Beyond Subversion:
Raising Doubt through Ancient Scriptures in Contemporary Novels

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ABSTRACT

"Beyond Subversion" argues that contemporary postmodern novels raise doubt through their invocations, reimaginations, and emulations of ancient scriptures, and further, that the doubt raised by these novels is a positive literary development that extends to cultural and political as well as philosophical and theological discourse. While subversion effectively overturns the hierarchies of dualist narratives, doubt takes resistance beyond subversion by pulling narratives out of unnecessarily violent yet hegemonically enforced opposition. That postmodern novels can inaugurate such a reconciliation project is a function of the textual and modal hybridity that obtains when they recruit religious language to counteract the fundamentalist narratives shaping our institutions – it is what I am calling a retro-realist (or, in the cases of *Song of Solomon* and *The Satanic Verses*, retro-magical realist) form that appeals aesthetically if also counterintuitively. A prologue provides context regarding my dissertative commitments while also defining the keywords in my title. My introductory chapter sets the stage with what I call a macro tutor text because I read Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* as doubting at the highest possible level. From there, the novels explored in my first chapter are E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, both of which invoke scripture to doubt canonical national historical narratives in America. In my second chapter, I explore apocryphal reimaginations of canonical scripture in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* by Joshua Ferris, novels that doubt the premises of a triumphalist posthistoricism that erases the possibility of meaningful disagreement in favor of difference. My third chapter takes Adam Levin's *The Instructions* and Doctorow's *City of God* as apocryphal emulations of canonical scripture that doubt the metaphysical perfection of the divine. Finally, my epilogue makes the case for a post-subversive literary future by exploring contemporary theory's uses of scriptural rhetoric to suggest that Haraway's cyborg may reverently resist a new enemy: the *mis*-informatics of domination.

My prologue explains the logic of my evolved title, my shift from "The Apocryphal Thought" to "Beyond Subversion: Raising Doubt through Ancient Scriptures in Contemporary Novels." As both options had taken works influential to my own development as their templates, this space affords me an opportunity to orient my project according to those influences, who are Timothy Morton and Linda Williams, respectively. Sketching my scope and parameters as I define each of the keywords in my new title (minus "subversion," as that is reserved for the introduction), the prologue blends formalist understandings of *mode* and *genre* with new historicist understandings of neoliberalism to contextualize the hybridity of contemporary postmodern novels infused with ancient scriptures. Calibrating in this way also gives me the opportunity to explain how a project focused on the blending of textual modes from a postmodern standpoint shares points of contact and affinities with similarly focused studies while also carving a new niche.

My introduction unpacks my remaining keyword, *subversion*, and it demonstrates not only the need to go *plus ultra* but also the contemporary novelist's willingness to do so – and to leave theorists behind in the process. Starting from the premise that subversion depends on structuralist hierarchies, I embark on a four-stage tour of unnecessarily opposed narratives. The first stage reads anti-CRT legislation and it interrogates the rhetorical work of asking "how do you oppose the Holocaust?" The second stage of the tour traces the manufactured opposition that exists between Pan and Christ, which, through an isomorphic chain that links an immanence-transcendence opposition to a science-religion opposition, reads Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* to ask "how do you oppose the new materialism?" The third stage provides a respite from what I am calling discursive dissonance so that we can appreciate what I call literary harmonies. Here I draw from work done with Clare Kinney in analyzing Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* as an example of (what I *also* call) a modal pairing: the successful coming

together of the Onegin stanza and contemporary postmodern narrative fiction. The rhetoric of asking "how do you oppose modal pairings?" builds on the positivity from the previous stage in its suggestion that combined modes need not be destined to zero-sum relationships. Rather, they can be mutually enhancing. Finally, a contemplative stage rounds out the tour with a somber look at *Winter's Bone* by Daniel Woodrell to ask in all earnestness, "how do you oppose messages from the fist of gods?" – which is to say, what work is being done by Woodrell's mysterious use of scripture?

In Chapter One, I dive into novelists invoking scripture by reading E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. These novels doubt the nationalist discourse that justifies everything from the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in a climate of McCarthyism to the Vietnam War in a climate of Cold War paranoia (on Doctorow's side) to the lynching of Emmett Till and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing by the KKK in a climate of systematized racism (on Morrison's side). Doctorow's invocation of the biblical book of Daniel serves to establish the structure of a *roman à clef* so that ancient Babylonian despotism illuminates contemporary US imperialism, but it also magnifies doubt by casting an overwhelming despair on the national historical discourse. Doctorow's rampant use of ellipses in excising the hopeful moments of the invoked biblical text leads to what I call the -7 effect, wherein the novel's narration assumes the shape of an unmarked elision, an elision without its ellipsis, which at once constitutes a statement and an interpretation of that same statement, confirming Theophilus Savvas's claim that "Daniel has had to recreate his past in order to analyze it." I then turn to Morrison by building on this discovery of how scripture that is invoked with incomplete/elided citational reference constitutes a decidedly selective postmodern strategy. After an examination of how the biblical naming practices in *Song of Solomon* give the effect of carefully controlled accidents, I suggest that the novel's epigraph is "missing its belly button" – its mark of a source or origin – just as Morrison's character named Pilate is missing her belly button. The lack of a traceable origin compels speculation. My speculation is that Morrison draws from the biblical book of Isaiah to concoct a hopeful, future-oriented doubt, one that turns Doctorow's despairing, past-oriented doubt on its head even as its cognate strategy of elided reference is intensified.

Chapter Two elaborates on the nature of doubt – re-theorized here as belief about belief, meta-belief – by turning from national historical discourse to the premises, implications, and questions raised by Walter Benn Michaels's articulation of posthistoricism. For Michaels, posthistorical logic stipulates the dispensation of *religious belief as belief* in favor of *religious belief as identity*. I use this as occasion for unveiling what I call the prophecy problematic and how I see this problematic represented by contemporary novelists. Josh Emmons and his *Prescription for a Superior Existence* is my literary starting point en route to my readings of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Joshua Ferris's *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*. Through the prism of prophecy problematic, I show that the posthistoricist formula in which belief is shoehorned into identity is thwarted, but not in a way that the recuperation of religious belief *as belief* is available to its protagonists. As a solution, I trace *avatar* from its Sanskrit etymology to James Cameron's blockbuster hit *Avatar* to sketch what I refer to as the avatar dynamic, a mechanism by which our protagonists wield virtuality to negotiate the severance of belief from identity and the dislocations that transpire when belief-in becomes belief-about (Rushdie) or vice versa (Ferris). The upshot for Rushdie and Ferris is that doubting one's beliefs and believing in one's doubt are available alternatives to those who find themselves caught between their disavowals of posthistoricism and the essentialist politics of difference that have come to epitomize the age of Empire, despite any such disavowals.

In my third chapter, I read for doubt directed at totalizing metaphysical interpretations of divinity. Doctorow and Adam Levin supply doubt of this nature in *City of God* and *The Instructions*, respectively.

Levin's novel features an intoxicating protagonist named Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee, a ten-year-old Jewish boy from Chicago who thinks that he might become the Messiah. The novel dramatizes itself as Gurion's recorded scripture, and it opens with a "Blessings" section that includes a call to "forgive" Adonai for His "mistakes": "Because you know that Your mistakes, though a part of You, are nonetheless mistakes, we accept that Your mistakes, though Yours, are ours to repair." Doctorow gestures similarly by writing of a priest converted from Episcopalianism to Reform Judaism who prays aloud, "I think we must remake You. If we are to remake ourselves, we must remake You, Lord. We need a place to stand." While the language of repair has deep Kabbalistic roots in the Hebrew concept of *tikkun olam*, we see in contemporary American literature a radicalization of this tradition that exceeds Judaic mysticism and extends to philosophical foundationalisms more broadly. Drawing from these novels and a smattering of other contemporary American fictions (e.g., *Jitterbug Perfume* by Tom Robbins and *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski), this chapter explores emulations of scripture to think in critical, speculative realist, and even mystical terms about how human beliefs interact with non-human realities. A theoretical synthesis centering on Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign* provides a lens through which we see that these contemporary American novels update and intensify the notorious proclamation by Nietzsche's parabolic madman that "God is dead." New, novelistic interpretations hold this cryptic aphorism to be less a rejection of God per se and more a rejection of "the metaphysicians and moralists" (Hart's phrase) who use "God" as a sobriquet for "the totalizing perfection of a *chosen* ground" (my phrase): what's "dead" now is a correlationist adequation of *what is wanted* with *what actually is*. Resurrected from this death is realist speculation: *what* might *be*. To imagine imperfection but also potentiality into foundationalist traditions is to imagine discursive futures not governed by metaphysics or moralism, which is to imagine repairs to cracked foundations that extend from religious to political discourse. We need new ground – rather urgently, it turns out. A sober, speculative, mystical form of realism might just offer us firmer footing, "a place to stand," as suggested by novels that emulate scripture in order doubt metaphysical and moralist foundations.

I conclude this dissertation with a reflection on contemporary theory's own use of religious language. Canvassing how Karen Barad uses the word "scripture" in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, how Jane Bennett concludes *Vibrant Matter* with a rewrite of the Nicene Creed, and how Donna Haraway deploys religious language in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," this epilogue valorizes theory that novelizes itself into that doubting posture whose silhouette is backlit by literary sensibilities, post-subversive positivity, and anti-reductionist affirmation. I argue here for a reverent cyborg figure to contend with what I call the Mis-Informatics of Domination.

PROLOGUE

Toward Modal Hybridities

They're the subjects of fate no less than anyone else, the difference being they're being spared the offense of ascribing it to God's will.
- Joshua Ferris, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*

For the last two years, the working title of this dissertation has been "The Apocryphal Thought," a riff on Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* (2010). The idea came to me in the early part of 2020, when Anne McConnell of West Virginia State University issued a call for papers for a special edition of *Humanities* premised on the notion that Morton "argues for a form of ecocriticism that refuses to limit itself to works of literature and art that are *about* something explicitly ecological."[1] In homage to Morton's oeuvre and as a function of their influence on my work, "The Apocryphal Thought" was to be my dissertative sobriquet for a critical literary theory that rethinks *modes of textuality* such that apocryphal thinking refuses to limit itself to apocryphal texts. "The Apocryphal Thought" was going to be a literary project concerned not just with mystical texts beset by dubious authorship or authority, questionable authenticity, and/or obscured by antiquity; the apocryphal thought was *also and especially* going to engage *canonical* scriptures and contemporary novels as forms of writing that interconnect across vast media ecologies. After all, these kinds of writing – canonical scriptures and contemporary novels – had been my primary focus before apocryphal texts unexpectedly asserted their relevance to my exploration, surprising me not just with how much attention they demanded but also with the extent to which my apocryphal insights seemed applicable to other textual spheres.

Like Morton's ecological thought, an apocryphal thought was to exceed that which gave rise to it, outstripping its own impetus and culminating in a Great Big Theory. Apocryphal thinking would

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[1] The original CFP is still available at https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2020/04/14/opening-the-ecological-text, while the special issue of *Humanities* that developed out of that CFP is available at https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/ecological_text. Both URLs accessed on 15 April 2022.

have revealed how even "non-apocryphal" modes of scripture and secular postmodern narrative fiction, which might otherwise be thought to constitute opposing canons at the extreme ends of a textual spectrum, are mediated by or shot through with apocryphal paradigms. Just as Morton demonstrates how everything, including us, is always already *ecological*, I was going to demonstrate how all texts are always already *apocryphal*, and I was going to do it in the same way: through the deconstructive dance of decentering and recentering, a theoretical tango revealing how all texts are susceptible to becoming "hidden away writings" (following the etymology of *apocrypha scripta*), pushed from a textual metropole to the periphery. If McConnell, in conjunction with her *Humanities* co-editor, Kent Shaw, was keen on "opening the ecological text," I wanted to open the apocryphal text by way of an apparatus that would give voice to the textual equivalent of the subaltern.

There were, and still are, many reasons for me to be excited by the prospect of an apocryphal thought. Sentimentally, I admire Morton's style and spirit, but more than that, I am partial to the way in which Morton and I intersect specifically at the University of Virginia, and I am impressed by the bearing of that intersection on my own academic trajectory. On the scholarly side, I admire what Morton has done with deconstruction, and I am proud of having found a way to be guided by two very different Derridean theorists in Morton and Kevin Hart, to synthesize them for the purpose of contributing to a literary conversation that concerns textual decenteredness. At a time when the appeal of Derridean deconstruction is receding swiftly into the past, when my cohort responds categorically to any mention of Derrida with the same sighs that they had previously reserved for figures like Marx and Freud, I still want to think about narrative in light of what deconstruction offers.[2] The "still" in that last sentence refers not just to the fact that I'm writing in 2022, but also to the fact that I have been exploring the relationship between ancient scripture and contemporary postmodern forms ever since I became serious about studying literature, way back in 2011.

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[2] Consider, for instance, that Daniel Punday's *Narrative After Deconstruction* (2003) is already nineteen years old.

Why *still*? Because deconstruction still helps me to think, to deliver my best literary insights. Hart and Morton prove that you can *still* draw from deconstruction momentously and meaningfully, progressively and provocatively, radically and realistically. They show that it can be useful in new ways, since they apply it to theology and ecology, respectively. But my insistence that deconstruction still assists in my thinking is even more audacious given that I'm not looking for any new outlet or au courant application. I'm *still* wanting to apply it to *literary texts*, and my overarching claim is that there are still un- and under-explored ways of doing so; underneath that claim are smaller supporting claims about literary modes and aesthetics, and their philosophical and perhaps theological implications.[3]

Yet my claims do not amount to a proper "apocryphal thought," nor do they "open the apocryphal text," or at least not yet. I intend to continue my pursuit of an apocryphal thought, but in the meantime, I admit that it is one of those things that I picked up and put down in the dissertative process. Lots of things get picked up and put down over the course of writing a dissertation. I picked up Toni Morrison and put down William Faulkner. I picked up new materialism and put down narrative theory. I picked up interdisciplinarity with Religious Studies and a new committee member in Kevin Hart as I put down my diatribe against representationalism. I held on to my hope for an apocryphal thought for longer than most of these other things. *The thought of* the apocryphal thought powered me through the apocryphal legends showcased in my second chapter, which is my best work, and Morton's academic aesthetic has helped me to find my own voice, so there are real and important ways in which the hints and traces of an apocryphal thought – as that which uses a textualist's figure of indeterminacy to critique the canon, to doubt hegemonic certainties – linger with enduring promise throughout my project. And, though I know that it is not yet fully developed, I nevertheless experiment with aspects of it in the pages of this dissertation.

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[3] Literary texts, for me, include scripture; I am extending the notion – and the popular class title within English departments – of "the Bible as literature" to something more encompassing and inclusive: "*scripture* as literature."

Meanwhile, throughout my picking-up and putting-down process, I remained committed to two core elements from start to finish. These include an unwavering impulse to explore doubt in contemporary novels and an eerily strong formalist conviction that doubt in contemporary novels has something to do with textual modality. These two core elements from which I never strayed deserve a new working title. As with "The Apocryphal Thought," my new title pays homage to a work that has deeply influenced me. "Beyond Subversion" owes itself to a piece called "Beyond Genre," which Linda Williams shared with me in draft form after delivering it as a talk in Paris in 2019. Prior to her Paris talk, I had heard her deliver a keynote address, in person, at the International Conference on Narrative in Lexington, Kentucky in 2017, and I learned why she prefers *mode* over *genre* when it comes to thinking about tragedy and melodrama. Tragedy and melodrama, Williams tells us, are modes; genres occur *within* these modes.[4] Analogously, it strikes me that various genres occur in both scripture and in postmodern novels, too, providing a reason to think of them both modally rather than generically. I thus see Williams as providing a new and transportable way of thinking about textualities at the largest scale, in addition to contributing fascinatingly to the study of what she calls the "body genres" and thereby expanding our understanding of tragedy and, particularly, melodrama.[5]

The *Beyond* in my title, then, signifies my movement, following Williams, past genres in favor of textual modes, while also carrying us past a titular *Subversion*. This means that when I discuss the phenomenon in which postmodern novels make use of ancient scriptures, I am really discussing how and why a *textual mode makes use of another textual mode*. By itself, this intermixing of modes radicalizes Williams, since she does not explore melodramatic uses of tragedy or tragic uses of melodrama. For

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[4] Note that James Phelan objects: "Tragedy and melodrama," he says after being handed a microphone during the Q&A portion of the keynote, "are genres!" Phelan is not alone. Amy M. King opens *The Divine in the Commonplace* (2019) with the claim that "natural histories that come out of the natural theological tradition are…a mode of English realism" (1), which, for her, is a genre, so the genre houses sub-modes. I happen to find Williams both more intuitive and more convincing, as there is a way in which the whole point of "Beyond Genre" is to tighten these terms so that they are not just loosely used to convey *a kind of form*.

[5] Body genres refer to pornography, horror, and melodrama – but Williams realized that the last on that list "refused to behave like a genre."

her, the modes don't mix; or, the one doesn't "make use" of the other. In fact, Williams tells us that they are at ideological odds with each other, and thus incompatible. Hart asks: "What provides the greatest resistance to postmodernism?" And he answers: "Many people, both advocates of and critics of postmodernism, would have no hesitation in nominating the Bible" (2004, 109). The idea of such ostensibly incompatible modes working together – compatibly – is what captures my attention. [6]

In my accounting, such an apparent antithesis between modes is precisely what allows them a *plus ultra* trajectory that carries them not just beyond genre but also subversion. When postmodernist writers bring scripture into their textual orbits, they are not just flipping scripts, upending long-standing traditions, appropriating language, or ironizing worldviews. *They are also and more importantly raising doubts.* These writers and their works are cultivating a weaponized, politically efficacious and agential aesthetic that goes beyond even the subversive resistance of normative power structures and into something like a desirably doubtful post-subversive future. As my introductory chapter explains what I mean by a post-subversive literary future, I first offer in this prologue clarifications of the other keywords in my title and then briefly situate my project relative to others with which it may converse productively. From there, our desirably doubtful post-subversive literary futures await.[7]

As to the keywords, I use *doubt* deliberately, and not interchangeably with philosophical skepticism, aporia, unbelief, or even uncertainty. Philosophical skepticism seriously entertains and

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[6] That is, scripture and postmodern narrative fiction seem to be philosophically incompatible in terms of their respective stances toward such things as knowledge, truth, and referentiality. In terms of postmodernist literary projects, however, scripture may be seen by some not only to be compatible with postmodernism, but to be implied by *anything* (postmodernist or otherwise) that involves language. Norman Finkelstein provides an excellent overview of the debate as to whether scripture and postmodern poetry do, or do not, "go together," in *On Mount Vision* (2010, "Introduction"). By the same token, various scriptures have been read in a referentially unstable, postmodern light; c.f. mobile symbols such as "Israel," or what some have called the metafictional elements of scripture, like Deuteronomy, which "distinctively narrates the process of its own formation (31:1-12) while also anticipating its existence and completion (17:18; 28:58; 30:10)" (Levinson 1997, 249), and in which the text's authors become interpreters of their own texts – just as Doctorow's Daniel becomes an interpreter of his own text. So when I say that two modes of textuality *seem* not to go together, I am essentially confirming Finkelstein's summary of the contemporary moment: "Today, in the light of postmodern forms of knowledge and of an experimental poetry such as [Michael] Palmer's, apparently dedicated to deconstructive procedures, to linguistic and epistemological skepticism, and to a radically secular worldview, we may be reluctant to discuss the relationship of [postmodern forms] to the sacred" (3).

[7] I suspect that this phrase – *desirably doubtful post-subversive literary futures* – is a subliminal reflection of Mohsin Hamid's twice-used phrase from *Exit West* (2017) that I have echoing in my head: the search for a "plausible desirable future" (217).

sometimes even believes in "the scandal of philosophy," which, briefly stated, is the impossibility of proving that phenomenological experience has any extramental bases. The icons of this long-standing scandal range from an "evil demon" (Descartes) to "a dream within a dream" (Poe) to "brains in a vat" (Gilbert Harman) to the Matrix trilogy (the Wachowski brothers), each of which tends to be treated as a tantalizing thought experiment but none of which can be disproven. Aporia, a keyword for deconstructionism, results from noticing things like logical contradiction, paradox, and un-resolvability while also believing in the Law of Non-Contradiction in its many guises, from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead. Unbelief, a keyword for readers of Mark 9:24, is a weakness of faith that believes in its own lack of strength and it is a category in which I anachronistically file away Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives."[8] Uncertainty, a keyword for feminists and readers of scripture alike, reacts to incomplete or less than satisfactory information, or to conclusions drawn from incomplete or less than satisfactory information, and it believes itself to be justified on these grounds.[9] Doubt, by contrast, is the keyword that I took from the novelist Joshua Ferris because it works systematically through claims of truth and knowledge that *do* present themselves as complete and viable; through *strong* beliefs; through *squared-off* resolutions, *balanced-*ledgers, and *non*-contradictions; through realist ontologies that *do* seek an exit from the cul-de-sac of phenomenology. That is, *doubt remains active even in the conditions that deactivate its near synonyms*. Doubt attends to all that doesn't invite it: canons, hegemonies, organized religions – sites of sureness and non-apocrypha. As such, doubt can be an affective and cognitive approach to anything, and it doesn't need to be literary, nor does it need to be positive. What I am noticing, however, is a decidedly literary

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[8] In Chapter Two, I parse even the difference between "unbelief," as found in Mark 9:24, and Rushdie's use of "disbelief."

[9] Though I dispense with uncertainty here in favor of doubt, it remains for me a worthwhile concept that has helped me greatly throughout this project. Mark Schaefer's *The Certainty of Uncertainty: The Way of Inescapable Doubt and Its Virtue* (2018), which conflates uncertainty and doubt (as is evident from the title), emerges as a productive point of reference about midway through my second chapter. In addition, Samantha Wallace, with whom I have crossed paths on several occasions as we both dissertate with mutual interests in feminism and narrative theory, describes her project, *Epistemic Uncertainties*, as one that "argues for the value of uncertainty to feminist theory as a way of acknowledging the complexities of representations of sexual violence." I look forward to exploring ways in which our dissertations may illuminate each other.

version of positive doubt that springs from a particular aesthetic and which, in turn, is agential.[10] I drill down on the technicalities of doubt, defining it as "a belief about belief" (Morton's phrase that surpasses Amy Hungerford's "belief *in* belief") in my second chapter, which means, too, that I must define belief, which I distinguish from mentations like faith and conviction, and – in my third chapter – from idealizations like hopes, wishes, and desires. Doubt in this specific, contemporary, literary-aesthetic sense arises from the seemingly antithetical relationship between scripture and postmodern novels…

…which brings me to my next keywords. Officially, I have "*ancient* scripture*s*" in my title because I want to juxtapose their antiquity with the contemporaneity of "contemporary novels," but also because I want to emphasize the plurality of scriptures ranging from the Hebrew Bible of Judaism to the Old and New Testaments of Christianity to the Qur'an to the Bhagavad Gita to other Vedic Hindu texts to the Buddhist Tripitaka to the Confucian Analects, and so on. While my project is limited in scope and does not examine appearances by each one of these scriptures in contemporary novels, I do make a point of giving good treatment to more than a single scriptural tradition. Whereas "scripture" sometimes serves in other studies as a loose handle for just "Bible," in other words, I really want for "scripture" to mean *scripture*. This has less to do with some lofty egalitarianism and more to do with the intellectual work of reckoning with *scripture as a kind of writing* – indeed, scripture qua textual mode. In this respect, I'm also tempted to refer to Scripture (de-natured and singularized) to indicate *the concept* of scripture, or *the Platonic form* of scripture, or *conceptual scripture-ness* – indeed, again, qua

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[10] In response to my second chapter, Hart notes that I "broach the issue of modalizing" and goes on to explain that "religious persons are often modalizing, that is, passing from faith to questioning to doubt to certainty, and so on, in one or another article of belief. One might doubt, but not in a way one would wish to call negative; it is a spur to understanding. One might believe an article of faith devoutly yet, in doing theology, see reasons to deepen, extend, or narrow what actually is believed. This is more or less inevitable given that several key teachings are mysteries, that is, they concern themselves with different modalities of divine hiddenness." I am grateful for such a clean articulation of my positive feelings about doubt. David Newheiser's work heads in much the same direction, per this podcast called "Embracing Doubt": https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-zm38z-d91e57 (accessed 31 May 2022). The only thing I would add is that I'm so in favor of doubt's broader applications that I extend from "religious persons" to "novelists," which is another way of saying that I'm in favor of bringing a religious sensibility to pedagogies of literature and, in turn, everything.

textual mode or literary identity. Also included and receiving treatment, of course, are those shadowy and apocryphal texts whose scriptural credentials are not always recognized: Gnostic texts from the Nag Hammadi, references to texts featuring Nu from Egyptian mythology, Babylonian creation myth (*Enuma Elish*), the putative legend of Islam's Satanic Verses, and mystical Kabbalah, for instance, have also been identified in this dissertation as "scriptural" works used by postmodern novels to raise doubt. Last but not least, contemporary novels have made use of *the concept of scripture* (ancient scriptures or Scripture) simply by inventing them: Josh Emmons imagines the *Prescription for a Superior Existence* in his novel of the same title, and Joshua Ferris imagines the Cantaveticles in *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (more ancient, even, than the Book of Job!). These are two purely fictional scriptures that I analyze in detail in this dissertation in hopes of expressing as capaciously as possible what I mean by *the concept of scripture as a textual mode.*

Now for "contemporary novels," which may be at once the most straightforward *and* the most slippery of my title's terms: straightforward because I really do mean novels written recently, slippery because I will also refer to them as *postmodern*. In my first chapter, my use of the term postmodern is a function of my reliance on Linda Hutcheon's notion of "historiographic metafiction," which for her is one manifestation of "a poetics of postmodernism." Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction is also a remarkably specific and apt way of thinking about E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the novels that I examine in that first chapter. To attach the term postmodern to these novels is not to periodize them so much as to formalize them, to focus on *how* their stories get told. But this formalist *how* of storytelling reflects some broader theories of the postmodern, theories that essentially rethink history and, in doing so, describe the conditions to which the novels that I examine are responding. Indeed, "what historiographic metafiction explicitly does,"

Hutcheon explains, "is to cast doubt on the very possibility of *any* firm 'guarantee of meaning'" (55).[11]

Hutcheon continues in her explanation of historiographic metafiction to describe the discursive and poststructuralist program of "radical doubting" (55) that thinkers like Derrida and Foucault helped to establish, which is to say that she fans out from describing a literary aesthetic to describing what that literary aesthetic has to do with non-literary conditions. Hutcheon connects the doubt of a postmodern form with the doubt stemming from "the cold placidness of postmodernity" in which "the co-presence of the productive subject and the process of liberation is utterly inconceivable," as Hardt and Negri have it in *Empire* (2000, 64).[12] Kevin Hart's description of postmodernity in *Postmodernism* (2004) aligns with Hardt and Negri's account to the extent that whereas modernity afforded a productive subject "some mastery over the world," postmodernity eliminates it: "There can be no controlling of reality here" (69). A quick tally reveals what is radically doubted in postmodernity: the very possibility of any firm guarantee of meaning (Hutcheon by way of Belsey) and thus knowledge (Lyotard), the co-presence of the productive subject and the process of liberation (Hardt and Negri), mastery over the world and the controlling of reality (Hart). Lest we think these are discrete forfeitures, we can see that Hart links them, since he glides seamlessly from the loss of mastery and control of the modern subject to the loss of meaning and truth when he suggests that "postmodern men and women will seek meaning and truth, although they will also be aware, uneasily so, that being itself undercuts the possibility of meaning and truth" (69).

Hart's observation cuts to the core of something resembling a return from melodrama to tragedy in our postmodern moment, from the prevailing melodramatic and decidedly modernist mindset that humanity can and will regulate *that which is unacceptable* (Williams, stamping for emphasis

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[11] The quoted "guarantee of meaning" is in reference to Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (1980). Belsey uses it "to make the connection between the aesthetics [of postmodernism] and the social, historical, and institutional" (Hutcheon 54).

[12] Reading the suffixes, postmodern**ity** refers to a condition or set of conditions; postmodern**ism** to an ideology; and the postmodern (no suffix) to a manifestation – product/outcome, reflection/symptom, representation/projection – of these conditions and/or ideology.

in Lexington, KY, in response to Phelan; see fn. 4) to an uneasy awareness that our attempts to regulate the unacceptable are – rather unacceptably – doomed. I could have reversed Nietzsche and called this dissertation "The Death of Melodrama," but that would have been melodramatic. Morton: the climate catastrophe is already and unacceptably here. Yes, this is tragic even for the posthumanist. When we say "global warming," what we really mean is "extinction event for many species, including humanity." This won't do, it is tragically unacceptable. Accepting the unacceptable is the entire point of Morton's *Being Ecological* (2018), and Hart is in lockstep with Morton in demonstrating how accepting the unacceptable is really, sometimes, to accept nonhuman ontologies that annihilate human-scaled epistemologies. Indeed, "being itself undercuts the possibility of meaning and truth." *Accepting* entails *not knowing why* entails *believing* entails *doubting*. An odd modal twist obtains when unacceptability becomes the discursive whetstone for what Georg Lukács, in *The Theory of the Novel* (1973), describes as "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (88). The postmodern update from tragedy is that now we are less the victims of vengeful gods, or even of ourselves and what's inside us (hubris, pride), and more the victims of a cruel neoliberal optimism, à la Lauren Berlant (2011), that molds our futilely striving subjectivities. Redirecting Ferris from my epigraph: *we're* the subjects of fate no less than anyone else, the difference being *we're* spared the offense of ascribing it to God's will. Hubris and bloodthirsty gods brought about some bitter endings, but at least their meanings were clear. Things got out of order and needed to be rectified. We knew why we suffered: to balance the cosmic ledger. What sense can we make of the harsh fates that befall us not because we know ourselves to be out of line, but because the meaning and truth of the line itself have been undercut?

If this is the question taken up by contemporary novelists who raise doubt through recourse to the very kind of writing – scripture – that traditionally would have been used to answer the question in a different age, then it is also the question taken up by novelists who incorporate "the classical tradition" into their work, as mythology sits comfortably alongside scripture as an overlapping form

of writing that attempts to deal with what Jennifer Michael Hecht refers to as a "meaning-rupture" (2003, xii; I engage more fully with Hecht in my introduction and my second chapter).[13] In this respect, I view my study as a companion to the work of scholars like Tessa Roynon who want to know "how and why so much modern, postmodern, and/or contemporary" fiction "makes such varied and extensive use of classical Greek and Roman tradition" (2021, 1-2). The affinity is all the more striking when our explorations intersect at the crossroads of authors who develop their aesthetics by drawing on both scripture *and* the classical tradition – William Faulkner and Toni Morrison are prominent examples that underscore Roynon's focus on American fiction. We'll see, too, in my first chapter, that Doctorow pairs mythology and scripture under the aegis of "sacred writings" and uses them interchangeably in acknowledgement that they modally reflect an epoch in which science and religion had not yet been dichotomized. And in my introductory chapter, I *doubt* this science-religion dichotomy with the help of Lydia Millet.

For my part, I had conceived of this dissertation as an Americanist project – yet more affinity with Roynon – and my prospectus only took flight once I leaned into Faulkner as my point of departure.[14] It is also true that, with the exception of Salman Rushdie, I focus exclusively on contemporary American novelists: E.L. Doctorow, Toni Morrison, Josh Emmons, Joshua Ferris, and Adam Levin, with readings of Lydia Millet and Donna Haraway serving as introduction-and-conclusion bookends to the body chapters. But Rushdie is no minor inclusion, and my hunch, especially lately, is that the literary phenomenon in question can be approached just as effectively from a Global Anglophone standpoint as from an Americanist one, or, at the very least, that corpus deserves engagement. I'm unable to do without reference to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and

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[13] I adopt Bruce Lincoln's definition of mythology, who, in *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (1999) calls it "*ideology* in narrative form" (147, emphasis in original; qtd. in my article "Recrafting Israel" [2015], 336). The definition resurfaces in my discussion of Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* in Chapter One.

[14] Faulkner's biblically-inspired titles, in particular *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939) were a major focus of mine during my MA in Boulder, under the supervision of Bruce Kawin.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), for instance, in setting up my broad interpretation of what these authors are out to accomplish. Hamid has popped up already in this prologue's footnotes, while Roy is footnoted in my introduction. Besides, who is to say that novelists like these cannot be investigated according to their influence on, and their being influenced by, American literature? Randy Boyagoda puts Rushdie into the American conversation, alongside Faulkner and Ralph Ellison in *Race, Immigration, and American Identity in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner* (2008).[15] Editors Sandhya Shukla and Heidi Tinsman collaborate on more capacious and inclusive visions of "America" in *Imagining Our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame* (2007).[16] This dissertation is friendly and inclusive in matters of both periodization and regionalization.[17] My refusal to apply a strict "American authors only" tag, along with my bringing ancient and contemporary textualities together, suggests that what I begin here could carry across time and space.

