relations to come between him and men of all kinds. His sense of his “physical” ontological difference emerges here in

a decision to halt his adolescence; rather than become a fully-functioning adult, Crisp accedes to total deformity in order to confine himself to an underdeveloped, maladjusted category of human experience—against the conditioning of both his father and his mother.

Soaked with tears, and filthy with excrement, Crisp is warned by his mother on the way to his first day at boarding school that he would no longer be able to go on in this manner, and he never did: “I was half-starved, half-frozen, and humiliated in a number of ways, but I never felt the faintest desire to cry. Fear and hatred do not seem to find expression in tears” (11). The growing pains one may expect of a young homosexual facing social isolation and acceptance are, in this way, absent for Crisp as he goes through the motions of being and becoming a schoolboy among schoolboys. Rather than lament his fate or feign nostalgia over the protection offered by his mother, Crisp seems to accept the weight of his father’s disgust with him as a way to reposition himself as a young man who would have to learn how to accept and outlive the hatred and violence directed at him from men, or, in greater respects, from the entire outer world. Once at school, he notes, “I learned only one thing that I was ever able to use in adult life. I discovered that my great gift was unpopularity” (16); recalibrating his manner of approaching his isolated station, and shifting his concentration from throwing fits and playing the victim to lying low and laying blame when appropriate, Crisp seems to internalize and even to learn the codes of being a normal human being, even as he is developing a private sense of himself that is becoming more and more bizarre. “At first,” he says of his unpopularity, “I would have done anything to shed it. I tried feverishly to develop protective coloring. Then these endeavors became fitful, alternating with essays in deliberate provocation” (16). Cautionary tales are, for Crisp, only opportunities for overcoming total vulnerability to others and the instructions given to him about being an outcast serve as resources not for resentment or retreat, but for the

development of an understanding of his future in his immediate present: “Finally I mastered the medium. It became an armor—almost a weapon. I had passed that barrier...I had learned consciously to achieve an effect that originally I had produced by accident. I must have been very unpopular indeed” (16). In this first act of style, Crisp makes himself at home inside his position outside reality and beyond reproach; overcoming his unfortunate attempts at protesting the fact that his parents intended to apportion their love for their children equally and thereby feeling victimized and betrayed, Crisp faces the struggles required of him in the future stoically. Coopting his future loneliness and abjection into his habits of being, Crisp articulates the ways in which style will offer him not only a way of, but also a reason for going on and moving forward. His ontological approach to sexual disfigurement absolved him from the responsibility of fixing himself—in this sense—so that his happiness was a process of living in the total present, without any anxiety or cause to blame:

So you don’t have to worry. Don’t keep looking into the sky to see what is happening. Embrace the future. All you have to do about the future is what you did about the past. Rely on your curiosity and your courage, and ride through the night.⁹³

Here, Crisp displays his capacity to transfigure his own experiences into a cause; in this case, it is one that cultivates an untimely audience of its own and sets out immediately to negate the prescriptions of being with a radical notion as style as becoming.

⁹³ Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*. 132

Being and Becoming Quentin Crisp: Cultivating the Art of Untimely Homosexuality

There are times when old age produces not eternal youth but a sovereign freedom, a pure necessity in which one enjoys a moment of grace between life and death, and in which all the parts of the machine come together to send into the future a feature that cuts across all ages.

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

While sexuality and homosexuality are of central interest to Crisp, and indeed drive much of the story he tells about his life up to the point of the 1968 publication of *The Naked Civil Servant*, they are presented as concepts as opposed to tropes, narrative structures or conceptual forms of difference. In exactly the same way that Crisp describes having turned his flair for unpopularity into a way of being in the world (as opposed to a tragic fact of life to be avoided or, under duress, weathered), the manner in which his relations to his own homosexuality never undo his project of laying out and projecting his personal style. That is, as an identity or a governing metaphor, sexuality is a force that exists outside, and sometimes in spite of, an individual's sense of agency and development. For Crisp, abject as it may make him, homosexuality is an irreducible part of what makes him the way he is; sexual difference is, in this instance, not something he has to overcome, but a source of self-knowledge that sets him on his way to being and becoming himself as a process of overcoming in and of itself. Self investigation and presentation, then, ought to be understood in Crisp's example as a habit to be cultivated; whatever failures and forms of social opprobrium and humiliation he keenly feels, Crisp accepts and transforms into ways of knowing himself, cultivating what would otherwise be very painful forms of being into an art form. Once again, Crisp's dedication to style as a project of developing pure individuality and difference places him squarely against the arrow of time, which, for homosexuals caught

up in the meaning-making machines of identity and representation, signals the inevitable dwindling of social difference. Rather than mask or attempt to repair the worst aspects of his personality as an effeminate homosexual, Crisp accepted the totality of his sexual failures and instead chose to become a stereotype of himself, transfiguring effeminacy into a way of being. The opposite of a “real” person, a homosexual person, for Crisp, represented an imitation of a human being. In flaunting the most distasteful aspects of what it meant to be a male homosexual, Crisp used his effeminate appearance to confirm to the world that he was “a sad person’s idea of a gay person.” In doing so, he gained even the hatred of other homosexuals, thereby accepting even the most terrible aspect of their own self consciousness, confirming too that he did not even think of himself as a real human being. In other words, while effeminacy was something that other homosexuals felt marked them and that they should attempt to ameliorate or hide in some way, Crisp saw his own set of feminine gestures and behavior patterns as clues to his future self. Choosing to flaunt and exaggerate those parts of his personality that would certainly one day cause him the most anguish and isolation, Crisp transformed his social injury into a campaign and a cause rather than a problem to be fixed.

Crisp’s concept of sexuality appears out of time and place, even self-diminishing and contradictory with each step that it takes. As a rhetorical strategy, however, Crisp presents himself as a “hopeless case,” offering up his untarnished and unfixable state of sexual ambiguity as stubborn and inconvenient fact of his existence, eschewing the ameliorating effects of epistemological representation in order to perhaps be able to express some sort of philosophical truth about sexual difference out of his ontologically broken state. Crisp is significant not for being a figure of twentieth century homosexuality, but for being a philosopher of sexual difference, a stylist concerned with the cultivation of concepts, which,

as Nietzsche has described, are the object of concern for philosophers of the future who, “[m]ust no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify and polish them, but first *make* and *create* them, present them and make them convincing.”⁹⁴ The task of this next section will be to present Crisp’s ruminations on sexuality and his cultivation of himself as a homosexual person in order to characterize his transformation of sexuality into a project of sexual difference. Style, in this instance, becomes the process by which Crisp manipulates his experience of being in time into an endless elaboration of difference, against the arrow of time and as a way of merging his present with his future.

A defining feature of modernity is the development of human consciousness through the production of identity. Identity has planted itself firmly in the ground of the modern world by existing as the vehicle through which representation and consciousness come to be understood and defined. Modern thought, on the other hand, is understood to be the product of the failures of representation. The modern world, according to Deleuze, is made up of simulacra; philosophical thought, then, has become responsible for accepting this fact and forming concepts that speak to difference in and of itself, “independently of the forms of representation which reduce it to the same.”⁹⁵ The kinds of work needed to perform this task of proving the existence of difference against the grain of representation and identity must be, first and foremost, untimely in their manners, not, as Deleuze argues, concerned with providing “a philosophy of history, nor of the eternal, but untimely, always and only untimely—that is to say, ‘acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of time to come.’”⁹⁶ Becoming, then, always carries with it an untimely quality: a recognition of the limitations of historical and philosophical inquiries

⁹⁴ Quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 5

⁹⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*: xix

⁹⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*: xxi

into the nature of human beings as a kind of *mirage* based on the “false illusions” garnered from the “projection backward of the possible.”⁹⁷ Deleuze offers a way of thinking of and writing which traditional modes of scholarship cannot and will not imagine in their scripted searches to explain the truth. Difference is, in intuitive terms, a paradoxical and lively force of nature that can only be spoken, that causes language itself to erupt as a force of expression and a composition of chaos. Style is the art of transfiguring this chaos into a way of living, an untimely becoming that follows intuition and requires an isolated experience of being in time.

Standing on the edge of his adulthood, and leaving the discomforting experiences of his adolescent past, Crisp begins his life as a homosexual in just this way. Filled with misgivings about the real world, yet totally sutured to the knowledge of himself, he decides, at the age of eighteen, that although he was “beginning to feel really uneasy about the future,” he did understand completely that “sexually I was quite unlike anyone else in the world” (18). Forgoing the normal trappings of human sexuality—relationships, sex, reproduction, companionship, community, etc.—Crisp walks into his future armed with the strength and purity of his own self-knowledge and his own untimely gamble against the arrow of time. The whole world lay before him, as he would say, “like a trapdoor” (36). In avoidance of the horrors of eternal life through struggle, Crisp defiantly remained himself. Thoroughly abject and pleasantly unsuccessful, Crisp never evolved; *he became*. Rather than succumbing to disaster, he made use of it; he never attempted to overcome himself, but rather committed himself to finding ways to become more and more *like himself*. In this sense, then, he has instructed us that in order to fail successfully we must only fail more and more excessively. To take up style as a way of being, the stylist must submit to constructing

⁹⁷ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*. New York: Zone Books. 1990: 20

a world that does not, and cannot yet, exist. Deterritorializing its relationship to the real world, the work of the stylist, as Crisp has said, faces the arrow of time and “stands facing the other way,” behind the march of time and beneath the floorboard of history.

Leaving his suburban home for the streets of London, Crisp immediately finds himself in the company of boys that he never before would have guessed existed and that seemed not quite like him, but certainly looked much like him. Crisp found temporary solace among the queer boys that loitered and worked the streets of Soho, London’s hooligan district. While he eventually relearned his aptitude for unpopularity even with homosexuals, Crisp assumed, at first, that he might have finally found a group of people with whom he could identify and sympathize. Shifting homosexuality “from being a burden to being a cause,” Crisp does find solace in the shared sense of torment felt by him and other boys living and working the streets: “My outlook was so limited that I assumed that all deviates were openly despised and rejected. Their grief and their fears drew my melancholy nature strongly. At first I only wanted to wallow in their misery, but, as time went by, I longed to reach its very essence. Finally I desired to represent it” (27). Understanding that, at that time, the common perception of male homosexuality was predicated on the assumption that queer men wanted desperately to be women, Crisp took on the project of presenting and parading effeminacy unto the English public: “I went about the routine of daily living looking undeniably like a homosexual person...Without knowing it, I was acquiring that haughty bearing which is characteristic of so many eccentrics...[e]ven people who quite liked me said that I felt superior to the rest of the world” (27-29). In the process of relating with and taking on the burdens of other boys like him in Soho, Crisp shows the first sign of what is to come for him: a flair for exhibitionism and a social habit of shoring up his isolation and vulnerability. By becoming this extreme, distorted vision of himself, Crisp

once again shows his inability to find protection in other people as well as his uncanny ability to survive in the most extreme and dangerous limits of human existence.