My mention of Global Anglophone novelists serves another purpose in bringing hybridity to the fore as a significant aspect of "what these authors are out to accomplish." Rushdie, Roy, and Hamid, for instance, are widely read for their depictions of East-West (metropole-periphery, postmodernist-fundamentalist, etc.) hybridizations. This is not to suggest that American writers do not emphasize hybridity (Gloria Anzaldua, Karen Tei Yamashita, Louise Erdrich and a slew of others

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[15] Scott Calhoun and I, in drafting the CFP for the 2020 U2 Conference, noticed that Boyagoda examines Salman Rushdie's fiction as a space which "seeks to imagine America as embodying a set of practices. This is an extraterritorial gesture that playfully dismisses organic connections between identity, place, and history" (2008, 23). Interestingly, this is also what U2 does, so that Boyagoda and Rushdie and U2 all constitute a set of non-Americans articulating America.

[16] "Uprooted Bodies," a chapter by Michelle Stephens in *Imagining Our Americas*, actually connects my two examples (Boyagoda, Shukla and Tinsman) by drawing on the work of Roberto Fernández Retamar (1989) to note that "Rushdie evokes similar meaning of the trope in his infamous novel *The Satanic Verses*" (211, fn. 11), with "the trope" in question being "the mixing of bodies to create a mixed body…to create a New World Self" (193).

[17] Eric Hayot's "Against Periodization" (2011) was my first exposure to the critique of periodization as a critical practice. I have since discovered that Hayot's work on this topic is itself periodized, now, as part of a groundswell of attention on periodization that gained traction in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Bracketing, for the moment, the paradox that periodization research has been periodized, I believe that periodization scholars like Hayot have hit on a remarkably important and underrated facet of contemporary scholarship, and one that demonstrates our ingrained habit of separating all that is interconnected. To be "against" periodization, then, is really just to be against against-ness (in much the same way that I oppose opposition in my introductory chapter), and in the way that Walter Benn Michaels is not just "against theory" (with Steven Knapp, 1982) but "against almost everything" (Sowards, 2005), everything, that is, that is for being against.

come readily to mind), but perhaps the Global Anglophone cohort cues us up to think about hybridity from another angle. While I clearly foreground the collective accomplishment of this enlarged group of writers as *the raising of doubt through ancient scripture in contemporary novels*, stating it this way subtly acknowledges the aesthetic contours of the novelists and their work, both individually and as a movement. Their *way* of raising doubt in novels lends itself to a certain hybrid shape – a modally hybrid shape, yes, but also a temporally hybrid shape akin to something like steam- or cyberpunk, genres that delight in anachronistic blending. I contend that novels that invoke, reimagine, and emulate scripture participate in a new wave of not retrofuturism but retro-realism (or retro-magical realism). Instead of responding to technological conditions, as the retrofuturistic -punks seem to do, they are responding to a set of post-secular conditions brought on by and symptomatic of the conditions of postmodernity as described above. Or: they are doing both, so long as writing is an evolving technology (it is). Doubt is raised, but it would be a shame not to notice too that it is done exquisitely by artists who use their words to defamiliarize and reenchant the world through an aesthetic of textual and modal hybridity.

Finally, as long as I'm reflecting on literary aesthetic shapes, it's worth remarking that this retro-(magical) realism, in which the contemporary returns to and incorporates the ancient technology of *writing itself* – in which one textual mode filters another through itself – feels a lot like a complex, writerly loop.[18] Moreover, in what appears to be a case of form driving content or vice versa, there is something going on with how this observed loopy complexity shapes this dissertation. I can point

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[18] Morton's influence here is undeniable, as loops are crucial to the illustration of their argument, particularly in *Dark Ecology* (2016). In turn, Douglas Hofstadter's *I Am a Strange Loop* (2007) is a huge influence on Morton's use of loop rhetoric as well as a delightful exploration of the connection between loops and human consciousness – namely, the awareness of being aware as *the* defining loop of consciousness. In *City of God* (2000), "a mind in consideration of itself" (passim) is how Doctorow expresses the loop of human consciousness, which I explore at length in "Literary Neutrinos and the Hot Dark Matters of Doctorow's *City of God*" (2000). Finally, I would be remiss not to point out how I have built upon Bruce Kawin's *The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable* (1982) to show how authorially and systemically self-referential texts (read: metafiction; read: loops) model human consciousness, primarily in "The Mind of *Then We Came To The End*: A Transmental Approach to Contemporary Metafiction" (2017). Loops, especially "strange" ones, have a lot to teach us about ourselves and our literature. See also fn. 102.

concretely to Chapter Two, a chapter in which the ouroboros and the Möbius strip emerge out of *The Satanic Verses* and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* as guiding tropes, and in which that chapter twists and folds back on itself: one novel's *doubt in belief* segues into the other's *belief in doubt*; one novel's *cognitive conditions* vanishes into the other's *conditional cognitions*, and out of a problematic ouroboros-shaped logic (which I also call "the prophecy problematic"), a more satisfying Möbius strip-shaped logic develops (referred to, too, as "the avatar dynamic"). Both are loops, but one is self-defeating while the other is a marvel. Moreover, the gravity of my second chapter, my lodestar, seems to have pulled the rest of my chapters into its orbit, so that all that I am up to now in this dissertation swirls around its density. There must be something inherently swirly or loop-like about the critique that I attempt. Where I succeed, Möbius strip; where I fail, ouroboros. The loop-like meta-trick, though, is to doubt even the marvelous loop – the successful one – and not just the one that is so obviously self-defeating. This is the lesson of ancient scripture and contemporary novels, of the hybrid loop that together they create.

INTRODUCTION

Beyond Subversion:
Discursive Dissonance, Literary Harmonies, and the Appeal of the Apocryphon

I'd join the movement
If there was one I could believe in
I'd break bread and wine
If there was a church I could receive in
- U2, "Acrobat"

I don't think quantum physics will save us.
I've seen the Himalayan monks in the Ding Bouché
Watching digital porn on their Enlightenment phones
Pattern Recognition and Black-Op Namasté
- Jerry Joseph, "Sugar Smacks"

This marriage between postmodernism and fundamentalism is certainly an odd coupling considering that postmodernist and fundamentalist discourses stand in most respects in polar opposition: hybridity versus purity, difference versus identity, mobility versus stasis. It seems to us that postmodernists and the current wave of fundamentalists have arisen not only at the same time but also in response to the same situation, only at opposite poles of the global hierarchy, according to a striking geographical distribution.
- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*

This introduction frames contemporary mandates to put narratives into opposition and then suggests that contemporary postmodern novels using scripture are one literary way of resisting these forced oppositions. En route to demonstrating the power of the novel using scripture in this way, I offer a four-part progression, a scaffolding that takes us from a political case study that highlights the contemporary, real-world consequences of the problem (Part One), to theoretical and literary treatments of the problem (Part Two), to an unpacking of those treatments with a view toward a possible solution (Part Three), to an open-ended meditation on the limits of this possible solution (Part Four). Each of the four parts is built on a "How Do You Oppose _____?" chassis, wherein a rotation of terms occupies the blank space in order to *critique*, *theorize*, *imagine*, and *reflect* (in that order), and to do so by turning a rhetoric of problematic certainty into a rhetoric of productive doubt. This "How Do You Oppose _____?" leitmotif starts sardonically but ends sincerely.

Part One: The Sticky Residue of Certainty – Or – How Do You Oppose <u>the Holocaust</u>?

  I am absolutely slathered in certainty's slime. I was born in Temple, Texas in 1980. As a product of this time and place, I am keenly aware of two opposing choices that permeate every aspect of Texan life: I am either *with* or *against* others, generally translated as *identifying with* or *opposing.* Evidently these are my options, hardwired to resist the dialectic.[19] I find that I tend to be problematic for well-meaning and well-adjusted others as I navigate these options. I am frequently "with" those with whom I do not "identify," just as I am frequently "against" those with whom I *do* "identify."[20]

  Certainty like this is not confined to the political or religious right. It is neither an exclusive province of religious fundamentalism nor of atheistic scientism. Though we tend to think of these camps as being diametrically opposed, they converge on common (il)literacies and pedagogies that propagate further illusions of opposition, enabling further illusions of certainty; my third epigraph, above, attests to this convergence, "this marriage." Against-ness is a scripture-derived formula, but that hasn't prevented it from making plenty of cameos for both the right and the left throughout history, and these cameos have been sacred and secular, canonical and apocryphal. In central Texas during my lifetime, however, *either you're with us or against us* has been wielded primarily by the religious right to press "identities" like mine into the service of a militaristic group *identity* that trades its scare-quotes for italics. My response is that I am just as frequently "with" other nations as I am "against" my own. I am presented with either/or choices that crescendo in a nationalistic mantra. *Either you are*

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[19] By which I mean that not much meaningful discourse is available to navigate across or between the two positions; neither a Hegelian synthesis nor a Marx-Engels-style coexistence is to be found in the "for us or against us" mantra. Jim Seitz once commented that "American discourse is broken," and I agree.

[20] Alison Booth suggested to me that a touch more specificity would help to solidify the notion that this "with us or against us" mentality is truer in Texas than elsewhere in my lifetime. It sounded like a reasonable suggestion, so I dutifully set to work on adding a touch more specificity. What I realized, however, is that I'm not actually trying to suggest that this *is* truer of Texas than other locations, simply that being from Texas has made me keenly aware of it (it has! I felt it much more acutely in Texas than, say, New Zealand…but New Zealand is notorious for its protectionist stance against immigrants, which, as an outsider, I *also* felt). Were I from India, for instance, I might feel similarly, or not. In *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy writes that "people always loved best what they identified with" (94). While not an identical statement, it certainly opens the door for "loving best" and "identifying with" to line up neatly with "being with, not against." In any case, Texas has made quite the go of it, culturally and politically. In an early draft of my third chapter, I aired out the relativist implications of what it might have meant *to me* to have been born, say, in first century Taprobane, known today as Sri Lanka.

with us or you are with the terrorists. The mantra structures a polarized and polarizing worldview, which was true even before a Texan president used it to re-structure American nationalism in the wake of 9/11. But even before 9/11, a boy growing up in central Texas could be certain that the Cold War was the result of two kinds of different – and therefore hostile – ideologies that couldn't coexist. *Either you are with us or you are with Soviet Communists.* The evangelical Protestantism that I grew up with was most certainly the result of different – and therefore incompatible – understandings of the divine, which were in turn the result of different – and therefore irreconcilable – interpretations of scripture. *Either you are with us or you are with the floundering and morally bankrupt relativists.* My schoolmates who lived literally across the tracks[21] from me were classed and raced differently, which in this context translates as un-American. *Either you are with us or you deserve second-class treatment.*[22]

Certainty, difference.

Difference, hostility. Difference, incompatibility. Difference, irreconcilability. Difference, inequality.

Hostility, incompatibility, irreconcilability, inequality…separation.

Separation, opposition.

Importantly, the divisiveness outlined here is largely the function of a numbers game within a representative democracy that redistricts and gerrymanders with abandon so that doubters and other second-class citizens in central Texas are pitted disadvantageously against not just those who are certain, but against the laws and policies of certainty – that is, against what Althusser famously dubbed the ideological state apparatus. Systemic racism is a function of *systemic* certainty. With the institutionalization of certainty comes the institutionalization of against-ness. "Being against" as a

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[21] McKinney, Texas is divided: there is an "east side" (impoverished) and a "west side" (affluent), or at least that was the nomenclature when I lived there.

[22] Cf. Dispatch's "Second Class" lyrics: "Oh I need a helping hand / How un-American / I'm a second-class soldier." *Break Our Fall*, BOMBER Records (2021).

function of "not being with" or "not identifying as" materializes beyond just attitudes or opinions, and it no longer matters whether you *doubt* the state's certainties with regard to such things as guns, death penalties (including for criminals with cognitive disabilities[23]), homosexuals, property taxes, oil, fracking, footballs, immigration and border patrol, marijuana, abortion, masks and vaccines, voting rights, and public school curricula (to name a handful of things that Texas tends to be extremely certain about) because you have been made, now, to *oppose* the state's certainties: the political options *themselves* reduce non-dualistic doubt to a dualistic certainty about (/against) certainty. Our two-party system is structured to marginalize voters who cast third-party ballots (you've thrown away your vote! No, worse, you've helped the *opposition*!) along with those who refuse to play according to strictly dualistic rules by abstaining from voting (you're apathetic; you're lazy; you're elitist; you offend my patriotic understanding of democracy; if you're not part of the solution, then you're part of the problem). Don't want to be ostracized? Then I highly recommend *opposing*. The more opposing you do, the more identity you will enjoy, the less ostracization you will suffer.

I can illustrate this institutionalized shift from doubt to mandated, certainty-driven opposition concretely by shifting us from my birth city of Temple in 1980 to Southlake forty-one years later. Southlake is an affluent suburb of the sprawling Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, not far from the community (McKinney; see fn. 21) in which I began high school. It is just a couple hours north of Temple. While Southlake's appearances in the news cycle tend to center on the successes of its high school football team, the Carroll Dragons, a story ran in mid-October of 2021 detailing a scandal that had to do with one administrator's interpretation of legislation written to keep critical race theory (CRT) out of public classrooms. The spirit of House Bill 3979, drafted by House Representative Steve

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[23] In *The Secret Life of Stories* (2016), Michael Bérubé reads the decision by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals to exempt some inmates with cognitive disabilities from the precedent set by the Supreme Court's ruling in *Atkins v. Virginia* (2002) – a decision that leads to their executions (191-192); I rely on Bérubé's reading to discuss the importance of deconstructive methods and the high stakes of interpretation in "Of Non-Mice and Non-Men: Against Essentialism in Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed*" (2020).

Toth, is fairly clear: it is a ban on CRT, and we'll get to that; meanwhile the letter of the bill only opposes CRT implicitly while calling more explicitly for teachers to "strive to explore [current events widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs] from diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective" (h-2, 2). Gina Peddy, the Carroll Independent School District's (CISD) executive director of curriculum and instruction, tried to provide guidance in interpreting the bill's language at a training session designed to help her district's teachers better understand a rubric that dictates "which books teachers can have in classroom libraries" (Hixenbaugh and Hylton, 2021). The training session was recorded secretly. After it was leaked to the media, Peddy was revealed to have referenced the amended language of the bill (and specifically the language of h-2, 2) in facilitating an interpretation in which teachers must "make sure that if [they] have a book on the Holocaust," then they need to have another "[book] that has opposing, that has other perspectives."

To the credit of the secretly recorded teachers receiving their training, the immediate question was raised: "How do you oppose the Holocaust?" Though the phrasing of the question is tortured in an especially Texan way (I think we should all oppose the Holocaust!), the anonymous voice in the recording means, presumably, to ask how teachers should be expected to counter narratives in which the Holocaust is presented as a historical atrocity, incredulous at the thought of being required to supply classrooms with "diverse and contending" narratives that would "oppose" the Holocaust's historicity, its atrocity, or both. Such "opposition to the Holocaust," which isn't opposition to the Holocaust at all, would amount to narratives of Holocaust denial and/or of Holocaust defense. *Either you are with the Holocaust or you are against us.* To interpret HB 3979 as a call for the *pro*-Holocaust narratives of deniers and defenders (that which is actually meant by "opposing the Holocaust") is of course preposterous, but Peddy's interpretation is only the tip of an iceberg of absurdity. Ironies stack up so quickly in Peddy's interpretation that, when I first came across the story, I had to read it several

times and do some cross-referencing to grasp that this was actually Peddy's earnest position (it was). Anyone tracking the spirit of the bill understands that it is an overtly anti-CRT bill (Toth himself routinely invokes CRT, and what he believes is wrong with it, in interviews regarding his authoring of the bill) corroborated by the looming specter of book-banning in tangible form; Peddy's premise is to fulfill the letter and the spirit of the law with recourse to narratives that "oppose" the historical atrocity of the Holocaust.

We might be taken aback by a phrase like "oppose the Holocaust" – its very wording is as shockingly derelict as its ethico-political program – but we shouldn't be surprised that far-right legislation written in slyly implicit terms, refusing to name that which it seeks to eradicate, yields far-right interpretations that extend beyond the target of a ban. The most fundamental misunderstanding of CRT by its opponents is based in an inability or an unwillingness to see past individual attitudes and opinions about race, which makes CRT's focus on systemic factors – those things like laws and policies that comprise institutions, things that can be enforced without any need to cite a personal belief one way or the other – unintelligible to them. CRT is a critique of law and policy; HB 3979 is a proposed law. HB 3979 proposes not just to ban the critique of the laws that comprise systemic racism, but it also (therefore) protects *itself* from such critique. HB 3979 provides CRT with exactly the sort of oppressive systemic regulation that CRT was developed to understand and counteract; a legislated commitment to narratives that challenge any and all challenges to white supremacy becomes, ipso facto, the very object of the disallowed critique! I could ask, "how do you oppose CRT?", and then show how opposition to it in this systemic format is a silencing that has nothing whatsoever to do with diverse and contending perspectives in which, allegedly, no bias is given deference.

But this stated goal – might we call it a canonical interpretation[24] on Peddy's part? – to place narratives in opposition, despite that many such narratives don't exist in oppositional space (until opposition is read into them and then instituted as policy), begins to touch on the contextualizing question elicited by the focus of this dissertation, *why these novels now*? Though CRT may seem unrelated to my focus on the presence of ancient scripture in contemporary novels, I believe that it is a useful analogue insofar as it presents a clearcut case of forced narrative opposition. As such, it eases us from current headlines into critical inquiry by allowing us to ask what to make of forced narrative oppositions in literary circles and academic disciplines, and how these forced narrative oppositions are being addressed in these other spheres. Thus we can relate the case of CRT to literary representation broadly, and ask: Why do postmodern novels bring scripture into their orbit, and what kind of commentary do such moves make about opposing narratives? Spiritually, psychologically, politically, pedagogically – what does it *do* to "oppose the Holocaust," and how do novelists respond to that?

I've used the example of CRT in Texas because I find it to be a timely reflection of a timeless tactic – and because I've wanted to hit close to home. CRT is being refused a place in the curricular canon; censorship renders it shadowy and apocryphal. But what is most striking about the way that CRT is being censored is that CRT is not even threatening to make its way into classrooms of secondary education in the first place; it is being banned from a place it has never been and has never really tried to go.[25] On top of that, CRT stands falsely accused of shaming individual whites for being white and of propagating doctrines of division and disunity, so it is also being castigated for things it

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[24] In "Refuse, Realism, Retelling: Literal and Literary Reconstructions of Noah's Ark" (2009) Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg uses the phrase "canonical account" (28, 37, passim) to refer not to the canonicity of the text or the story of the ark in Genesis, but to the canonicity of the story's (literal) interpretation. I am firming up her phrase as a way of indicating that the mainstreaming or censorship of texts entails a mainstreaming or censorship of *interpretations* ("accounts") as part and parcel of the canonization process. Moreover, Stahlberg modalizes novels such that, "on some level," they are "all" "unsettling the idea that there should be only one account of anything" (37).

[25] Booth shrewdly notes in responding to this chapter that the irony being pointed out here is an important one to emphasize, with far-reaching implications. In her example, for instance, my CRT example is analogous to civil rights advocates who "were accused of being Communist, with little basis in reality." I will simply extend her excellent point to my larger one by noting that *even being an actual Communist* does not somehow mitigate or justify the inherently oppositional logic driving a narrative, which is just to say that oppositional logic operates on multiple levels: those of hypothetical *and* of actual CRT/Communism.

has never done and has never tried to do. It's not that placing narratives of whatever kind into structural opposition is in and of itself objectionable, it's that placing narratives into opposition *becomes* objectionable when doing so shoehorns laziness, ignorance, privilege, and distorted versions of reality into systemic oppression. We might just as easily ask what is accomplished by putting any number of other narratives into manufactured opposition, and we might just as easily come to understand that some other status quo, some other systemic -ism, is being guarded…by being made invisible…by allowing – or better, enabling – the institutional to absorb the personal.[26] Forcing narratives into unnecessary opposition with each other is the process of canonization and censorship. My ongoing pursuit of apocryphal thinking (see my prologue) attempts to track this process and its outcomes.

While I could wiggle my way from the CRT example to any number of other examples, and then reference that wiggle with smart economy in a bid to justify my reading of another set of narratives that have been strongarmed into opposition, such a move would be disingenuous: the ubiquity of binarized oppositions is such that I could literally pivot *anywhere* and land on another set of artificially structuralized narratives (*either you're with* [fill in the blank] *or you're against it! How do you oppose* [fill in the blank]*?*). This ubiquity isn't something I want to minimize by making it seem as though the oppositional pairing that I'm about to unpack is somehow uniquely interconnected with CRT (it is interconnected, but not uniquely), while any pairings that I don't attend to are somehow separate or disconnected (they're not). Canons and apocrypha are everywhere, constitutive of all textual ecologies. That said, I pivot here toward narratives of transcendence and immanence specifically because their opposition is being questioned in the contemporary theory underpinning this project *and* in the literature that this project explores. Plus, my pivot comes with the added benefit that it's also a turn

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[26] It's important to remember that even as CRT tries to get people to see past personal attitudes and opinions so that they can understand instead how institutions operate according to law and policy, that personal attitudes and opinions *do* help to build institutions. People voted for Toth based on how they felt personally about these kinds of issues (among other things). That personal bias does reflect in systemic racism; or, systemic racism is an aggregate of personal opinions. We shouldn't let our racist uncles off the hook just because they're not on Southlake's school board. Those racist uncles are registered voters.

toward a set of analogous figures that are invested in doing the work of pulling terms out of opposition, both across the disciplines and in the literature.

Part Two: Discursive Dissonance – Or – How Do You Oppose <u>the New Materialism</u>?

To understand how and why Millet's novel, *A Children's Bible*, helps to pull transcendence out of opposition with immanence is to start with an understanding of how and why they were ever opposed in the first place, which entails an understanding of how a couple of their most prominent icons, Jesus and Pan respectively, have been used, and how these uses have been co-opted to further binarize non-binary things like science against religion, or object-oriented ontology (OOO) against new materialism.[27] That Jesus was put into narrative opposition against Pan reveals that Pan was CRT before CRT was CRT; Eusebius of Caesarea was the original Steve Toth of District 15. *How do you oppose Pan?* By being with Jesus! That Jesus was *put into* narrative opposition with Pan reveals, too, that there is nothing primordial about a Pan-Jesus opposition, just as there is no intrinsic opposition between immanence and transcendence, or between the scientific (natural) and the religious (supernatural), for which they stand. In what follows, I rehearse both the attempt by religious studies scholars to adopt new materialist tenets as well as Mary-Jane Rubenstein's identification of Pan as a key figure in each field's pursuit of a transcendence-immanence reconciliation, as tracking each of these lines of inquiry helps us to appreciate most fully Millet's reconciliation between (in her terms) Jesus and science.

Pan enables pantheism, a theological move that resonates with new materialism and thus prefigures some innovations within that discourse. This interests me, since it suggests (as will be

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[27] "What we call natural religion refers to a theological system made without reference to revelation, which expressed man's ability to comprehend certain truths about God from nature alone" (King 2019, 5). Importantly, my use of immanence throughout this section is not synonymous with natural religion, since natural religion does without revelation and therefore without scripture. On the contrary, the immanence pursued in my reading of Millet's novel has everything to do with scripture as revelation.

shown) that perhaps religious studies has already contributed to new materialism what religious studies hopes, now, to gain from new materialism. Regardless, we have Pan, and then later we get things like Morton's mesh and Karen Barad's diffractive reading (which she gets from Donna Haraway, whose cyborg receives attention in my epilogue). Each figure or concept combats the separations of certainty in some capacity, and each informs my own handle of the apocryphon as emblematic of categorical indeterminacy, a troubling of textual modes that allows literary studies to participate in this project of inclusion propelled by ontological realism and ethical activism. So I am using a textualist figure (the apocryphon) to guide my thinking, but I'm doing it analogously and in solidarity with other figures (Pan, mesh, diffractive reading, cyborgs) doing similar work in other disciplines.

Today, transcendence and immanence threaten to be so irreconcilable – so structurally oppositional – that even when religious studies scholars import new materialist tenets in hopes of harmonizing structural difference, they wind up reinforcing that which they seek to dissolve. In the third chapter from *Religious Experience and New Materialism* (2016), Clayton Crockett and John Reader trace the Deleuzian focus on immanence, affirming "plane of immanence" as a phrase that "constitutes a refusal of transcendent meaning given from elsewhere" (86). They go on to recognize how controversial it is for "many traditional Christians" when Relational Christian Realists "embrace immanence rather than transcendence as the most appropriate basis for a Christian ontology" (91). Crockett and Reader conclude by suggesting how "a different focus—that upon immanence rather than transcendence might be able to transform both theory and practice" (95) within religious studies.

Though it might sound forward-thinking, it is a conclusion that unwittingly maintains and even fortifies that which it seeks to dismantle – the binary opposition of immanence against transcendence. The way that we know that Crocket and Reader are out to *dismantle* the structure (and not merely to subvert it by focusing upon one thing over another, to rearrange which term takes precedence) is because they tell us how doing so "takes us a long way toward challenging the subject-

object and human-nonhuman distinctions" (94) that are implied by and supported by the transcendence-immanence divide. They are explicit that "the necessary challenge to this humanism comes from an understanding of immanence derived from the New Materialism and Relational Christian Realism" (98). *Challenge* is thus used in rapid succession to indicate that dualist "distinctions" and the -isms based on those distinctions are their real targets, but in choosing to focus upon immanence at transcendence's expense, they perform the work of subversion, of putting a subjugated immanence on top and relegating a heretofore privileged transcendence to the bottom. The dualism is flipped for progressive reasons that we can applaud, but it is still a dualism, and a newly prioritized something is still coming at the expense of a newly relegated something else. And lest we worry that I'm misreading the word *challenge*, we can look to Joerg Rieger (different chapter, same volume) to confirm that "there are other ways to conceive of transcendence than as a dangerous abstraction from real life, for instance when it is defined *not in opposition* to immanence but as transcending one kind of immanence for another" (149, emphasis added). So, the stated goals of importing new materialist methods into religious studies are indeed to challenge distinctions by pulling terms out of structural opposition with one another, even if doing so requires redefinition.[28] However, as we know from Morton's *Being Ecological* (2018), "[w]e are so used to thinking in a dualistic way" (37) that achieving that goal is remarkably difficult, redefinition or no; attempts to do so circle back, more often than not, to subversions based, ironically, in structuralism.[29]

Fortunately, such difficulty has not precluded the occasional success; unfortunately, the rare success tends to be dismissed derisively (a lot like CRT), such as the theological move to pantheism that Rubenstein so deftly shows to be an object of ridicule and name-calling throughout the ages –

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[28] Redefinition could be instrumental to process relationism, as would seem to be the case following Spinoza's claim that "every definition is a negation" (1995, 260), and then Hayot's interpretation of Spinoza's claim to mean that "without [definition], the totality cannot become parts; without parts there can be no relation" (2011, 739). Parts, for Hayot, do not default to *separate and opposing* parts. To redefine implies a way to re-relate.

[29] I will return to this line from Morton and give it a much fuller treatment in Chapter Two.

and certainly ever since Spinoza was excommunicated from his Talmud Torah congregation for expressing his *Deus sive Natura*, an expression that revealed "his evil ways." Spinoza's Latinate slogan translates to "God or nature," and it thereby undoes Cartesian-flavored dualisms while also prefiguring Nietzschean revaluation insofar as it questions the traditional God-world hierarchy as interpreted by orthodox understandings of "ontological distinctions." It should be noted, however, that even revaluation is a project of inversion, and thus subversion, and thus not a dismantling of hierarchies so much as a reconfiguration of them. Revaluation is sometimes referred to as transvaluation, but this would be a misnomer, as values are more accurately re-ordered without really being transed. But, as Rubenstein points out, there is a way in which pantheism really can work to trans – and not just re-order – the immanent universe and transcendent divinity. It is a way that depends on what I'd call Rubenstein's style of apocryphal thinking, her apocryphal reading of the pagan Pan god from which pantheism derives etymologically.

In *Pantheologies* (2018), Rubenstein characterizes Pan, the goat-man-god, as hybrid in just about every way, even in normative ways that blur things like good and evil, blessing and curse. Pan is at once protector in the role of a shepherd (precursor to the literary Christs of Milton, Jonson, and Spenser), and destroyer in the role of a hunter, the god who ensures a successful kill (which is also a form of protection; it's all a matter of subject-position). "All in all," Rubenstein tells us, "Pan is what Donna Haraway might call a 'contact zone': a cross-species concatenation of 'world-making entanglements,' within which he is both singular predator and flockish prey, both protector and pruner of the multitude" (2017, 169).[30] So the pagan figure of Pan really does put a concrete "pan-" prefix

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[30] Booth, in responding to my chapter, rightly "wonders why Rubenstein attributes 'contact zone' to Haraway when it is Mary Louise Pratt in 1991." I think the answer may be that, in *When Species Meet* (2007), Haraway takes ownership of the term and differentiates it from Pratt's usage: "Figures help me grapple inside the flesh of mortal world-making entanglements that *I* call contact zones" (4, emphasis added). This line is footnoted, so my expectation, following Booth, was naturally to see Pratt cited in this footnote. But no! Haraway's second footnote of her opening chapter merely steers us toward her eighth chapter for fuller discussion of contact zones! In this chapter, "Training in the Contact Zone: Power, Play, and Invention in the Sport of Agility," Haraway's sixteenth footnote, acknowledges Pratt's coinage of the term in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*

(translatable as "all") into what has become a more abstract or esoteric pantheism, à la Spinoza, and Pan the pagan god therefore serves as a metonym for a transing of *everything* (transcendence and immanence included), just as, for Eusebius, Pan "stands metonymically for 'all' the pagan Gods" (2018, 103).

Rubenstein's characterization of Pan isn't what makes her an apocryphal thinker; everyone agrees that Pan is a great mascot for hybridity. Rather, what makes Rubenstein's reading of Pan so seductively apocryphal is the way that she connects Pan with pantheism, and then further, the way that she understands pantheism as a solvent for the solute that keeps transcendence and immanence in their separate capsules. In one capsule is religion's answer to "the least interesting question one can ask with respect to any given phenomenon," which is (of course) "whether or not God did it" (xviii), while in the other capsule is science's answer:

> The reason it is so uninteresting to ask this question is that *one can always say God did X*, whatever *X* might be. And if one's **opponent** makes the counter claim that, not God, but *Y* accomplished *X*, one can always make the counter-counterclaim that God made the *Y* that went on to do *X*. These are moves that theists and atheists can always make in antagonistic relation to one another. (2018, xviii-xix; italics in original, bold added)

While the insistent separation and opposition of science and religion is maintained by this least interesting question, a much more interesting development is underway.[31] Rubenstein cites the ways in which "some physicists tend to encode dark energy as a malicious demiurge at war with the forces of gravity and light," or "the way that others place mathematics in the position of Plato's forms,

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(1992). Haraway also acknowledges and engages Pratt at length in the body of her eighth chapter, along with others who have borrowed her term (James Clifford, Juanita Sundberg, Eduardo Kohn). But I do think that Haraway popularized the term within the academy in the same way that Karen Barad popularized "diffractive reading," even though that phrase comes from none other than…Donna Haraway herself!

[31] This separation is enforced even when neither half of a binarism is subordinated. Amy King "seeks to peel back our twenty-first century vantage point that generally presumes the 'two-language' rule between science and theology: we acknowledge that each works within separate domains of knowledge, and in general attempt no sustained connection between the observable world and the Christian narrative of God's creation of that world" (2019, 4).

rendering the physical world an imperfect copy of an eternal, unchanging, immaterial realm," or "the way that simulation theorists are trying to ingratiate themselves to the highly advanced scientists whom they believe created humanity out of the more sophisticated equivalent of PlayStations" (xix). We could include Barad's claim that "scientists can explore metaphysical issues in the laboratory" (2007, 35) to stockpile examples of transcendent immanence that come not from religion but from scientific theorizing; or, to phrase it differently, these examples showcase that scientific theories are actually producing pantheistic theologies (back to Rubenstein's terminology): "Despite their steadily secular self-identification, these sciences are generating rigorous, awestruck, and even reverential accounts of creation, sustenance, and transformation – processes that are wholly immanent to the universe itself" (2018, xix).[32]

Rubenstein thus notices how the opposition between science and religion is an impoverished line of inquiry that can be traced to a prohibition on pantheisms, and that prohibition can be traced to a canonical interpretation of Pan's death, which takes us all the way back to Eusebius (the proto-Steve Toth), who views Pan's death as a necessary, zero-sum outcome of Christ's life. And if "the death of Pan," for Eusebius, "is coincident with the life of Christ" (2017, 171; 2018, 103), then Christ now assumes the status of a metonym that undoes Pan's figural work of transing[33] immanence and transcendence – or, more straightforwardly and following the lead of Jeffrey W. Robbins, we might say that Christ's succession of Pan is the succession from liminality and hybridity to stability and purity, or even from becoming to being. Christ, then, comes to stand metonymically for a science-religion

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[32] If we follow Amy King's reading of Francis Gorman (2013), then we may conclude that the conditions are ripe for a mode of writing that puts divinity on an immanent plane: "realism as a literary practice…is habitually a discourse of the agnostic because it conceives itself with the empirically knowable; romance readily makes way for the theological, because it admits to its textures the non-empirical, the extraordinary, the supernatural, the possibilities of what might be beyond the globe" (qtd. in King, 3). By extension, we now have empiricism itself as the thing that entertains the seemingly extraordinary, so that empiricism-friendly realism and theology-friendly Romanticism can no longer justify their division.

[33] I follow Jenny Súnden's use of *to trans* as a verb (2015, 135-150), a detailed explanation of which is available in my essay, "The Mind of *Then We Came To The End*: A Transmental Approach to Contemporary Metafiction" (2017). The verb picks up steam in Chapter Two, which is concerned with the othering of identities.

opposition of the kind that Nietzsche was probably critiquing when he had his fictional madman proclaim God's death, which is to say that the deaths of figures like Pan and Nietzsche's God are really the deaths of *concepts* and *interpretations* that, by turns, dismantle and support the totalizing metaphysics of hierarchical oppositions. Pan died so that Peddy's reading of Toth may live; an apocryphon was sacrificed for the good of canonization.

If we wanted to bend a discussion toward the ways that Pan's death and Christ's life coincide, and of how they find metonymic expression in contemporary American fiction, we could start with *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), by Tom Robbins. In this novel, Pan "lives only so long as men believe in him" (184); as fewer and fewer men believe in him while more and more men believe in Christ, Pan – and the transed *all* that he stands for – fades away. His fading is coincident with the establishment of Christianity's hegemony. But the protagonist of *Jitterbug Perfume*, a medieval king named Alobar, is warned by the mythical Lalo not to dismiss Pan's importance (184-185). While I go into much greater detail about this admonishment from Lalo to Alobar in my third chapter as a way of launching a dialectic between mind-dependent idealisms and idolatries (on the one hand) and extramental realisms and mysticisms (on the other), I use it here as a way of bridging from Rubenstein's Eusebius to the much broader literary phenomenon in which postmodern fiction makes use of scripture – that is to say, as a way of connecting that intersection of religious studies and new materialism with my literary arguments; as a way of articulating how the metonymic contrasts between Pan and Christ find purchase in contemporary literature, especially when those contrasts are enacted by novels that use scripture not to subvert it, but to square it with non-canonical modes of interpretation, which is to say – to read it apocryphally.

If Pan, per Rubenstein's rehearsal of Eusebius, is taken to represent the collapse of creator into creation, while Christ is taken to restore and then maintain the ontological distinction between creator and created, then we may extrapolate Pan-as-immanently-commensurate-with-nature and

Christ-as-transcendently-over-and-above-nature into something like Pan-as-science (/nature) and Christ-as-religion (/supernature). Furthermore, we may set this structuralist split between science and religion – a split, by the way, in which science is currently the theoretical totalizer, and religion the theoretically totalized – as the target of the contemporary novel that invokes, reimagines, and even emulates scripture as its way of giving treatment to what I have elsewhere (in my essay, "Of Non-Mice and Non-Men") called the most sinister binarism of all, that of the non-binary *over* the binary. In the non-binary-over-binary binary, the non-binary (Pan, process relationism, becoming) totalizes the binary (Christ, object orientation, being) in precisely binary fashion, an ironic and self-defeating poststructuralist backfire. Our novelists today appear to recognize that such a binarism arises from a dualistic telos in which a temporal succession is interpreted not just as an advance, but as a typological advance, so that "rising above primitive pantheism" might have been the provocation that led new materialists to reverse the narrative. In reversing that narrative, though, the subverters have erased the dualism from a temporal-advancements standpoint but reinforced it from a totalizing scientism standpoint. Hence the new, *post*-subversive novels. This is how you know that Lydia Millet, as we're about to see, is honest: because, as a proud, card-carrying member of Team Nature, she rejects not just the dualistic telos of a temporal advancement, which puts Christ over Pan and thus the supernatural over the natural, *but also the reversal of that dualistic telos*, which is to say, *its subversion*, in which her valued bottom term (Pan/nature/science) works its way to the top. In being post-subversive, Millet forfeits a win for her own team, but it is worth it because she improves the game.

Our novelists today recognize that both process relationism and object orientation, movements attaching to becoming and being, respectively, undergird speculative realist philosophies that make the same earnest attempts to understand and explain reality, much as science and religion make the same well-intentioned attempts to account for the mystery at the center of existence, a mystery that, following Jennifer Michael Hecht, can be referred to as "a meaning-rupture because we

are human and the universe is not" (2003, xii; Hecht's "meaning-rupture" is mentioned in my prologue and garners extended treatment in the footnotes of my second chapter). Science and religion are equally interested and invested, which ought to make them allies, just as the speculative realists of different camps, or the old historical and the new materialists, all ought to be allied to the same cause.

The novelists to which I keep referring, those who scrub certainty by recognizing a need for less oppositional thinking and more compatibilizations, supply the grist for my dissertative mill: E.L. Doctorow and Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie and Joshua Ferris, and Adam Levin with Doctorow again. My chapters detail how Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* invoke scripture in order to doubt national-historical narratives; how Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Ferris's *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* reimagine scripture in order to doubt religious belief as identity rather than as belief, by engaging what I've called "the prophecy problematic"; and, finally, how Doctorow's *City of God* and Levin's *The Instructions* emulate scripture as a way of doubting ecclesial and metaphysical interpretations of scripture that lead to things like idolatry, but which also maintain things like patriarchy and agrilogistics. I call these my micro readings. Ahead of them, I offer Millet's *A Children's Bible* as a macro reading – macro in that it doubts even the non-binary over binary split evinced by the coincidence of Pan's death and Christ's life.

The way this works is that an actual children's Bible falls into the hands of Jack, younger brother of a teenaged Evie, who reads it without any interpretive guidance and during a summer vacation torpedoed by reckless, negligent parents and a tropical storm that leads to increasingly chaotic, seemingly apocalyptic conditions. Jack and Evie are one set of siblings that join a larger group as their parents go in with several others to rent a summer estate. The group's parents spend their days drinking while the kids, ranging from grade school ages to teenage, entertain themselves in the usual ways (breaking things, making out, stealing their parents' beer, etc.). For the parents, soggy days of drinking yield to evenings saturated in harder substances that lead, at one point, to an MDMA

episode (to get a sense of how dark the novel can be, imagine some of the children witnessing their parents as they engage in an X-fueled orgy with their friends' parents – a good candidate for a repressed memory).[34] Eventually, a combination of the storm's damage and parental unfitness renders the summer home an unviable place for them to stay, and they strike out on their own in search of safe haven.

One of the younger children in the group, about Jack's age, is a deaf boy named Shel. Jack and Shel become fast friends, thoughtful and courteous boys who exude innocence and ethical maturity as stark contrasts to the group's parents. Together, Jack and Shel read the children's Bible. They come to the remarkable conclusion that "Jesus is science," and they justify this reading by explaining the salvific qualities of each. Just prior to that, however, Jack describes the Bible as his fifth favorite book of all time, "if you count series" (142). For him, it goes *Frog and Toad*, *George and Martha*, the *Guinness Book* and then *Laugh-Out-Loud Jokes*,[35] but in explaining what it is that he likes most about his children's Bible, Jack explains that it's "mostly" that "it's a mystery," and further, that he and Shel had "solved a lot of it" (142). Jack explains that "the first clue was, God's code for nature. And then we figured out that trinity thing. With God and Jesus…So if God stands for nature, then Jesus stands for science":

<pre>
                    NATURE
                   = "God"
                      /\
                     / \
                    /   \
              knowing   making
               stuff   stuff
           SCIENCE   ?
          = "Jesus"   = "Holy Ghost"
</pre>
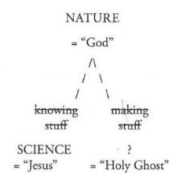
(142)

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[34] Booth notices the irony, here, lurking in the "children's code to keep their affiliation a secret. That is, it is a dystopia, undoing the 'begats' of the Bible." To which I would only add that, while it might be tempting to read Millet as reversing the dualistic telos of temporal advancement, working in a backward motion through human progress or even evolution (as Erdrich does, too, in *Future Home of the Living God* [2017]), and therefore literally *subverting* the biblical mode, I maintain that she actually pulls the begotten out of opposition with their begetters.

[35] Subtly but importantly, Jack's inclusion of the children's Bible among his other favorite books serves as a reminder that even scriptural texts are still texts (Derrida: Il n'y a pas de hors texte; see Chapter Two for a translational treatment of this famous line), and his inclusion of them alongside non-scriptural texts is, well, *inclusive*. In addition, he counts his favorite texts conditionally, allowing that the counting of series ("*if* you count series") is a provisional and categorical act that we may doubtfully reconsider.

Jack shares this diagram to illustrate his point and continues: "…there's lots the same with Jesus and science…Like, for science to save us we have to believe in it. And same with Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, he can save you. Science comes from nature. It's kind of a branch of it. Like Jesus is a branch of God. And if we believe science is true, then we can act. And we'll be saved" (143). A teenager named Juicy reacts negatively to Jack's theory. "Saved like, go to heaven? Holmes, that's some Santa Claus *shit*," he tells Jack, but Jack remains undeterred. "No," Jack responds. "Like the *earth*. The climate. The animals…Heaven's part of the code. It just means, a good place for us all to live" (143). Jack's not done yet, so he turns a page in his notebook to show Juicy how "Jesus = Science" by detailing that "these are the miracles of Jesus, right? But they're all what science does, too! *Almost* all" (144). And of course, the only thing that science hasn't yet accomplished that Jesus has done by way of miracle is to raise the dead:

Jesus = Science

		Jesus	Science
1.	Heals sick	✓	✓
2.	Makes blind people see	✓	✓
3.	Turns hardly any food into lots	✓	✓
4.	Walks on water (HOVERCRAFT!!)	✓	✓
5.	Raises the dead	✓	✗

4/5

(144)

According to Jack's reading, there simply is no opposition, structural or otherwise, between science and religion, just as there is no structural split between a transcendent heaven and an immanent earth that might be made into "a good place for us all to live." For Jack, heaven is a concept that piggybacks on the nonhuman turn in that it accounts for things like "the climate" and "the animals."

Toward the end of her novel, Millet makes an oblique reference to Voltaire, who himself ends *Candide* with an oblique reference to Genesis 2:15, with the line that "all we can do is cultivate our

garden" (212). It is an intriguing moment insofar as it leaves readers to determine whether gardens, like the famous one of Edenic lore, are sites in which one kind of immanence transcends another, as Joerg Rieger has it, or whether they are manifestations of an inherent wrongness about humanity, as Timothy Morton (reading Genesis) has it. Or, perhaps I've stopped too soon. The Voltaire reference does come toward the end of her novel, but it's not *the* end. In the end, Millet has Evie rewriting Revelation to her sick brother Jack, because Revelation is left out of the children's Bible on the grounds that it's too violent. Evie imagines a new ending for the children's Bible. She speculates on what comes after the end, and she relays to Jack an artful future of hope in which the last branch of the trinity – the holy ghost – is art, or, "making things" (see diagram, above). Millet posits art as an immanent aspect of divinity, a way in which "knowing stuff" through science and/or Jesus allows us to transcend; but Millet's point seems to be that art is indeed one kind of immanence that transcends another, and moreover, that art and literature's transcendent capacities depend on a decidedly apocryphal treatment of a manufactured opposition separating science from religion. The novels that have caused me to think most deeply as I've researched for this dissertation have been the ones that trouble even the categories that I've set up to describe the very troubling of textual modalities. By resisting tidy categorization into my tripartite framework – my schematization of invocation, reimagination, or emulation – there are novels that are apocryphal even among the apocrypha. Millet's is among them. We can discern its invocations, reimaginations, and emulations in pretty equal measure. But this isn't why it serves as a macro reading. Most of the texts explored in this dissertation defy my designations in any number of ways, an appropriate paradox befitting my attempt to organize categorical indeterminacies. *A Children's Bible* is macro, rather, because its template for questioning against-ness zeroes in on certainty and the structural oppositions that against-ness engenders.

Zeroing in: the traditional typographies of binary oppositions are hyphens (aka dashes: masculinity – femininity) and virgules (aka slashes: spirit / matter). I like to think of the virgule as a

material wedge (it even looks like one), or as the punctuative equivalent of a crowbar that enforces separation by prying interconnected things apart from each other, turning complementary counterpoints into antipodes of antagonism. By dissolving the wedge that holds transcendence apart from immanence, *A Children's Bible* achieves through literature what speculative realisms, as apocryphal offshoots of poststructuralism, are currently trying but failing to accomplish. Perhaps Millet's novel is macro because it is willing to be allegorical, to achieve its realist aims through a backdoor, an exit from literary realism.[36] I suspect that this is what Paul Youngquist had in mind when he told me, during my MA at Boulder, that "novels are often way out ahead of theory," that "theory is fiction all the way down," that our best theorists are essentially creative writers, that Hardt and Negri's *Empire* is a novel, etc. We have seen how religious studies scholars who are overtly trying to overcome dualist, oppositional thinking tend to lapse back into it, seemingly without realizing that their Pan was already making this contribution to new materialism, so that whatever they tried to adopt from new materialism was, as I had hinted at near the start of this section, already theirs.

Rubenstein noticed (there's always someone). Rubenstein has done excellent work in bringing religious studies and new materialism together to expose the falsity of a canonical dichotomy, and to read a figure that informs a theological movement that has been given the CRT treatment, albeit in the academy instead of provincial secondary education. In the cases of CRT and pantheism, that which is written to proceed in non-oppositional solidarity is maligned as oppositional to the oppositions that keep us comfortable. The charge against each, I suppose, is that they perpetrate the most sinister binarism of all, which means that they totalize the lesser binaries beneath them (lesser for being overt and non-meta in their oppositions). If this is the charge, it just goes to show that nobody wants to be totalized. Not even lesser totalizers want to be totalized. And maybe CRT and pantheism *are* totalizing;

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[36] I thank Booth for putting this back on my radar. From my prospectus, back in 2018: "One irony is that 'antirealist' modes are often better suited than literary realism in conveying realities."

after all, CRT's keyword is *systemic*, and pantheism's prefix means *all*. Those are higher-ground, all-encompassing terms, to be sure; I can appreciate that detractors of my apocryphal preferences do their detracting for at least one of the same reasons that I detract from their canonizations and censorships, and that's what we call common ground.

Can this common ground be a starting point? Will anyone believe me if I acknowledge how CRT and pantheism do threaten to binarize in the sneakiest and most pernicious of neoliberal ways? And even if my opponents believe me, will it matter to them that my search to pull terms out of opposition is an earnest one that seeks precisely to resist Empire's operative logic? All I can do is give them my word and point to my record. So much of my extra-dissertative work has been to unmask other false dichotomies, like that of virtuality as pitted against materiality (information/embodiment, etc.), and though our novelists seem well out in front in terms of pulling these terms out of structural opposition, not many theorists sustain a non-oppositional approach to this pairing for very long (N. Katherine Hayles and Elizabeth Grosz are notable exceptions). But the separations that have really surprised me, and which I have written about, are the discursive ones that make deposits in the same ontological and ethical banks, run by the same non- and/or posthuman investors. That Walter Benn Michaels can so easily pit an old historical Marxist materialism against a textual materialism, despite that they're both materialisms and therefore realisms, has had me thinking extremely hard since before my prospectus for this project was even accepted. That object-oriented ontologists like Morton or Graham Harman can so easily theorize interconnection and yet so easily disparage the intra-actions of Karen Barad's agential realism by referring to it as a "lava lamp" ontology has always struck me as unnecessarily oppositional. Indeed, Rubenstein, along with Catherine Keller in their jointly-edited *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, New Materialisms* (2017), guides me to the crux of the opposition between OOO and new materialism, which happens to reside in an apparently insurmountable being vs. process dualism, though I think that in arguing to keep being apart from process, and thus OOO

apart from new materialism, Morton actually makes the most convincing case for their interconnection and, yes, their intra-action.[37]

Will it matter to self-appointed canonizers that I'm pointing out the discursive dissonance not just between ideological enemies but also among a bunch of hard-left-leaning liberal academics like myself? Or that I keep asking what happens when even critical theories that ostensibly work toward better futures according to realist and materialist premises find themselves in manufactured opposition? What happens when Michaels and Morton are so *certain* about things like intentions and being, respectively, that things like texts and processes are wholly subsumed by them? The same thing that always happens:

Certainty, difference.

Difference, hostility. Difference, incompatibility. Difference, irreconcilability. Difference, inequality.

Hostility, incompatibility, irreconcilability, inequality…separation.

Separation, opposition.

OOO starts off as a doubting philosophy, but it becomes so certain in its doubt that it separates itself from new materialism and accuses it of the kinds of things that, like CRT and pantheism, it isn't doing or saying, banishing it from discursive spaces that it hasn't tried to occupy in the first place. OOO canonizes itself as the authoritative scripture of the speculative realisms, happy to let new materialists fade into apocryphal obscurity. From this separation of discourse into opposing camps, it is a short step to argue for and institute the separation of literary modes into opposing camps as well.

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[37] I delivered a paper at a graduate conference making this very point. "Reconciling New Materialism with Object-Oriented Ontology: Toward an Ontology of the Wedge." *Materialisms: Reconciliations in the Present*, Department of Cultural Studies & Comparative Literature University of Minnesota. Virtual on Zoom (April 2021).

Part Three: Literary Harmonies – Or – How Do You Oppose <u>Modal Pairings</u>?

    A primary question: are scripture and postmodern novels, as two kinds of writing, inherently antithetical, and if so, what does that say about the relationship between form and ideology?

    More autobiography: I am so completely on the narrative side of literary studies that when I took Clare Kinney's class on "The Sonnet, Revised and Revisited" (Spring 2017), I chose, in the end, to write about Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) because it is a *novel* written entirely in Onegin stanzas. Even its table of contents takes the form of an Onegin sonnet! What Seth's novel afforded me was ~~an out~~ an opportunity to bring narrative analysis into lyrical space, to read sonnets, yes, but to read them, all 590 of them, *as a novel.* I felt out of place reading sonnets, so I smuggled my narrative comfort zone into a poetic jungle. At the time, I thought that Kinney was being merciful in allowing this; now I realize that she probably had her own pedagogical reasons beyond just pity – namely, that I might learn something.

    If so, she was right: I began to understand that both narrative and lyrical forms are frequently theorized according to a set of generalized ideologies, and moreover, that sonnets and novels are frequently and generally thought to embody *opposing* ideologies. Heather Dubrow (and her reliance on Helen Vendler) became my theoretical go-to as I explored Seth's marvelous novel of sonnets. From Dubrow, I found that lyric can be seen as "[f]eminine and potentially effeminizing," and, "enhanced" as it is "with the power of the semiotic," it can be seen also as "an excitingly transgressive force that overturns the power of narrative" (2006, 258). By contrast, this "power of narrative" tends to be characterized as "a method of asserting sovereignty," which is, of course, a power associated with masculinity (2008, 179). The contrast sketched here, then, is that of a feminine and effeminizing lyrical form whose force is subversive, contra an implicitly masculine narrative form whose sovereign power is hegemonic. That "early sonneteers" would "eschew" such narrative-associated sovereignty highlights that "the signature figure of [the sonnet] is the oxymoron, that embodiment of excessive

doubting," and Dubrow cites Helen Vendler (1997) as "rightly maintain[ing] that indeterminacy is 'intrinsic to the sonnet sequence as a genre'" (179). If we are making columns, then "femininity," "doubt," "uncertainty," "indeterminacy," and "transgression" all fall under the sonnet heading, while "masculinity," "sovereignty," "certainty," "hegemony," "order," and "normativity" fall under the narrative tag. While Booth offers the helpful reminder that we should not conflate verse or prose forms with *modes* – there are tragic and melodramatic poems and narratives; there are scriptural and postmodern poems and narratives; the modes dabble in the genres – it is nevertheless productive to see how these columns provide options to authors looking to modalize their work according to specific priorities, preferences, and prejudices.[38]

Dubrow's intervention is, of course, to complicate these columns, to pull the terms out of structural opposition by pulling lyric and narrative out of structural opposition – that is, by pulling *two kinds of writing* out of structural opposition. Here is where we shift from pulling *narratives of* out of opposition to pulling *narrative itself* out of opposition – from the thematics inside the stories to the formal trappings of the stories. Seth's novel provides exactly the sort of literary performance to which a theorist interested in pulling *kinds of writing* out of opposition could then point toward, since Seth's Onegin stanzas work "excitingly as a transgressive force" to *establish* his narrative, not to "overturn" its "power." To me, and I think to Seth and Dubrow, it is more exciting to see forms complementing and enhancing each other than it is to see one subverting the other, even when subversions like these are corrections to dualist hierarchies, victories for social justice. *How do you oppose* The Golden Gate *without opposing a model of cooperative coexistence*? Must social justice always be attained through a framework of hierarchical structures, or is that precisely the problem?

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[38] Bruce Heiden (2014) argues that we should not conflate verse, lyric, and poetry, either, and he rehearses a genealogy of explorations that look at narrative in poetry, starting with Clare Kinney's *Strategies of Poetic Narrative* (1992) and including James Phelan's *Experiencing Fiction* (2007), among many others. I mention Kinney and Phelan specifically because they each depend on *rhetorical definitions* of lyric and narrative, respectively, so that their modes are largely a function of audience response, of the *effects* of things like genre and mode. One appeal of Dubrow's analysis is her sensitivity to these effects.

Even more impressive: the "excessive doubting" and "indeterminacies" of Seth's sonnets don't evaporate when narrativized, just as the novel's "order" doesn't evaporate when lyricized. Rather, the admirable traits of one transfer to the other, and a "best of both worlds" scenario obtains. It would be easy enough to return to this section's primary question about whether scripture and postmodern novels are antithetical, keeping Seth's novel in mind, to make an analogy between his sonnet-novel pairing and scripture-novel pairings, and it is true that there's an extent to which I'm doing just that. After all, in scripture and postmodern fiction, we have two kinds of writing that purport to do different things according to different ideologies (or at least they can, arguably, be theorized that way), and I think that their pairing does yield an excitingly transgressive hybrid form that moves beyond even the politically desirable subversions of dualist hierarchies and into non-oppositional territory. But I think, too, that something even more exciting is at play. If lyric can feminize narrative's masculine sovereignty, for instance, we might expect that a postmodern novel can be made more reverent by its use of scripture, or that a work of scripture can be "opened" by the textuality of the postmodern novel (to use the Barthesian terminology).

Maybe these things happen. Of greater interest to me is not that postmodern fiction becomes more scripture-like or that scripture feels more postmodern,[39] but that in hybrid form they fulfill each other's non-oppositional missions more fully than either could do on its own. In other words, even if scripture does begin to feel more postmodern when it is used by the postmodern, I think that it also starts to feel more scriptural, as well. And vice versa: postmodernist fiction may take on some scriptural tendencies by dint of its use of it, but I think that it becomes more fully postmodernist, too. If this were Pan, it wouldn't be that his goat parts were more tenderly human and his human parts

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[39] Scripture has always felt like postmodern narrative to me, anyway; cf. my first peer-reviewed essay, "Recrafting Israel" (2015). And, like Mark C. Taylor, I've usually felt that our most powerful prophets are writing contemporary fiction. As he writes in *Rewiring the Real* (2013), "Though I was raised in a churchgoing family, it was always clear to me that the most important scripture was literature and that the most sacred icons were artistic. I did not realize it at the time, but I was also learning that religion is most interesting where it is least obvious" (2).

more coarsely goat-y so much as that his humanity and his goat-ness were *themselves* more fully human and goat-y than if they weren't combined. Or, if this were CRT: the right's worries about individual shaming and indoctrinations would be assuaged *precisely because* the systemic elements would be well and truly understood and thus work to counteract the systemic elements could begin. Or, if this were Stahlberg's modalizing of "all" novels "at some level" (see fn. 24): it's not that some "accounts" of scripture are literal while others are literary, it's that novels help us to see that "there is no single way to read the canon" (37), so literal *and* literary accounts (of scripture, of anything) are more fully validated without detracting from the validity of the other. In each case, the totalizing of the non-binary over the binary is defused. I'll go so far as to say that postmodern novels using scripture are precisely providing the blueprint for achieving not just non-oppositional futures, but *fuller* futures all around, and that the reason they can do this is that they never position themselves above a scripture-novel dichotomy.

I hadn't thought this way (read: apocryphally) until I had gone through what I am calling "the subversive stage," and I was able to get through that stage with the help of an erudite, slim little gem of a volume called *Subverting Scriptures: Critical Reflections on the Use of the Bible* (2009), edited by Beth Hawkins Benedix. My discovery of Benedix's volume came far too late in the dissertative game for me, but once I found it, I was able to work through many of the nagging questions about what it was that contemporary novels were doing with scripture, and why they were doing these things now. It was here that I realized that the stated goal of overcoming binary oppositions really does hold a lot of appeal for many contemporary scholars (not just speculative realists and other post-poststructrualists, but for literary scholars, too), despite that immediately after stating the goal, subversive moves are made where I'd hoped to see de-binarizing moves. In fact, it was after finding Benedix's volume and chatting with her on Zoom, and then exchanging emails with her, that I began spotting the many instances in which explicitly stated attempts to dismantle binary oppositions were followed by reflex

actions – usually just a few paragraphs or a few pages later – that reverted to the inherently structural language of subversion.[40] *Subverting Scriptures*: the title of the volume that Benedix edited is a clever double entendre as well as a faithful capture of this tendency to revert to the inherently structural language of subversion, and to her credit along with all of her contributors, the literary phenomenon wherein the Bible *is* used subversively is indeed one real and fascinating result of the modal pairing. That I feel as though I have discerned another result, related and descendent but ultimately invested in another kind of work, just means that there isn't always a single answer to questions like, "what happens when you mix different kinds of writing together?"

Part Four: How Do You Oppose <u>Messages from the Fist of Gods</u>?

In this introduction, I have tried to build a framework around the problem of authoritative, canonical and canonizing mandates to put narratives into opposition, to turn all narratives into narratives of against-ness, and then to show that contemporary postmodern novels using scripture are one literary way of resisting these forced oppositions. There are non-literary/discursive versions of the resistance, and there are literary phenomena that do other, more subversive things with scripture, but I have wanted to focus specifically on novels that use scripture to pull terms out of opposition. Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* pulls Jesus and science out of opposition; working backward through a genealogy in which Eusebius reads immanence into pagan gods and transcendence into Christ, I extrapolate Millet's reconciliation (between Jesus and science) to a reconciliation of science and religion, and ultimately to a reconciliation between immanence and transcendence, which amounts to an inherently new materialist maneuver.

This maneuver is happening now, across disciplines and clearly in literature. In fact, it's happening in terms of stated desires even when those stated desires aren't realized, for instance when

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[40] Benedix brought the Southlake news to my attention and helped me to think through its relevance to my overall project.

religious studies scholars who want to challenge oppositional distinctions end up subverting them, or when the contributors to Benedix's volume make overtures to non-oppositional readings before (rightly, though perhaps unwittingly) producing analyses based in the subversive language of overturned (but not dismantled) hierarchies. I wish to make clear that I'm not noticing these trends in some kind of hyper-critical mood in which I enjoy pointing out inconsistencies or mistakes; on the contrary, I'm not even sure they're mistakes so much as testament to where it is that theory *wants* to take us if we can just move past subversion to get there. In other words, I think the impulse is correct, and all that is needed to satisfy the impulse is the execution of non-oppositional modal pairings, non-violent pairings, pairings in which each side of whatever was formerly "opposite" is now reread as complementary or contrapuntal, each side of a complementarity bringing out the fullest expression of the other. This is also why I think that Youngquist was correct in telling me that novels are way out ahead of theory. It will take some time for scholars to catch up to the likes of Lydia Millet, whose novel is already doing what various theoretical essays and chapters explored in this introduction have wanted to do.

Have *I* caught up? While I'd like to think so, I seriously doubt it. I believe that I can bring a really interesting literary phenomenon and a new set of readings to the attention of my peers and colleagues, yes, but just as other scholars are gesturing beyond subversion even as they still wax subversive, I am probably gesturing beyond subversion in a way that I've yet to fully understand, and I probably wax post-subversive in a way that will feel extremely basic if we ever have the chance to read it retrospectively from a post-subversive future. One of the main reasons for thinking this has to do with my failed attempts to articulate the modal pairing of scripture and novel. When I try using a phrase like, "postmodern novels that incorporate scripture into their textual programs" to explain my dissertation, a common response is enthusiasm for allegorical novels that retell scriptural stories from

new settings, or for "spiritual novels" that are sympathetic to scripture.[41] "No," I say. "You haven't read *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, have you?" is what I want to say, or, "No, my dissertation does not include critiques of Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* or Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. No, not even Robinson's *Gilead*…" So, backing up: I get a lot of mileage by recalling that a major motivation for this project, in the beginning, was the *concept* of scripture (real or fictional) *in* the storyworld reality of the novel: the metafictional gambit, the text within the text, an expansion of the question, "why are these texts (real or fictional) hanging out in the novel's storyworld as material objects available to interpretation by the novel's characters or even by the novel itself?" And while I've been including "real or fictional" in these questions, the truth is that I have a personal preference for novels showcasing *fictional* (or reimagined, or emulated) scriptures because it drives my questioning toward an important clarification: what I'm really interested in, it seems, has to do with the way that postmodern *novels* are *conceiving* of scripture – that is to say, the *idea* of scripture as a *kind of writing* from the point of view of another form.

When I formulate my question like that, I realize that my argument about doubt, about scrubbing a violent brand of certainty by pulling narratives out of coerced opposition, is likely just a preliminary and provisional feature of something much larger. For all the novels that I read featuring doubt-by-way-of-its-use-of-scripture, there's still something like the scripture that I come across in Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006) that serves as a reminder to keep doubting the status of any kind of writing, to doubt even the utopian inflections of my theory that modal pairings are wholesome, enhancing marriages in which each partner in the pair brings out the best in the other. Realism compels us to consider less desirable options when they present themselves as viable likelihoods; indeed,

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[41] As does Millet's, arguably. Booth encourages me to rethink the value of allegory, as when she suggests that part of the success of *A Children's Bible* is its willingness to be an antirealist allegory in the service of ontological realism (noted above). I am an appreciator, and I appreciate this. Still, what draws me to Millet's novel initially is the fact that it places a scriptural text materially into its world, and this would have interested me regardless of what happens allegorically, so that my appreciation of allegory happens on another, perhaps secondary, level.

considerations in this direction are the stuff of mysticisms that fight contumaciously against idealistic idolatries (cf. my third chapter). One may just as easily ask *how do you oppose the observable facts of life* as *how you do oppose modal pairings*? It's time to consider now that non-oppositional things can be simultaneously true – and possibly even interconnected – without necessarily being augmentative.

Winter's Bone is where we find "messages from the Fist of Gods" and wonder, to the best of our abilities, how we could possibly oppose them. These scriptural messages, however, are buried in the novel like apocrypha are buried near the Dead Sea, so some background is in order. Ree Dolly is our *Winter's Bone* heroine; a student in one of my composition classes (Fall 2021) opened one of her essays with the following line: "Ree Dolly's life *sucks*." Why does life *suck* for Ree Dolly? She's a teenager living far below the poverty line during a brutally cold winter in the Ozarks, and her father is missing; she has two younger brothers and a mother incapacitated by a cognitive disability. There's not enough cash on hand to buy groceries or to keep their one horse fed. To make matters worse, Ree's father, Jessup, is not just missing, but out on a bail that was paid for with the Dolly house and property as collateral, meaning that if Jessup fails to show up to court for his arraignment, then Ree will be caring for two younger brothers and an incapacitated mother without shelter in freezing temperatures. It's a desperate situation.