Crisp's effeminate appearance did not take very long to evolve from the peculiar to the outright bizarre. With his flagrantly flamboyant demeanor, he not only exiled himself from the general public, but also earned scorn from fellow homosexuals, who felt insulted and endangered by any proximate comparison that may be drawn between themselves and Quentin Crisp. The "cause" that Crisp made out of his homosexuality also soon marked the end of any romantic fantasies he may have had about companionship with other men, sexual or otherwise. Understanding a homosexual man to be someone who desires the love and affections of a real man and, conversely, the definition of a heterosexual, "real," man being that he did not desire the company of other men, Crisp accepted the insolubility of his situation and, in turns, amplified his effeminacy while accepting the fact that he would never know love or be loved in any way that matched his true desires. Unlike other homosexuals, who, as he says, live their lives clutching at "the myth of the great dark man" (58), Crisp increased the severity of his social exile and made a life out of parading the fact of his existence so that the whole world could see. "Exhibitionism," Crisp explains, became, for him, like a drug: "Hooked in adolescence, I was now taking doses so massive that they would have killed a novice. Blind with mascara and dumb with lipstick, I paraded the dim streets of Pimlico with my overcoat wrapped around me as though it were a tailless ermine cape" (43). Rather than occupying his psychic life in fantasies of darkly-lit rooms promising meetings with dark, handsome men, Crisp begins, in this moment, to make himself known, and subsequently subject to, a bewildered public, living every moment that he was outdoors "in a state of feverish awareness" (59). His entire experience of being in time transmogrifies itself here: refusing the trappings of a damaged inner life by accepting and confronting the

dangers awaiting him in real life, Crisp transforms his method of existence into a purely physical state. Exhibitionism is the vehicle through which Crisp not only accepts, but also overdramatizes his total effeminacy. He not only accepts whatever humiliation and opprobrium are to come for him, but practically insists on shoring up the hatred and violence awaiting him in the outside world forcing fate to play all of the cards stacked against him by making a living out of marching across the unsuspecting and increasingly angry present.

The end-result of Crisp's movements toward total alienation did not undo his attempts at survival and growth. While he certainly insisted upon coordinating a lifestyle that would absolutely confirm his presence on earth as the one at the mercy of the many, Crisp's very dangerous routines allowed him to live in a way that he felt to be total, sincere and without resentment of any kind. Contentment, for Crisp, comes along with self-knowledge; self-knowledge, however, is only secured in its totality. Parading the streets in London wearing makeup, women's clothes and hennaed hair, Crisp desired the entire physical experience of his exile in order to transform it into a form of absolute awareness. "The essence of happiness," he says, "is its absoluteness. It is automatically the state of being of those who live in the continuous present all over their bodies" (48). Trading in the benefits of identifying with others in his sexual situation for the extreme experience of living on the fringe of society, Crisp's exhibitionism operated for him as a purely physical and affective process of achieving absolute awareness, all the while believing as an inalterable law that "[n]o effort is required to define or even attain happiness, but enormous concentration is needed to abandon everything else" (48). Homosexuality, like happiness, was never an aspect of Crisp's personality that he was able to believe in or conceive of partially. Just as happiness came in the most physical processes of abandoning everything else, so too did

understanding his homosexuality emerge out of his extreme efforts at accepting, announcing and fashioning it.

How to Have a Lifestyle

True style changes less and less as it moves towards its perfection and, once complete, is unalterable by outward circumstances or even by time itself.

Quentin Crisp, *How to Have a Lifestyle*

To be clear: difference stands apart from uniqueness and diversity.⁹⁸ Differences in degree are measured within a given, proscribed frame of reference; pure difference exists in and of itself. In advocating the need for style, and indeed by dedicating his own life to that practice, Crisp has provided a very noble and instructive example of how one might transform being into becoming, and focus one's energy on producing difference on its own terms. In possessing the strength to own and communicate his style, Crisp shows the kind of hubris and strength required of the noble man of the future once imagined by Nietzsche, one who finds joy in extremity and sees a vision of themselves beyond the limits of natural time. Untimeliness, in this regard and certainly in the case of Crisp's writings on style, is at the heart of this procedure. Writing, like Nietzsche himself, in the form of aphorism, ideas in Crisp's work appear not in the form of arguments or critical dictates, but as puns, jokes, and knotty truisms cast off from his position in the universe into some future time and for some future audience for whom an ounce of truth may one day make itself known. The art of being and becoming oneself on purpose is at the heart of Crisp's presentation of style; like

⁹⁸ See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*: 30-45

Nietzsche, Crisp displays an understanding of the importance of knowledge not so much as a key to knowing oneself and one's world better, but as a way of interpreting oneself and one's future self in order to become a master of those domains. A very noble pursuit indeed, Nietzsche once looked to the language embedded in physics and the sciences of energy in order to describe the processes by which human beings understand and transform themselves as a noble endeavor.⁹⁹ It is towards these noble pursuits made by Crisp in his writings about style that I would like to turn my attention in this section of my discussion. In fully taking in Crisp's aphoristic negative definition that comprehending that "[s]tyle is never natural" (31), my focus here will be to offer up his characterizations of style as instructions for an ethical commitment to the noble expression of difference and the untimely projection of concepts that are tended towards some future, uncanny resemblance of truth.

To be engaged in the cultivation of style, it is important to understand that, while it does offer its subjects a way of avoiding the equalizing effects of modern time, it is not, in all respects and purposes, a way of gaining more freedom. While the arrow of time promises freedom for all along with the accumulation of equality and representation for all, the stylist is forced to understand the cost at which that freedom is gained. The burdens of engaging in style are many; from the isolation ensured by committing oneself to a life lived in the continuous production of pure difference to the weight of the future to which stylists must constantly attempt to imagine in the present, the means and mechanisms by which one attempts to set oneself apart require an excess of concentration and a fierce commitment to what one is and what one will always be. As exemplified in his own occupation of homosexuality, Crisp sees style as a very formalized procedure for announcing one's image

⁹⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*: 41

of oneself unto the world: a lonely and somewhat dangerous commitment to individuality that commands recognition and, ultimately, respect in the place of resemblance or the safety of human sympathy. In a spirit of total openness and conviviality, stylists must accept and manipulate the dangers associated with living for themselves and in itself, learning not to simply avoid or endure the pain of existence, but working instead to greet it and cultivate it to one's own ends.

Rather than live in a constant state of fear as to how the outer world would treat and eventually victimize him for his way of being, Crisp chose to flaunt and exaggerate the worst part of himself, announcing to others that he was indeed an effeminate homosexual long before they could even take the time to pause and react negatively to the sight of him coming down the road. As a mere identity, homosexuality could have only offered Crisp with a way of understanding and ameliorating his ontological injuries. But as a procedure and a lifestyle, Crisp's effeminate appearance was a weapon, with which he could shock, tame, and even shore up power over others. Much as he once flung urine and fecal matter at his parents in order to gain their attention and secure in them a sense of terror regarding his existence, Crisp's manner of presentation transformed lipstick, rouge and henna into a set of weapons against which he could do battle with the shocked and angry mobs waiting to greet him at every turn. Wanting power over the human public became, for Crisp, the exact opposite of anticipating their eventual tolerance, which, for Crisp, is only a matter of time and not of effort or sincerity, "not the simple statement of acts that ushers in freedom; it is the constant repetition of them that has this liberating effect. Tolerance is the result not of enlightenment, but of boredom" (NCS 204). Armed with his style, Crisp managed to offer a sacred example of how one might cast off the insulting and banal effects of human tolerance in place of a more extreme, self-glorifying process of being and becoming not

currently known or understood in the present. Style is, in this sense, “the way in which a man *can*, by taking thought, add to his stature.” (*Lifestyle* 7).

While *The Naked Civil Servant* was important for introducing Quentin Crisp to the public, his book *How to Have a Lifestyle* contains the material he was to use in his life as a public figure. After the broadcast of the television play of *The Naked Civil Servant* aired on British and, more significantly, American television, Quentin Crisp became a public figure in the English-speaking world. If *The Naked Civil Servant* is to be understood as a document of Crisp’s courage and conviction in spite of great trauma and pain, *How to Have a Lifestyle* is the instruction manual for how such a noble effort ought to be endured. Based on the simple idea of style as “an idiom arising spontaneously from the personality but deliberately maintained,” this book focuses on the ways in which style adds to mere identity (8). Whereas identity provides an expedient form of self-definition and representation, style is a way of getting expression and identification purely on one’s own terms: “Most people are at present content to cherish their mere identity. This is not enough. Our identity is just a group of ill-assorted characteristics that we happen to be born with. Like our fingerprints, if they are noticed at all, they will almost certainly be used against us” (47). By “polishing up” one’s “raw identity into a life-style,” Crisp describes how forgoing the freedom of similarity and representation in modern life offers the stylist a way of doing “barter with the outside world for that you want” (47). “This polishing process,” he explains, “makes your life so formal that by comparison the life of a Trappist monk is an orgy” (98). This self-induced formalism is, for Crisp and indeed for any stylist, the primary function of style. While identity defines us and helps translate its victims to the outer world, style requires an immediate knowledge of the sum-total of one’s personality and reception and, subsequently, an ongoing procession of that image across the present and into a world-to-come.

Style is, for Crisp, the most powerful form of communication. In the “permissive society” to which he first penned his thoughts on style, communication seems to have lost its ability to provide individuals with a way of differentiating themselves from others; originality and difference, as a result, lose not only their meaning, but also their vitality and force. Differences—between the classes, the sexes and between human being at all—pass by the wayside as the march of time cross the threshold of modern communication. The modern world, says Crisp, is “a stunningly ignoble place,” explaining: “It has not really grown all that much worse but appears to have done so because we know so much more about it than we did. Communication, which the class magazines are always telling us we lack, is in fact an epidemic” (40). As the entire modern world came over the course of the twentieth century to meet its once distant neighbors and, as a result, find more and more commonality and resemblance in them, the glamour and the power of difference, and of foreignness, fell by the wayside as the concept was leached of meaning. Crisp’s crusade for style, then, ought to be understood as a stubborn insistence on the persistence of queer, bewildering and strange forces in the world. Although a bit Edwardian in his choice of classed mannerisms, one must not confuse Crisp’s disdain for the equalizing effects of modern communication with a form of bitter nostalgia or simply class aspirationalism. Style is instead a more eternal, untimely dedication to the vitality of forms that produce difference: forms that are, as they have always been, in existence not as a demonstration of the way things are, but in spite of the world.

“Present-day society,” Crisp writes, “with its constant change, its deafening communication, its almost total loss of definition, has produced a climate of bewilderment so profound that in it personality disintegrates in all but the most persistently self-aware” (*Lifestyle* 42-43). As a cure for the ills of modern freedom and excess communication, style,

for Crisp, dictates a different kind of self-awareness. Any projection of style, then, must be concentrated and effected by three principal means—one's speech, one's movements and one's appearance (and in that specific order) (64). "Like justice and crossword puzzles," Crisp explains, "style must not only be done, it must be seen to be done" (63). So, far from being an emotional, nostalgic reaction to modern time, style is, once again, to be immediately understood as a physical and confrontational practice. Whatever meaning the word queer originally insinuated, and whatever purely strange and off-putting anomalies that word once attempted to describe, style puts into queer practice. As more and more of the world becomes known and more and more of us become immediately recognizable to one another, Crisp has saved a place at the table of the sacred order of stylists for those figures dedicated to the noble projection of difference as difference itself.

How to Become a Virgin: Quentin Crisp Goes to Heaven

Once we have mastered the gestures, the voice, and the words that will express our chosen image of ourselves, we are prepared to leave that place that has so far been our hermit's cave, our athlete's gymnasium, our actor's sound booth. Having progressed from making to doing to being, we are ready to move out into the world.