During her quest, Ree traverses the rugged hollows of the Ozarks in search of information about her father from the extended Dolly clan, an endeavor that carries her to and from the ominous Hawkfall. Hawkfall is miles from her house and she has no means of transportation, so she walks. "She became ice as she walked" (64; her life *sucks*). Ree finds herself freezing on her walk back from Hawkfall and in dire need of shelter, so she makes her way to a cave she's familiar with, a place she can build a fire and thaw. En route to this cave, Ree

> passed the meadow of old fallen walls leaving Hawkfall, and as she considered those
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> furiously tossed stones olden Dollys rushed to mind loud and fractious, bellowing and

shaking fists. She knew few details of the old bitter reckoning that erupted inside those once holy walls, but suddenly understood to her marrow how such angers between blood could come about and last forever. Like most fights that never finished it had to've started with a lie. A big man and a lie. (64-65)

The problem Ree has in ascertaining information as to her father's whereabouts has to do with an "old bitter reckoning" among the Dolly ancestors, a reckoning that, as Woodrell's language makes clear, bears some connection to the sacred, since it "erupted inside those once holy walls" and involves "a big man and a lie." Though Ree understands something of "angers between blood" "to her marrow," that *something* remains apocryphally vague, as does our readerly understanding of the big man and the lie. All that is revealed about the big man and the lie comes in the following paragraph, which is also where we get the scripture within the novel:

The big man and prophet who'd found messages from the Fist of Gods written on the entrails of a sparkling golden fish lured with prayer from a black river way east near the sea was Haslam, Fruit of Belief. The sparkling fish had revealed signs unto him and him alone, and he'd followed the map etched tiny on the golden guts and led them all across thousands of testing miles until he hailed these lonely rugged hollows of tired rocky soil as a perfect garden spot, paradise as ordained by the map of guts sent to his eyes from the Fist of Gods. (65)

Given this passage, we know: Haslam is the Fruit of Belief. Haslam is a prophet, a receiver of signs. Haslam finds messages from a Fist of Gods, which I'm going to call scripture – rather safely, I think, despite that the messages are unconventionally written on the golden guts of a sparkling golden fish. From the novel more broadly, we know too that Haslam is a common name for the Dolly patriarchy, along with names like Jessup and Milton. We can infer from an earlier "fist of wives" that a "fist of gods" constitutes a quintet of deities.

Much later, as Ree recovers from a beating at the hands of the Hawkfall Dollys, we glimpse what seems to be an image from a fever dream:

> A golden fish in the bucket with a sparkling tail that swished bright words across the blood, bright words splashed past so fast they couldn't be understood, leaving the mind to guess at the words and just what the fish means by them and all those sparkles in blood. (147)

And later still, the briefest of references to the Fist of Gods sneaks in at a moment when Ree wonders whether those Dollys from Hawkfall intend to murder her: "Ree stood straight and proud in case the very worst was about to happen and she would soon be presented to the Fist of Gods, and no god craves weaklings" (183).

And…that's it: the extent of scripture (or gods) in Woodrell's novel. The word "scripture" appears exactly one (1) time, and not in relation to any of these three passages. "Fruit of Belief" is given no further context whatsoever. All that we know of Haslam's map is that of the Dollys' Ozark origin story as presented above. No clues are offered at any point as to the nature of what we think is likely to be five upper-case-g Gods, how they are organized among themselves or in relation to creation, their powers or mercies or wraths, and "Ree did not know much about religion" (66). So much for contentual or contextual breadcrumbs, and there are even fewer formal leads. Actually, I can't find *any* formal leads, though I will say that if you like deciphering novelistic puzzles, then reading *Winter's Bone* would not be a terrible idea – and Booth suggests wonderfully that both Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy might serve as Woodrell's scriptural sources.

Though narrative information like this does limit our interpretive options, there are still a few things that can be said about it. First, that limitation is clearly an authorial choice. Second, that choice clearly makes use of scripture as a kind of writing. Third, scripture as a kind of writing seems not to have saved the Dollys, whose Eden was "tired rocky soil" even before it fell to ruins, as though a fall

from innocence was preempted by a more primordial start at the bottom, not a fall so much as an originary ground-zero of the Dolly (and/or human) condition, not "original sin" so much as "original bottom dweller" status. If this were my third chapter, I'd be speculating mystically that maybe Haslam just misread his map, that his misreading is an allegory for imperfection. Maybe he read a paradise *into* a map when it was never really there. Maybe we're not all perfect until a perfectly logical myth explains to us why we aren't. Maybe our students aren't all A students until their first grade is less than 100%. Maybe our conditional imperfection can be explained just so: conditionally, which is not to be confused with contextually.

But, as this is my introduction and not my third chapter, I will suggest instead the possibility that things can be non-oppositional *and* still suck (like Ree Dolly's life), all at once. It's possible that my not joining a movement has less to do with any given movement's opposition and more to do with my lack of belief in it on its own terms; that my failure to break bread and wine has less to do with an oppositional narrative that quantum physics will save us (quantum physics as opposed, here, to a Messiah) and more to do with not finding a church that I can receive in. It's possible that an immanent spiritual movement like Buddhism will not transcend the kind of immanence that brings digital porn to Himalayan monks on their Enlightenment phones, or that Islamic fundamentalists and atheistic postmodernists have arisen not only at the same time but also in response to the same situation, only at opposite poles of the global hierarchy, according to a striking geographical distribution.

It seems to me that these are important possibilities to consider, that they might ramify the implications of a doubt that pulls narratives out of structural opposition, a doubt that scrubs the certainties that have held narratives in opposition for so long. If what theorists want is to conceive of a transcendence defined *not in opposition* to immanence but as transcending one kind of immanence for another, then they would do well to work through a series of timely and formal questions on their way to asking *how do you oppose messages from the Fist of Gods*?

CHAPTER ONE

Invoking Scripture:
E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Part One: *The Book of Daniel*

I Daniel was grieved in my spirit in the midst of my body, and the visions of my head troubled me.
- *Dartmouth Bible*, Daniel 7:15

Hitherto is the end of the matter. As for me Daniel, my cogitations much troubled me, and my countenance changed in me: but I kept the matter in my heart.
- *Dartmouth Bible*, Daniel 7:28

I Daniel, was grieved, and the visions of my head troubled me and I do not want to keep the matter in my heart.
- Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel*

The argument of this chapter is that E.L. Doctorow and Toni Morrison, in *The Book of Daniel* and *Song of Solomon*, bring our two seemingly antithetical modes of textuality together to raise doubts about canonical national historical narratives in America. This claim extends the idea advanced in my introduction that scripture and postmodern novels may actually *enhance* each other's modalities – not just that scripture may get postmodernized or that postmodern novels may get scripturalized, but that each becomes more fully itself when complemented by the other. And to my reading of Millet's novel as a macro tutor text that doubts from the highest level (viz: from the level of the non-binary over binary binary), I now add my readings of Doctorow and Morrison's novels as ones that recruit scripture to doubt on the more local level of American national discourse. But I am also distinguishing their micro-mode of doubting from the ones in my second and third chapters in terms of *how* they hybridize these two textual modes, since they are *invoking* rather than reimagining or emulating scripture.

The observation that Doctorow, Morrison, and other postmodern writers invoke scripture is in itself nothing new. What is new is a focused attention on the invocations themselves: how they

work, what they do, and why. By focusing acutely on how Doctorow and Morrison invoke scripture in *The Book of Daniel* and *Song of Solomon* (coincidentally, each author's third novel), I demonstrate that each author's invocation of scripture accomplishes, wonderfully, both aesthetic and discursive paradox. That loop-shaped aesthetic that I had mentioned in my prologue and which is enunciated in my second chapter incubates like a zygote in the paradoxes of this chapter. For Doctorow, this means that when scripture is invoked, it is scripture itself, the textual mode of faith and hope, that is wielded to adduce threats of persecution, and to adduce despair as the response to those threats. Of course, scripture is wielded in a selectively postmodernist way for this to occur. For Morrison, the loopy paradox is achieved when her postmodern novel makes a faithful statement of hope *despite* its many destabilizations of scripture.

In Doctorow's case, scripture as the perceived mode of truth and hope compounds the postmodern sensibility in which truth, meaning, and knowledge are thought to be elusive, and in which hope is, therefore, thought to be forever out of reach. Scripture becomes *The Book of Daniel*'s postmodern enhancer. Morrison, on the other hand, reverses and radicalizes Doctorow's way of invoking scripture. To start, Morrison ups the ante with her invocation of scripture by intensifying Doctorow's specific methods – to be clear, I am claiming this Doctorow-Morrison dialectic as my own critical observation, and not as an aspect of Morrison's authorial intention. Just as I show, below, that my interpretation of *The Book of Daniel* depends largely on readings of authorial decisions to include and exclude aspects of its predecessor texts, which manifest most concretely in Doctorow's use of ellipses and in an incomplete citational reference to a scriptural epigraph (which I call the -7 effect), my interpretation of *Song of Solomon* is based on a whole array of possibilities that springs from an entirely unattributed epigraph that *could* be considered scriptural. The movement from Doctorow's partial and incomplete citation, in which *some* epigraphic content goes unreferenced, radicalizes in Morrison's totally absent citation, in which the source of *all* epigraphic content remains subject to

speculation. Moreover, *The Book of Daniel*'s invocations of scripture, while puzzling and problematic, seem to lead readers programmatically or even formulaically to despair. *Song of Solomon*, on the other hand, reverses course by pointing hopefully away from ignorant and apathetic tendencies, and toward transcendent wisdom, salvation, and redemption. Morrison's novel becomes scripture's postmodern enhancer – and now our two looped zygotes invert each other as one's realism-based despair twists into the other's antirealist-(/magical-realist) based hope.

My earlier allusion to statements on hope and despair in the face of wide-ranging doubts (and just now to nihilism) raises some obvious questions: What specifically prompts hope, despair, or nihilism for Doctorow and Morrison? Or, to what questions or conditions might their statements of hope, despair, or nihilism be responding? What is the occasion for doubt in the first place? My aim in tackling these questions is to provide an overview of the two novels in question, and to do so by describing how they fictionalize the past, how their texts modify their contexts. I mean for things like "the past" and "contexts" to be taken as junctures in American history, and as the cultural climates during those junctures. For *The Book of Daniel*, this is the Rosenberg trial in the climate of McCarthyism; for *Song of Solomon*, this is a seemingly endless procession of racial violence – including, specifically, the lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955, and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing by the KKK in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. But the moment that I begin describing how pasts are fictionalized and how contexts are textualized is the moment when to their subtending histories must be added the biblical books, The Book of Daniel (Dan.) and The Song of Solomon (Song), respectively, that give them their titles and which guide their internal logics.[42] All to say that by

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[42] I say that these biblical books give the novels their titles and guide their internal logics, but that is not to say that the invocations stop with Dan. and Song – far from it. As I demonstrate below, each novel opens onto apocryphal plateaus to question processes of canonization and (therefore) of authority. For *The Book of Daniel*, I suggest that the novel's three endings may find analogues in the three apocryphal additions to Dan., and that Susanna (Sus.) in particular may drive the naming of Daniel's sister, Susan, in the novel. For *Song of Solomon*, I follow Yvette Christiansë's lead (2013) in exploring the Coptic Gospel of Truth (GTr) from the Nag Hammadi scriptures, which leads in turn to a consideration of Isaiah (Isa.), though it is not apocryphal, as a potential source for that novel's epigraph. Finally, The Wisdom of Solomon (Wisd. Of Sol.) presents itself as a potential source with one foot in the canon and one foot in the apocrypha, according to divergent traditions.

sketching an overview of each novel, *three* groundworks are laid: that of the novel, that of the novel's historical template, and that of the novel's scriptural template.

Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*

     The Book of Daniel is an overt roman à clef that fictionalizes the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg at the height of Cold War paranoia in the early 1950s. Doctorow struggled early with the writing of it, gaining narrative traction only when he experimented with a formal conceit in which a fictionalized son of the Rosenbergs, Daniel, sets out, during his years as a young graduate student, to make sense of his parents' demise, which he remembers experiencing as a young boy, with his sister, Susan. The novel thus becomes the story of Daniel Isaacson, or Daniel Lewin, or Daniel Isaacson Lewin, as he turns the writing of his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University into a transcript of his search for the truth about his parents, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson (the fictionalized Rosenbergs), who were executed by electric chair for sharing national intelligence secrets with the Soviet Union.

     The text raises the doubt of Daniel's identity as a source of pervasive doubt driving the narrative, as the son questions his parents' past. There is also doubt about how the national historical narrative – that is, the official record according to the US government – accounts for that past. The presumption seems to be that discoveries about his parents – their actual guilt or innocence, whether guilt or innocence really matters in a country that claims to be free but which nevertheless kills people for thought crimes – will translate to self-discoveries, that knowing the truth (to resort to the biblical aphorism of John 8:32) will set Daniel free.

     The confusion surrounding Daniel's surname(s) stems from his adoption by the Lewin family after the death of his parents; by legally taking his new family's name, Daniel goes from Daniel Isaacson to Daniel Isaacson Lewin, just as the real-life children of the Rosenbergs, Michael and Robert,

took on the name of their adoptive parents, the Meeropols, to become Michael and Robert Rosenberg Meeropol. A vignette from late in the novel captures the discrepancy in Daniel's identity by locating it in the difference between Isaacson and Lewin. This discrepancy occurs as Daniel engages in "an act of civil disobedience" by turning in his Vietnam draft card, along with a throng of protestors at "the doors of the Justice Department" in Washington DC:

> The point of the drama is reached and the draft cards of hundreds of college boys across the country are dropped in a pouch by their representatives. There is applause. Others in the crowd are invited to add their own cards. Many do. I make my way through the crowd, and drop my card into the pouch, and say my name into the microphone. Daniel Isaacson, although the card is in the name of Daniel Lewin. (*Daniel* 252)

Daniel's name is not actually in question in any conventional or normative sense, but because Daniel questions the very legal system that murdered his parents, he puts the (conventional/normative) legality of his own name into question. Or, he corrects it. Or, he simply yearns to revert to an earlier, more innocent time. In any case, the issues surrounding Daniel's name(s) reflect the nature of the novel insofar as generally accepted and unquestioned things, like one's legal name, *become* questioned, doubted, resisted, corrected. The question of names – of knowing, creating, mistaking, and doubting them – connects Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* to Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, for it is the marrow of *Daniel*'s bones to the extent that the legality of Daniel's name is bound up in state power.

Naming is a power of the state, which is likewise resisted by Daniel's biblical precursor, whose names work similarly in scripture: Daniel is an Israelite, known by his native tribe to be pious and fiercely devoted to an adherence to Jewish law; but Belteshazzar is the Babylonian name given by King Nebuchadnezzar to Daniel the slave-in-exile. While it is true that Lewin is just as Jewish as is Isaacson, it is also true that Lewin constitutes a legal name change, and that that legality, as an extension of the

state, constitutes something that Daniel comes to doubt. Daniel means "God is my judge." Belteshazzar means "Protect the life of the king." It does not require much dot-connecting to see how Daniel Isaacson's transition to Lewin parallels the transition of the biblical Daniel to Belteshazzar: in both cases, state power leaves its mark on the persecuted in the form of a new name. The bearer of the new name can only claim an identity based on an attempted reclamation of moral authority, either by protesting in the form a refusal to follow the forced idolatry of Nebuchadnezzar, or of a refusal to follow the forced idolatry of capitalist imperialism. In both cases, the authority of the state undermines the protester's attempt to reclaim moral authority.

Many more features of the biblical narrative present themselves as candidates to run parallel to, or to set the template for, *The Book of Daniel* – everything from readings of various US presidents as Nebuchadnezzar figures, to US ideology and imperialism echoing an ancient, hubristic Babylon drunk with power, to two injustice-suffering Daniels, one ancient, one contemporary, aligning in wisdom and prescience, to formal mysteries, such as abrupt changes in temporality, narratorial voice, and even of shifts in language itself (*literally* in the Bible, from Hebrew to Aramaic and back again – and then translated to Greek; *discursively* in the novel, from dissertative and analytical to peevish and pornographic). There are apocryphal "additions to the Greek Book of Daniel" in The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon (see, for example, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha*, 1543-1554), which might serve as blueprints for the novel's three mysterious endings, just as the book of Susanna's eponymous heroine might serve as the precursor for Daniel Isaacson Lewin's sister, Susan (my own conjectures). Finally, there is even the discrepancy in Dan.'s canonization, since, according to the Hebrew Bible, Dan. is classified with the *Ketuvim* (writings), whereas in the Christian tradition, the book and its title figure join the ranks of the major prophets; just as each of these canonization decisions is driven by competing theologies, so too might Doctorow's novel be classified in different ways depending on

differing interpretative agendas. Both Dan. and Doctorow's novel are heavily invested in faithfully chronicling flashpoints of adversity in their respective national histories, flashpoints that center on threats of capital punishment for those who refuse to bow to golden images, whether kingly statues or capitalist expansion. And of course both texts, in addition to being considered masterful pieces of literature, also present considerable interpretive challenges.

Much work has been done already in teasing out the ways in which Doctorow's novel fits, fails to fit, or subverts the scriptural parameters of Dan. Some scholars take Doctorow to invoke the biblical book sincerely. Others take the invocations to be ironic. My input in this regard is to recognize that all of those critical positions are the result of a common approach that compares and contrasts contents, contexts, and thematics. What is missing, I feel, is an approach that takes scripture and postmodern narrative fiction as modes that purport to do different things, so that invocation becomes not just a matter of *contextual* matching and mapping, but a matter of *textual* contrast that highlights and accounts for each mode's unique capabilities. It is in this spirit that I continue my reading of *The Book of Daniel* in a way that draws out elements – such as history, justice, and personal and political identity – that necessarily read differently in one mode than in the other.

Take history: scriptural histories and what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafictions" in *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) are very different beasts. The former purports to deliver history as a true version of the past, whereas the latter insists on a distinction between the constructedness of so-called historical facts and the actual objects and events of the past.[43] This is Daniel Isaacson's primary dilemma as a postmodern subject. As he researches the facts pertaining to his parents' case, it dawns on him that these facts belong not to an objective past but to a subjective and manipulated history. For Daniel, the reality or truth of his parents' case proves too elusive to

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[43] "Belief aims at truth": this phrase, coined by Bernard Williams in 1973, gets extensive treatment in my next chapter, but I mention it here as a response to one reader's comment that "belief accepts," when actually, tragedy (per Linda Williams in my prologue) and faith (per Žižek in my second chapter) are accepting modes. Belief, on the other hand, is a doxastic reflex.

grasp, and eventually, this elusiveness spreads from his parents' case to *everything*: "Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive. Human character. Quarters for the cigarette machine" (*Daniel* 42).

Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction depends on a distinction between events as referents and facts as meaning-making representations of those referents. In describing the "systems of signification by which we make sense of the past," Hutcheon explains that "the meaning and shape [of historiographical metafictions] are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past events into present historical 'facts.' This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs" (89, emphases in original). Theophilus Savvas, in *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past* (2011), stands on this distinction to advance the notion that re-presenting the past necessarily involves the construction of historical representation; that, while the past as an extramental reality is filled with irretrievable objects and events, history as representation of such an irretrievable past mediates subjectively that which cannot otherwise be mentally grasped:

> history is not the same as the past. The past is what happened and as such is (largely) irretrievable; history, however, is how we understand the past, and how we constitute it in the present. The past is ontological, where history is epistemological. Events (of the past) and facts (of history) differ, in that the latter is a constitution of the former in a 'conceptual matrix,' as Linda Hutcheon puts it; before an event becomes fact it needs meaning. (Savvas 2-3)

So the making of the past into history is translation work in which aspects of objective reality are inevitably lost. Hutcheon and Savvas, like Michelle M. Tokarczyk and Christopher D. Morris, derive these concepts from and apply them concretely to *The Book of Daniel*. Each of these thinkers articulates some reading of the novel in which ontological realities – particularly those pertaining to the past – distort and erode as they are sifted through the epistemological filters of the present, tantamount to

naming a representationalist shortfall. Similar claims are made more specifically about death. In *Models of Misrepresentation* (1991), Morris offers death as something that cannot be represented, historically or otherwise, which is why Doctorow resorts to a formalistic reliance on ellipses in *The Book of Daniel*. Morris writes simply, "Death is unrepresentable, undecidable" (84). Doctorow's ellipses in *The Book of Daniel* are not just managing the unrepresentability of death but also adding a commentary of despair to death's unrepresentability. Moreover, despairing commentary is added not just through ellipses but through what might be thought of as ellipses' opposites, something like an *un*-abridgment or *extra*-inclusion that occurs when *extra* content appears, sneakily, as discursive referent, without any sort of corresponding reference.

Daniel's discovery that "everything is elusive," then, proceeds from Hutcheon's distinction between *events* and the fact-generating *systems* that allow those events to be understood historically. But whereas for Hutcheon a recognition of the systems at work in apprehending the past is no cause for despair ("this is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs"), Daniel is less than reassured. For Daniel, the historicizing of the past is precisely a dishonest refuge from the truth, the most immediate cause for despair. Daniel searches for meaning more immediate, for that of a past directly entangled with a present, and not for a subjective, editorial key to the past in the form of myth or history. Daniel's search is for meaning in the events themselves, as Kantian noumena, and not in the meaning-making systems of historicization – the phenomena – that give us our facts. Unable to reach those noumenal events directly, Daniel's putative dissertation goes rogue to explore numerous discursive options. That is, Daniel's search becomes research, with the result that Daniel will dispense eventually with the imagistic and sequential methods of narrative representation before exploring a panoply of other discursive options. Daniel's peculiar motive – the mystery of his dead parents – distances him, modally, from both scripture *and* from postmodern theorizing, since he is driven to discover not an origin but an end.

Regarding sequence, we find out toward the end of the novel that "What is most monstrous is sequence" (*Daniel* 245). Why "most monstrous"? Because it eludes, or subverts, fixity: "Is there nothing good enough to transfix us?" (245). Something "good enough" is thus prerequisite to our being "transfixed," itself an evidently desirable state of being, but the mere presence of sequence reveals that "nothing" is ever good enough. In this formulation, the point of sequence is not just to keep things moving (*fabula*), but to negatively encode any sense-making of the past such that to "withdraw only in order to return" (245) becomes a nihilistically discursive arrangement of events (*syuzhet*). With such monstrosity defining sequence, any notion of a *meaningful* sequence becomes intensely oxymoronic. Withdrawal is a consequence of a certain answer to the question, "is there nothing good enough to transfix us?", while return is the result of a perpetual hope for just the opposite answer. Thus the deflating "only" in "*only* in order to return" – that is, *only* in order to discover the same answer that first precipitates withdrawal, and which now does so again. Nothing is ever good enough to transfix us. The monstrosity of sequence is thus the monstrosity of a *double* despair, of hope negated or silenced *again*, a point reinforced by the radical character Artie Sternlicht, whose slogan, which he shouts with his girlfriend and followers, is that "EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME" (*Daniel* 136).

A look at the passage in full helps to trace sequence's transformation from the thing that structures the novel to the thing that the novel deconstructs:

> What is most monstrous is sequence. When we are there why do we withdraw only in order to return? Is there nothing good enough to transfix us? If she is truly worth fucking why do I have to fuck her again? If the flower is beautiful why does my baby son not look at it forever? Paul plucks the flower and runs on, the flower dangling from his shoelace. Paul begins to hold, holds, ends hold of the flower against the sky, against his eye to the sky. I engorge with my mushroom head the mouth of the womb

of Paul's mother. When we come why do we not come forever? The monstrous reader

who goes on from one word to the next. The monstrous writer who places one word

after another. The monstrous magician. (*Daniel* 245-246)

Moments of love are offered here as candidates for what *could* be good enough to last forever: erotic love between Daniel and Phyllis, the fatherly love of Daniel for his son, Paul, and Paul's fleeting aesthetic appreciation of a flower's beauty. Added to these storyworld loves are the literary loves of readers and writers who are unable to fixate on single words, needing always to withdraw from one and to turn to another. This is the nature of sequence, of narrative temporality. Daniel's frustration is with the inevitable passing of each of these moments from a subjectively graspable present to an objectively irretrievable past; that, like the very past that he hopes to recover, these moments recede (or "withdraw") even within historicizing narratives that might be written, or read, as attempts at "capturing" certain times. Daniel's frustration with narrative composition is just really a rearticulation of his frustration with the past, as it is also frustration with the present's continual passing. Daniel knows, or discovers, that narrative is a technology that transfixes neither past nor present. Narrative bounds afford no capture. Moments of love recede so categorically that they can be chosen at random to get across the point that *none* of them ever transfix. Even a highly inventive and formally experimental composer like Daniel, who does what he can to disrupt traditional sequential methods, finds that to historicize is always to narrativize, and vice versa, so his composition is itself sequential and thus monstrous. One suspects that Daniel's graphic descriptions of making love to his wife express not only these frustrations about narrative, but also, therefore, a desire to escape narrative's inherent temporality. Daniel seems to want to capture these passing moments in indelible pictures, linguistic snapshots that allow "us to convert the temporal flow of language into a global image that

exists all at once in the mind" (Ryan 2001, 17), for they border on the "body genre," per Williams (see my prologue) of pornography.[44]

Daniel's frustration here caps off his earlier attempts to narrativize the various moments that together comprise a sequence most monstrous. His discovery is that "the temporal flow of language" cannot be converted into "a global image that exists all at once in the mind," or at least not when the global image in question is an image of the past being brought into the present. When Marie-Laure Ryan mentions such a possibility, she does so to set up a way of thinking through texts as immersive, or alternatively, as interactive. Immersive fiction "strives toward global coherence and *a smooth sequential development*" (emphasis added) and is exemplary in facilitating "the [mental] construction [by the reader] of a textual world" (16). Interactive narration disrupts the smoothness of such mental world-making processes by constantly reminding the reader of the world's textuality. Crucially, Daniel's frustration with narrative construction is not that he fails to construct a world, but that the very textuality of this world ensures that its internal realities attach to nothing externally stable, which is to say that Daniel struggles to get "out" of his own text, to work outside of the interactive sub-mode that characterizes the mode of postmodern narrative fiction.[45] What he composes is *not*, vexingly, is a reconstruction of the past. At best, Daniel's attempt to reconstruct *the past* culminates in the construction of *a history* (and not a very immersive one at that), or possibly even *a mythology*.[46] By spotlighting sequence per se, Daniel's narratorial gambit shifts into a counteractive sub-mode (not "sequential"), as the overwhelmingly interactive narration earlier in the novel (not "smooth") gets outside itself to muse pessimistically on its failure to achieve a fully immersive experience (neither "globally coherent" nor really "developmental"). Ryan riffs on Brian McHale to suggest that writers

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[44] Hutcheon shrewdly teases the "graphics" out of historiographic metafiction when she notes that "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historio*graphic meta*fiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (5, emphases in original).

[45] Ryan paraphrases Brian McHale's characterization of postmodern fiction as that which "thematizes ontological problems" (1987, 6-11) to make this point.

[46] Here we recall from my prologue Bruce Lincoln's definition of myth: "*ideology* in narrative form."

looking to "reconcile" this "polarity" inevitably run up against "a fundamental incompatibility" between the two sub-modes, with the result that "immersion becomes thematized" (2015, 135-136). Or, as we see in the case of *The Book of Daniel*, a component of immersion, sequence, "becomes thematized." Interestingly, the thematization of ontological problems (per McHale, see fn. 45) seems to be the result of narrative dissonance, if not of the discursive dissonance discussed in my introductory chapter. Or: this is the result of trying to hybridize sub-modes (interaction, immersion) beneath a discursive mode – narrative fiction in this case.

Just as troubling, though, for the frustrated composer seeking something good enough to transfix, is that a thematized sequence's seeming vitiation of imagistic fixity does not really point toward fixed images themselves (global or otherwise) as solutions to the past's inaccessibility, for the simple reason that images are also representations: "I worry about images," Daniel writes:

> Images are what things mean. Take the word image. It connotes soft, sheer flesh shimmering on the air, like the rainbowed slick of a bubble. Images connote images, the multiplicity being an image. Images break with a small ping, their destruction is as wonderful as their being, they are essentially instruments of torture exploding through the individual's calloused capacity to feel powerful undifferentiated emotions full of longing and dissatisfaction and monumentality. The serve no social purpose. (71)

The meaning-making essence of images finds affinity with the meaning-making essence of history, as opposed to the past, and it calls our attention (counterintuitively, perhaps) to the remove at which they stand in relation to the inaccessible objects and events that they hope to map. Rather than helping to break Quentin Meillassoux's "correlationist circle," images actually reinforce it when they "break with a small ping" against it. They "shimmer," pornographically ("soft, sheer flesh"), as seductive but false; all appearance and no substance; not exactly immaterial but also not exactly real. Having dispensed with sequence and images as monstrous and worrisome, respectively, we might be tempted

to think that Daniel exhausts his modal options, but such a temptation just indicates the hegemony of narrative representation, since Daniel really just ticks boxes off his narrative checklist.

Neither sequential nor imagistic are the encyclopedic entries detailing gruesome execution methods across time and place, and which punctuate *The Book of Daniel*'s narration. Elsewhere we get an Adorno-like diatribe against the sinister elements of Disney Land (285-290), Marxist theory (129-130), and even an attempt "to be objective" (209). These are all non-sequential, non-imagistic features of the novel that are nevertheless key to its discursivity: all *syuzhet*, no *fabula*. The discursive effects, in turn, amplify when they overlap with each other, as they do when the encyclopedic entries on knouting and burning at the stake dovetail with Marxist critique: "Explore the history of corporal punishment as a class distinction" (129). Sounding in this moment like a reminder to himself to explore another avenue of academic inquiry, Daniel's note does imply sequence to the degree that it calls attention to his writing process (to the extent that the story of the writing itself is the overarching plot structure), but it also sutures two entirely non-sequential descriptions of capital punishment together with another non-sequential meditation on "why Marx used the word 'slavery' to define the role of the working class under capitalism" (130).

Certainly there is a sort of sequential logic to the entries on torture and execution since they make their way toward and culminate in the electric chair. They progress linearly, chronologically; they unfold horrifically as a plot of historical persecution over centuries so as to provide "a counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social, and political world," to again recall Hutcheon (ix). In this respect, the monstrosity of sequence matches the monstrosity of things like being bound, whipped, dismembered, burned alive. But it is also true that they make their way to the *commentary* on sequence, and that in that respect that are part and complicit parcel of externalizing any "smooth" or "immersive" aspects of the novel's sequentiality. Far more discursive than sequential, *The Book of*

Daniel's academic, dissertative-sounding elements match Karen Barad's way of defining discourse as not that which "is said" but "that which constrains and enables what can be said":

> Discourse is not a synonym for language. Discourse does not refer to linguistic or signifying systems, grammars, speech acts, or conversations. To think of discourse as mere spoken or written words forming descriptive statements is to enact the mistake of representationalist thinking. Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts a meaningful statements. Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities. This field of possibilities is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity. (Barad 146-147)

Foucauldian to the core (as a footnote after "language" in the first sentence of the paragraph attests), Barad's concept of discourse is central to her preference for performativity over representation in sketching an ontology that she calls "agential realism." The appeal of Barad's richly succinct definition of discourse is how useful it is in understanding a novel like *The Book of Daniel*, for if I extrapolate my understanding of the novel's commentary on sequence *discursively* to my understanding to the novel's other discursive elements, then I begin to understand not only how but why the novel's "statements" operate. In turn, I begin to see that the invocation of scripture toward the start of the book (and throughout) is really a discursive tone-setter in that it determines what the novel can and cannot say; it determines what will count as meaning.

The discovery of historical facts is not, as we have seen, Daniel's primary pursuit. Daniel, jaded by the constructedness of history, comes to understand that what he really wants is for access to the events of the past (stripped of their historical facthood) to mean in some direct, ontological way that he has yet to figure out. The objectivity that Daniel seeks depends paradoxically on the very

subjectivity that drives his search – *his* subjectivity. But conceding a subjectivity as the *sine qua non* of a sought-after objectivity is not the same as conceding representationalist tenets. Daniel may have exhausted his representationalist options, but modal options are still on the table. Daniel brings scripture in for its non-representationalist status, as prescribed by the discursive treatments of sequence and image, so that he might have something transcendent to work with, something at once "good enough to transfix us" and less worrisome or fragile than images.

In a sleek volume called *Reporting the Universe* (2003), Doctorow describes "texts that are sacred, texts that are not" (51-56), and here he leans, as he often does, on a formative lesson imparted to him in his undergraduate days at Kenyon College at the height of New Criticism's formalistic dominance. The lesson is as basic as recognizing that ancient writings, and in particular those that have come to be known as scriptures, "made no distinction between fact and fiction, between ordinary communication and heightened language" (53).[47] A similar remark shows up twenty-six years earlier in an essay called "False Documents" that is now considered by Doctorow scholars to be, as John Williams puts it, "the definitive statement of his aesthetics" (1996, 5). In "False Documents," Doctorow rehearses the old lesson from Kenyon as a way of supporting his distinction between "two kinds of power in language" (16), with recognition of the "possibility" that

> there was a time in which the designative and evocative functions of language were one and the same. I remember being taught that in school. The sun was Zeus's chariot in fact as well as fiction—the chariot was metaphor and operative science at one and the same time. The gods have very particular names and powers and emotions in Homer. They go about deflecting arrows, bring on human rages, turning hearts, and

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[47] This statement shouldn't be taken to mean that ancient readers and believers of scripture weren't invested in the *truth* of the sacred writings – but neither did that mean that the truths were taken to be literal. Indeed, "Language was enchanted. And the very act of telling a story carried a presumption of truth" (54). But this presumption of truth brought with it "the concept of scriptural events as having metaphorical rather than literal truth" (89). Mark Schaefer's *The Certainty of Uncertainty* (2018), which pops up in a prologue footnote and which gains steam in my third chapter, provides a strong argument that most canonical and ancient scriptures are already characterized by predominantly metaphorical language use.

controlling history. Nevertheless there really was a Troy and a Trojan war. Alone

among the arts, literature confuses fact and fiction. ("False Documents" 18)

Literature no longer "confuses fact and fiction," or so we tend to think. Doctorow's observation is

steeped in antiquity, which is what affords him the distance to see that attitudes have changed, to

exploit a difference that he now sees. Doctorow frequently mentions this difference en route to his

justifications about "giving a political character to the nonfictive and fictive uses of language because

there is conflict between them" (17). In other words, "there was a time" of no conflict (no difference),

but now, "there is conflict" reminiscent of the "hostilities," "disparities," and "clashes" that John

McCormick (1975) names as the basis of Faulkner's total achievement. But this conflict is more than

just an evolved straightening-out of an ancient confusion. In Doctorow's reckoning, the confusion

originally masked "two kinds of power in language," which he says can be thought of in terms of *the

power of the regime* and *the power of freedom* (Doctorow's italics), which can be summarized, respectively,

as "a regime language that derives its strength from what we are supposed to be and a language of

freedom whose power consists in what we threaten to become" (17).

Toggling from 1977 back to 2003, to the difference between "texts that are sacred, texts that

are not" in *Reporting the Universe*, Doctorow outlines how thoroughly entrenched he is in the language

of freedom. "As a novelist," he begins, he is "a specialist in nothing, unendowed by discipline and

therefore able to travel back and forth freely across the borders that demarcate disciplines" (51).

Doctorow catalogues the modes of textuality (with their concomitant "powers") available to him:

science, theology, anthropology, philosophy, pornography, history, journalism, confession,

autobiography, mythology, legend, dreams, hallucinations, "and the mutterings of poor mad people in

the street" (51). The very discernibility of these modes indicates that they are, along with the language

of freedom, no longer confused with each other. Doctorow slides next into the idiom of manifesto –

or perhaps credo, indicating belief – by concluding that all of these disciplines "have equal weight as

far as [he is] concerned," and that he "will use all the modes from every mode of thinking with the assurance that they can meld into a sensible composition" (51). *The Book of Daniel* calls on the power of regime language, but it does so at the behest of the novelist and, thus, for Doctorow, in the service of the language of freedom. At least that's the hope.

Invoking Scripture in *The Book of Daniel*

Daniel's first invocation of the biblical Daniel (not counting one of three epigraphs, which is taken up in depth below) occurs in the novel's opening scene, as Daniel recounts a hitchhiking trip to see his younger sister, Susan, recently committed to the Worcester State Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, over Memorial Day weekend of 1967. Interspersed with the details of getting from Columbia's Upper Manhattan campus to the hospital nearly two hundred miles to the northeast, are details about his relationship with and marriage to Phyllis, with whom he travels. Prior to the invocation, Daniel introduces himself as an author-narrator writing from a "Browsing Room" near Columbia's special collections library; immediately after the invocation, he decides that it might be better to begin the narration from an earlier point: "The way to start may be the night before, Memorial Day Eve, when the phone rang" (6). Amid these jumps in time and space that establish a thoroughly postmodern style from the outset appears the following:

> From the *Dartmouth Bible*: "Daniel, a Beacon of Faith in a Time of Persecution. Few books of the Old Testament have been so full of enigmas as the Book of Daniel. Though it contains some of the most familiar stories of the Bible, nine of its twelve chapters record weird dreams and visions which have baffled readers for centuries."
> (*Daniel* 6)

As it happens, these lines are indeed quoted faithfully, verbatim[48] if one allows for the headnote's subheading – "A Beacon of Faith in a Time of Persecution" – to be reformatted as continuous with the prose that follows. Though they do not appear in the novel, the lines following this headnote's opening in the *Dartmouth Bible* are as follows:

> It [Dan.] *purports* to be an autobiography of a person living in Babylon from 605 B.C. and as covering more than half a century, and it is so accepted by Catholic and many Protestant scholars. But to others little of it reads as though written by an eye-witness of the events. (*Dartmouth Bible* 712, emphasis added)

The word "purports" here is exactly how I've conceived of what it is that textual modes *do*: they purport. Further, they purport to do very specific and fundamental things. Something in the scriptural mode purports to do something different from what, say, a novel in the modernist or postmodernist mode purports to do, which is why – in addition to the Linda Williams- and Heather Dubrow-driven distinctions outlined in my prologue and introduction – "textual mode" is more helpful than "genre," or even than "form," for thinking the invocation of scripture in the postmodern novel; that is, for thinking what happens when one mode invokes another. Genre is too narrow a term, since things like autobiography purportedly show up under scripture's umbrella, as is clear from the *Dartmouth* headnote to the Book of Daniel.

It is not inaccurate to say that Dan. "purports to be an autobiography," but saying so is a decidedly *non*-scriptural description of what the text does, which is to say that autobiography *within scripture* purportedly differs from secular and especially from postmodernist autobiography. Autobiography purports to do a different thing when it is billed as scriptural as opposed to when it is

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48 I had thought, on my initial reading, that they might not be: "Weird dreams" stands out in this headnote as the sort of thing that Doctorow may have inserted himself, making a "false document" out of a real document, which is tantamount to saying that an introduction to something scriptural actually sounds remarkably postmodern. In itself, that's not too problematic, since the headnote is not the scripture; things become more difficult, or less schematized, when it is recognized that there are aspects of scripture that do seem modern, and/or postmodern, as scholars like Bernard Levinson point out, and as I detail in "Recrafting Israel," and which I mention in my introduction.

billed as, say, postmodern. When it is scriptural, an autobiography (or any other genre) purports to derive its power from "the authorship of God, through his intermediaries," and as such, it "is uncontested" (*Reporting the Universe* 54). Doctorow observes (correctly, I believe) that, "for many people, the universe is not the possibility of being reported because it has been accounted for, attributed in its entirety now and forever to a Supreme Author" (55-56). But even for other people, the non-adherents or non-believers for whom scripture *is* contested and is *not* a full accounting of the universe, the *purporting* remains intact even if it is taken to be false. As Doctorow says, sacred text calls upon its followers; "for all its powers," he adds, secular "literature does not call upon its followers" (52). The upshot is that a scriptural autobiography is read *even by non-believers* as a(n attempted) deployment of the power of the regime language because it is more concerned with providing the basis for "what we are supposed to be" than with "what we threaten to become," whereas the reverse is true for the secular autobiography that Daniel Isaacson seeks to write, hopeful that he might unleash the language of freedom. For Daniel Isaacson, the promise of becoming other than he is, through writing, stands in opposition to the biblical Daniel, for whom the promise of being as he is supposed to be means that his autobiography is an ultimate one, accomplishing "all the writing that was necessary for anyone, for all time" (56).

Daniel Isaacson's dissertation-as-autobiography/autobiography-as-dissertation, by contrast, is necessary for him alone (not "for anyone") in a very specific moment (not "for all time"). There is nothing ultimate about it (which is part of what makes him so angry about it), and even the power of freedom that it seeks to harness is elusive for as long as that which Daniel threatens to become remains doubtful. In turn, Daniel's doubt about what he threatens to become extends from an even more profound doubt about what he's supposed to be, that is, from his reading of the regime language of the authorities. Phrased differently, Daniel doubts the official US government's representations of history and justice as they pertain to his parents' trial and execution, and his doubts intensify when his

own writing project reveals the inevitable yielding of the past to a history. Doubt here presents a major

problem for the textualist unsure of which mode to use: if authoritative regime language fails to deliver

certainty regarding Daniel's subjectivity, then surely he is left to counterpoint it with the language of

freedom. But the decision to experiment with the language of freedom compounds the doubt that

originates in the regime language by deconstructing the meaning of that language's facts.

If the mode that *purports* to impart reality, objectivity, or truth cannot be taken as realistic,

objective, or truthful, then how can Daniel have any sense of himself as a really, objectively, or truly

consequential subject, as really coming out of a certain past and not just perceiving – or "confronting"

– himself historically?[49] In what would his consequentiality consist, if history is a poor substitute for

the past? In what, objectively speaking, would his subjectivity consist? The conventional approach to

these questions is to decide first whether Daniel's invocations of scripture are sincere or ironic.[50] While

critics stake out their positions on the question of whether invocations of scripture in *The Book of*

Daniel are to be read ironically, sincerely, or in combination, one commonality that they share is that

the ironies and sincerities discerned are all focused on contents, contexts, and thematics: is Daniel a

straight or an inverted version of his biblical namesake? Is an ancient Babylon, whose "kings had no

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[49] "Confronting" in this sense is taken from John McCormick's *Fiction as Knowledge* (1975, passim).

[50] Taking the side of sincerity, we have Peter Prescott (2000), Eugènie L. Hamner (2000), Sam B. Girgus (1988), and Bruce Bawer (2000). Taking the side of irony, we have Hutcheon, Savvas, and Harpham. Still others complicate the question by noting sincerity and irony, correspondence and inversion. In Tokarczyk's accounting, Daniel, "like the Biblical Daniel who emerged apparently unscathed from the lion's den, is a survivor. Yet unlike popular depictions of unscathed survivors, he has been radically changed by what he has endured; he has gone through the fire and, as he says of Linda Mindish, has been 'forged,' perhaps into something beyond recognition. The characters of Susan and Daniel graphically represent how the oppressed often take on the qualities of their oppressors" (2000, 75). Morris is even more hesitant, having noticed how the "stalemated critical debate over the message of Daniel's text obviously raises the general issue of hermeneutics, which is also the novel's subject" (80-81). For Morris, the most tempting answer is the non-ironic one that highlights the commonalities shared by the scriptural and secular Daniels: "The biblical Daniel is saved because he refused to worship the golden images of Nebuchadnezzar, as the novel reminds the reader. Like him, Daniel disdains the mere signifiers that haunt his life and the fate of his parents: his Yahweh is the signified truth, not the image, and his narrative records his effort to find it" (81). "But," he continues, "despite all of Daniel's passion, his engagement, and his commitment, the failures of articulation are finally as inescapable for him as they were for Billy Bathgate, Wallace Creighton, Red Bloom, and Blue" (81). The problem, for Morris, is that Daniel Isaacson's "hopes collapse as he writes" (81). Where Tokarczyk's parallels are followed by a "yet," Morris's are followed by a "but," both indicating a critical turn from direct correspondence to an unwillingness to ignore aspects of the text that point the other direction.

more use for Jews and intellectuals than have most governments in history" and who "were a stupid lot" with an atavistic penchant for executing dissenters (Prescott 62) a too obvious clef for an imperialistic US with idiotic ideological agendas?

What I called the conventional approach, above, is just that – conventional in *approach*, not in conclusions drawn after having taken the approach. While I have my own conclusions to offer according to this approach (the Babylon-US analogy is perfectly sincere while the Daniel-Daniel analogy is imperfectly inverted), I more importantly suggest a different approach altogether: to come at the question formalistically, modally; to ask whether the pairing of the *modes themselves*, and not what shapes them or what is inside them, is ironic or sincere; to ask how invoking scripture aids or tempers doubt in the postmodern novel. Key to this approach is the difference between asking how scripture *itself* purports to aid or temper doubt, and asking how its *invocation* aids or tempers doubt, tantamount to asking most specifically about Doctorow's use and treatment of scripture. Having seen what scripture purports to do, and that Doctorow is outspoken about it and deeply impressed by things like "texts that are sacred" and "the language of the regime," we now get to see what Doctorow does about it.

The -7 Effect

When Doctorow, or possibly Daniel, frontloads *The Book of Daniel* with epigraphs from the biblical Book of Daniel and excerpts from Whitman's *Song of Myself* and Ginsberg's *America*, selectivity is on full display. For example: a line from Ginsberg's *America*, which reads, "America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956." is elided, but at least the ellipsis indicates the omission in a straightforward and accurate way. By contrast, the passage cited as "Daniel, 3:4" is given as follows:

> Then a herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations and
>
> languages, That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut,

psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the golden image

that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up: And whosofalleth not down and

worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.

Therefore at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the cornet, flute,

sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, all the people, the nations, and the

languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king

had set up.

At first glance, Daniel 3:4 appears correctly. It is difficult to know whether the "whosofalleth" is an

intentional error or an accident by Random House, since intentional errors do appear in parts of *The

Book of Daniel*, particularly in official documents (as we see below). But apart from a minor

typographical error, what is amiss is that it reads, "Daniel, 3:4," when the full biblical passage that

appears actually extends through Daniel 3:*7*, meaning that the citation ignores or in some other way

fails to account for three quarters of the quoted text (and with the "whosofalleth" actually coming in

3:5). Proper citation befitting an academically rigorous dissertation (or even just a conventional novel)

would read, "Daniel, 3:4**-7**," or even better, "Daniel 3:4-7, *Dartmouth Bible*," with a nod to the

translation in question. But if full and comprehensive citation is the goal, then perhaps the most

academically sound and authorially responsible citation would read, "Daniel 3:4-7, *Dartmouth Bible: An

Abridgment of the King James Version, with Aids to its Understanding as History and Literature, and as a Source of

Religious Experience* (1950), 718."

To my knowledge, nobody has yet written about or commented on the lack of a "-7" on the

back end of "Daniel, 3:4." Perhaps scholars take it to be as minor as, and/or as unintentional as the

"whosofalleth," but it strikes me as a curious oversight, especially in light of Morris's meticulous work

on "the oscillation of inclusion and omission, sound and silence, presence and absence" (97), in which

his readings of the ellipses throughout the novel, including those in the Ginsberg epigraph, illuminate

expertly how the novel's formal properties render it a hermeneutically "undecidable" paradox (sic passim), potentially even as a *mise en abyme* (96), or as a metaleptic device enabling Daniel to transgress the textual-extratextual threshold (96). Just as scholars agonize over the novel's putative ironies and sincerities, for instance, they are divided as to whether they should attribute authorship, or rather "point of view," to Daniel or to Doctorow, or to a conflation of the two in which Daniel is Doctorow's surrogate. Whose originating consciousness should we be analyzing? If it is Daniel's, then the work purports to dissertate, and the epigraphs (as well as the extremely problematic, italicized passages from Daniel 12:1-4, 9 that close out the text) are part of the storyworld's textual ontology, serving, presumably, as "prelude and heuristic of *The Book of Daniel*" (Morris 92). Certainly the opening epigraph can be read as a diegetic prologue, even if it is allegorical. If it is Doctorow's, then the novel purports to doubt, and the epigraphs "establish" an extratextual "homology among the Old Testament Daniel, Walt Whitman, and Allen Ginsberg: the passages concern state power and its enforcement of 'correct' interpretation" (Morris 91). According to this framework, Doctorow provides help in interpreting Daniel's text, even if the help is cryptic and elliptical. And, of course, if it is a conflation, then Doctorow has found a way "in," so to speak, and he, his epigraphs, and the title on the cover *all* "remain 'inside and outside' the text, blurring the distinction between the orphaned Doctorow and Daniel" (92).

Deciding how to read a missing "-7" thus depends on prior decisions about how to read epigraphs, since those decisions pose different problems for Doctorow and Daniel respectively. Morris, for instance, notes that the elision of the line from Ginsberg's *America*, which references the 1950s, "might have created new problems of chronology in the novel to come, which spans that decade, but because such problems would differ between Doctorow or Daniel, the question of authorship…is raised again" (92). Such differing problems are precisely the textual cues driving my own decision to attribute the epigraphs to Daniel, itself an ironic decision in that it places Daniel in

the Doctorow role by establishing textual-extratextual homologies even as it effaces textual-extratextual distinctions. But I arrive at this decision by revisiting what I have, parenthetically, just called "the extremely problematic, italicized passages from Daniel 12:1-4, 9 that close out the text," which appear as follows:

> *and there shall be a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation . . . and at that time the people shall be delivered, everyone that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end . . . Go thy way Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.* (302-303)

All credit to Morris for having already done the work of contrasting the novel's version of the scripture to the *Dartmouth Bible*'s version, and for doing it well:

> The excerpt is from Daniel 12:1-4, 9, and the two ellipses included are innocuous. However, they divert attention from an egregious omission, not marked at all, which is indicated here in square brackets: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, [some to everlasting life][51] some to everlasting contempt."
>
> The anonymous quoter suppresses the most famous passage in Daniel, unique in the Old Testament and traditionally valorized by Christian interpreters. At a stroke, through an unmarked ellipsis, the Bible is reinterpreted, and the afterlife—some respite from the eternal reiteration of the same?—is denied. This excision again exemplifies the interpretive implications of the selectivity necessary to writing and language. (Morris 96-97)

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[51] Morris forgets the comma: "[some to everlasting life[,]]…," which seems to matter, given that the King James/*Dartmouth* versions of these passages do include the punctuation.

When Morris mentions "the two ellipses included" as being "innocuous," he is contrasting it with an earlier discussion in which Daniel's citation of the US Constitution, Article III, Section 3, includes an ellipsis that is "clearly inaccurate," as "there are no words in Article III, Section 3" where the ellipsis supposedly replaces them (85), and so "Daniel's misplaced ellipsis calls attention to itself" (86). In other words, the ellipses in the final biblical passage are innocuous to the extent that they do not mislead, as this other one in the Constitution does; they are not willful *mis*representations of the predecessor text, that which is invoked. However, as with the biblical passage that does feature "an unmarked ellipsis," Daniel's "more damning omission is the remainder of the section, which follows his excerpt" in the actual Constitution, but which is not provided in his novel/dissertation, leading Morris to call it "Daniel's true, guilty ellipsis" because of what it "conceals" (86).

Morris's point is that some of the ellipses in *The Book of Daniel* are intentional decoys, while the omissions of other content go unmarked.[52] The irony is that the "innocuous" instances actually call attention *to*, rather than away from, the "guilty" instances. In short, Morris reads intentional misrepresentation even at the level of the novel's punctuation, or lack thereof. So Morris does identify a logic for reading what might be interpreted as either textual or extratextual material, as the product of Daniel- or of Doctorow-as-writer, respectively, which is evident by his statement that "the only indications that this passage [the final biblical passage cited above] belongs in the novel at all—to be attributed perhaps to Daniel, perhaps to Doctorow,—are [the] three final ellipses, the last suppressions" (96). But Morris neither commits to his own logic in the case of reading the final biblical passage, nor does he extend it to the first epigraph or even to the title, preferring to let "the ultimate undecidability of Daniel's savage indignation" (92) remain intact as an unresolvable paradox.

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[52] Booth out "possible errors between manuscript and printer" as another possibility, though it isn't one that factors into Morris's analysis, or else Morris rules it out according to his own bibliographic research. But I have to think that a novelist who encodes his text in ellipses and omissions would be vigilant about monitoring manuscript-printer transitions.

Morris mentions the "only" textual "indications" that would allow him to attribute authorship to Daniel, but then he stops short of actually making the attribution, choosing instead to remain undecided. He commits fully to undecidability because he thinks that his theory of misrepresentation depends on it. His "speculation" that "maybe the existence of an author is inferable only by an absence in a text" (96) is too tentative, for it is precisely his readings of ellipses throughout that demonstrate how Daniel's nihilistic tendencies drive the narrative, how the unmarked ellipsis that closes out the novel connects to Daniel's "savage indignation" by redacting hope from "the most famous passage in Daniel," "unique" and "valorized" for the "respite" that it promises. That these same features are on display "outside" the narrative, epigraphically, is not a guarantee that "the question of selector" (92) is answered definitively, but it is about as close as it comes if one follows textual cues, in which case, Daniel is the most likely "selector" – and editor – of epigraphs, and the epigraphs, along with the biblical passage at the end, are both as much "in" the novel as they are "out" of it, so Daniel finds his way out just as Doctorow makes his way in – a common enough paratextual gambit. Corroborating this view of the biblical epigraph as attributable to Daniel's centrifugal compositional process is that it is in the language of a King James translation, which connects to the *Dartmouth Bible* that appears within the text of the novel. Again, this is no guarantee that the epigraph is attributable to Daniel, but it does square, without contradiction, with all of the other textual information offered in the novel.

A sneaky, unmarked redaction, then, robs a passage of the hope that was meant for it, but similarly, the unmarked addition of Daniel 3:5-7 to Daniel 3:4 supplies the threat of persecution for anyone not willing to swallow the inane dictates of state power (the "fiery furnace" is the sentence for dissenters named in 3:6). The lack of citation, which amounts to a sort of anti-ellipsis in that it fails to designate what has been added, acts as decoy for an unsignaled threat, an unmarked cause for despair, especially for an exile like Daniel. Verse 3:4 sets the stage with the command to obey; 3:5 specifies the form of obedience; 3:6 names the consequence of disobedience; and, 3:7 concludes with the result

that everyone, under such duress, obeys the command to fall down and worship the golden image set up by Nebuchadnezzar. The power of the regime is in full effect, here, as the threat of persecution emerges as a referent stripped of reference, equal but opposite to the referent-free content of the false ellipses, and what Morris hitherto identifies as *mis*representation gets catapulted into *non*representation, for representation is no longer being manipulated but rather *interrupted*. Where nonrepresentation is generally thought of as absence or omission, it is now accomplished via presence and extra-inclusion. This is how the epigraphic invocation that appears ahead of anything else in the novel announces, audaciously and discursively, that the novel is prepared to make statements in the form of non-referenced referents. What will be said will not be signposted; it will be present but unmarked. In this case, the despair and desperation that attend threats of persecution are meaningfully stated without being referenced; or, they are the unrepresented referents, presented by a presenter who stacks the deck in a self-fulfilling, retroactive prophecy when he mentions, parenthetically, that "You've got to be desperate to read the Bible" (12). Wouldn't such a statement mean that the Bible *counteracts* desperation? Isn't the Bible an antidote to despair? But the desperation that it takes Daniel to read the Bible feeds into the despair that he writes into it.

To this point, my readings of *The Book of Daniel* have focused on what the novel is unwilling to do, according to the parameters of its own discourse. Here is a novel discontented with sequence, images, and even straightforward citational reference; a novel that uses unmarked presences and absences to make its statements. Now we are in position to see that *Daniel*'s invocations of scripture are wholly in the service of doubt, that the novel uses the language of the regime to serve the language of freedom, and that (therefore) doubt is a powerful facilitator of freedom even as it originates as a response to the regime.

Several short pages after Daniel inserts the opening lines of the *Dartmouth Bible*'s headnote to The Book of Daniel, in which the Dartmouth editors state that the scripture purports to be

autobiographical, Daniel returns to a fuller invocation after recounting that his sister professes her belief in a God (10). Directly preceding this fuller invocation is Daniel's cruel diagnosis of Susan, in which he conflates her belief with a gullibility so intense as to explain her mental illness:

> Ah Susy, my Susyanna, what have you done? You are a dupe of the international moralist propagandist apparatus! They have made a moral speed freak of you! They have wrecked your hair and taken away your granny glasses and dressed you in the robe of a sick person. Oh, look at what they've done, Susan, look at what they've done to you. (10)

Just as Daniel merges his sister's belief in God with her mental illness, so he blends the regime language of scripture with the "the international moralist propagandist apparatus," which sounds like an imperialist ideology to which Susan has fallen prey. Not that any of this makes much sense; instead, Daniel sounds a little unhinged in his cruelty. The obvious holes in Daniel's logic notwithstanding, what matters here is his manner of composition, his discourse. Daniel makes clear – even if he doesn't make much sense – that *for him* there is a direct correspondence between Susan's victimhood and the authority of the regime language. Formulated differently, and evident from how he proceeds, we see that "the international moralist propagandist apparatus" corresponds with the Bible:

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF GOD

AS REPRESENTED IN THE BIBLE

> Actually that's what God does in the Bible—like the little girl says, he gets people. He takes care of them. He lays on this monumental justice. Oh the curses, the admonitions; the plagues, the scatterings, the ruinations, the strikings dead, the renderings unto and the tearings asunder. The floods. The fires. It is interesting to note that God as a *character* in the Bible seems almost always concerned with the idea of his recognition by mankind. He is constantly declaring His Authority, with rewards for

those who recognize it and punishment for those who don't… (10, emphasis in original)

The invocation, which becomes a glossed paraphrase, continues for another page and half, increasing in its flippancy as it goes. By the time Daniel states that "[d]reams, visions, and apparitions in the night seem to be an occupational hazard of the ancient rulers" (11), or that one of Daniel's interpretations for Nebuchadnezzar translates to "You've bought it, Kingy" (11), the reader is well aware that Daniel puts no stock in the biblical narrative. The "tone of the Old Testament" might not be ironic, to recall Prescott, but Daniel's tone when invoking it is nothing short of caustic. Daniel's doubt, though, cannot be divorced, even here, from the selectivity that drives the biblical passages that bookend the novel, from the opening epigraph missing a "-7" to the final italicized passage that deliberately expunges the hope of "everlasting life." For as Daniel winds down his summary of the biblical Daniel's trajectory, he caps it off with none other than a direct quotation, broken by an accurate (or "innocuous") ellipsis:

Toward the end his [the biblical Daniel's] insights become more diffuse, apocalyptic, hysterical. One night he suffers his own dream, a weird and awesome vision of composite beasts and seas and heavens and fire and storms and an Ancient on a throne, and ironically he doesn't know what it means: "I, Daniel, was grieved in my spirit in the midst of my body, and the vision of my head troubled me. . . . My cogitations much troubled me, and my countenance changed in me: but I kept the matter in my heart." (12)

The sentence in quotation marks ("I, Daniel…") is from Daniel 7:15, while the second sentence coming after the ellipsis ("My cogitations…") is *most* of Daniel 7:28, minus the "Hitherto is the end of the matter" that begins that verse. Redacted, then, is Daniel 7:16-27 (and the first line of 28), a sequence, ultimately, of hope. Just as "everlasting life" loses out to "everlasting contempt" in 12:2, there is an "everlasting kingdom" in 7:27 that loses out to the selector's preference for a grieving spirit

and a troubled, or troubling, head. Likewise, there are moments in which Daniel "would know the truth," in both 7:16 and 7:19, that are elided in favor of the "cogitations" that Daniel knows will continue troubling him.

And with good reason: truth and justice cannot make Daniel a "beacon of hope in a time of persecution" for the simple reason that they are, for Daniel, unattainable outside of the biblical context. Daniel knows this because he knows that what happened to his parents is the opposite of what happened to the biblical Daniel, whose friends were delivered from the furnace and who was himself delivered from the lion's den unscathed, just as it is the opposite of what continues happening, at the time of his writing:

> The summer of 1967 was just beginning. There would be a wave of draft-card burning. There would be riots in Newark and Detroit. Young people in the United States would try a form of protest originated in this century by the Buddhist monks of South Vietnam. They would douse themselves with gasoline and light matches to themselves. They would burn to death in protest. But I, Daniel, was grieved, and the visions of my head troubled me and I do not want to keep the matter in my heart. (17)

Daniel's move here is pretty fascinating. He elides *history*, jumping from ancient Babylon to the present (skipping his parents' history, for the moment), invoking self-immolation as a form of resistance against regime power in both contexts; then, he presents this *historical* ellipsis as the occasion for a *re-*invocation of his *biblical* ellipsis, where Daniel 7:15 and the latter part of 7:28 are not only sutured together *without* an ellipsis, but turned around so that the decision to keep the matter in the heart of a prophet transforms into the stated desire *not* to keep the matter in the heart of a prophet's opposite, a doubting and despairing nihilist. Meanwhile, the line, "They would burn to death in protest" aptly describes his parents, as though they are the focus of his attention in this moment. So the referent of this line has been expunged, since what is really being discussed throughout *The Book of Daniel* is neither

a fiery furnace from scripture, nor Buddhist monks nor protesters of the Vietnam War, but an electric chair used against Jewish intellectuals with left-leaning sympathies; namely, Daniel's parents. In this way, Daniel fully textualizes history (not the past; he knows that the past can never be textualized), reducing its ontology to selectable and removable words, thereby setting discursive parameters on what can and cannot be said. Daniel's narrative thus assumes the shape of an unmarked elision, an elision without its ellipsis, which at once constitutes a statement and an interpretation of that same statement, confirming Savvas's claim that "Daniel has had to recreate his past in order to analyze it" (135). In this way, what is invoked in *The Book of Daniel* is actually a newly invented set of events to which Daniel confers meaning, an emergent set of referents (his own new past) unfettered by the *systems* of signification that would force him to confer meaning to the facts of history.

Part Two: *Song of Solomon*

Look not upon me, because I am black, but because the sun hath looked upon me.
- Song of Solomon 1:6, King James Version

The Father Utters the Names of People Who Know.
- *Hag Nammadi*, Subheading to "The Gospel of Truth" (21,5 – 23,17)

For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.
- Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Part One of this chapter begins with a progression of epigraphs that culminate in a line from Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* that I show, over the course of that section, to be an ironic, inverted, and compressed rearticulation of that novel's previous invocations. The previous invocations are themselves selectively elided passages from Dan. that Daniel uses to cast heightened doubt on official representations of state that bleed into personal and political identity. *Not* included in my own epigraphic progression is the novel's biblical epigraph from another part of Dan. that is only partially cited, creating an effect that is equal but opposite to the effects of the novel's many strategically placed ellipses: where ellipses expunge referents, partial or incomplete citation expunges reference. Likewise,

the progression of epigraphs that opens Part Two of this chapter does not include *Song of Solomon*'s actual and wholly unattributed epigraph, in which all reference is fully detached from an already abstracted referent, as will be shown below. I leave *Song of Solomon*'s single, uncited epigraph out of this section's epigraphs precisely because it figures so prominently in making sense of Morrison's novelistic statements that it becomes the focal point of my reading, but also because I find something poetic about how the excluded epigraph is the presence around which the included ones congregate – analogous, perhaps, to the way in which the pervasive presence of scripture throughout all of the works taken up by this dissertation constitutes a sort of magnetic field to which postmodern narrative forms of doubt are drawn. As with the epigraphic progression that precedes my reading of Doctorow's novel, I intend for this progression that precedes my reading of Morrison's novel to demonstrate how its various invocations work together to culminate in the aesthetic and discursive paradox that defines *Song of Solomon*.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Song of Solomon dispenses with the undeniably overt aspects of *The Book of Daniel*, in which that novel's characters are thinly disguised avatars of controversial historical figures. For Morrison, the past is more background or setting than it is script or plot. The importance of context to *Song of Solomon* is not a specific injustice as it actually happened, but a cultural logic that perpetuates probabilities of injustice, including a couple of actual historical events to hammer home the point. Milkman Dead is but one representation of African American masculinity. To describe Milkman Dead's situation is to describe not just any instance of injustice or persecution but an entire national legacy of institutional inequality. *Song of Solomon* is more the fictionalization of a situation than an event (in either case, it is still "the past"), and it opens with the suicide of a man whose attempts to overcome this legacy reveal it as – for him, anyway – insurmountable. The ending is where things get tricky, as it closes with the

suicide of a man whose attempts to overcome this legacy reveal it as surmountable only through a paradoxical erasure (for it is erasure by duplication) of the first man's attempts: prima facie, *Song of Solomon* appears to be a despairingly symmetrical novel. What makes it unexpectedly hopeful is what happens between these two suicides.