Quentin Crisp, *How to Have a Lifestyle* (181)

The result of Crisp's sixty-year campaign to produce difference, enacted in his parades of effeminacy across the streets of London again and again until he had perfected himself and entered the sacred profession of being, was to make him into an "autofact." An autofact is a living artifact: that rare figure who, according to Crisp, "embodied nobody's dream but there own," living in order to announce an individuality not known or immediately acceptable to other human beings (166). "Individuality is," according to Crisp

“feared by those who have none” (167). The stylist must, in this sense, learn to anticipate and manipulate the anger and terror directed at them by the hordes of people living without a sense of or respect for difference for its own sake. The untimely quality her exists in cultivating an autofactual image of oneself, transfiguring oneself as a way of transfiguring one’s existence. While unmanageable for most, there are figures, like Crisp, that can transform the negative side-effects of living at the mercy of the world into a self-sustaining and self-made career as an iconoclast, as an autofact.

While *The Naked Civil Servant* documents Crisp’s alienation from the world and depicts the courage with which he occupied his outcast state, *How to Have a Lifestyle* finds Crisp ruminating on the ways in which that same stalwart ownership of his difference might also, with time and self-education, reap some positive benefits for him and give him a set of tools for bartering with the outer world. Far from isolating him more and more from the public, Crisp’s ever-developing sense of his difference and of the codes of conduct associated with his style eventually led him to a place where he felt he was able to have ultimate power over his relations with the rest of society. Not to be confused with the more banal desire to be popular, style, once perfected, is simply an ability to be known, not in spite of one’s best efforts, but, more importantly, as a result of one’s image of oneself.

The success of Thames Television’s production of *The Naked Civil Servant* provided Crisp with an avenue out of the life he had known in England. Once the movie was shown in the United States, Crisp found an opportunity to leave England for good and point his toes towards what he called, “The Island of the Blessed.” Claiming at every opportunity that in his heart he had always been an American, and that “as soon as [he] saw Manhattan, [he] wanted it,” Crisp found residence in New York City and, nearly seventy years old, began the most productive and notorious stage of his career on earth.

Hollywood films and, more importantly, the movie stars from its silent and golden eras, were first responsible for drawing Crisp's attention towards the land across the Atlantic Ocean. Whereas England was, in Crisp's eyes, the image of a dead empire—dreary, socially constipated and ugly in almost every possible way—the America that he saw in Hollywood movies—beautiful, friendly and free of the stifling social codes and mores defining life for him in England—forever captured his attention. What's more, America provided Crisp with a new, forever captivated audience—one that, unlike the angry crowds that accosted him on the streets of London, was drawn to his eccentricities. Like the American G.I.s who occupied London during World War II and were, according to Crisp, handsome and actually kind to him, all Americans, Crisp found, were attracted to him. And he to them.

The fact that *The Naked Civil Servant* was shown on public television and not in the theaters was significant in the way that Crisp came to understand and hone his public notoriety. Had the film been produced and released in the theaters, it would have been, to use one of his favorite disparaging phrases, “utter festival material,” seen only by other homosexuals and liberals wishing to be recognized as sympathetic to the cause. Shown on public television, however, Crisp's story became known to a broader, less politically motivated mass of the population, quickly transforming him from a somewhat notorious object of public scorn in London to a sympathetic, almost cozy public figure. Armed with a self-education in being and becoming a star, Crisp turned to the sacred Hollywood stars for examples of how he might enter what he called “the profession of being”:

Stylists must remember that the journey made by an actress from nonentity to stardom is the path that they themselves must tread in one context or another. In the beginning of her career an actress plays a great number of different parts—anything she can get. Later she plays fewer, larger, and more closely connected roles.

This is like attacking the problem of style American Indian fashion: the circles of experimentation become smaller and smaller until you arrive at the center of yourself. Once an actress has discovered her ideal role, she never looks forward. She has left the profession of acting and entered the profession of being. (*Lifestyle* 128)

So, while the beginnings of style occur in one's decision to discover what makes someone the way he is, and then performing that role on purpose, the ultimate goal is to one day enter into a twilight stage, where one's style is forever fixed and, as he says, perfected and "unalterable by outward circumstances or even by time itself" (*How to Go to the Movies* 16). As he began his life in America, Crisp accepted the permanent role of being both a "Resident Alien," an image ready-made for public affection and consumption. He would soon find, of course, that life had prepared him for both of these roles—roles that would finally begin to pay off. Like the actress in his anecdote, Crisp took advantage of his lifelong campaign of marching the streets of London, flinging himself at the mercy of others until the circles had been drawn around him so strongly that the world had no choice but to finally accept the fact of his existence. Simply by surviving the decades preceding his relocation to America, Crisp's example shows the ultimate strength of untimeliness. Even a lifetime spent in the absolute margins of society must, at a certain point, be given an amount of recognition and respect. "If to be a man of destiny," he writes, "is to arrive at a point in history when the only gift you have to offer has suddenly become relevant, then in this tiny and purely social way that is what for the moment I became." (*How to Become a Virgin* 1)

The same components of Crisp's public image that annoyed the English press became for him the exact things that the American public desired and appreciated. All of the side-effects of becoming a fixed, autofactual object—repetition, singularity,

predictability—eased Crisp’s transition into American infamy, making him a ready-made and self-evident celebrity. The technical status of “resident alien” given to Crisp by immigration authorities in the United States suited the role he imagined himself playing: utterly predictable and infinitely available to his new, adoring audience. “People,” Crisp quips, “are never with me, they are in my presence. I am never involved in conversation, I am always being interviewed” (*Virgin* 190). While he wrote other books while in America, Crisp’s occupation changed here, giving him a loftier throne from which he became able to preach the need for and virtues of style. A friendly visitor and a markedly strange, purely individualized character, Crisp utilized the strength of his new position in society as the resident, but suddenly desired, alien figure and began to live his entire life in the public arena. The tasks that once made up his private, solemn campaign of producing difference were now acts that he took on the road. From public theatrical events to regular editorials in gay newspapers across the country to various cameos in films, plays and commercials, Crisp had certainly entered himself into the profession of being. The need for a private life—and, indeed, the presence of private torments and struggles—evaporated for Crisp once he entered the United States and the practices of his style that once set him apart from the entire world now placed his entire fate in an exalted, glamorous state of living in the continuous, public present. In this place, Crisp finally won acclaim for doing what he had once done on accident on purpose. American interest in personality and celebrity suited Crisp’s efforts at acting out all of the elements of his nature; the iconic image of himself that he had for so long known and wanted others to know became a graven image of a strange man adopting an appearance that told everyone what they seemed to want to know.

Before his editors decided on the title *The Naked Civil Servant*, Crisp had intended for his memoir to be called *I Reign in Hell*, a nod to Milton’s Satan who found it “better to reign

in Hell than serve in Heaven.” Had he never left England, we might lament the fact that this more accurate, this provocative title was overruled by Crisp’s publisher; however, understanding that, to him, America was just like Heaven, we may rejoice in the fact that, with the right sense of style, even the lowliest among us may one day experience divine transfiguration. For Crisp, this exalted station was achieved through his courageous forms of surviving and documenting his life lived as the one among the many, understanding, as he says, “the way in which your size and luminosity seem to increase as you become the focus of a crowd’s attention, and the way in which the crowd sees something, some quality in you that you cannot name simply because you stand alone and above them” (*Omnibus* 419). Finding himself employed in the profession of being, and living up to Americans’ positive perception of him (as opposed to confirming the unfortunate prejudices held by English countrymen about his various sins), Crisp saw the successful fruition of the image of himself he had held the entire time: “A free-loader, a dilettante, a butterfly on the wheel” (*Omnibus* 424).

The Cause Behind the Cause: Conclusion

At a performance in New Orleans, Quentin Crisp was once asked if he believed in God. He began, as the story goes, by saying that he would not like to offend anyone with his answer (to which an audience member purportedly shouted “Why stop now?”). He went on to state that, on the subject of God or anything else, he believes, “like most people, not that of which logic can convince me but what my nature inclines me to believe.” Showing, once again, a stalwart ability to see through the false matters occupying human fantasy, he continued: “I am unable to believe in a God susceptible to prayer as petition. It does not seem to me to be sufficiently humble to imagine that whatever force keeps the planets

turning in the heavens is going to stop what it's doing to give me a bicycle with three speeds." In a later more direct answer to the question, however, Crisp provides a characterization of God that is instructive in understanding the ethics underlying not only the matter at hand, but also his entire life's work:

But if God is the universe that encloses the universe, or if God is the cell within the cell, or if God is the cause behind the cause, then this I accept absolutely. And if prayer is a way of aligning your body with the forces that flow through the universe, then prayer I accept. But there is a worrying aspect about the idea of God. Like witchcraft or the science of the zodiac or any of these other things, the burden is placed elsewhere. This is what I don't like.

As with any performance of style, this passage succeeds at being both immediate and profound. This perception of God as the universe enclosing the universe is exactly the same concept of difference encapsulated by Crisp's laws of style. Style is a form of knowledge based on intuition, governed by instinct and projected through means that are self-governed. As opposed to representation, which drives the arrow of time, diminishing differences at every step, style is, first and foremost, a conscious decision to shoulder the burdens of opposition and individuality. Failure—to be human, to repair one's own habitual ways of being, to progress—is at the heart of the profession of style. As a way of being, style is not merely a static way of living one's life, nor is it a revolt or rebellion of any kind. Also a mode of becoming, style is an endless endeavor to live in a virtual state: constantly imagining and creating a form known instinctively, yet not-yet-known. It is an ethical commitment to the production of total and excessive sensation—producing a state of happiness that, according to Crisp, "is the automatic state of being of people who live in the continuous present all over their body."

As a process, style demands *encounter* rather than recognition; it asks for and produces bewilderment at the expense of clarity; it produces multiplicity instead of metaphor; it is imperceptible; it defies the very hungry needs of critical investigation. Like any form of becoming, style imagines a world other-than-the-one given unto us. It seeks out pleasures not permitted in the present; it expresses only in order to constantly construct and expand the limits of its own, limited territory within the real world. The practice of style allows for something more than *knowledge* of oneself, but a kind of undoing of the trappings and abstractions of the self *itself*. Style is, in its most visceral sense, a form of self care and preservation; in this way, then, it insures for its practitioner a kind of solitary life where time becomes stuck upon the limits of one's own habitual nature and lags there, against the passage of human time that moves towards its own bland and nameless future like an undertow. Style recreates human consciousness into an *untimely* form of existence. Simply put, style is a way of realizing that the future is now—a sensation and way of aligning one's entire self with the forces that flow through the universe, an endless procession towards the cause behind the cause and the universe that encloses the universe.

Chapter Four

World Gone Wrong: Bob Dylan's Time Out of Mind

An artist has to be careful never to really arrive at a place where he thinks he is 'somewhere.' You always have to realize that you're constantly in the state of becoming and as long as you stay in that realm, you'll be alright.

Bob Dylan¹⁰⁰

Introduction

Bob Dylan called his thirtieth studio album *Time Out of Mind* (Columbia, 1997), a line lifted from the opening paragraphs of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." In the story, the narrator describes the Usher family as existing in a strange, fatuous state, living and passing their time on earth more like ghosts than like men:

I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties of musical science.¹⁰¹

This phrase, "time out of mind," was one that Poe left lying on the ground for Dylan to pick up in 1997 when he released this album that would mark one of many points in his career when he would "come back" from bouts of temporary obscurity. While not necessary or certain, "time out of mind" evokes a way of thinking that is out of step and out of tune, a

¹⁰⁰ From *No Direction Home*, dir. Martin Scorsese. 2005

¹⁰¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher." *The Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Doubleday. 2012: 177

way of being in the present while still obsessing over and living through ghosts of the past. As a phrase that I too have stolen for my own purposes here, “time out of mind” represents the style of untimely artistry and an attraction to obscurity, darkness and opacity that I have attempted to focus on in this dissertation. Indeed, this shadowy—rather than illuminative—spirit also sums up the approach I will take to Dylan’s life and work.

While Bob Dylan is the only member of my cast that is still living, his significance here will be more indebted to the ways he has used his songs and honed his public persona to dredge up long forgotten stories, fables and traumas from America’s past. Bringing them into the present, and giving these old, arcane ways of being and feeling new life, Dylan has done more than make a historian out of himself through a folk tradition that, as he says in his 2005 memoir *Chronicles Volume One*,¹⁰² “...if nothing else, makes a believer out of you” (256). Setting his sights on the “parallel universe” still living in old folk songs and hymns, Dylan has found a way, in his music and performances, to chase after what he refers to as “a reality of a more brilliant dimension,” one that “exceeded all human understanding” (236). Not so much digging up the past in his work, but finding ways of proving that the graveyard of America’s history had not yet been properly dug up, Dylan’s presence on the scene has stirred up the spirits of the past that, in his songs and through his very formalist devotion to the folk music genre, have never gone away. The entire history of the country is, for Dylan and certainly in Dylan’s work, only a collection of restless voices in the wilderness. “More true to life than life itself,” he writes in *Chronicles*, these stories, passed down through generations and looming ever larger over the American culture as a result, constitute “life magnified” (236). History here is a process, an ontology, and folk music the method

¹⁰² Bob Dylan. *Chronicles: Volume One*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004

through which Dylan calls upon these hidden and long-forgotten voices in the wilderness. This is the path through which his untimely style travels.

The “mythical realm” of folk songs have become the world of Dylan’s musical science; populated not so much with individuals or contemporary visions of life, Dylan’s visions are, as he says, haunted by “archetypes, vividly drawn archetypes of humanity, metaphysical in shape, each rugged soul filled with natural knowing and inner wisdom. Each demanding a degree of respect” (236). So, while he is certainly the most contemporary figure in my work here, it may be more fitting to understand this chapter on Dylan’s ontological historical methodology as haunting the three that come before it. Untimeliness means, in Dylan’s songs and also in the ways he has repeatedly and consistently resisted the call to speak for the nation or his generation, devotion to a time out of mind, a vision of the future weighed down by restless and unruly voices from the past: a past revealed through ghosts—*les revenants*—whose hard times and presences find new life in both Dylan’s songs and in the governance of his long untimely career.

Having been called a legend almost from his first appearance, Dylan has been well aware of his precarious position in the mass production of himself as a musical icon and a spokesperson of a generation. “It’s like being in an Edgar Allan Poe story,” he told a *60 Minutes* interviewer in 2004, “you’re just not that person everyone thinks you are. . . . [But then I realized] that the press and the media, they’re not the judge. God’s the judge. And the only person you have to think twice about lying to is yourself or God. The press isn’t either one of them.”¹⁰³ Like any untimely or heroic person, Dylan doesn’t believe he is God, only that he is closer to God than many of us, certainly the members of the press with

¹⁰³ Interview with Ed Bradley, *60 Minutes*. CBS, December 5, 2004

whom he has notoriously sparred. Folk music has, as he has said, given him a view of “the truth about life...even if life is more or less a lie” (*Chronicles* 71). As in any folk song, the grain of Dylan’s style is evasive and yet somehow timeless and everlasting as well. The names, faces, histories and locations that his songs move through sing of a world lost and seem to warn of a future world gone wrong.

A Dylan song, like any folk song, has the capacity to, in his words, “vary in meaning and it might not appear the same from one moment to the next” (*Chronicles* 71). Moving through the worlds imagined and conjured up in Dylan’s songs, his cautious and sometimes paranoid interactions with the public vis-à-vis his notoriously caustic interactions with the media and his *Chronicles*, this chapter will present Dylan as an American stylist weighed down speak to the varying meaning and potent visions of time embedded in the world of Dylan’s songs. His artistry will, in the end, be treated for its uncanny abilities to find power and meaning in rhythms, feelings, histories, manners and meanings long forgotten, but by no means dead.

Before the Beginning: Bob Dylan and the Folk Music Method

Folk songs played in my head, they always did. Folk songs were the underground story.

Dylan, *Chronicles* (103)

We study history very closely, and it’s often said that we must understand our past to understand our present, even to understand where it is we might be headed. This is all well and good, but what makes history history is the fact that its fate has already been sealed, its meaning already crystallized for our present use. And while anthropologists and certain cultural historians may emphasize the histories of various tall tales, mythologies and legends

passed down from generation to generation, why, at least in America, has there not been a move to study the contents and import of folk songs more seriously? A more lively approach to the folk tradition in America must necessarily include an understanding of the coeval untimely and timeless qualities of certain stories, names, romances and feuds that are still playing themselves out and elaborating their conclusions into and beyond our present day. A key feature of many a folk composition is, on the one hand, its story-telling component; here, the facts of certain significant and/or traumatic past events are given to us in ways that may satisfy the historian or cultural scholar looking for details of obscure and long forgotten facts. Popular folk songs like “Long Black Veil” (1959)¹⁰⁴, “Delia” (1928) or “Frankie & Johnny”/ “Frankie & Albert” (1899)¹⁰⁵ do, on the one hand, simply tell a story that, in the case of “Delia” and “Frankie & Johnny”/ “Frankie & Albert,”¹⁰⁶ actually occurred at one point in time or, as in “Long Black Veil,” broadly describes the feelings of a man—who could be *any* man—falsely accused of murder.

¹⁰⁴ “Long Black Veil” was first recorded by Lefty Frizzell in 1959 on Columbia Records. Dylan never recorded it, but has performed it in concert 292 times (<http://www.bobdylan.com>)

¹⁰⁵ “Frankie & Johnny”/ “Frankie & Albert” first appeared in response to the 1899 murder of a 17-year old Allen or Albert by a 22-year old woman Frankie Baker in St. Louis. First iteration composed in 1899 by Bill Dooley of St. Louis (entitled “Frankie Killed Allen”). First recorded and released commercially 1904 (as “He Done Me Wrong,” by Hughie Cannon” See Cecil Brown, “Frankie and Albert/Johnny.” *Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture*. 2011, v. 2, 542-546. Recorded on Dylan’s *Good as I Been to You* (Columbia, 1992)

¹⁰⁶ Delia Green, a young black woman from Savannah Georgia, is the motivation for the 1908 song “Delia” (and, in later iterations, “Delia’s Gone”). First recorded by Blind Willie McTell of Atlanta in 1928. See *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 1 (4). December 1937; Sean Wilentz, *Dylan in America*. New York: Doubleday, 117-131. Dylan on “Delia,” in the liner notes to *World Gone Wrong* (Columbia, 1993): “DELIA is a sad tale-two or more versions mixed into one. the song has no middle range, comes whipping around the corner, seems to be about counterfeit loyalty. Delia herself, no Queen Gertrude, Elizabeth 1 or even Evita Peron, doesn’t ride a Harley Davidson across the desert highway, doesn’t need a blood change & would never go on a shopping spree.”

Still, these songs have had a power over time that amounts to more than just the fact that they have been sung, re-sung, adapted and re-adapted. Any kind of unifying cultural myth or icon of folklore that simply operates as a historically changing metaphor is simply that. American culture is full of Santa Clauses, Easter Bunnies and President Washingtons chopping down cherry trees, but these figures are only sentimentalized objects, nationally recognized fairy tales that give citizens a sense of commonality and meaning. What is unique about these folk songs—and, indeed, the kinds of folk songs I will address in this chapter and to which Dylan owes his artistic abilities—is that they are strange, that they tell stories that, while containing occasional historical facts that may constitute their origins, are in effect believable because they rely on archetypes that always seem, or at least, in the singing of them, *become*, contemporary. An appreciation for folk songs is not the same as nostalgia; in fact, since folk music relies on appropriation and reappropriation, the power of suggestion and influence of the songs lies in their capacity to become something else at some other time. A folk approach to American history is a view of the past as an ongoing story still being told, or a gaping wound still feeling its way in the world. In the folk tradition, history is a becoming; what has passed always waits for some future opportunity for a reinvention, a retelling or a revision.

An appreciation for history is by no means necessary to understand the weight of a song like “Frankie & Albert.” No one needs to ask who Frankie is or why she shot her Albert down in order to feel as if they have already heard of her case.

Frankie was a good girl

Everybody knows

Paid one hundred dollars

For Albert’s new suit of clothes

He was her man but he done her wrong

Frankie went down to 12th street

Lookin' up through the window high

She saw her Albert there

Lovin' up Alice Bly

He was her man but he done her wrong

Frankie pulled out a pistol

Pulled out a forty-four

Gun went off a rootie-toot-toot

And Albert fell on the floor

He was her man but he done her wrong

The weight of this very real, archival chain of events pales in comparison to the song's ability to transform young Frankie into any girl at any time. "A folk song," Dylan writes in *Chronicles*, "has over a thousand faces and you must meet them all if you want to play this stuff" (72-73). A singer, in other words, must take on the responsibility not just for Frankie Baker's life story in order to be able to convey this song successfully, he or she must develop a worldview and style that is based on the American folk music tradition. In order to perform any of these songs legitimately, the performer is asked to step inside their skin and become possessed by all of the intricate details and violent intentions that the songs carry with them. It is as if these songs have no origins or original authors, that they are simply

there, passed down from artist to artist and from author to author.¹⁰⁷ These are more than just old stories waiting to be told; folk songs are restless ghosts moving around the landscape, poisoning themselves to find new homes and new vehicles of transmission.

A folk singer must, as Dylan then alludes to in *Chronicles*¹⁰⁸, and as Nietzsche once described in *Beyond Good & Evil*, feel old even at the beginning of life.¹⁰⁹ The key is not to become an expert of this material, but to become the material itself. The burden of these songs is a one the folk singer agrees to carry into the future, lest their power be lost and forgotten. In his time on the American popular music scene, Dylan has made this task his own, explaining, in the liner notes to his 1993 album *World Gone Wrong* (Columbia)—an acoustic album containing his renditions of ten popular (but at that point, obscured) American and English folk songs—: “there won’t be songs like these anymore. factually there arent any now” [*sic*]. History is not something that did happen, but something that *is* happening, *could* happen, *will always* happen whether it is studied or not. At every turn in his career, Dylan has always come back to the folk tradition, has always made it his duty to see that these songs and these tales live on and find new meaning again and again.

A story like Frankie Baker’s is a story that repeats itself over and over again and what folk songs do, more than share these archetypical events and sensations, is contain within

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, there was lots of flak given to Dylan following the release of *Good as I Been to You* in 1992 (the first of two collections of traditional material) regarding his decision to list himself as composer of all thirteen songs. From the editor’s review of the album in issue 114 of *Folk Roots* magazine: “...why has this rich old has-been copywrited every damn track as Traditional Arranged Dylan?”