When Mr. Robert Smith, a North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent, leaps to his death from the cupola of No Mercy Hospital on Not Doctor Street, Milkman Dead is just about to be born. Before Milkman makes his own leap from a rocky outcropping and into the outstretched arms of Guitar Bains, thirty-six years later, a proliferation of mysterious, sometimes scriptural names crowds his identity and demands to be explored. In addition to the cryptic place names like No Mercy Hospital and Not Doctor Street, and defamiliarizing character names like Milkman, Guitar and Milkman's grandmother Sing, are the names of Milkman's sisters, First Corinthians and Magdalene (Corinthians and Lena for short); Milkman's mother, Ruth; Milkman's cousin and lover, Hagar; Hagar's mother, Rebecca (Reba); Reba's mother and milkman's aunt (his father's sister), Pilate; and finally, Milkman's great-grandfather (Pilate's father), the eponymous Solomon (or Shalimar, or Sugarman, or Charlemagne, or Shalleemone) rounding out the Dead family whose names are also scriptural echoes. There is also a Circe, invoking Homerian epic. And then, of course, there is "Milkman" himself, whose "real" name is Macon Dead III, though "Dead" is, like "Lewin" in *The Book of Daniel*, only "real" in the legal sense, imposed by the hegemony of state power after a clerical mistake originating in the Macon I generation – that of Milkman's grandfather, also known as Jake, presumably short for Jacob (though "Jacob" never appears in the text), to make a last and doubly indirect scriptural allusion.

Clearly, the names in this novel are blatant; surely we can imagine a version of Morrison's novel devoid of such blatancy, and in which the overall structure of the novel would remain intact

even in the absence of such blatancy.[53] In such a version, the interpretive challenge would entail, inter alia, making sense of the fictionalization of a historical situation and deciding whether a novel bookended by suicides makes a statement of hope or despair. Names and naming aside, *Song of Solomon* is wholly absorbed by its relationship to the past, a feature that it shares in common not just with *The Book of Daniel* but with anything else that falls under Hutcheon's banner of historiographic metafictions, including works like Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), a novel published in the same year as *Song of Solomon*, but which neither invokes scripture nor utilizes blatant character names. The common feature of historiographic metafictions is not some formal technique involving scripture but a specific stance toward history and the past, so that, in situating *Song of Solomon*, it must first be said, as Justine Baillie does (citing Orlando Patterson), that the novel's narrative investment is "an act of reclamation that involves a return to the past and the original trauma of slavery," and that "it is toward such a confrontation with his past and, by extension, the past of his people, that Morrison takes Milkman Dead" (2013, 111). Baillie echoes Philip Page who sees Milkman's "confrontation with his past" as "a quest for identity and meaning through knowledge of the ancestral and cultural past" (2005, 99), and Page, in turn, echoes Dorothy H. Lee's summary that "[t]he reader learns of a black family victimized by the social ills inherent in Afro-American history – those engendered by slavery and the loss of a past as well as the consequences of the urban, middle-class standards for success and rejecting society. Anonymous and in awe of fair color and property, the Deads have experienced a loss of true self-respect" (1982, 66).

Taking critics like Patterson, Baillie, Page, and Lee at face value, readers might reasonably expect that a successful "confrontation" with the past, or a "reclamation" of it, or "knowledge" of it will result in such promising things as identity recovered, meaning discerned, and social healing; that

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[53] Booth encourages me "to consider the long tradition of blatant names, including Dickens, and even Trollope with many of his minor characters. [She] feels in Morrison it's united with a community creating nicknames where surnames are not the people's own."

if "the loss of a past" equates to "a loss of true self-respect," that a recovery of that past equates to renewed self-respect. Here, the postmodernist assumption that the ontological realness of the past outweighs the epistemological constructedness of history remains intact, but interestingly, the assumption is attended by an unexpected hopefulness that such an ontology *can* be apprehended, known in philosophy as naïve realism. Whereas we saw previously how Savvas maintains the realist stance that the past "is what happened and as such is (largely) irretrievable," and that history "is how we understand the past," here we are seeing, in Morrison and Morrison criticism, that the past and history are indeed different animals, but that they may both be captured. This hopefulness seems to stem from the different starting points from which Doctorow's Daniel and Morrison's Milkman depart. Daniel sets out to apprehend the past in its ontologically pure state, only to learn the impossibility of doing so. Frustration ensues. But Milkman's starting point is practically opposite. As Patrick Bryce Bjork points out in *The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1992),

> Macon teaches his son that identity can only be found in the future, in his linear vision to "own things," "own people," and therefore "own yourself." *He wishes to escape the past* because it has, for him, no materially functional purpose.

> Displaced between these two visions, Milkman chooses not to choose. Rather than attaching himself to any belief of commitment and acting from any set of principles, Milkman only reacts, self-consciously and indifferently, to whatever transpires about him. (92, emphasis added)

So Bjork, following his reading of Macon's impact on his son, casts doubt on the possibility that access to the past holds any promise of redemption, or, at least, of a place where identity can be located, and this doubt ties directly into whether Milkman can meaningfully pursue "any belief or commitment" or "any set of principles." In other words, Bjork supplies the missing critical pessimism by turning Daniel's discovery into Milkman's starting point, while also connecting Milkman's lack of belief –

perhaps a soft form of doubt – to his relationship with the past. For Milkman to flee from his past is also to flee from the built-in assumption that he's got any access to that past, just as his individualistic, capitalistic turn toward the future assumes that *it* can somehow be apprehended or attained. Milkman seems to know better, however, "choosing not to choose," and the tendency is to read his passivity in negative light, as Bjork does. Positive readings, on the other hand, tend to center around the notion that Milkman undergoes transformation, from passive to proactive, from individualistic to community-centered, from future-oriented self-sufficiency to past-oriented ancestral harmony. Consider Page's positive assessment when he claims, citing Valerie Smith and Michael Awkward, that "Milkman transcends individualism and finds himself in a grand harmony with all people and all things" (2005, 112).[54]

Page continues in the next paragraph to claim that "Milkman's quest enables him to recapture his ancestral and cultural past" (112), making overt and explicit the notion, contra Savvas and most of philosophical realism,[55] that the past *is* retrievable: "recapturable" and thus capturable at all. Notably, though, an "enabled" Milkman, undergoing the apparently positive transformation from passive and reactive to proactive and "recapturing," suffers no anxiety about the *constructedness* of what is being recaptured. That is, Milkman seems to make no distinction between the past that he recaptures and the *historicity* of that past, a distinction that becomes all the more necessary to parse in light of *how* he recaptures his ancestral and cultural past. According to Page, Milkman accomplishes this recapture of the past

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[54] Booth notes that this is the spirit of the suicide in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

[55] Graham Harman (2018) explains that the "basic outlooks on the question of realism vs. anti-realism... At one extreme is so-called 'naïve-realism,' which holds that a world exists outside the mind, *and* that we can know this world... At the other extreme is subjective idealism, in which nothing exists outside the mind" (15). These are situated as the poles of what he calls "Meillassoux's spectrum," between which are weak and strong versions of correlationism. Weak correlationism is closer to the realist end of the spectrum and believes that an extramental reality exists but that we cannot know it. Strong correlationism is closer to the subjective idealist end of the spectrum and is a radical attempt to undercut both realism and idealism by way of what Meillassoux calls "speculative materialism."

by embodying the essences of his family ghosts. He reaches the womb of his family (the

cave) by embracing the terrifying but guiding Circe, who models Milkman's quest by

fusing Western and African-American cultural traditions, life and death, and present

and past. *He becomes Jake* as he rediscovers the lost paradise of Lincoln's Heaven in

Shalimar. *He then becomes Solomon* as he achieves the spiritual equivalent of flying first in

his "dreamy sleep all about flying" and then in his final leap. (112, emphasis added)

By "*embodying* the essences of his family ghosts," "*becoming* Jake," and "then *becoming* Solomon,"

Milkman's recapture of his family's past is clearly a matter of performative affect. Milkman's

performativity offers nothing short of an alternative to representationalism and an answer to the

question, "Does language accurately represent its referent?" (Barad 2007, 47; see, too, the earlier

mention of Barad's preference of performativity over representation in Part One of this chapter). But

it is a mistake to think that Milkman captures, or recaptures, his ancestral and cultural past through

his affective performances, and in particular, in his final, Icarus-like flight, his riding of the air to which

he ultimately surrenders. To be sure, he re-engages in the world, and he does so meaningfully for a

terribly short time. He gains a form of literacy which allows him to learn some facts about his heritage,

and we can recall that facts are, by Hutcheon's definition, meaningful. But the present does not

become the past and Milkman does not become his forefathers or their ghosts. To say that Milkman

becomes who he "really" is based on what he learns – to say, as Christiansë does that "'Milkman' is

really Macon Dead III" (2013, 232) – discards Shakespeare's truism regarding roses and the names

they go by. Certainly there is such a thing as an "originary present," as Benedict Anderson calls it

(1991, 205), that (re)produces history, and I have demonstrated that retroactive dynamic in a reading

of Deuteronomistic narrative,[56] but it does not *become* the past. Instead, just as Dorothy H. Lee

describes how "the ugly, spreading watermark on the dining room table" in Ruth Dead's household

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[56] "Recrafting Israel" (2015).

"was made by a crystal bowl which had, in the past, been filled daily with fresh flowers" (1982, 65), the past becomes – or rather, informs – the present. To rename Milkman – to strip him of that highly constructed form of reference so that the real referent underneath might align with a truer form of reference – is simply to re-historicize the same referent's subjectivity.

If Milkman's name is therefore irrelevant in at least a limited sense, and if his starting point is a pessimism (or at least an indifference) regarding the past, redirected by his father into an optimism regarding the future, then the next phase of questioning takes readers to Milkman's endpoint – the novel's second suicide by a man taking flight. It is an endpoint that is every bit as ambiguous, in terms of splitting critics into interpretive factions, similar to the factions that we saw earlier who read irony, allegory, or both, in *The Book of Daniel*'s invocations of scripture. In *Song of Solomon*, the interpretive split comes between hope and despair – optimism or pessimism – with a good dose of ambiguity added by those, like J. Brooks Bouson, who hesitate between the two poles. Bouson writes in *Quiet As Its Kept* (2000), for instance, that "if the novel intends an 'optimistic' ending by depicting Milkman's moment of flight and racial pride, it also undercuts that optimism by suggesting that his leap into the arms of the waiting Guitar is nihilistic and suicidal" (76). Such a reasonably centrist position as Bouson's tempers the more polarized split that characterizes *Solomon* scholarship elsewhere. Goulimari notes, for instance, that "[t]he final chapter and especially the closing scene are so open-ended, so open to a variety of interpretations that critics have read them in diametrically opposed ways: for some Milkman's quest ends in success, for others in failure" (2011, 68). Goulimari goes on to survey a range of readings, from optimistic (Carr Lee, 1998) to ambiguous (Michael Awkward, 1990) to pessimistic (James Coleman, 1998; Gerry Brenner, 1987). Goulimari's survey gets to the heart of whether Milkman's "flight," like the flight of "fathers" who "may soar," should be taken as a positive or a negative.

Meanwhile, Marianne Hirsch, in an influential and anthologized article entitled "Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" (1995), unpacks the dialectic surrounding flight and soaring fathers in such a way that the novel's two themes of flying and naming are shown to be inextricably connected – as the title of her essay and the novel's epigraph both attest. Hirsch tracks the ways in which "the novel's images of paternity vacillate between this crushing presence [that Macon Dead II brings to his nuclear family] and a devastating absence, between incestuous closeness and injurious distance" (75). The "crushing presence" clearly alludes to Milkman's father; the "devastating absence" refers to Solomon, whose

> own paternity receives contradictory interpretations in the space of the text. His flight, a heroic return to Africa, offers his descendants a mythic form of transcendence with which to identify, an admirable and legendary rejection of his slave condition, a revolutionary rebellion. But his flight can also be seen as an act of paternal irresponsibility and abandonment, especially as it echoes the mock-heroic flight of the insurance agent Robert Smith, with which the novel begins. (77)

Reading these figures, Hirsch argues convincingly that "the novel acts out the confusion between closeness and distance that it tries in different ways to resolve" (79). This confusion regarding closeness and distance permeates the novel's parental relationships to the point that it

> is perpetuated in [Ruth Foster Dead's] relationship with her son and is responsible for his name, "Milkman." It is here that the confusions between closeness and absence which define paternal relations extend to and shape a number of other familial interactions. Ruth's secret and transgressive nursing feels to Ruth not only like 'a gentle balm, a gentle touch,' but also like an act of magic and creativity. As Ruth's imagination equates nursing with spinning gold, she places herself in a heroic tradition of fairy tales which the novel juxtaposes to the masculine heroism of flight. (79)

Nursing her son well past the age that is generally considered appropriate is thus an instance of the novel "acting out" (and here we are back to performativity) this confusion between presence and absence, both of which have their pros and cons. "Milkman" is the result of Ruth's negotiation of the dialectic; its referent starts with "Milk-" and ends with "-man," implying a whitewashed person too old to not be weaned (c.f. Grewal 1998). The name itself is an example of the past – a remarkably specific part of the past, but a part that is nonetheless remarkably consistent with the novel's central themes – becoming/informing the present. The present, here, is marked by "Milkman," the name; the name, in turn, marks Ruth's overcorrection of a soaring father, and her overcorrection renders Milkman ignorant of the names that he "may know."

We can now recall that Milkman, along with the other character names in *Song of Solomon*, is blatant. Such a catalogue of names as the one provided, above, raises the interpretive challenge of *Song of Solomon* considerably – to the point, arguably, that making sense of the novel's names is tantamount to interpreting the novel, and in which reader and protagonist find themselves in the same predicament of trying to sort out the knowledge available to the protagonist, as they do in *The Book of Daniel*. Indeed, as Goulimari concludes, "Morrison has created a dialogic text that allows or rather that demands the reader's active participation and the continuation of dialogue" (2011, 69). And, as with Doctorow's Daniel, characters with biblical names offer possibilities of allegory and irony. What significance, if any, attaches to names such as Pilate and Hagar (for example)?

In what follows, I work toward an answer to this question, which gets me partway down the path of answering the other, larger question about what invoking scripture accomplishes in *Song of Solomon*. Attaching significance to the scriptural names takes me only partway because the many scriptural names constitute only part (albeit a significant part) of the novel's invocation of scripture, since scripture is invoked not just *through* the names but also, arguably, in the anonymous epigraph *about* the names:

> *The fathers may soar*
> *And the children may know their names*[57]

Thus, what follows is an attempt to account not just for the novel's invocations of scripture via names, but also for the linkages between names, epigraphs, and scripture, with the suggestion that *Song of Solomon*'s use of a (possibly) scriptural epigraph *concerning* names indicates fundamental connections such that names, epigraphs, and scripture are intimately related formalisms. But this suggestion is secondary to my primary claim that Morrison invokes scripture as a rallying cry against ignorance and in support of wisdom, of which the scriptural Solomon is an emblematic figure.

In order to set up my readings the novel's biblical names with which I intend to inaugurate the logic of the invocations of scripture in *Song of Solomon*, it is worth noting from the outset that Hirsch, in the article mentioned above, begins the process of sketching the interrelations between names and epigraphs (as hinted at previously) when she links Solomon, the transmission of his paternity, and the (in)ability *to know* this paternal transmission, to "the novel's epigraph, its beginning, and its end" (77-78). Likewise, Yvette Christiansë, in a study that I incorporate heavily below, begins the process of sketching the interrelations between epigraphs in scripture in her "Epilogue" to *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (2013) when she links *Song of Solomon*'s epigraph to The Gospel of Truth (GTr) from the Coptic and apocryphal Nag Hammadi texts, which in turn leads to a fascinating exploration of the intertextuality of Morrison's oeuvre as First Corinthians (the character in *Song of Solomon*) is read by Christiansë as being meaningfully connected to the epigraph from First Corinthians (the biblical epistle) in Morrison's next novel, *Tar Baby* (1981). Key to my own reading of the *Song of Solomon*'s epigraph is Christiansë's conclusion, which begins with *Solomon* but which leads to and culminates in *Tar Baby*, whose epigraph is 1 Cor. 1:11: "For it hath been declared / unto me of you,

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[57] Booth comments in her reading of this chapter that "the prophetic voice invokes the opposite of African American conditions. Biblical genealogy makes a claim that enslaved, uprooted people can't claim." Moreover, these opposite conditions manifest concretely in "the white refusal to let Black people learn to fly," as in "the resistance to the Tuskegee Airmen," which "is blended by Morrison with the legend of the ancestral spirits from across the ocean."

my brethren, by them / which are of the house of / Chloe, that there are / contentions among you."
The latter epigraph in *Tar Baby* "points paradoxically toward and away from its Pauline context, as well as the Pauline call for unity" (235). Such language and analysis comport nicely with my overall claim in this chapter, beginning with Doctorow's paradox, that scripture, when invoked and edited in a characteristically postmodern way, actually points away from itself (or, in Christiansë's case, its "context"), its own premise. My task here is to explicate how my reading of *Song of Solomon* aligns with my reading of Doctorow's *Daniel* and Christiansë's reading of the *Tar Baby* epigraph, so that this postmodern treatment of scriptural material clarifies not as an isolated formal technique in a couple of idiosyncratic works, but as a technique originating in works with considerable influence largely because of it.

Invoking Scripture in *Song of Solomon*

Song of Solomon is much more tentative than *The Book of Daniel* in its invocations, and this is as much a literal aspect of the text as it is a stylistic, effect-inducing element. For instance, whereas *Daniel* offers a clear, pinpointable moment of its initial invocation of scripture, apart from its title and epigraph ("From the *Dartmouth Bible…*", 6), *Solomon*'s first invocation is debatable. It could be Solomon, as the name Solomon appears on the title page and might be implied in the epigraph, and is indirectly invoked by the "O Sugarman" song sung by Pilate "in a powerful contralto" (6) in the opening scene, all before a Bible or another biblical name is ever mentioned explicitly. But it could also be Pilate, who does the singing but whose name is as yet unknown; or, it could be Ruth, whose character appears ahead of Pilate and her Sugarman lyrics even though her name is not mentioned until after. In fact, entire pages are spent flirting with and withholding the names of Ruth and her daughters, First Corinthians and Magdalene; it is as though the narratorial voice wants to tease before divulging these characters' scriptural names. Prior to Ruth being named by the narrator as such, for

example, she is introduced and referred to as "the first colored expectant mother [who] was allowed to give birth inside [No Mercy Hospital's] wards" (4-5), "the dead doctor's daughter," "mother," "pregnant lady," "the doctor's daughter" (5), and "the rose-petal lady" (9). We finally discover that she is the pitiable "Ruth Foster" on page ten. Similarly, her daughters bearing biblical names are first referred to as Ruth's "half-grown daughters," "the girls" (5), "the young girls holding baskets of flowers," "some girls playing with pieces of velvet" (6), and Ruth Foster's "dry daughters" (10) before we ever get to know their proper names. Even when we learn these daughters to be "Lena and Corinthians" on page ten, we still do not know that Lena is short for Magdalene, nor that Corinthians is short for First Corinthians, nor that both names were selected at random, in the same fashion as Pilate's; these pieces of information are supplied a full eight pages later, when the patriarchal method of naming is recounted: "[Macon II] had cooperated as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every other child other than the first male. And abided by whatever the finger pointed to, for he knew every configuration of the naming of his sister," (18) who is, of course, not Pilot, "like a riverboat pilot," but "a Christ-killing Pilate" (19).

Faced with a remarkably fuzzy line as to where and when *Solomon*'s invocations of scripture truly begin, we are guided textually, nevertheless, toward a focus on biblical naming as randomness, and it is for this reason that I focus more heavily here not on biblically named in-laws, like Ruth, whose name is relatively common even outside of scriptural contexts, but on the tradition that Macon I begins out of anger at the passing of his wife, and which eventuates in "a monumental foolishness" that plagues the Deads. In other words, while biblical names like Ruth and her biblical mother-in-law, Naomi, are commonplace, I focus not on the novel's biblical names per se but on its *blatant* biblical names, like Pilate. It is in this sub-bracketing of the novel's scriptural names that the scriptural and postmodern modes most forcefully collide. This is not to say that Ruth, Hagar, Reba, Jake, and (of course) Solomon, as invocations of scripture, do not figure in my analysis. Indeed, as just mentioned,

Ruth begets Lena and Corinthians, and her name is just as withheld as theirs toward the start of the narrative (in contradistinction to Robert Smith, Guitar Bains, and Macon Dead), so do I acknowledge commonalities and affinities among the groupings, as well as the work that names within each grouping accomplish. Furthermore, I find Goulimari's reading of Hagar to provide a worthwhile foothold from which to begin an ascent of *Song of Solomon*'s mountain of biblical names, so I begin with Goulimari's breakdown of Hagar, but I do so with a view toward my own breakdown of that category of the novel's names occupied by Pilate, Lena, and Corinthians, because it is that category in which Morrison's postmodernist invocation of scripture manifests most acutely.

Beginning with Hagar, then: Goulimari starts us off with the observation that,

> Like her biblical namesake, Hagar is expelled. Abraham's marriage to Sarah is childless and Hagar is a slave used by Abraham to give him a child, Ishmael. But when Sarah gives birth to Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael are cast out. Christian versions broadly follow this pattern, while in Islamic traditions Hagar is resettled by Abraham rather than expelled. In all versions, Hagar survives. This story of a slave and single mother who survives in spite of inimical circumstances has been especially resonant for African Americans. But Morrison's Hagar dies. She does not survive Milkman's casting out because the individual's survival is a collective and intersubjective project: it depends on the help of others as much as on the individual's resources. (65)

What is clear from Goulimari's paraphrase of scripture across multiple traditions is that *Song of Solomon* provides grounds for both sincere and ironic interpretations. The straight-allegorical fodder is given in the figure of a once-loved Hagar who is later rejected ("*Like* her namesake"), while the inverted-ironic fodder is given in the death of a character whose precursor – in all versions and across all scriptural traditions – survives ("*But…*"). The ironic option feeds back into the sincere one when the very death of the novelistic character is precisely what supports a thematic resonance with the

scriptural lessons of community and collectivity as necessary to an individual's survival. In other words, scriptural accounts (the "Islamic traditions," at least) agree with Morrison's novel that the isolation that results from America's veneration of rugged individualism is an ideological, spiritual, and even physical death sentence. And Booth's observation that "Hagar and Ishmael are often invoked as the origins of Islam, and metaphorically of Other peoples" at once corroborates my "death sentence" reading and provides a point of contact with Doctorow's novel to the extent that these novels invert the scriptural mode of tracing origins into a quest to represent death and endings.

These reflections on Morrison's use of Hagar's name are fruitful because they suggest Morrison's tight authorial control when it comes to appropriation, or, more specifically, to what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls Signifyin(g). Goulimari suggests in her critical survey of Gurleen Grewal's *Circles of Struggle, Lines of Sorrow* (1998) that *Solomon* "appropriates the biblical Song of Solomon and redefines the African American motif of flight" (181). Here is a clear critical statement that Morrison's novel invokes scripture – a mainstream, hegemonic text – as a form of appropriation for the counterhegemonic purpose of complicating a form of resistance. Just as "Hagar" is lifted into a new context to refigure and problematize individualism, so is the entire biblical text of Song of Solomon (Song) lifted to refigure and problematize flight. So too are the other, randomly selected biblical names lifted out of their respective scriptural contexts to refigure and problematize the dominant forms of literacy that determine how they – the names themselves – are interpreted. Dominant literacy dictates that "Pilate" be interpreted as the Christ-killer, for example, but in *Solomon*, this dominance is countered by another kind of literacy, one that allows the name to detach from "Christ-killer" and which affirms its homophonic resemblance to "pilot" – not just the noun, but the verb, as in, "to pilot" or "to guide or steer," so that addressing this character by her name is akin to issuing her an imperative. While much criticism latches onto these aspects of Pilate's name, they are so prominently displayed in the novel itself that an extensive look at the explanation of her naming is in order.

Immediately after Macon II "had cooperated as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every other child other than the first male," we are given the scene in which the tradition begins, when

> his father, confused and melancholy over his wife's death in childbirth, had thumbed
>
> through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that
>
> seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree
>
> hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees. How he had
>
> copied the group of letters out on a piece of brown paper; copied, as illiterate people
>
> do, every curlicue, arch, and bend in the letters, and presented it to the midwife.
>
> > "That's the baby's name."
> >
> > "You want this for the baby's name?"
> >
> > "I want that for the baby's name."
> >
> > "You can't name the baby this."
> >
> > "Say it."
> >
> > "It's a man's name."
> >
> > "Say it."
> >
> > "Pilate."
> >
> > "What?"
> >
> > "Pilate. You wrote down Pilate."
> >
> > "Like a riverboat pilot?"
> >
> > "No. Not like a river boat pilot.[58] Like a Christ-killing Pilate. You can't get
>
> much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that."
>
> > "That's where my finger went down at."

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[58] Or, for a novel invested in flight, an air pilot. Thanks to Booth for noticing what the characters themselves don't.

"Well, your brain ain't got to follow it. You don't want to give this

motherless child the name of the man that killed Jesus, do you?"

"I asked Jesus to save me my wife."

"Careful, Macon."

"I asked him all night long."

"He give you your baby."

"Yes. He did. Baby name Pilate."

"Jesus, have mercy." (18-19)

Whereas the Pilate from scripture is a villain, Pilate Dead in *Solomon* is almost universally celebrated as

the novel's best and strongest character. In *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison* (2000), for instance, Marc C.

Conner reads Pilate as the literal counterpoint to her brother's (Macon II's) smotheringly masculine

individualism (59), as well as to her sister-in-law's (Ruth's) passivity (25), and, therefore, Pilate serves

as her nephew's (Milkman's) model for transformation (25; Judith Fletcher and Justine Baillie each

make the same point, that Pilate "acts as a guide to the protagonist, Milkman Dead" [Fletcher 1999,

183], and that she is "a guiding figure restoring to Milkman Dead his history and the possibility of

freedom" (Baillie 2013, 100). Hirsch, too, sees Pilate in the positive, contrapuntal light of feminine

compromise, since Pilate corrects the foolish practice of the Dead patriarchy by naming her daughter

Rebecca. Hirsch notes that Pilate "asks someone for some suggestions and chooses one that sounds

good rather than one that looks good or the first one her finger hits" (1995, 85). The consensus seems

to be that Pilate is the successful negotiation of the presence-absence dialectic that soaring fathers like

Solomon (who escape bondage successfully but abandon their familial responsibilities in the process)

and overbearing fathers like Macon II (who provides for his family by keeping them in a sort of

spiritual and ideological bondage) seem unable to reconcile.

In the same way that Morrison's Hagar appears to "agree" with the Islamic versions of Hagar, despite the putative irony of the former dying while the latter "all survive," Morrison's Pilate (Hagar's grandmother) appears to agree with the Christian versions of Pilate, despite the putative irony of the former serving as a model and acting as a bringer of life, while the latter, as a bringer of messianic death, is not to be emulated. If agreement between the Hagars is predicated on a repudiation of individualism in favor of communal values, then agreement between the Pilates is predicated on an activation of salvation mechanisms. The biblical Pilate killed Christ, yes, but Christ's death, according to Christian theology, has always been prophesied as necessary and fundamental to the role of the savior, so both Pilates facilitate the availability of salvation for others, and they both – in their opposite ways – pave the way for attaining it. In doing so, they disabuse sinners and protagonists alike of the notion that profound transformation is unnecessary, and that continuing along in passivity, apathy, and ignorance is an acceptable ethic.

Here we glimpse a way in which the names "Hagar" and "Pilate" perform similar functions and operate according to a similar logic in *Solomon*, since each name ironizes *and* aligns with its symbolic status in scripture. That is, each name points paradoxically toward and away from its scriptural context much like the epigraph to *Tar Baby* "points paradoxically toward and away from its Pauline context, as well as the Pauline call for unity," to repeat Christiansë's observation. But between the two names, "Pilate" is the more intense example precisely because how it is chosen imbues these pointings "toward and away from" with the appearance of pure accident, so that all the referentiality bound up in Pilate is a product of staged randomness and improbability. The meanings which adhere to the novelistic Pilate might have been anything. By the same token, even the stabilized meanings which do emerge in connection to Pilate in *Solomon* (like her role in guiding Milkman toward community and ancestral harmony) might have attached, following the logic of the Dead patriarchy and their method

of naming,[59] to any other names (or even just random words) from scripture – within the storyworld's reality, they might just as easily have attached to a "Samson" or a "Habukkuk" or a "Maher-shalal-hash-baz" or an "Appius," or even to another postmodern Daniel.[60] The point here is that *Solomon*'s invocations of Pilate, First Corinthians, and Magdalene are carefully controlled accidents. These invocations of scripture are not Morrison "choosing not to choose" (as Bjork says of Milkman) so much as they are Morrison choosing to make these characters' names appear as though they are unchosen or unintended, while simultaneously allowing this apparent lack of intentionality to cohere into an even more improbable system of paradoxical reference. Now we will turn from names that point to an intentional lack of intentionality to an anonymity that points unintentionally toward intentionality.

An Epigraph's Missing Belly Button

If the epigraphs to *The Book of Daniel* make a spectacle of editorial selectivity, then the aforementioned anonymity, which pertains to *Song of Solomon*'s single, unattributed epigraph, elevates that spectacle. The epigraph, again:

> *The fathers may soar*
> *And the children may know their names*

The lack of a given source to these lines intensifies what we saw Doctorow doing in *Daniel* insofar as incomplete citation in *Daniel* extends, here in *Solomon*, to nonexistent citation. Morrison's move in withholding her source creates the natural readerly effect of asking, "Where is the reference for these lines?" As soon as that question is asked, authority in the form of canonicity is also called into question.

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[59] Booth remarks on an irony bound up in this logic that is "directed against primogeniture (first son has foreordained name); the father's rule makes him break the rule that names belong to one sex or the other."

[60] I admit to having a bit of fun in selecting these names and places "at random," according to the tradition of Macon Dead: I opened a Bible and let my eyes settle on the words that I thought might make for a "strong and handsome" sentence in this chapter, my own version of a tightly controlled and highly improbably accident.

But such a question should be asked regardless of whether we take the lines to be scriptural. After all, Doctorow invokes the authorities of Whitman and Ginsberg in the same space that he draws moral clout from the canonical Book of Daniel. This means that, in addition to making sense of Morrison's lack of citation, we must also make sense of the epigraph's textual status and determine what difference it would make if the source were provided, since the difference lies not in authority or authorization per se, but in the specific quality of authority. The murky waters of counterfactual reasoning await.

In thinking through the epigraph's textual status, I follow Yvette Christiansë's readings of Morrison's epigraphs in much the same way that I followed Christopher D. Morris's readings of the ellipses in *Daniel*. Just as Morris gives brilliant and insightful attention to ellipses in *Daniel* but misses the narratological opportunity to designate Doctorow or Daniel as editor of epigraphs, so too does Christiansë provide erudite readings of Morrison's epigraphs without fully substantiating her fascinating speculation that the *Solomon* epigraph derives from the mystic and apocryphal Gospel of Truth (GTr). Nor does she suggest other possible sources. Nor does she make any claims about what difference the source might make, apart from "imparting or bestowing authority upon what follows" (Christiansë 2013, 231). But having already seen that "authority" might just as well be "imparted or bestowed" by secular and canonical sources (c.f. Whitman and Ginsberg in *Daniel*), the implications of authority deriving from the textual mode of scriptural apocrypha remain unanalyzed.

To complete the analysis that begins with Christiansë's speculation about the source of *Solomon*'s epigraph, I briefly outline her reading of the epigraph itself, as it teems with irony as well as rhetorical and narratological possibility, before moving on to consider the full weight of Christiansë's suggestion regarding the source. In doing so, I flesh out the passage from the GTr sub-headed "The Father Utters the Names of the People Who Know" in an effort to really test how much it resonates with Morrison's epigraph, as compared to other sources with which the epigraph might be just as resonant or even more so. These comparisons include Isaiah (Isa.), The Wisdom of Solomon (Wisd.

Of Sol.), and, of course, Song of Solomon (Song) as potential scriptural sources for *Solomon*'s epigraph. Each of these possibilities comes replete with its own bundle of interpretive directives, which I explore. Finally, there remains the possibility that Morrison's epigraph is not given a source because it didn't have one until she herself wrote it. As Christiansë points out, the epigraph "might stand as Morrison's own fabrication" (230). In fact, this possibility insinuates itself into all of the others, since *none* of the scriptural candidates for reference match the epigraph's lines verbatim; in *any* scenario, Morrison either alters a potential source text through paraphrase, revision, translation, or some other process (in Christiansë's terms, "it might be mimicry, or worse, dissimulation or violent misrepresentation," as "[a]ll of these practices are enacted in Morrison's novels" [230]), or else the editorial force that she brings to bear outstrips *Daniel*'s display of selectivity to the point that she renders her edited referent so unrecognizable as to be actually beyond reference.