¹⁰⁸ “In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche talks about feeling old at the beginning of life...I felt like that, too” (73). I am still searching for the specific reference Dylan makes here, though he is not one to be trusted in terms of seeking out accurate references or archives. The connection between Nietzsche’s description of the pleasure to be found “beyond good and evil” and Dylan’s own religious conviction to folk music that makes his work so untimely and that marks it with a “time out of mind” is one I would like to explore further.

¹⁰⁹ *Chronicles* 72-73

them an opening, or a wound, that, as the song is sung, carves out a place for itself beyond the confines of the historical event of the original story or even the original song into the future. At the end of “Frankie & Albert,” after the judge has sentenced and convicted poor Frankie to death, she stands on the hanging scaffold, “Calm as girl could be//Turned her eyes up toward the heavens//Said ‘Nearer, my God, to Thee,” transfiguring herself and her story into something grander and more imposing than the mere facts of the story itself. Like the woman in “The Long Black Veil” who walks the hills of her dead lover’s grave for eternity or the man who mourns his dead “Delia” over and over again, Frankie’s last act sets its site on the world-to-come. This untimeliness is, however, unlike nostalgia in that it points towards what forces and creative elements can’t be seen by contemporary logic rather than overindulging in scripts and narratives that we all know too well. Songs, if they succeed in any way in and of themselves, are concepts—rolls of the dice on a future moment and of a future landscape.

History is, as we know, past, while important to understand and register, only has contemporary import for the ways that its events may remind us of what is happening now; anthropological concepts of folklore and oral history, too, bear significance on how a culture understands where it came from, often and necessarily against the grain of what dominant histories dictate as true or widespread. The common theme here is in looking back in order to broaden our appreciation of our current states of being. Folk songs, on the other hand, have little concern for the hard-to-see past events only in order to open up a place for themselves in the actual future, the one at which we will never have yet arrived. Folk songs open wounds and conjure up ghosts; the history they embody is a material, constantly elaborating history. Folk songs do not think of the past as dead and do not confine their relations with history in a timely manner. Rather, they tell us what has happened in order to

display what will always happen and what still is. The America that Dylan finds in his songs is drenched in this tradition and is one that is constantly being crucified and resurrected, where “the suffering is endless and the punishment is going to be forever” (*Chronicles* 86). The sound that results, and continues to perfect itself, in Dylan’s performances is the pure sound of time out of mind—described aptly, in fact, by a David Sexton of *The Sunday Telegraph*, in his review of Dylan’s 1992 album of folk standards, *Good As I Been to You*: “Dylan sounds now, in comparison to his younger self, like one of those ghosts...but a powerful ghost. The effect is not so much nostalgia...as deeply inward.”¹¹⁰ The feedback loop of history would become the bedrock of Dylan’s songwriting method as he would make an entire career out of a religious and formalistic approach to the American folk music method.

In the next section, I will give an overview of Dylan’s personal roots—not so much in terms of his biography, but, more importantly, of his earliest steps on the long journey through the backwoods and backwaters of the American folk music world: the story of how a young man became a genius in order to become a ghost.

Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan and the Nowhere of American History

I had already landed in a parallel universe, anyway, with more archaic principles and values; one where actions and virtues were old style, and judgmental things came falling out on their heads. A culture with outlaw women, super thugs, demon lovers and gospel truths....streets and valleys, rich peaty swamps, with landowners and oilmen, Stagger Lees, Pretty Pollys and John Henrys—an invisible world that

¹¹⁰ Review of *Good as I Been to You*, David Sexton, *The Sunday Telegraph*. London, UK 1992

towered overhead with walls of gleaming corridors. It was all there and it was clear—ideal and God-fearing—but you had to go find it.

Dylan, *Chronicles* (235-236)

Greil Marcus—music historian and rock critic who has been writing about Dylan since the late 1960s—released a book in 1997 about Bob Dylan’s collaborative effort with The Band, *The Basement Tapes*, that he entitled *Invisible Republic*¹¹¹ (and, when republished in paperback, was re-titled, *The Old, Weird America*). Characterizing the spirit driving the *Basement Tapes* recordings as a resurrection of the 1952 Folkways release, *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Marcus presents the songs Dylan and The Band perform as being “palavers with a community of ghosts” (86). The kinship expressed through time here—from Dylan and The Band back to the 1952 Folkways record back to the country and folk songs from the 1920s and ‘30s that it originally conjured up—emerges out of Dylan’s lively relationship with the past that is absent of any nostalgia yet is responsible for calling its odd and forgotten stories back to life. Marcus quotes Band-member Robbie Robertson’s take on the *Basement Tape* sessions in order to set up his own argument about the supernatural power of the recordings and, in particular, the impact of Dylan’s vision: “[Dylan] would pull these songs out of nowhere. We didn’t know if he wrote them or if he remembered them. When he sang them, you couldn’t tell” (xvi). Writing that these songs, or, rather, these ghosts “were not abstractions,” Marcus has done important work in guiding a re-understanding of American history through folk music: a relation with the past that is always strange, out of time and coming from places that only those who sing the songs attempt to imagine and to make real once again.

¹¹¹ Greil Marcus. *Invisible Republic*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997

Dylan himself, in *Chronicles*, celebrates Marcus' take here, honing in on his term "Invisible Republic" to describe the world that he found in American folk music as a young man. Folk songs, for Dylan, became his "preceptor and guide into some altered consciousness of reality, some different republic, some liberated republic" (34). Indeed, Dylan's *Chronicles*, in its reference to the Biblical *Chronicles*, provides more of a timeline and narrative of Dylan's life in American folk music than it does give its readers a straightforward presentation of the man's life from beginning to end. Dylan's participation in folk music and his membership in the "Invisible Republic" of other folk revivalists and performers through the years has been a process of education and possession. Dylan's *Chronicles* detail his constant movement towards the truth folk songs contain, a truth that, as in the Biblical example, pre-exists time and language. Folk music became a way of making Dylan into a man outside of time. From the time he became Bob Dylan (and no longer Robert Zimmerman), he developed an immediately confounding relationship to the mass culture that would only become more stark in the years to come; "Mainstream culture," he writes, was "lame as hell and a big trick. It was like the unbroken sea of frost that lay outside the window and you had to have awkward footwear to walk on it" (34-35). The education he was to receive from the folk music community would be the framework from which he would build an alternate universe in his songs. While, as he complains, "I didn't know what age of history we were in nor what the truth of it was" (35), Dylan, as a public figure and artist, poised his senses toward the parts of America's past that looked like nothing and sounded like nowhere at the same time. Dylan's consciousness as a folk singer and conjurer of strange American histories became, for him, a rear-view mirror and an escape route out of the mundane and banal action on the contemporary times.

As far as his own American origins, Bob Dylan seems to have come simultaneously from everywhere and nowhere. Born in Duluth and raised in Hibbing, Dylan spent his entire childhood under the dark skies and on the sparsely populated grounds of the Mesabi Iron Range in Northern Minnesota. The experience, as he recalls it in *Chronicles*, was stark and foreboding. The stuff that ghost stories are made of:

What I recall mostly about Duluth are the slate gray skies and the mysterious foghorns, violent storms that always seemed to be coming straight at you and merciless howling winds off the big black mysterious lake with treacherous ten-foot waves. People said that having to go out onto the deep water was like a death sentence. Most of Duluth was on a slant. Nothing is level there. The town is built on the side of a steep hill, and you're always either hiking up or down. (230)

The details of Dylan's imagination here are significant for understanding the affective template from which his songs would arise. As in any piece of American folk music, the land that Dylan can call his home colors and pollutes the visions that appear and reappear in all of his songwriting. Songs like "Scarlet Town," from his most recent *Tempest* (Columbia, 2012), and "Girl From the North Country," released on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (Columbia, 1963) and again with Johnny Cash on *Nashville Skyline* (Columbia, 1969), articulate a sense of the world that lives always under the slate gray skies of Northern Minnesota. Here, Dylan sings a love song to a lost girl, one his singer meets while on tour with a traveling carnival, up "Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline."¹¹² The sense of loss that the song indeed romances is for the place that Dylan left behind—a story that is acted out here by a sorrowful traveling man calling out for the one he left in the wilderness of the North

¹¹² *Bob Dylan: Lyrics 1962-2001*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004: 54

Country, the one who he hopes is wearing a coat so warm that it will “Keep her from the howlin’ winds.”

In “Scarlet Town,” The singer sings, “In Scarlet Town, where I was born//There’s ivy leaf and silver thorn//The streets have names that you can’t pronounce//Gold is down to a quarter of an ounce.” Here, the vast, empty and cold upper Midwest is personified in a song about a town where the end is always near and loneliness is a way of life. Here, personal histories are like chains that unhappy ghosts carry around with them. Scarlet Town is, like Dylan, both everywhere and nowhere. A vision of the beginning of time and the end of the world.

In Scarlet Town, the end is near

The Seven Wonders of the World are here.

The evil and the good livin’ side by side

All human forms seem glorified

Put your heart on a platter and see who’ll bite

See who will hold you and kiss you goodnight

There’s walnut groves and maplewood

In Scarlet Town cryin’ won’t do no good

In Scarlet Town, you fight your father’s foes

Up on the hill, a chilly wind blows

You fight ‘em on high, and you fight ‘em down in

You fight ‘em with whiskey, morphine and gin

The singer in “Scarlet Town,” like the man in “Girl From the North Country,” is gone, but still wishes, in some way, that he was still here (“In Scarlet Town, the sky is clear//You’ll

wish to God that you stayed right here.”), carving out a familiar relationship Dylan has in all of his work with his leaving his past behind. While becoming Bob Dylan meant not only leaving Minnesota, it also meant leaving his family and his family name (Robert Zimmerman) behind to freeze in the North Country he once called his home. The worlds and times through which Dylan would travel through his music would be more mystical ones, as his process of artistic becoming would come to be charted through the pleasures he finds in crisscrossing American time and space.

One avenue through which Dylan would find inspiration and gain insight into other musical and cultural worlds would be the tradition of American blues music, originating in the Deep South at the end of the nineteenth century by rural, mostly black singers singing, as Dylan does in his songs about Minnesota, about the world around them. The tradition of American blues singers is a mystical one, and, in the same ways that Dylan has tried to emulate in his own work, can be credited for opening up an alternate, submerged American universe full of stark, obscure figures and songs that both seem like they have been around forever and that no one has ever heard before. Highway 61, immortalized in Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited* (Columbia, 1965), provided him with material access into this subterranean universe. Running along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to the city of Wyoming, Minnesota, Route 61 has been seen by many to be the gateway into the world of American blues music. Songs were written before his about Route 61 (by Sunnyland Slim in 1957 and Johnny Young in 1962), but it is in his “Highway 61 Revisited” that Dylan transfigures the highway into a sublime vision of America’s time out of mind. While many Dylan critics place significance on the song and the album from which it emerges as marking out a place in his post-acoustic, electrified music, and while some, as in the case of Michael Gray, have gone so far as to even see the song as not only describing, but marking the

beginning of the chaotic 1960s,¹¹³ its true impact is in forecasting an America-as-burlesque: a place where all the notable figures from the past live out situations and personalities not-yet-imagined and not-yet-imaginable.

On Highway 61, the place that Dylan calls, “the main thoroughfare of the country blues” that “begins where I began” (*Chronicles*, 240) is the same place where, in the song, God tracks down Abraham, Mack the Finger asks Louie the King where he can find forty red, white and blue shoestrings; where the beginning of the world plays out like a never-ending comedy and where the singer imagines the beginning of World War III¹¹⁴. Dylan’s beginnings, and the country blues’ beginnings, are set on their course in this song, which is hardly an accounting for any thing or any imaginable or contemporary in any way. So, yes, *Highway 61 Revisited* is a significant album to be considered among Dylan’s ongoing collection of albums, but not because of any electric guitars or thanks to any social critique embedded within it. The magic of this song, and certainly of this Highway traveling from Minnesota down through to New Orleans, is in creating an ancestral bond between Dylan’s music and the country blues songs that came before it. It is, as he says, “the same road, full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors...It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood” (*Chronicles* 240-241).

“He Had a Face Like a Mask”: Dylan’s Obfuscations

It’s just Halloween. I’ve got on my Bob Dylan mask...I’m masquerading.

Dylan, to his audience at Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic Hall, October 31,

1964

¹¹³ Michael Gray. *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*. New York: Continuum International. 2006: 321

¹¹⁴ *Bob Dylan: Lyrics 1962-2001*: 178

I'm just average, common too
 I'm just like him, the same as you
 I'm everybody's brother and son
 I ain't different from anyone
 It ain't no use a-talking to me
 It's just the same as talking to you.

"I Shall Be Free No. 10," *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (Columbia, 1964)¹¹⁵

Many will tell you that Dylan's songs and his public persona obfuscate, that he tries at every step to hide behind the content of his music and the manner in which he deflects from and interacts with public attention. To be certain, the theme of masquerade and alienation do weigh heavily on Dylan's work and also on his performance of himself as a public figure. Indeed, masks appear again and again throughout the body of his career: Think of "The Man in the Long Black Coat" (*Ob Mercy*, Columbia, 1989) who "had a face like a mask,"¹¹⁶ the young man in "Masters of War" (*The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia, 1964) who "can see through your masks,"¹¹⁷ the born-again Dylan who laments to unbelievers in "When He Returns" (*Slow Train Coming*, Columbia, 1979) to "surrender Your crown, on this blood stained ground//Take off Your mask,"¹¹⁸ or, certainly, the white-face mask that Dylan wore on his famed Rolling Thunder Revue in 1976. But, masks aside, obfuscation has never been Dylan's goal in his work and, against the grain of conventional American wisdom on Dylan, any deep or serious consideration of it is always self-

¹¹⁵ *Bob Dylan: Lyrics 1962-2001*, 118

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 530

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 55

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 417

revelatory.¹¹⁹ His masks are only artistic modes of projecting untimely truths in his work that popular wisdom and conventional interpretation cannot, in and of themselves, see or appreciate.

Dylan has been called many bad things since his emergence on the scene—“Judas,” when he went electric in 1965,¹²⁰ a paranoid recluse when he took a hiatus from public life and moved with his family to Woodstock, NY from 1971-73, and, continually, a plagiarist and a thief for his approach to appropriating and reinventing melodies and songs from the past—but, to him, the most damning of all the titles given to him was the one that crystallized earliest in the career, the one he has never been able to shake: Bob Dylan, “The Voice of His Generation.” Since the beginning and throughout every stage of his career, Dylan has been attempting to reveal truths about himself and about his songs that rub against the very notion that he or his work might be defined in any timely or journalistic way. The title “Voice of His Generation” has hung around his neck like an albatross since it was bestowed upon him, causing, in the bulk of time making up his career following these early compliments, accusations to be leveled at him for letting his public down, ruining his good work and not living up to his true abilities.

In this next section, I would like to chart Dylan’s use of masquerade as a salve against the deadening concept that he was (and that he try again to be) the voice of his generation. Looking first into his behavior in interviews with the press—who were, after all,

¹¹⁹ See Michael J. Gilmore’s *The Gospel of Bob Dylan: The Old, Old Story for Modern Times* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) for another iteration of this idea of Dylan’s work being self-revelatory.

¹²⁰ While there was general backlash after the release of his *Bringing It All Back Home* (Columbia, 1965) for moving his sound away from the stripped-down acoustic folk music of his earlier records to a more electrified hipster sound, it is at his concert in Manchester in 1965 that journalist John Cordwell screamed “Judas!” as Dylan and his band began to play “Like A Rolling Stone.” This event has been recorded on Dylan’s *Live 1966: The “Royal Albert Hall” Concert*, an official bootleg released by Columbia Records in 1998.

the cause of all this—I will present Dylan as, on the one hand, wry and comical in his attempts to state again and again that they had him wrong and, in the end, they have *it* all wrong and, on the other, constantly suffering, “like being in an Edgar Allan Poe story,”¹²¹ under the weight of his false reputation. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will return to his music, tracing the theme of masquerade and false consciousness in his songs as vehicles through which Dylan reveals his true, untimely self. Here, we will find the contemporary Dylan, in concert, singing songs that wage war against a world gone wrong.

While he may hate it, Bob Dylan is really at his best when he is being interviewed. If you are willing to side with him, and go along with his jokes that you—and even he—may not get, there is much to be learned about the maintenance of vision and style against undo pressure (which, in Dylan’s case, amounts to just about any pressure). Members of the press—who, in Dylan’s most recent public interview, he simply refers to as “wussies and pussies,”¹²²—have never had an easy time figuring Bob Dylan out. Befuddled by his ambivalence to their praise, headlines like “Spokesman Denies That He’s a Spokesman”¹²³ sum it all up. From the beginning, Dylan has insisted that the nature of the media’s interaction with him is adversarial and confounding. He has asked for it. Dylan writes, in *Chronicles*, “I was sick of the way my lyrics had been extrapolated, their meanings subverted into polemics and I had been anointed as Big Bubba of Rebellion, High Priest of Protest, the Czar of Dissent, the Duke of Disobedience, Leader of the Freeloaders, Kaiser of Apostasy, Archbishop of Anarchy, the Big Cheese” (119-120). The solution? Dylan’s only hope for maintaining any sense of power over his work would be to toy with the press, to lie to it: “I’d

¹²¹ Again, from the *60 Minutes* interview in 2004

¹²² “Bob Dylan Unleashed: On Striking Back at Critics,” *Rolling Stone*. September 27, 2012

¹²³ *Chronicles* 119

have to send out deviating signals, crank up the wrecking train, create some different impressions” (120-121).

Creativity, for Dylan, is a precious thing and something to be guarded fiercely against outside forces that would tie it down, interpolate it and deaden its meaning. Lauded almost from the first moment the media learned of his existence in the 1960s Folk Revival that was taking place in the West Village of Manhattan, Dylan’s senses were keen and defensive, and his recalcitrant behavior in the face of public scrutiny would become his only way of securing for himself a sense of ownership over the private and mysterious aspects of his creative life. In other words, while he was given very little of it, anonymity became the prized possession of Dylan’s creative life; and, since he has survived so much under the public spotlight, he has utilized his time with the media to navigate a way out, to pull any notion of him as spokesman for anything or anyone up by the roots.

Dylan’s infamous 1965 press conference in San Francisco crystallized his frantic and often obnoxious behavior in the face of media scrutiny, indeed many of the questions-and-answers given at that event sealed an uneasy deal between Dylan and any of his future interviewers. Here, a number of obvious and obviously significant questions were asked and immediately shot down. From this moment on, Dylan had communicated to the press exactly which questions he could not and would never be able to answer.¹²⁴

Do you think of yourself primarily as a singer or a poet?

I think of myself as a song and dance man.

In a lot of your songs you are hard on people...Do you do this because you want to change their lives, or do you want to point out to them the error of their ways?

¹²⁴ *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, edited by Jonathan Cott. New York: Wenner Media (Rolling Stone), 2006: 61-80

I want to needle them.

Josh Dunson in his new book implies that you have sold out to commercial interests and the topical song movement. Do you have any comments, sir?

Well, no comments, no arguments. No, I sincerely don't feel guilty.

What's your new album about?

Oh, it's about, uh—just about all kinds of different things—rats, balloons. They're about the only thing that comes to my mind right now.

What do you think about these interviews?

You see the songs are what I do—write the songs and sing them and perform them.

That's what I do...anything else interferes with it. I mean anything else trying to get on top of it making something out of it which it isn't, it just brings me down...it just makes it seem all very cheap.

While Dylan does rail against the notion that, as voice of his generation, he is an icon of the charmed sixties subculture, he does express here, and throughout his career as he is asked the same questions again and again, an understanding of himself as existing subculturally, against the grain and logic of the modern times which, as he says, cheapen his art. The entire basis of the media's interest in Dylan is based—both materially and spiritually—on a shared interest in what he, his songs and his persona can do for them, what product exactly it is that he is selling them. In their attempts to flatter him in their questions about the true meaning and import of his music, the media does no more, in Dylan's eyes, than try and use him up. However, unlike the “Man That Was Used Up”¹²⁵ that Poe once imagined (who, in the satirical story from 1839, is the great “war hero” John A.B.C. Smith

¹²⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man That Was Used Up.” Philadelphia: *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1839

that, when broken down, is merely nothing more than a prosthetic man ameliorated by his wooden leg, glass eye, wig, etc.), Dylan has tried to shift the power dynamic between himself and his inquiring audience around. He has cultivated his mystery in order to indicate a self-conscious endeavor to maintain his distance and, in turn, his dignity. While the media questions him, attempting, repeatedly, to uncover his secret, Dylan sneers, dodges and hides behind answers that replace the overblown images of him with shoddy caricatures of himself as nothing more than “a song and dance man.” An untimely strategy if there ever was one, the seriousness of Dylan’s music is hidden away and protected from public scrutiny as he burrows it away beneath his perplexing, and often paranoid, performances of his public image. Indeed, it is only behind his “Bob Dylan mask” that the man can maintain any grain of dignity for himself or his art, which travels beneath and behind the floorboards of contemporary time, place and meaning.

Busy Being Born: Dylan’s Art of Self-Revelation

Even to adoring members of the public who are not representing the media, Dylan is cagey and withdrawn. To fans, gawkers and even other popular musicians, Dylan always keeps his distance and keeps quiet—and this is something we must learn to appreciate as a blessing. Lamenting, in *Chronicles*, that his decision to move he and his family out of New York City to nearby Woodstock—a relatively unknown upstate hamlet at the point of Dylan’s arrival (which occurred just before the notorious Woodstock Festival)—in order to find some privacy, it did not take very long for him to feel invaded by hordes of fans, traveling hippies and revolutionary wanderers, all descending on his home in hopes of an audience with the King of Anarchy, the Voice of His Generation Himself. Stating, “I wanted to set fire to these people,” Dylan seethes: “These gate-crashers, spooks, trespassers,

demagogues were all disrupting my home life... Each day and night was fraught with difficulties. Everything was wrong, the world was absurd. It was backing me into a corner. Even persons near and dear offered no relief” (116-117). Aside from the obvious, the problem here is no different than the one posed by the press in their endless, if somewhat bemused and affable, attempts at sucking Dylan’s sense of consciousness and creative dignity dry; the fans who descend on Dylan, looking for some deeper meaning and connection with him disrespect the spirit of generosity between an artist and his or her audience. Dylan saw, and sees, himself as never more than what he ever was, “a folk musician who gazed into the gray mist with tear blinded eyes and made up songs that floated in a luminous mist” (*Chronicles* 115-116). While his songs may not deliver clearly defined lessons or draw out timely and clearly organized metaphors, they do, in spite of Dylan himself, have untimely truths within them that can be revealed in a space less free of the concept that he, as an artist, owes anything to the world other than the songs, that both he and his work are subject to consumption and spiritual corruption from the ever-needy masses. As leader of his generation, Dylan came to feel immediately more like a scapegoat for social issues he did not understand and a contemporary world gone absolutely mad.