The upshot for Christiansë is that "Morrison makes the epigraph a hinge, opening her own text outward and receiving into its interiority the dense burden and potential of the past" (234). Her metaphor of a hinge gains traction when we think of the epigraph as the literal link through which First Corinthians (the novel's character) "and the novel's title conjoin Old and New Testament" (234). In other words, the epigraph bridges the distance between the Old Testament "Song of Solomon" as it appears on the title page and the New Testament "First Corinthians" as it appears in the name of a character in that this epigraph appears, literally, *between* the two, but also, figuratively, in that it mediates differing interpretive traditions. Christiansë reads First Corinthians and Hagar as the novel's characters who most appropriately activate the line from Song, "Look not upon me, because I am black, but because the sun hath looked upon me" (Song 1:5-6). Indeed, readers of the novel who read Song for clues as to how to interpret the title's invocation inevitably pause at this line, sensing an opaque relevance. In *Daniel*, the connection between a Babylonian despotism and a US imperialism is

straightforward, relative to the connection between scriptural precursor and novel in Morrison's *Solomon*. But Christiansë gets us going with an outline of Song's contours:

> Sometimes called the Song of Songs, the Old Testament book comprises a series of songs that praise the absent beloved. This too would seem to have clear resonances in the novel's concern with "flying" fathers and fickle lovers. Like the lamenting Old Testament lover who rose to "go about the city, in the streets and in the squares" to "seek him who my soul loves" (Song of Solomon 3:2), Hagar in the novel goes looking for Milkman when he abandons her. Such comparative readings abound in both overt and subtle ways: for example, in the Old Testament text, the singer refers to the cedars of Lebanon (Song of Solomon 3:9), and Milkman thinks of Hagar while he is crouched against a cedar (*SS* 301). Yet these books do not fold neatly over each other. For Morrison's book, there is more bitterness than consolation, and the love song meets with ridicule. (232-233)

I suppose this puts Christiansë, ultimately, in the critical camp that reads *Solomon* ironically ("the love song meets with ridicule"), and despairingly ("more bitterness than consolation"). But I think that she is correct to begin teasing out the parallels between an anonymous female lover and the Hagar of the novel. She finds a way, too, to continue these parallels in the character of First Corinthians, who engages in a series of trysts with a man named Henry Porter, whom she meets on a bus and who calls her Corrie: First Corinthians shortens to Corinthians shortens to Corrie such that the name's original reference whittles away. But this whittled-away, attenuating reference – now a recurring trope as much as a new invention – is also a freedom of sorts from the patriarchy that named her in the first place, so that "she takes her father's prerogative and flies herself, not subject to the epigraph's implicit warning that those who do not know their father's names do not know their own…Like the unnamed singer or singers of the biblical book of Solomon, she eventually embraces herself in a way resonant

with the assertion 'I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem' and further the exhortation to 'Look not upon me, because I am black, but because the sun hath looked upon me'" (Christiansë 234).

Productive and convincing as Christiansë's reading of Hagar and First Corinthians is, it serves to unpack the allegorical and ironic aspects not of the epigraph, but of those things surrounding, and mediated by, the epigraph. To move into the epigraph – the hinge – is to notice two additional ironies as well as a capacity for scriptural rhetoric. Actually, the two ironies feed directly into scriptural rhetoric, since they result in a "transcendent potential" (232). Noticing that only "the men in *Song of Solomon* are remembered by name," Christiansë goes on to claim that

> the novel looks back at the epigraph and shows it up as an ironic promise. If the fathers do indeed "soar" or abandon their families, those families bear the consequences. Pilate's mistaken interpretation of her father's spectral call, "Sing, Sing," is a direct consequence of not knowing her own mother's name (*SS* 333).
>
> The further irony of the epigraph, given the emphasis on the father's names in the novel, is that it has no source. It is unnamed. As such, it has its own transcendent potential, but this potential is persistently undermined by the novel's content. (232)

For Christiansë, this "transcendent potential" is the crux of her speculation as to the epigraph's source and indeed its scriptural, if apocryphal, status. She cites "the epigraph's tone and style" as consistent with the way in which "the book's title is resonant with biblical authority" (230) as well as the way in which *Solomon*'s "epigraph partakes of the biblical rhetoric of the patronym even while invoking the fear that the patronym masks, namely, the uncertainty of paternity" (230). Later she describes how the epigraph "grants the text its exalted tone, which partakes of prophetic utterance via the aura emanating from the auxiliary verb formation 'may soar.' The language has already taken off via the invocation of

ascent in 'soar'" (230-231), and how "an epigraphic aura implies an utterance that comes from elsewhere" (231).

A "tone and style" "resonant with biblical authority"; a partaking of "biblical rhetoric"; a granting of an "exalted tone"; a partaking of a "prophetic utterance"; an "aura" which emanates; "language" which "has already taken off"; and, "an epigraphic aura" that "implies an utterance that comes from elsewhere." Morrison's epigraph surely has a decidedly scriptural ring to it, and though I may suggest that "the choice of a 'may' rather than 'will'" (230) actually undercuts a sense of prophetic intonation, the larger point is that *Solomon*'s epigraph feels for all the world like scripture. I would think that readers arguing otherwise would not only find themselves in a slim minority but that the onus would be on them to demonstrate their non-scriptural impressions.

However, none of that changes the impossibility of knowing the source of the epigraph, for it is unattributed, and the lines match nothing in Song verbatim. For that matter, the lines match nothing anywhere *at all* verbatim, scriptural or otherwise. Readers must therefore resort to resemblances to scriptural passages where they can be found, and a knowledge of literary histories and patterns, which taken together combine to form the basis of speculation. Thus Christiansë stands on her awareness that Morrison elsewhere draws from the Nag Hammadi texts (in the epigraphs to *Jazz* [1992] and *Paradise* [1997]), and combines that knowledge with a resemblance between Solomon's epigraph and the subheading in the GTr which reads "The Father Utters the Names of People Who Know" (231). Ergo, the Nag Hammadi is for Christiansë a viable candidate to be the source of what could be an instance of an invocation of scripture in *Solomon*'s epigraph. Both the epigraph and the scripture in question foreground fathers and names, and we know from *Jazz* and *Paradise* that Morrison is familiar with the Nag Hammadi texts. Furthermore, there is a thematic resonance to the extent that this particular section of the GTr "concerns itself with correcting errors that have been generated and then corrected by 'the Father,' a transcendent being, though these errors are no fault of his" (Christiansë

231). Citing the "Introduction" to the GTr, written by Harold W. Attridge and George W. MacRae (1988, 38), Christiansë goes on to draw a parallel between "the end of Morrison's novel, which concludes with Milkman's awakening from his self-centered existence to imagine others and Pilate's learning the truth about the bag of bones that she carries" and the GTr, which "ends with 'an authentic human existence, imagined in traditional Gnostic terms as a state of wakefulness'" (Christiansë 231 quoting Attridge and MacRae 39).

While Christiansë deserves full credit for combining a resemblance (between that of *Solomon*'s epigraph and the GTr's sub-headed section) and a literary history (as contained by the intertextuality of Morrison's oeuvre) to make a provocative conjecture, there are, to my mind, several problems with her conclusion, all of which overlap with each other. To begin, the resemblance between

> *The fathers may soar*
> *And the children may know their names*

and

> "The Father Utters the Names of People Who Know"

rests mainly on the mutual textual appearances of "father(s)," "names," and "know," though its extension into the GTr's transcendent thematic content, in which the errors of the past are corrected, is certainly compelling. But if, as Hirsch claims, "the novel's epigraph raises the novel's central themes" and "in its two parts…confirms the intersections and interconnections between the structures of the familial (paternity, childhood) and the structures of language and the symbolic (naming and knowing)" (73-74), then the work of the epigraph is just loosely accomplished, at best. In Part One, for instance, I present Morris's reasonable assertion that the biblical epigraph in *Daniel* serves not only as "prelude and heuristic" but also establishes homologies among the figures in the epigraphs and within the novel. Following Christiansë's suggestion that the GTr is the source of Morrison's epigraph means doing away with prelude and homology, leaving (perhaps) heuristic, since the novel features neither an *uttering* father nor a *knowing* people. Instead, the fathers may *soar*; the children *may* know. Moreover, in the

GTr, the transcendent figure is indeed the Father, whereas in *Solomon*, it is knowledge *of* the father (and his name) that paves the way for transcendence. Even when transcendence attaches to Morrison's Solomon, it is not so much the character but the character's flight that is transcendent in a highly problematic way, as Christiansë herself and others point out (see above).

The resemblance card that Christiansë plays is undeniably intriguing, and I find myself wanting genuinely to root for it. On its own merits, however, it is too strained, and it is further strained not only when other resemblances are noticed and which present themselves as alternative candidates to be the epigraph's source, but also when the scriptural status of the actual phrase, "The Father Utters the Names of People Who Know" is called into question. I do not mean to suggest that the GTr's *apocryphal* status endangers its scriptural status. Rather, I mean to suggest that the phrase itself does not appear as part of the original scripture, and that its status is editorial and thus extra-scriptural in the manner of a headnote, or of chapter titles that vary by translation, or even of traditional chapter-and-verse organizational methods. Just as Attridge and MacRae provide the sub-heading to a specific portion of the text, so others provide a different sub-heading, or none at all. Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer sub-head the same section of text with, "The Father Calling Those Who Have Knowledge." Robert M. Grant's translation offers no sub-headings at all, as his text breaks are simply line breaks. None of this means that Morrison's epigraph couldn't have derived from Attridge and MacRae's editorial supplement, but neither is that a very attractive possibility. The non-scriptural aspect of the phrase rather limits such aspects as tone and style resonant with biblical authority, biblical rhetoric, exalted tones, prophetic utterances, emanating auras, language which has taken off and which comes from elsewhere – all aspects that are indeed discernible in the epigraph itself.

What if, instead, I nominate (provocatively, I hope) another candidate for the epigraph's source? There is a passage from Isaiah (Isa.) which bears resemblance and which also connects intertextually to Morrison's other epigraphs (notably *Beloved*'s, which is from Romans; but all the

Pauline letters tend to be highly intertextual with Isa.) such that the hinge between Old and New Testaments can be preserved:

> Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that
>
> I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I. (Isa. 52:6)

Here we have the mutual textual appearances of "know" and "name(s)," with the important difference that in Isa., the "people" who "shall know" will apparently do so *in the future*, correcting the problematic aspect from the GTr that the Father utters the names of people who *already* know. Moreover, while "Father" does not appear in this verse, it is implied that it is the "Lord God" who speaks, rendering "the heavenly Father" intrinsic to any interpretation. Further, the larger context from which this verse springs is one in which awakening and redemption of the Father's people are primary themes. "Awake, awake" are the first words opening chapter 52; the promise of redemption is given by the Father in verse 3 ("For this is what the Lord says: / 'You were sold for nothing, / and without money you will be redeemed'"); and the redemption is itself nothing short of freedom from a heritage of slavery and exile, culminating, finally, in a triumphant wisdom that appears in verse 13 ("See, my servant will act wisely; / he will be lifted up and highly exalted").

The context is helpful, but even without it, does not Isa. 52:6 more closely resemble *Solomon*'s epigraph than the GTr's editorial sub-heading? Sonically, rhetorically, and textually, this is my intuition. Once the context is added, I find that each criterion lending itself to the candidacy of the GTr as the source of *Solomon*'s epigraph (textual resemblance, thematic resonance, etc.) is matched, and then exceeded: the sequence of people who *shall* know is more compatible with the epigraphic sequence of children who *may* know than it is with the GTr's "People *Who* [already] Know." Also, in both Morrison and Isa., the knowing is of the Father's name specifically, whereas in the GTr, the names in question are those of the people (not the father), and their state of knowing is a state of being free of "error"

or "oblivion" or "ignorance" (the terms which activate that particular scriptural passage) much more than it is a state of being savvy to the patronym, as is specifically the case in Isa. 52:6.

At this juncture, I wish to explicate that my attraction to Christiansë's suggestion is bound up in her assertion that Morrison's epigraph acts as a mediating hinge, and further, that this mediation is inherently apocryphal. In fact, an invocation of this nature is so appealing to my own ethico-political leanings that I wish her reading of the GTr vis-à-vis Morrison's epigraph were more convincing than my own reading of Isa. Implicit in her reading is a complication of authority and authorization, canonicity and canonization. Isa.'s canonical status brings with it no such attractive complication. Caught between my sense of correct reading and wished-for implications, I sought solutions (with no small confidence) in the Wisdom of Solomon (Wisd. of Sol.) and of course Song itself. A Wisd. of Sol. connection is appealing insofar as it is apocryphal *and* canonical, depending on its context within various traditions. Mediating, indeed: an invocation attached to this text would have one foot in hegemonic authority and another in counterhegemonic resistance. In addition, it would restore a less convoluted connection to Solomon. Similarly, a Song connection appeals merely in its straightforwardness – an avenue of interpretation that such things as anonymity and apocrypha devoid of a Solomon figure all but foreclose. Yet, in combing these texts for solutions along these lines, I cannot in good conscience say that any of their passages resemble Morrison's epigraph even remotely enough to warrant a speculative comparison. As far as resemblance goes, Christiansë's provocation stacks up more impressively than anything in Song. and Wisd. of Sol.; yet, its weaknesses in comparison to the Isa. possibility cannot be ignored.

For the sake of argument, I could conclude that Morrison invokes Isa., but by itself, that conclusion would fail to account for anonymity and its effects, so we return to the phenomenon of vanishing reference. One way to think of what is happening in the anonymous epigraph is to think of what would happen if the epigraph *were* cited, according to my sake-of-argument conclusion:

The fathers may soar
And the children may know their names

      - Isa. 52:6

Visualizing it this way, an array of problems crystalizes: readers cross-checking the reference would notice blatant alterations to the text; the text's alterations would be obvious no matter which translation were consulted; no translation is attributable, and therefore full citation in the manner that I had suggested in *Daniel* (wherein a King James version, such as the *Dartmouth Bible*, is available to complete the reference) becomes impossible; the representor is accused of misrepresentation and the author is accused of mis-authorization. It now becomes clear that the processes I mentioned above (paraphrase, revision, translation; or, Christiansë's mimicry, dissimulation or violent misrepresentation) would *all* be inappropriate ways of accounting for some imagined version of Morrison's epigraph that *did* include full or partial reference, so that anything other than a faithful rendering of the original source would *have* to be anonymous.

We are now left with only three possibilities: Morrison alters a potential source text in an editorial way (possibility #1), or in a non-editorial way (possibility #2). Each of these is itself a version of Christiansë's brainstorm that the epigraph "might stand as Morrison's own fabrication," which in turn is capable of standing alone as possibility #3. At work in each of these possibilities is the common denominator that *even if Morrison's epigraph is attributable to a source text* (whether to Isa. or to GTr matters little for present purposes), *it is also, at one and the same time,* practically and literally, un*attributable*, for there is simply no way that Morrison would include a reference to any scriptural source, canonical or apocryphal, that she had paraphrased, revised, or mimicked, just as there is no way that she would be overt about dissimulating or violently misrepresenting. Like the explanation of a punchline or irony, dissimulation and misrepresentation short-circuit when made overt. (The possible exception is the one in which she translates the passage herself, but the improbability of such a translation even occurring *and* it being so drastically different from other translations makes this possibility essentially moot.)

For a chapter that purports to tackle invocations of scripture, the foregoing discussion concerning Morrison's epigraph to *Song of Solomon* is hardly justifiable if, in the end, it is determined that the epigraph is less an invocation proper, and more an example of the scriptural *reimagination* that I take up in Chapter 2, or of the scriptural *emulation* that I take up in Chapter 3. Instinctively, I gravitate toward invocation over the others because, even as an anonymous epigraph is maddeningly difficult to trace, it behaves ultimately more like an invocation than it does a reimagination or an emulation. That is, *Solomon* seems more invested in participating intertextually with the rest of Morrison's oeuvre *and* with scripture than in asking hypothetical what-ifs (theological or otherwise), or in adopting the formal conceit of being qualitatively or modally *other* than postmodernist narrative fiction. I remain in solidarity with Christiansë in her observation that Morrison's epigraph feels absolutely as though it is invoked from scripture (as though it emanates an aura from elsewhere), even if I part company by not finding the likely source in the GTr and by reading the invocation as a sincere and hopeful deployment against ignorance, instead of acceding to her readings in which "the love song meets with ridicule," or in which she finds "more bitterness than consolation."

Of the three options outlined above, I am committing to the second: Morrison, clearly versed in ancient texts that share the commonality of combating ignorance, gestures widely, if vaguely, toward a salvation predicated on a knowledge on the part of people/children who know whence they come, symbolized by a knowledge of their father's name. Booth reminds me that the father's name and patriarchal law are part of the problem that Morrison critiques, which is true. Though I'm not totally sure how to resolve that, I do think that Morrison can be described as invoking the spirit, and not the letter, of scripture.[61] More accurately, she invokes the spirt of scriptures or Scripture (plural and/or

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[61] Initially I thought that perhaps a critique of patriarchy might be subordinate to a critique of *violent* patriarchy, and/or of the damage done to one patriarchal culture by another slave owning patriarchy – that violence to and from patronyms is a bigger target than patriarchal law itself. I don't believe this to actually be the case, however: Morrison isn't the type to curb her critique at a *version* of male supremacy; rather, I think she resists male supremacy completely. Perhaps there is something in her epigraph

idealized, per my prologue), taking a sort of poetic and thematic average of everything from Song to Wisd. of Sol. to Isa. to the GTr, and possibly more besides. Anonymity thus becomes the more accurate approach to reference at the practical or technical level just as it becomes the more poetic approach at the symbolic level. The quest to know the epigraph's reference runs parallel to Milkman's quest to know the name of Shalimar/Sugarman, and it ensures a readerly fight against ignorance and apathy. Active readers engaging in a community of scholarship are redeemed – not because we learn the epigraph's source definitively, necessarily, but because we doubt: we understand that an *unknown* reference works on us in the same way that *known* (/*learned*) names work on Milkman. Put differently, anonymity in the epigraph is equal but opposite to naming in the novel, since both protect the integrity of their respective referents. By opposite means, they both point resolutely away from ignorance and toward wisdom as a specific way of coping with the irretrievable past.

Even Macon Dead II, arguably the novel's least likeable or redeemable character, intuits these insights in a moment of contemplation, a moment in which he is "thinking of names":

> Surely, he thought, he and his sister [Pilate] had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name. (*SS* 17-18).

Macon's insight here is that of the realist – more specifically of the "weak correlationist" – who believes in an objective reality, a world of mind-independent referents that cannot be known (see fn.

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to suggest that soaring fathers are inherently non-oppressive – that would be the definition of them "soaring" – and that for children to know the names of those fathers is for them to not be under patriarchal duress – that would be the definition of them "knowing their names." In the same way that a detection of and treatment of essences need not culminate in essentialism, perhaps Morrison's detection of and treatment of fathers need not culminate in letting patriarchy off the hook. She is, after all, writing about fathers who may soar. Just like all power relations, fathers are always with us.

55). But for Macon, the reference is just as unknowable as the referent, since "who this young man was…could never be known. No. Nor his name." Paradoxically, while "love and seriousness" motivate Macon's realist desires that there be a real "ancestor" of the past "who had a name that was real," the irretrievability of that ancestor and his name propel Macon *away* from love and seriousness and *toward* "the monumental foolishness" (15) of the absurd name-giving practice for which his family is known and by which it is marked. This foolishness that pushes Macon away from a loving seriousness and carries him into an ignorance and apathy epitomized by his ignorance regarding his own son's nickname, Milkman. "Macon Dead never knew how it came about…Without knowing any of the details, however, he guessed, with a mind sharpened by hatred, that the name he heard schoolchildren call his son, the name he overheard the ragman use when he paid the boy three cents for a bundle of old clothes—he guessed that this name was not clean" (15). It is thus with resignation that Macon cooperates "as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every child other than the first male" (18).

While the effects of Macon's brand of realism are clearly not healthy, neither are they the only or necessary outcomes that weak correlationism produces. Love and seriousness remain legitimate possibilities even for (perhaps especially for) people who find themselves between the poles of naïve realism and subjective idealism. Neither Macon nor Milkman ever understands this. Macon remains caught despairingly between the poles, and Milkman, in thinking that his discovery of an ancestor's name somehow liberates him, becomes a naïve realist (see again fn. 55). But having discovered "Solomon," the father's name, Milkman's subsequent flight into the arms of Guitar does nothing to resolve the complaint (often attributed to Pilate but actually attributable to her father, Jake) about soaring fathers, that "You can't just fly on off and leave a body" (147).

Macon is hate-filled and resigned. Milkman, in an overcorrection, "just flies on off and leaves" *everybody* by jumping off a cliff. He surrenders to the air, but even if he does ride it, which I doubt, he

still leaves everybody behind. Milkman's repudiation of ignorance is well-intentioned but mistaken. As it happens, it is Jake and his daughter Pilate whose ethics and approaches to knowledge are the novel's lessons. Shortly after the passage in which Jake "leaned in at the window" to warn Pilate about flying off and leaving a body, her own bildungsroman (and not her nephew's) instructs, as we find out how she reacts to being treated as a pariah for having no navel:

> Finally Pilate began to take offense. Although she was hampered by huge ignorances, but not in any way unintelligent, when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn't want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know and stay alive? What is true in the world? Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometimes at profundity, other times at the revelations of a three-year-old. Throughout this fresh, if common, pursuit of knowledge, one conviction crowned her efforts: since death held no terrors for her (she spoke often to the dead), she knew there was nothing to fear. That plus her alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and—the consequence of the knowledge she had made up or acquired—kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people. (149)

Here is the direct result of Pilate's being stigmatized by her lack of a navel, which is to say, by her literal lack of any traces of her origin. In *Solomon*, sources are scars. An origin is damage. In *Solomon*, Pilate builds upon her own lack of a traceable origin, her own damaging lack of damage, and *authors herself*. She is self-authored and self-authorized, functioning according to the same logic as the epigraph which, "[g]iven the fact that epigraphs function as authorizing gestures, this ambiguously authored

epigraph might be called an unauthorized authority, or a self-authorizing authority" (Christiansë 230).

In a brilliant stroke of magical realism, Pilate's missing belly button supplies the perfect illustration of *Solomon*'s paradoxical logic, which is that there may be no trace whatsoever of "what is true in the world," but that doesn't mean that nothing in the world is true. Rather, it suggests that we ease up on our obsessive reliances on reference and naming as the only paths to truth. Morrison's invocations thus act like her mythical Pilate in steering us away from assumption-based ignorance and toward figures of wisdom (i.e., "Solomon") in a hopefulness that, like Pilate but unlike Milkman, we might throw away every assumption we have and begin at zero. Indeed, this seems to be the method of the novelists in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Reimagining Scripture:
Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Joshua Ferris's *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*

Part One: The Prophecy Problematic

Religious belief *as belief*—which would require a commitment on the part of the people who didn't believe in Islam to the idea that people who did believe in Islam were mistaken—is replaced by religion as a kind of identity, from which standpoint, people who *believe* differently are treated as people who *are* different.
-   Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*

In shifting from the previous chapter's exploration of scriptural invocation to this chapter's

exploration of scriptural reimagination, I'm shifting from a focus on historical knowledge to

posthistorical belief, from a focus on literary treatments of national historical questions to literary

treatments of the posthistoricist stipulation that belief must be a function of identity. In turn,

reimagination marks a shift from doubts about the accuracy of historical narratives that purport to

reconstruct the national past, to doubts about religious belief *as identity* (to invert my epigraph from

Walter Benn Michaels that begins with "religious belief *as belief*"). And since religious belief is a way

for human beings to make sense of existing in a nonhuman universe,[62] then I pivot also in this chapter

toward a much broader focus on the nature of existing in the universe (which is not to suggest that

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[62] In *Doubt: A History* (2003), Jennifer Michael Hecht frames religious thought as a response "to the fact that we live between two different realities: On one side, there is a world in our heads—and in our lives, so long as we are not contradicted by death and disaster—and that is a world of reason and plans, love, and purpose. On the other side, there is the world beyond our human life—an equally real world in which there is no sign of caring or value, planning or judgment, love, or joy. We live in a meaning-rupture because we are human and the universe is not" (xii). Hecht refers to this meaning-rupture between human and nonhuman realities as "the great schism" that religious philosophies through the ages have attempted to address. "Great doubters," she continues, "are concerned with this same area: they seek to understand the schism between humanness and the universe…" (xv). Hecht's mention of "an equally real world" that exists "beyond our human life" articulates the recent trend in philosophy to move past subjective idealism, and so it's not surprising that her description of "the great schism" initiates points of contact with speculative realist and New Materialist philosophies. In *Being Ecological* (2018), for instance, Timothy Morton sketches a history in which the emergence of religious thought coincides with the emergence of Neolithic agricultural logic: "Since organized religion is an agricultural-age way for agricultural society to understand itself, it is riddled with the kinds of bugs that have helped to destroy Earth" (129). For Morton, the irony of religion is that it seeks to undo the very schism that it creates: "I believe that humans are traumatized by having severed connections with nonhuman beings, connections that exist deep inside our bodies" (32). Morton is outspoken in this volume on the role of *agrilogistics* as a form of religious thinking that fuels a violent human-nonhuman dichotomy, and those familiar with his object-oriented oeuvre will recognize his mention of "nonhuman beings" as commensurate with Hecht's nonhuman universe.

Doctorow and Morrison fail to consider "existing in the universe," but just to suggest that their doubts about American historical knowledge take precedence in *Daniel* and *Solomon*). As the wording of this last shift indicates, such a turn also signals a shift in literary attention from epistemology to ontology, pace the ontological and nonhuman turns in the humanities and in keeping with my description of the postmodern in my prologue. Finally, in attending to the nature of existence by way of religious belief, this chapter aims ultimately to interpret interpretation[63] – that is, to account for how beliefs (about texts) are formed (including, importantly, whether beliefs are formed at will), and to demonstrate the materialist and representationalist consequences of such an account.

In order to arrive at those consequences, I engage Walter Benn Michaels and his interpretation of posthistoricism, as he articulates it – according to his understanding of materialist methods – in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004). But, as such engagement entails a number of theoretical reconciliations[64] as well as the undoing of some errors that arise as non sequiturs from these unreconciled theoretical vectors, I want to state at the outset my own conclusions: identifying a certain way does not amount to believing (or doubting!) a certain way, nor does bodily form determine mental content. We need not succumb to essentialisms just because we have bodies and ontologies that fuel our identities, but

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[63] My phrasing indicates that interpretation, and therefore meaning, do not get left behind in our so-called posthistoricist moment, which would be one way of expressing the danger of posthistory intuited by Michaels. But my phrasing also implies an interventionist reading practice that cuts against the grain of postcritical methods, of which I'm wary for the same reasons that Booth expresses: "We're busily creating narrative histories of decolonizing, of climate change, and so on, beyond one nation-state, encompassing the nonhuman." In fact, my first strong academic impulse as an undergraduate was to reject, viscerally, Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), and it heartens me to see that undergraduates at the University of Virginia seem to react similarly upon their first encounters with Western triumphalism.

[64] The reconciliations I have in mind are between old historical and new materialisms, and then between the New Materialism and other schools of contemporary thought in which "everything that happens is an expression of agency" (Wolfendale 2014, 380). Michaels, for instance, mounts a polemic against textual materialism, ironically using the foundations of old historical materialism for doing so, as Phillip Barrish points out in a review essay (2006) by stating that "Michaels now argues against 'the extraordinary recent prestige of the notion of culture' from what can only be called a Marxist perspective, despite the fact that he never invokes the M-word in reference to his own argument" (242). The claim that old historical Marxist materialism is inherently incompatible with new materialism is being overturned on numerous fronts; good starting points include Isabelle Stengers's "Wondering about Materialism" (2011) and Simon Choat's "Science, Agency and Ontology: A Historical-Materialist Response to New Materialism" (2018).

neither is this a dismissal or minimization of embodied ontology (nor even of essences).[65] I want to appreciate a difference between accounting for (even, at times, honoring) vs. reducing to material reality as a way of defending textual materialism – and materialist interpretations of texts – against Walter Benn Michaels without falling prey to essentialist tendencies. I do this by reading Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Joshua Ferris's *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (2014) as strong arguments that what we are does not by itself determine what we believe (there's my antiessentialism) even though, or maybe because, what we are (/our experience of what we are) is irreducibly meaningful in its own right (there's my extrapolation of textual materialism).

Prior to delving into the nature of belief, I need to begin by framing reimaginations of scripture in contemporary fiction by locating them somewhere between Chapter One's invocations and Chapter Three's emulations of scripture, and I mean this both conceptually as well as chronologically. This chapter's exploration of authors who reimagine scripture to doubt that belief constitutes identity is phase two of a three-part progression. We saw in the previous chapter that Doctorow and Morrison *invoke* scripture in *The Book of Daniel* and *Song of Solomon*, respectively, precisely to cast doubt on historical American narratives. In these novels from the 1970s, the scriptures that inspire the titles of Doctorow and Morrison's "historiographic metafictions" (recalling Hutcheon's terminology) are given a certain textual treatment that recognizes scripture as a textual mode with a distinct status, distinct

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[65] "Essentialism" is likely this dissertation's most loaded term. I am all too aware of how it makes people squirm, rightfully so. I am also aware of its mistreatments. Finally, I'm aware of those, like Hart, for whom the term seems to be unnecessarily irksome for literary theorists in particular: "I tend to think that 'essentialism' is a bogy man who frightens literary critics late at night. Now one might not be an idealist, of one or another sort, and still maintain, reasonably, that there is an essence (εἶδος) of something. One might well intuit, in the phenomenological sense, the εἶδος of a text, for instance, either correctly or incorrectly, adequately or inadequately." Hart articulates succinctly the premise of my own intervention in treatments of essentialism, which is that emergent realisms are "frequently mistaken for essentialism itself. Realists invoking the nature of reality, or 'the nature of nature,' tend to be read automatically as essentialists because people confuse nature, essence, and reality, and because people assume wrongly that ontology does not account for social constructivist viewpoints" ("Of Non-Mice and Non-Men," online). It is therefore crucial to know what is being challenged when essentialism is invoked, which, for me, is *not* the mere detection of an essence but the interpretation of essence as an ideology, *as a form of oppressive reductionism that disallows becoming*. I follow Elizabeth Grosz's definition of essentialism that which "refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization" (1995, 48; qtd. In "Of Non-Mice and Non-Men").

from the mode that invokes it.[66] Thus a contemporary novelist invoking scripture maintains important differences between the invoked and the invoking, and I argue that scriptural invocation maintains these differences even when the invocations are ironic, as they are especially in Doctorow. Impressively, these differences do not vanish even when authors emulate scripture, as do authors like Adam Levin in his gigantic, scripture-like tome, *The Instructions*, or again, Doctorow, in his sutured-together compilation of texts reminiscent of biblical accumulation, *City of God* (the novels under investigation in Chapter Three). Chapter Three explores how the status of scripture and its distinctive mode of textuality are actually reinforced by emulation, a performative conceit in which there is no difference, or in which difference doesn't matter. We might therefore keep our eyes on these various strategies of *maintaining essential differences* across textual types as a way of articulating doubt, since a recognition of difference across categories is one thing that can trigger doubt qua an interpretive pause.