It is no wonder then that Dylan has matched his aggressive relationship with the press with his audience. Following his disrupted period in Woodstock, he figuratively—and, if we believe him, literally—drove his popularity off of the rails, falling victim, he says, to a bad motorcycle accident in 1966,¹²⁶ beginning a long period of reclusion—a period from

¹²⁶ “I had been in a motorcycle accident and I’d been hurt, but I recovered. Truth was that I wanted to get out of the rat race. Having children changed my life and segregated me from just about everybody and everything that was going on. Outside of my family, nothing held any real interest for me and I was seeing everything through different glasses.” (*Chronicles* 114-115)

which he has never truly ever reemerged.¹²⁷ Since then, he has wrestled with the public in a number of ways, erring always on the side of re-authorizing himself as in control of the sound and the scope of his music and his career, shifting things jerkily as if driving a motorcycle off a cliff or a slow train off of its rails. Punishing not only his devotees, but also the executives at Columbia Records, he released albums that he knew were bad and that he hoped would sell poorly. Just like Dostoyevsky who, when accused of writing socialist propaganda, wrote bad stories to ward off creditors and political enemies, Dylan says he released records in the early '70s to keep his own demons and professional vultures at bay (*Chronicles* 38-39). Following an album (*Street Legal*, 1978) and a tour that seemed more like a latter-day Elvis show in Las Vegas with heavy, glitzy orchestration that stunned critics and followers alike, Dylan emerged in 1979 as a born-again Christian, releasing a string of three gospel records (*Slow Train Coming*, 1979; *Saved*, 1980; *Shot of Love*, 1981) and took his evangelical show on the road, enraging fans by neglecting any secular music and with angry sermons from the stage about their shared destination in hell.

While Dylan is broadly understood to be in the midst of a “comeback,” touring endlessly (on what critics have been calling, since 1989, his “Never Ending Tour”) and finally receiving professional accolades and higher sales in the record market after wallowing through much of the late '70s and '80s, he has only broadened the gap between his public and himself. Even though he has become, in a sense, a professional troubadour and lives

¹²⁷ In his last interview with *Rolling Stone*, Dylan seems obsessed with presenting the notion that he actually became a different person during this period, that he was transfigured following the motorcycle death of a Hell's Angels driver named Bobby Zimmerman: “I can refer you to the book [the Sonny Barger biography]. It happens gradually. I'd say that that accident, however, if you want to call it that, I think that was about '64? [*Referring to the death of Bobby Zimmerman, which, in fact, took place in 1961.*] As I said earlier, I had a motorcycle accident myself, in '66, so we're talking maybe about two years – a gradual kind of slipping away, and, uh, some kind of something else appearing out of nowhere.”

most of his life on stage these days, it has been years since Dylan has so much as spoken to any of his live audiences (he was quoted recently as having asked, rhetorically, “What the hell is there to say?”¹²⁸). He has alienated other popular musicians—even the ones on tour with him, who are all notoriously instructed that they are to neither speak to nor even look at Dylan if and when they may cross his path backstage.¹²⁹ The reason for all this? Dylan has been fighting with a public that lives in a different time than his, asking questions and making demands of him that diminish whatever uncanny power he senses exist in his songs and whatever style it is he wishes to broadcast into a world to come. Questioned himself a million times in a million different ways, at last Dylan has placed his feet firmly on the ground, asking us this time: “For what? Why are they doing this? They don't really know. It's sad. It really is. May the Lord have mercy on them. They are lost souls. They really don't know. It's sad – it really is. It's sad for me, and it's sad for them.”¹³⁰

At every turn in his career, Dylan has always come back to the folk tradition, has always made it his duty to see that these songs and theses tales live on and find new meaning again and again. And it is in his turn to Christ, in his crossover into gospel—and, specifically black gospel—music that I want to conclude this section of my discussion. One of his more successful artistic cross-overs despite the wide-spread consternation occasioned by his seeming becoming born again, the gospel era in Dylan's career is better understood within the context of his ongoing relationship with American folk music—within the context of his own desires to become a believer through music and of folk music. The vision of time that Dylan finds in his music, and certainly that he yearns for so deeply in his gospel records, is one that has him imagining what's beneath, what remains and what will be.

¹²⁸ “Seven Questions for Bob Dylan,” Tom Junod. *Esquire Magazine*, January 23, 2014

¹²⁹ *Ibid*

¹³⁰ *Rolling Stone* 2012

So how does Dylan's music move? And in what direction does it go? The answer, it seems to me, is in the style of his zone of crossing-over, in the way that his songs and his impatient movements from sound to sound, genre to genre and through his visions of the history of the earth and of its impending futures. Dylan's movements are earth-bound, terrestrial. His various crossings are made in order to chart new territory for himself, to stretch out and to continue to elaborate the times and places his music belongs. This kind of motion, this form of creative expansion is, of course, an organic and very natural way of being. Birds do it too—they sing only in order to announce and expand their own territory, to frame for themselves a bit of the world's chaos that they can call their own. Dylan sings, he's just like that bird, singing songs and crossing over into genres and temporal flows that he wants to belong with. His vision, here, and his expressions ought to be considered as acts of style...style, in this case being a set of expressions and creative resources capable of making things and worlds possible that would not be otherwise. Style, to point to Deleuze's definition, is "the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says, but by what it causes to move, to flow...a pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds—art as 'experimentation'" (*Essays Critical and Clinical* li).

So, style is both an effort of immense concentration and creativity but also a practice that is rooted in the earth, that seeks out territory untimely and unknown. Dylan's cross-overs are always in search of the root of things—not only in an epistemological or metaphorical sense, but in a material sense. In his song "Solid Rock," from the 1980 album *Saved*, Dylan makes this rough and noisy journey behind the arrow of time which points always to diminishing difference (to dust, that is) and to a future of foregone conclusions, beyond into the "solid rock / made before the foundation of the world." A song that is interested in experimenting with the notion and the music of this foundation, "Solid Rock"

is an experiment with the ontology of sound. Like any stylist, Dylan is invested in eschatology—in imagining and singing the song of the earth’s beginnings and endings. In his performance of the song you will see Dylan at, perhaps, his most urgent, his most fulfilled. A performer normally known for his cool, detached affectations and demeanor, Dylan is full of life here, filled up with some kind of vision that escapes immediate recognition. Born again, surely, but also overtaken by his artistic escape behind the empty arrow of time, into the dust and the sediment of the earth’s history and of the blocked-out, solid musical time of its future. Born again, of the spirit, giving the spirit a material dimension, singing songs that seek out the pleasures and mysteries contained in the natural world that live on and remain even in spite of the agnostic arrow of empty time.

This is a spiritual song, yes, but one rooted in reality, one that finds the spirit in the place where it meets the bone. “It’s the ways of the flesh//the war against the spirit//24 hours a day//You can see it and you can hear it//Using every angle//Under the sun//And He never give up, ‘til the battle’s lost or won.” The song is doing battle with the war against the spirit, the arrow of time; in defense of itself, it creates a “wall of sound” (like Phil Spector’s wall of sound) as a will to power. An act of style, again, the song tries to make a life for itself, using creative expression and sonic momentum to build up an untimely rhythmic wall of aliveness in a world that seems dead. Here, Dylan’s spiritual becoming is also an opening up to the future already imbedded in the earth’s sediment casting its shadow on the present. This born again becoming is, like all becomings, based in the admirable and mysterious self-recognition of life: Dylan opens up to the promise made by Christ in John 16:12-13: ‘I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.’” And it is in that direction that the song moves...sounding the bell of power layering dirty, grindy earthly guitars and a tight-

sprung roiled-up melodic rhythm section. The song melody is negotiable, just a foundation for Dylan's sermon, an adjunct for his style—in fact, he breaks up his melody line into chunks interrupted by a pulsing rhythm of sound—all the while chasing a sense of the universe that is justified in its solidity, that understands that the spheres of the universe which are endowed with thought and feeling cannot exist without a physical principle of *spiritual* coherence and energy. And, even after the song has finished, still it builds momentum, it spreads, like water or fire—hanging onto the solid rock made before a world where the emptiness is endless.

Conclusion: Ballad of an Untimely Man¹³¹

Bob Dylan at the Hollywood Bowl, October 2012

Unbeknownst to most of the very distracted and all too chatty members of the audience for Bob Dylan's Friday night show at the Hollywood Bowl on October 26, 2013, there was a moment when it became clear that the concert was something more like a war between Dylan and us. An untimely hero, Dylan has already pre-deceased himself; the man we heard that night was a man paving his victory trail into a world-to-come. As he spat and echoed his way through the always menacing "Ballad of a Thin Man," he had won. Dylan rose up from his seat behind the baby grand piano, where had spent most of the evening tapping his toe and crooning his hits, to grab a microphone, proceeding to prowling around the stage with a devilish grin and started in:

You walk into the room

With a pencil in your hand

You see somebody naked

¹³¹ First published in *American Quarterly*. Volume 65, Number 2. Spring 2013: 397-404

You say, "Who is that man?"

You try so hard

But you don't understand

Just what you'll say when you get home

Because something is happening here

But you don't know what it is,

Do you, Mr. Jones?¹³²

A standout track from an already formidable collection of records making up Dylan's 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*, "Ballad of a Thin Man" is a searing and grotesque send-up of the kinds of questions and ponderings that clutter the modern world and make it so noisy as well as a thinly veiled mockery of a particularly rotund journalist that gained Mr. Dylan's ire back on one of his infamous tours through England in the early sixties where he and his band electrified and busted up the genteel folk audiences who had at one time come to concerts to kneel beneath his gilded toes but who now called him Judas and screamed at him to go home. His fans wondered then why Bob Dylan had forsaken them? Why couldn't he respect the place given to him in the pantheon of American folk music and just sing the damn songs the folks wanted to hear? And how could this so-called voice of a generation commit sins of self-righteous individuality and still have the nerve to charge the public admission?

Still on the road and certainly still confusing and confounding audiences as he goes, Dylan has not escaped his own legacy enough to avoid the incessant drumbeat of passive aggressive admiration and rabid nostalgia that his adoring public seems to love so much. In

¹³² *Bob Dylan: Lyrics 1962-2001*: 174

some ways, it may make sense that the man that we all know and refer to as America's folk singer king may have made a quick escape from that sound and that scene just as soon as he was given credit and praise for making his way into it. Maybe the "folks" he has performed for and given himself to need Dylan even as they profess, as they always have and undoubtedly always will, that they don't really like him anymore. Maybe Dylan's dedication to his "Never Ending Tour" is a prophetic one for him. Perhaps his path is led by a righteous dedication to singing to the reprobate consuming public, hurling his songs and his tricks at them like holy water on a possessed corpse. Perhaps Dylan just wants to show us how good and true a man can be.

For Dylan, the disappointment and confusion that his live performances create for his audience are charismatic effects that he is conscious of—a performative challenge he is able to make the most of. His concerts are opportunities for fans and listeners to gather before him and enter into the very banal but always deceptively thoughtful remarks about Dylan's talents that followed him through his electrified barnstorm tour of England in 1966 and that mutated and still remained in the Hollywood Bowl's echo chamber that night in October. While not relevant, or, more pointedly, young enough, to warrant orgasmic and angry accusations of being a Judas, Dylan was the occasion for many conversations that swirled around me during that night's performance. In a different time and place, the responses I witnessed were just as mean and just as simple as the infamous ones hurled at him on his electric tour of 1966.

With their faces aglow with the blue lights of iPhone text messages and Instagram updates, the weary patrons of the Hollywood Bowl amphitheater all carried the same burdens through Dylan's October concert. Sticking to the contemporary party line given to us by insipid and sniveling rock journalists and parroted endlessly, the same questions were

on everyone's minds and mouths that night: "What song is this? I don't even recognize it!" "His voice sure is shot!" "Oh my God: he is old!" Spoken from the mouths of babies, the criticisms and thoughtful reflections on Dylan's music and career have and will always be the same. Neither given to them by God nor placed in their beaks by the Devil, the catchphrases and resounding remarks upon Dylan are unfortunate productions of modern listeners and audience members themselves. Bob Dylan's appearance at the Hollywood Bowl was, for me and in the long run, an amazing and exhausting experience. Leaning back in my chair and letting his angry shouts and horror movie Wurlitzer sounds astound me, I looked, listened and watched while Dylan worked himself over on this undeserving and unsuspecting crowd: the same one that had always been there.

Well, you walk into the room

Like a camel then you frown

You put your eyes in your pocket

And your nose on the ground

There ought to be a law

Against you comin' around

You should be made

To wear earphones

Because something is happening here//But you don't know what it is

Do you, Mr. Jones?

The song in question is, I must sheepishly admit, not so much a critique of Dylan's audience as it is a painful prodding of the music critic's motives and insinuations. The sin

Mr. Jones commits that I am not guilty of, however, is critical relevance and a real commitment to American pop culture. In the original Highway 61 version of the song, Dylan moves through the strange and warped scenery like a cowpuncher, delivering jokes and sneers about the pitiable Mr. Jones' walks through rooms he doesn't know and characters he just can't get. Unfolding behind the sound of a horror movie house organ, "Ballad of a Thin Man" sees a twisted and grotesque the world through the critic's eyes; with evangelistic zeal, Dylan writes the critic's story on the wall as one burdened by the sin of cheap confidence and covetous critical accuracy. At the end of the song, Dylan hands Mr. Jones his throat back and says "Thanks for the loan."

What in the world can this inflammatory song about the dead end of criticism do for someone who finds himself engaging in that very precarious industry? Considering that Dylan's antagonistic relationship with his audience is undergirded by and historically based on his more heated and nasty relationship with the press (and with rock journalism in particular), it is important for me to consider my responsibilities and check my own hang-ups having to do with taste and style as I attempt to work my way through the tricky task of writing about Dylan. As Sean Wilentz so aptly put it in the introduction to his 2011 book *Bob Dylan In America*, critical reception of Dylan's music is always and already polarizing.¹³³ Outside of Dylan's own insistence upon this fact from the very first moments of his career, his commercial releases have received polarizing responses. That is, Wilentz argues, the very fact that Dylan has, we all know and he himself has admitted, released bad, or at least puzzling, albums (To name a few: *Down in the Groove*, 1988; *Knocked Out Loaded*, 1986; *Live at Budokan*, 1978; *Self Portrait*, 1970) has created two kinds of critical creatures: the Dylan fanatic and apologist who will accept anything from him and, as they say, would listen to him sing

¹³³ Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*. New York: Double Day Press. 2010: 4-5

through the phone book, as well as the devil's advocate who will, much more carelessly and dangerously, always dispute the fact of Dylan's genius and disregard anything he does. We take Dylan's talent for granted as a culture when we consider his applications and performances of it; what we rarely do is humble ourselves before it or actually sit back and listen to what the man has to offer.

Devoted and dogmatic as I am with regards to Bob Dylan, I realize that it may be easy to lump me into the first of these categories. However, my interest in Dylan as a listener is and certainly ought to be different from my relationship to him as a writer and a thinker. At the heart of the critic's reception of Dylan—either for or against—lies a cancerous and totalizing nostalgia that, Dylan himself would agree, is worse than death. Either through the apologist's projections of themselves and their own histories with Dylan and his music or the naysayer's annoying remarks about Dylan having lost his appeal (remarks that, I hope I have made clear, have been there all along), the motor that drives critical responses to and affective receptions of Dylan's work move through the world carrying nostalgia and sentimentality like a tumor.

The real challenge with situating Dylan is that to get it right the writer must take very careful steps through time and space—steps that understand the ways Dylan works against the grain of nostalgic time, marching his songs to the drum beat of the future, toward an audience-to-come, an audience that might not, as Dylan well knows, ever get themselves together enough or get themselves to the great show at the end of the world. Moving back to his baby grand after "Ballad of a Thin Man" that night, Dylan and his band moved quickly into another strange number. Sounding like a futuristic take on Jimi Hendrick's own version of the song, Dylan gave the audience a performance of "All Along the Watchtower" that blended old and new, sounding like a song that had been around for thousands of years and

that would still be sung a thousand years from now. Cinematic and visual as all of Dylan's songs are, "All Along the Watchtower" is a strange piece to consider among all of his other works: clocking in at only eleven lines, Dylan still paints a horrifying picture of bleak land and scorched earth. Having once fought against the rigidity and spoiled sanctimony of American modernity, Dylan's performance had a different effect that night at the Hollywood Bowl. Traveling away from and beneath the homogenizing forces of our post-modern consumer culture and soaring into the aural space above his audience of mouth-breathing iPhone users and their constant comments over his songs, the lines in Dylan's song took on new life as they imagined a new twilight of the idols.

"There's must be some way out of here," said the joker to the thief

"There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief"

Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth

None of them along the line know what any of it is worth¹³⁴

Of course, not everyone in attendance that evening deserve my scorn and disapproving glances back in time. Inside the amphitheater that night, I could see a small population of Dylan fans that, like myself, knew all the words and anticipated each of Dylan's gestures and affectations to songs that others pretended not to recognize. Bootleg brothers of mine knew full well that Dylan wasn't just making up new lyrics on the fly that evening as he crooned and soft-shoed his way through a version of "Tangled Up in Blue" he'd been doing since at least the early eighties. Not one of us turned to our neighbors at the beginning of the show and asked "Where is he?," not knowing that Dylan performs

¹³⁴ *Bob Dylan: Lyrics 1962-2001*: 224

from behind a keyboard or piano almost entirely these days and that the tiny guy dressed in a black suit, green shirt and grey Spanish cowboy hat behind the organ singing “Ooh wee” through a jaunty version of “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere” was the man himself. Even worse, the *LA Times* itself, in a review of the show¹³⁵, perpetuated the audience’s general state of mind when it published complaints that the concert wasn’t aired on the Hollywood Bowl’s jumbotron that evening. No wonder the public was so consumed and distracted that evening: with no concert to see, what in the world were they to do? That night, thousands packed into the Hollywood Bowl, sat themselves in front of what even President Obama has agreed¹³⁶ is the most looming and important figure to ever appear in American music and tuned themselves out. Thousands of hungry souls not knowing how to sit back and listen; plugged into pop culture and constantly interfacing with multiple forms of social media and digital communication squirming in their stadium seats, repeating every one of their doubts and perplexing questions at least twice to anyone who would listen to them that night. Almighty consumer citizens poured into the Hollywood Bowl that night only to leave estranged and wondering why they had made the effort in the first place.

Music critics and academic writers of pop cultural phenomena are, unfortunately, not much better than my fellow audience members at understanding and perpetuating musical and creative virtue when they see it. Like Mr. Jones, the cultural critic walks around with its eyes in its pocket and its nose on the ground—ever in search of relevance and meaning in any form of entertainment or popular media. Untimely as ever, it is not convenient that Dylan is still alive and performing himself and his music to audiences across the globe. No

¹³⁵ Randall Roberts. “Review: Bob Dylan at the Hollywood Bowl.” *Los Angeles Times* October 27: 2012

¹³⁶ Natalie Jennings. “Presidential Medal of Freedom: Obama honors Bob Dylan, Madeline Albright and others.” *Washington Post* May 29, 2012

wonder our cranky and antagonistic bard is so set on his Never Ending Tour when most forms of praise given unto him amount to passive aggressive ways of telling him to drop dead. It is in his dogged protection of his privacy and of the private truths embedded in his music that he has been able to transfigure time and place. Like any untimely or heroic person, Dylan doesn't believe he is God, only that he is closer to God than any of us. He has lived and experienced himself in this manner and with this in mind.

To write about Dylan is necessarily to answer the kinds of questions of time, history and righteousness that all of his songs insist upon. You just can't make it through "Ballad of a Thin Man," for instance, without deciding which way you want to go when it is done: either you're with Bob or you're not; if you're a writer or a critic, then the pressure is definitely mounted upon you as to what sorts of timely or untimely claims and phrases you want to fall from your mouth once the deal goes down. For the postmodern critic, relevance—be it political, pedagogical or topical—is the trap door that is hard to miss when putting words to print with regards to this or that musical act of the moment. Like the iPhone-bound audience members witnessing, but ultimately missing Dylan's performance at the Hollywood Bowl that night, we are bound to lose out when we turn away from what's happening right in front of us, when we put our ears to the ground and miss the songs being sung right to us. The tendency has been to dissociate the performer or the song from the present moment in which it is sung; to desire cross-wired mash-ups over pure productions of ingenuity and untimely grace; to stubbornly and clumsily seek out political narratives in order to announce an artist's importance; to mistake hackneyed nostalgia and overwrought citationality in pop music for futurity of some sort.

Like my bootleg brothers spread throughout the crowd at Dylan's Hollywood Bowl show, relevance is not on my side. This untimeliness is, however, unlike nostalgia in that it

points towards what forces and creative elements can't be seen by contemporary logic rather than overindulging in scripts and narratives that we all know too well. Songs, if they succeed in any way in and of themselves, are concepts—rolls of the dice on a future moment and of a future landscape. When Dylan penned his “Ballad of a Thin Man,” he was surely venting, painting a picture of one or, more likely, a whole host of characters that really did impinge upon and limit his existence as an artist with confounding amounts and forms of media attention upon him. Still, though, his castigations and grotesque lamentations remain as possible sites of future ideas and lines of flight towards righteous creative forms in the world to come. To hear and anticipate these thunderous echoes, all you have to do is listen.

Against the maelstrom of noisy complaints and a glowing sea of cell phone screens, I held on tight that evening at the Hollywood Bowl as Dylan growled and his voice echoed through the amphitheater and out into the wilderness. Shadowy and imposing, Dylan's words and his graven image conjured up, if just for those two hours he was on stage, a world lost and a world gone wrong.

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