On the other hand, I'll be arguing that, by enacting an antiessentialist transing of categorical difference across our modes of textuality, this chapter's reimaginations encourage us to read scripture the same way that we'd read anything else, which is to say, with an inquisitive distance, an interpretive curiosity powered by the ability to imagine alternatives to surface-level, literal, canonical, or even fundamentalist meanings. These reimaginations of scripture insist on putting factors such as materiality, context, subtext, and intentionality at the forefront of the interpretive process so that our contemporary reimaginations of scripture fall between invocation and emulation both on the timeline and in terms of what they do with (the politics of) difference. Rather than keep scripture's status and mode fully intact, as invocation does at one extreme, or pretend ironically that scripture and postmodern narrative prose function equally, as emulation does at the other extreme, reimagination

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[66] Hart calls my attention to "the modern way in which certain words or cadences can be debased by the parasitism of contemporary language and the attitudes it embodies. This happens all the time with religion (e.g., 'spiritual')." He notes, too, that scripture "has more than one status. There are canonical and deuterocanonical texts, to begin with, and different groups have 'canons within the canon': e.g., some Protestants prize Paul as giving a hermeneutical key to the whole New Testament."

tinkers playfully with possibilities by exerting pressure at the fault lines, where, incidentally, the apocrypha dwell. We thus see Salman Rushdie causing a worldwide ruckus with *The Satanic Verses*, for Rushdie most certainly *reimagines* the Qur'an when he reimagines – apocryphally – *how* the Qur'an came to be. There is a way, Rushdie shows us, in which a reimagination of scripture is the reimagination of an actual text like the Qur'an, as well as a reimagination of that scripture's origins. But we'll see too, by way of Joshua Ferris, that a reimagination of scripture can also be the invention of a purely fictional scripture that takes an existing scripture as its point of departure: what is reimagined, in Ferris's case, is not so much a snippet of the Hebrew Bible as it is a richly imagined *apocryphal spin-off* of a snippet of the Hebrew Bible.

Josh Emmons complicates these senses of reimagination when he introduces a third and even a fourth sense of how scripture can be reimagined. Because these senses of reimagination provide such sharp contrasts to the ways that reimaginations structure *The Satanic Verses* and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, outlining them briefly here helps to show how the reimaginations of Rushdie and Ferris operate uniquely as forms of doubt. In Emmons's short story collection, *A Moral Tale and Other Moral Tales* (2017), "Arising" is the story of an encounter between an aging tiger, estranged from his pride ("pride" being the double entendre that it sounds like), and a snake who regales the old tiger with the story of his encounter with a woman named Eve. The narration reveals eventually that what is "arising" is the rainwater that prompts (I almost said *precipitates*) Noah's building of the ark in Genesis 6, and the time of the storyworld appears to coincide with Genesis 7:10, in which "the waters of the flood came on the earth." The collection's final story, "Agape," alludes to "Arising" (and a few of the collection's other "moral tales") in a suggestive nod toward scriptural holism.[67]

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[67] "Possible things became impossible, and the tales that lasted longest and spread furthest—about the origin of the world, about falling from grace and falling from walls and falling in love, about being our brother's keeper and sinners in the hands of an angry god and proud tigers and deceitful snakes, about the end of the world—were sublime and absurd and provisional" ("Agape," 150). The mention of "the origin of the world" alludes to the stories "Nu" (in reference to the Nu of Egyptian creation mythology)

What appears to be happening in this collection differs substantially from the reimagination of scripture in *Prescription for a Superior Existence* (2008), Emmons's earlier novel that features its own fictional scripture. This is a novel named for the scripture that it is about, though the novel's characters shorten the name of the holy text from the mouthful that it is to its acronym, PASE, while its adherents are known as Pasers. PASE exhorts Pasers to a transcendence program predicated on eventual reunion with Ultimate Reality God (UR God) once savant status, and then ur-savant status, is achieved. The achievement of ur-savant status culminates from a progression of asceticism that begins by controlling the desires of the flesh (eat better, exercise more, abuse fewer substances, masturbate less, etc.) and ends with suicide. Along the way, sex is strictly proscribed, and so the logical conclusion of the fulfilment of the PASE prophecy (whose own prophet, using the alias Montgomery Shoale, is a hardcore doubter even of his own prophecy) is an extinction event for humanity.

Emmons offers contrasting versions of scriptural reimagination in the story and the novel. In his short story, he reimagines Genesis *from the inside* – much like David Maine's *The Preservationist* (2004), but with a postmodern sense of irony in place of Maine's apparent sincerity. What is reimagined in the novel is so far outside – so independent of – any extant scripture that the ensuing invention is in no way derivative of any text that could be named specifically, an aspect that might lead some readers to just call it imagination instead of *re*imagination. To retell Genesis imaginatively from the perspective of the animals that populate Eden (and then to connect that retelling holistically with the rest of the collection) is to do one's reimagining from entirely within the scriptural tradition of the Hebrew Bible and to reimagine that text from within what is already established canonical space, which goes

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and "Arising"; "falling from grace" makes sense in the context of many of the collection's tales, though "Arising," "Stargazing," and "Jane Says" may be the most explicit of these; "falling from walls" is a reference to a reimagined version of the traditional "Humpty Dumpty" in the form of the remarkable "Humphrey Dempsey" but also to "Haley"; "falling in love" to the eponymous "A Moral Tale" and other moral tales such as "The Stranger," "Haley," "Concord," and "Sunrise"; "about being our brother's keeper and sinners in the hands of an angry God" could connect arguably with any of the collection's stories (not to mention with Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" [1741]); "proud tigers and deceitful snakes" again points toward "Arising"; and, "the end of the world" resonates with "Nu," "Arising," and "BANG," at the very least.

unchallenged as such. In "Arising," Genesis is recognized as much as it is re-cognized, unlike PASE, which is a contemporary scripture made up from scratch with a cult following ("cult" here indicating a minority alternative to the religious "mainstream"). Since PASE cannot be traced to a real world analogue, it all but exits the category of scripture itself, neither recognizing nor re-cognizing anything already out there. "Arising" in conjunction with "Agape" constitutes a biblical reimagination that threatens to bleed into emulation just as Morrison's epigraph to *Song of Solomon* threatens to bleed from invocation to reimagination (and/or emulation), as I suggest in Chapter One. PASE, on the other hand, is a scripture reimagined apart from any specifically identifiable text, ancient or otherwise, and the novel that houses it makes no move either to invoke or to emulate real life scripture.

Yet PASE *does* bear a faint resemblance to the general philosophical contours of some early Gnostic texts (generally considered to be apocryphal), and the mystical quality that such a resemblance affords is compounded by the clever use of UR as an acronym for Ultimate Reality (as in UR God, ur-savant).[68] UR becomes a multitasking signifier in Emmons's hands, pointing at once toward a transcendental absolute (such as an Aristotelian Prime Mover or Unmoved Mover, itself a sort of ur-God or monotheistic blueprint for medieval Christian metaphysics), *but also* toward the work done by the prefix *ur-*, such as we see in *urtext*.[69] The prefix indicates the kind of originality that might serve as a template to subsequent versions, so it converges with the sense of primacy that may be gleaned from abbreviating Ultimate Reality, but, in real world usage, *ur-* rarely attaches to anything other than *-text*.[70]

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[68] In *What Is Gnosticism* (2003), Karen L. King states that Gnosticism as "a rhetorical term has been confused with a historical entity. There was and is no such thing as Gnosticism, if we mean by that some kind of ancient religious entity with a single origin and a distinct set of characteristics. Gnosticism is, rather, a term invented in the early modern period to aid in defining the boundaries of normative Christianity" (1-2). My claim that PASE bears resemblance to early Gnostic texts depends on PASE lining up with something like disincarnation, described by Hart as the idea that "the spirit is real and the body is to be despised." The resemblance with Gnosticism is not to be conflated with the mystical quality that I mention (though the former facilitates the latter), which is a function of Paser's ability to fuse with UR – compatible with Blanchot's understanding of mysticism (see fn. 77).

[69] This is just one example of how the prefix multitasks. Booth recognizes that it also fits nicely with the acronyms of the digital age (AR, VR, IA), and elsewhere I make my own acronyms to comport with these markers of the postmodern tech world (see "I, Theorist: Accrediting the "Wild Imagination" of *Northanger Abbey*," 230, fn. 5). She also reads "you are."

[70] Though, of course, Ur is also a place mentioned in Genesis as the birthplace of Abram. In addition, Ur is referenced in Neh. 9:7, and in the Sumerian praise poem of Iddin-Dagan. I have not found any mention of Ur in Surah 14.

Attention is thus directed to the way in which PASE is (ur)*textually* distinct as a reimagination of scripture in that its novelty is entirely bound up in its *kind* of writing, in its emphasis on PASE as a textual mode over and above PASE's spiritual or prophetic contents. PASE's textual status as scripture, in other words, is more important than its theology for interpreters who believe, as I do, that modality subordinates thematic content.[71] Better still, PASE is the reimagination of scripture as an *original and transcendent* textual mode – an urtextual mode. Even better still, PASE reimagines scripture without direct reference to or invocation of existing scripture – unlike in "Arising," he uses no scriptural template to guide his rewrite, unless you count modality itself to be the template. Best of all, for Emmons to reimagine scripture as the original and transcendent urtext that is PASE (from within the highly evolved and immanent text of the novel) is for Emmons to confirm through imagination and reinvention that *the idea* [72] of scripture as an original and transcendent textual mode (and thus essentially different from the contemporary novel) is well-suited to help us think about how (identity-based) difference and belief interrelate. And, as we shall see, questions about how identity, difference and belief interrelate are precisely the questions posed by posthistoricism, the questions that guide this chapter.

What Emmons demonstrates, as he gestures toward posthistoricist questions of belief, is that scripture can be reimagined from *completely within* and from *completely without*, and so his examples mark the polarity of an axis along which scriptural reimaginations might be plotted. By contrast, Rushdie and Ferris fall between the poles, since their reimaginations of scripture are neither entirely from

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[71] Case in point: "Whereas Montgomery Shoal might have thrown a curve ball to distinguish his religion from the Bible's in both form and substance, he instead began, like the other book, with a description of the universe's origins" (*PASE* 91). Emmons's priority is emphatically to establish the *scriptural modality* of PASE, upon which Shoal's theological program depends. Note, too, the democratic relegation of the Bible as "the other book," a decentering of the canonical as "just another text."

[72] This is why Emmons is *re*imagining, rather than just imagining, scripture: he wouldn't be able to imagine it without a prior idea of it (an ur-idea?) already available to him to work with, which Hart recognizes as a potential case of reproductive imagination. George H. Taylor (2006) gives a useful thumbnail sketch of reproductive imagination according to Paul Ricœur's "Lectures on Imagination": "For Ricœur, this [Platonic] model of original and copy exemplifies reproductive imagination. The image as copy is at best derivative from the original – from reality. At worst, to the degree the imagination tries to portray something different from the original, it is simply marginal, an escape or flight from reality; it produces nothingness. The history of Western thought – again with the principal exceptions of Aristotle and Kant – is one of attention to reproductive imagination only" (95).

within nor entirely from without: their reimaginations engage extant scriptural texts obliquely and apocryphally, sidling up to the Qur'an's fifty-third surah, *An-Najm* (Qur'an 53:19-20), and to the Hebrew history of the Amalekites and Agag's war with King Saul (which includes Exodus 17:14; Deuteronomy 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15:1-7, and parts from Numbers and 1 Chronicles), respectively. What this means is that Rushdie and Ferris reimagine according to something that is already there, but in a way that remains outside of what is already there (contra "Arising"), making their fictions a form of n+1 logic. The reimaginations of Rushdie and Ferris are excellent examples of the way that doubt is the n+1 product of belief in the same way that, according to Morton, irony is the n+1 product of whatever is being ironized (presumably sincerity):

> Irony is the aesthetic exploitation of gaps, or…gapsploitation. To be more precise, irony is the exploitation of a gap between 1 + n levels of signification. Irony means that more than one thing is in the vicinity. Irony is the echo of a mysterious presence. For there to be irony, something must already be there.
>
> …Irony is the footprint of at least one other entity, an inner ripple, a vacuum fluctuation that indicates the distorting presence of other beings. (*Hyperobjects* 173)

Just as irony exploits an aesthetic gap between levels of signification, so too does doubt take aesthetic shape as the exploitation of a gap between a kind of belief and another "thing in the vicinity," even if that other thing is just belief of a different and incompatible nature from that which lies across the gap, as may indeed be the case. Put differently, just as irony is the recognition of a different, previous other (sincerity), so is doubt a recognition of a different, previous other (belief). So too does the apocryphal thought echo the mysterious presence of scripture. To reimagine scripture apocryphally, as Rushdie and Ferris both do, is to reimagine a textual program of belief as a textual program of

doubt, to *trans* the textual category of scripture into its apocryphal other.[73] To trans in this way is not to conjugate belief into unbelief, since unbelief is really just non-belief, which is just an ontological affirmation of belief's existence (see fn. 95). Instead, to trans a scripture that is already in the vicinity is

1. to recognize that scripture as a previous other (sincerity, belief);

2. to recognize that previous, other scripture as something that is categorically incompatible with whatever sits across the gap from it;

3. finally, in a move that compatibilizes precisely because of what it does to the exclusivity of categories, to *re*-cognize that previous other scripture (or, to *reimagine* it).

Just as irony operates in the interface between attempts at sincerity and an awareness that those attempts are doomed, doubt insinuates itself into the gap between extant scripture that aims at absolute truth and the postmodernist fiction that aims at relativistic truth[74] that lies across the gap from it, and so the reimagined apocrypha act as interfacing compatibilizers in which doubt reconciles the discrepancy between the *absolute* and *relative* truths as aimed at by inherently different textual modes.[75]

　　To come at it from another angle, doubt and belief are not opposite sides of a single logical coin; this is not dialectic. Doubt *does something* to the logic of belief – it is the contrapuntal conjugation

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[73] See my introductory note (fn. 32) regarding my Jenny Súnden-inspired use of *to trans* as a verb. I deploy Súnden's usage not despite, but because of, our need to theorize transed identities of any sort (race, gender, class, etc.).

[74] Bernard Williams coined the phrase "belief aims at truth" in 1973, and Timothy Chan edited a volume, *The Aim of Belief* (2013), that is devoted to unpacking Williams's problematic platitude (as Chan has it) in order to extend "important and fertile ongoing debates about how this idea is to be fleshed out, what explains it, and what its implications are, including but going far beyond whether Williams is right to claim that it implies belief cannot be formed at will" (1). Chan and the contributors to the volume note, too, that the notion that belief aims at truth is a normative one (passim), with the exception of David Papineau, who argues "that there are no norms of belief," a phrase that also serves as the title of the volume's third chapter. Hart suggests that "Notes on a Supreme Fiction" by Wallace Stevens (1942) poses a strong challenge to Williams.

[75] Certainly there are multiple ways in which the mysterious presence, as that which is already in the vicinity, can be re-used or added to beyond what I am describing. Hart provides the example that, sometimes, later scripture modalizes earlier scripture – and sometimes that modalization of earlier scripture by a later scripture is itself modalized by contemporary novelists, as when Toni Morrison modalizes Romans modalizing Isaiah as an epigraph that helps to modalize *Beloved* (1987; also mentioned in Chapter One).

of belief into belief's subjunctive, not its negation. Doubt is a virtual, apocryphal, n+1 irregularity (and we will soon add that it is "proximal" as well). Doubt "gapsploits" the aesthetic gap between scriptural absolutism and postmodernist relativism, between inflexible versus compromising kinds of ideas (to look ahead to a key question that Rushdie's novel repeatedly asks, "*What kind of an idea are you*?"), which is to say, between two incompatible notions of truth, and by extension, between two incompatible notions of belief. Whereas belief aims at truth, doubt *aims at belief's aim* – and at the normativity bound up in aiming at truth – not to derail it, but to keep it honest. Doubt is thus best described as "a belief *about* belief," Morton's attractive phrase that updates Amy Hungerford's focus on "belief *in* belief" by turning it, prepositionally, into something to be examined from without or next to (but also *between* or *in the gap*), rather than relied upon from within. By going from *in* to *about*,[76] Morton makes the same move as our novelists, whose reimagined scriptures are *about* the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible, not only in the sense that they concern themselves with these scriptures (by reimagining them), but also in that they manage to share proximity with them, to be *near* and *by* and *around* them, to have the aimed-at and espoused truths of these texts in their own crosshairs. Rushdie and Ferris demonstrate that doubt aims at truth by aiming at, and thereby transing, normative scriptural belief programs. More specifically, they trans normative scriptural belief programs with apocryphal reimaginings, and even more specifically, they channel the disbelief (not to be conflated with unbelief or nonbelief; see fn. 95) of their protagonists into the doubts of their protagonists' corresponding avatars. Before examining the doubts facilitated by these avatars, however, I need to sketch "the prophecy problematic," as it establishes the grounds for doubt that necessitate these proximal avatars in the first place.

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[76] For Slavoj Žižek, belief *in* vs. belief *about* amounts to a Lacan-driven distinction between faith (belief in) and belief (belief about), wherein faith is a "symbolic pact" between a people and their God (for instance, between the ancient Jews and Jehovah, who had chosen them as *His* people). In this formulation, it becomes possible to actually have "faith without belief," which is to *decide* to honor the symbolism of the pact *without actually thinking* that Jehovah is real. The idea reinforces the consensus that "belief cannot be formed at will," even as faith is, in this case, necessarily an affective act of will. See Žižek's *On Belief* (2001), pp. 109-113.

The Prophecy Problematic (Ouroboros-shaped Logic)

I have shown how the fiction of Josh Emmons frames an encompassing spectrum along which we can locate contemporary reimaginations of scripture. I lean on him once more, briefly, as a segue to Rushdie and Ferris because his portrayal of contemporary attitudes toward divine revelation wonderfully describes our current meme of prophets and prophecy, and by extension, what I'm going to call "the prophecy problematic." In a set piece in *PASE*, the protagonist Jack Smith finds himself committed involuntarily at the PASE Wellness Center, being initiated against his will into the theology of UR God by a pear-devouring Ms. Anderson. Ms. Anderson explains to Jack that UR God "is the supreme generative force who, cognizant of the Earth's imminent collapse, gave us the book *The Prescription for a Superior Existence* so that we can improve enough to fuse[77] into Him." To which Jack responds,

> "I thought Montgomery Shoale wrote it."
>
> "UR God used him to convey His message."
>
> "Did that happen on a mountain?"
>
> "As I said, a certain amount of cynicism is healthy, but there comes a point
> where it causes more harm than good. […]". (*PASE* 13)

Jack's cynical rejoinder about the conveyance of UR God's message to Montgomery Shoale happening "on a mountain" caricatures the prophet figure as stereotypically predictable: from Moses to Mohammed to the Mormons' founder Joseph Smith to Montgomery Shoale, we expect our silver-bearded, staff-wielding prophets to descend from on high with the latest "message" from "Him." The prophecy problematic involves cynicism and cliché working in tandem – and by "cynicism," Ms.

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[77] The language used by Emmons in this dialogue reinforces the gnostic quality of *PASE* to the extent that Gnosticism tends to align with mysticism (see fn. 68). Hart confirms this in his account of how Maurice Blanchot understands human relationships. For Blanchot, human relations can be dialectical (following Hegel) or aesthetic (following St. Augustine), but there is also the possibility in which a person forfeits "individual identity in order to be fused immediately into a higher union with the other. Such is the route taken up by the mystics…" (*Postmodernism* 99-100).

Anderson refers colloquially, of course, to something more along the lines of a whole genealogy of philosophical skepticism than to, say, the legacy of Diogenes.

Jack Smith's stance regarding PASE, and a refinement of the "cynicism" that it entails, clarifies via a later argument that takes place at the PASE Wellness Center, this time between Jack and a PASE educator named Mr. Ortega. Again, the argument centers around PASE as an allegedly scriptural record of prophecy. In response to Jack's questions about the text's highly ascetic injunctions, Mr. Ortega answers,

> "I presume you haven't read *The Prescription*."
>
> "No."
>
> "It explains exactly what happens when we break free of our bodies and, if we've proven ourselves worthy of UR God, rise into Him. Its eloquence and truth are irrefutable."
>
> "I refute them."
>
> "You haven't read them yet."
>
> "I refute *Mein Kampf* and a hundred other stupid manifestos I've never read."
>
> "Those were all written by mortals. *The Prescription* was written by UR God."
>
> "The Bible was written by the regular God, and I imagine it contradicts *The Prescription* all over the place."
>
> "The temptation to endow a man-made book with legitimacy by saying that a higher power wrote it—whether it be the Bible, the Koran, *The Book of Mormon*, or what have you—has often tempted its authors."
>
> "Like it did Montgomery Shoale." (*PASE* 57)

Now the "cynicism" in question is directed at all of these additional elements that round out the prophecy problematic: irrefutable truth and eloquence; authorship and authority higher than that of

mere mortals; superiority over other texts that make similar but competing, or even contradictory, claims; and most importantly, the requirement that *this* prophet, Montgomery Shoale, be perceived as more divinely appointed than *those* prophets, all of the biblical ones, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, and any others who may have been tempted to endow their books with legitimacy by saying that a higher power wrote it. Clearly these elements interlock with each other, since the requirement that *this* prophet be the real deal is part and parcel of the text's irrefutable truth and eloquence, its authority, its superiority. The prophecy problematic goes full circle, like an ouroboros, and outsiders to the faith, like Jack Smith, can see the faithful insiders eating their logical tails.[78] The problem is that, when confronted with a "prophetic" text, insider and outsider resonate metonymically with the default positions of Mr. Ortega and Jack Smith, respectively: the former receives the text's purported truth and eloquence *even though* he can see the obvious problems associated with receiving Joseph Smith's *The Book of Mormon* as "irrefutable" (for example), while Jack refutes PASE *precisely because* he views Montgomery Shoale as not being significantly different from Joseph Smith and other so-called scripture writing prophets.

Insiders thus have a "belief *in*," which can be described as a mode of reception that *imposes a difference* between "our text" and "theirs," even if that difference is a self-labeled one. Outsiders have a "belief *about*," which *rejects* what it sees as an *artificial imposition of difference*, insisting instead that any and all prophetic scriptures suffer from the same general logic because all of their differences are self-labeled, making them all inherently and equally problematic.[79] Just as Derrida asserts that there is no

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[78] In *The Satanic Verses*, the image of the ouroboros applies to the terrorists who hijack the jumbo jet *Bostan*, Flight AI-420, when Saladin Chamcha recognizes that the "men do not *know*…they are reality aping a crude image of itself, they are worms swallowing their tails." Crucially, Saladin's imagery is designed to distinguish between "the men," who don't know, and Tavleen, "the woman" in charge of the hijack who "*knows*," whose "eyes turned inward" and who "scared the passengers stiff" (80); the men and the woman embody different *kinds* of ideas.

[79] Hart's guidance is instructive: What I am calling belief-in and belief-about tack onto "the difference between natural belief and supernatural belief." In Christianity, for example, natural belief (belief-about) is general while the second (belief-in) is infused. Within the supernatural/infused/belief-in variety are further sub-categories. As Hart explains: there are "differences between *credere deum*, *credere deo*, and *credere in deum*. The first is belief that God exists; the second is belief in what God says; and the third is believing oneself into God, that is, entrusting oneself to God and what he says. What we call Christian belief is, or should be, *credere in deum*. One must be careful not to jumble all these different senses into the omnibus 'religious belief.'"

(text) outside of textuality, so Jack Smith asserts that there is no scripture outside of scripturality.[80] In an interesting twist, then, to describe Jack as an "outsider" to PASE is to describe him as one who denies PASE's "outside" status (here meaning "exempt from the rest of its own category"), which is to say that what Jack "refutes" is precisely PASE's *labeling of itself* as transcendent. By contrast, "insiders" like Ms. Anderson and Mr. Ortega are the ones who insist on PASE's transcendence, which is precisely to vitiate its immanence, which is to say that "insiders" imagine PASE as being transcendently "outside" the rest of scripture as a textual mode in the sense of being "above" it, or exempt (*ex*: out, *emere*: to buy, take, distribute; *exemptus*, meaning "taken out" or "freed," is the past participle of *eximere*). So one's position of looking in on PASE from without entails the perspective that PASE is situated immanently on one of a thousand plateaus of prophetic scripture, whereas one's position of looking at the rest of scripture from within a PASE-centric position entails the perspective that all other scripture is beneath PASE, that PASE condescends to the remainder of all scripture as though scripture were actually two categories: right (/true) prophecy and wrong (/untrue) prophecy from which the right/true is exempt. Outsiders like Jack Smith tend to notice that PASE's self-labeled truths (however eloquently rendered) are not different in kind from other self-labeled truths, and this becomes especially important when the truths being self-asserted[81] are the sort of cosmic, supernatural,

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[80] In "Against Almost Everything" (2005), Robin J. Sowards, reading Walter Benn Michaels reading Derrida, notes that Michaels "translates the well-known sentence from Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, 'Il n'y a pas de hors texte' (110; thus misprinted without the hyphen *hors-texte*) as 'there is nothing outside the text' (125); but what it means is *There is no-outside text*, i.e., there is no text that is outside of textuality" (229). Hart remarks that because there is nothing outside the text, then "all phenomena, no matter where they are in [Husserl's] 'regions of being,' give themselves by way of *la différance*. So, the distinction that interests [me] is between empirical texts and quasi-transcendental textuality. There is no empirical text that is outside or beyond quasi-transcendental textuality." This feels right: the distinction is that of textuality whose legibility depends on the existence of a specific reader (e.g., contemporary novels) vs. textuality that is, by contrast, more (quasi-) transcendentally legible (e.g., scripture). "No scripture outside of scripturality" essentially redefines of scripture as an empirical text: e.g., the Bible as "the other book" rather than "*the* [quasi-transcendental] book" (see fn. 71).

[81] Scripturally-derived self-assertion is a problem distinct from that of self-legitimization (see fn. 86). Here is what David Dark has to say about it: "…go ahead with your gut and call it strength of purpose, improvising an insane justification for your own folly as you go. Against this all too common culture of self-assertion, the expressions 'as far as I can tell' and 'as far as I know' and 'to my knowledge' signal a vigilant awareness concerning our own limitations. I'd like to see this self-criticism more frequently displayed by pundits, politicians, and professional religious figures who confuse their gut feelings for integrity and a changed mind for weakness" (2009, 16).

transcendental truths that scripture-writing prophets not only claim as the basis of hierarchical social organization, but which also tend to be fundamentally unable to coexist with those other writings *of the same kind.*

How peculiar that a mode of textuality exists such that the texts in that mode are of the same general nature, but also that the texts in that mode cancel the legitimacy of the others with which they share the category ipso facto.[82] The very sharing of the category, which would normally be grounds for identity-based affinity, becomes the ground for difference-based incompatibility; textual identities and textual belief programs fail not just to coincide but even to coexist amicably. Differences in content and context override categorical sameness. The prophecy problematic illuminates these peculiarities of scripture as a textual mode. It serves to isolate a "belief *in*" (or lack thereof: "*un*belief *in*") and to separate it from "belief *about*." Contemporary postmodern novels that reimagine scripture go about setting up predicaments for their respective figures by putting their protagonists' default positions either as insiders or as outsiders at odds with the expectation that the first of these positions accords with having absolutist belief *in* the scriptural texts that form the basis of the communities to which the protagonists belong, while the second of these positions is expected to square with having relativistic beliefs *about* scriptures with which the protagonists do not identify. Authors like Rushdie and Ferris, in other words, experiment with the prophecy problematic in order to engage in candid thought experiments about the nature of belief, to conduct their own philosophical workshops concerning claims being made by the likes of Walter Benn Michaels, who characterize "the end of history" as a moment in which ideological disagreement (wherein objective meaning is still possible)

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[82] I'm speaking here, generally, of the prophetic brand of monotheistic scriptures, actual and imagined, ranging from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament to the Qur'an and the *Book of Mormon* (on the actual/canonical side of things) to things like PASE (Emmons), the Satanic verses (Rushdie), and the Cantaveticles (Ferris) (on the reimagined/apocryphal side of things; of course, for LDS, Hebrew and Christian Bibles are legitimate). I'm aware that Vedic texts from Hinduism and other "materialist," atheistic, and/or polytheistic scriptures allow for other texts to share space "inside," making them inherently less exclusionary but also less exclusively transcendent. Malise Ruthven provides an excellent overview of both inclusionary and exclusionary examples of scripture, as a mode of textuality, in the concluding chapter of *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam* (1990).

gives way to identitarian experience (wherein the perspective of the subject-position relegates meaning to the nihilism of subjective relativism).

As philosophical workshops, *The Satanic Verses* and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* depart from *PASE* only insofar as they posit n+1 apocryphal scriptures (as opposed *PASE*'s non-derivative imagining) as parts of their theoretical arsenals. Otherwise, these novels join *PASE* in a mental exercise geared toward interrogating whether (or how much) identity and belief are tethered together, and by extension, whether belief can be formed at will. What follows is a demonstration that Rushdie and Ferris pry identity from belief (rather flamboyantly, it turns out) and reattach belief to something less like identity and more like what a character *thinks* is actually true, regardless of that character's demographic and/or physical profile. Religious belief in these novels – whether abandoned or adopted – comes to resemble something much closer to the contemporary philosophical realisms invested in contemplating the extramental aspects of our universe (see fn. 62).

The Satanic Verses: Doubt in Belief

Where Jack Smith's default position in relation to PASE is that of the bona fide outsider, replete with the kinds of beliefs *about* the fallibility of prophets that his position evinces, *The Satanic Verses* offers characters brandishing insider credentials with respect to the Qur'an, rife therefore with all the belief *in* Mohammed's infallibility that one expects from devout Indian Muslims.[83] Chief among these characters are Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, a Bollywood star and a voice actor, respectively, whose bodies, identities, and beliefs undergo radical transformations as they – immigrants

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[83] *Infallibility* emerges as a crucial term for belief and epistemology, especially where Justified True Belief (JTB) serves as the most commonly accepted epistemological basis for knowledge. In JTB, knowledge is said to obtain when a belief is held, when the belief is justified, and when that belief is true. Problems with JTB are generally reconciled with recourse to the notion of infallibility, but this runs into the same problem as verifying what's supposedly true in order to meet the truth condition, since determining truth is just as fraught as determining infallibility and vice versa.

to the secular West – develop neoliberal adjustments to their worldviews during their time in London

(that is, in "Ellowen Deeowen").

Yet, for all the alienating neoliberalism to be explored, there is the constant reminder that each

of these characters hails from a starting point in which the Qur'an is perceived as *the* meta-scripture

above and apart from all other, lesser scriptures; in which the Qur'an is a scripture exempt from

scripturality. In Gibreel's case, this reminder of his insider status is engrained in the very symbolism

of his name(s), and it extends to the ways that he experiences his subject-position.[84] Nominally:

"Gibreel Farishta had been born Ismail Najmuddin…Ismail after the child involved in the sacrifice of

Ibrahim, and Najmuddin, *star of the faith*; he'd given up quite a name when he took the angel's" (*SV*

17). No kidding: Kierkegaard famously reads the story of Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice Ismail

(albeit the Abraham/Isaac version of the story, from Genesis instead of the Qur'an) as the absolute

pinnacle of belief,[85] and Najmuddin, in addition to the definition provided in the novel, shares an

etymological connection with *Al-Najm*, the name of the surah that not only refers to "the star" that

Gibreel is to become (in more than one sense), but which also self-labels the divinity and legitimacy

of Mohammed more explicitly than any of the other surahs.

All this before we get to "Gibreel Farishta" (semiotically), another grandiose self-labeling that

translates none too subtly as "the Angel Gibra'il," and implicitly then as one of the four Islamic

archangels (Qur'an 2:97). Though the stated intention of this self-appellation is that it is Gibreel's

"way of making a homage to the memory of his dead mother," it serves nonetheless as a form of

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[84] While it is true, as Booth points out, that "so many writers of all kinds use 'subject-position' as a stand-in for identity," it is also true that Michaels draws specifically on Paul de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology* (1996) to derive a unique understanding of "subject-position," and that he deploys it in this specialized manner distinguish between belief as identity and belief as belief.

[85] "But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too soon nor too late. He mounted the ass, he rode slowly along the way. All that time he believed—he believed that God would not require Isaac of him, whereas he was willing nevertheless to sacrifice him if it was required. He believed by virtue of the absurd; for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed the absurd that God who required it of him should the next instant recall the requirement. He climbed the mountain, even at the instant when the knife glittered he believed…that God would not require Isaac" (*Fear and Trembling* 75-76). In *The Gift of Death* (1992), Derrida considers the story of Abraham and Isaac through *Fear and Trembling* through Nietzsche to determine that "Nietzsche must indeed believe that he knows what believing means, unless he means it is all make-believe" (115).

identification reflecting Gibreel's ardent belief in the faith tradition inherited from his "mummyji," his "one and only Mamo" (*SV* 18). Suffice it to say that Gibreel's primary forms of identification – his names – are intimately and inextricably bound up with scriptural self-proclamation as much as they are badges of belonging; that, prima facia, Gibreel's default position as a Qur'anic insider jibes with an expected belief *in* the Qur'an's self-legitimizing revelations, which itself follows from being his mother's son.[86]

Sure enough, the belief expected of the insider is the one that ensues – at least initially. The entire second chapter of "Part I: The Angel Gibreel" condenses Gibreel's biography of belief into a timeline that stretches from his youth to an illness suffered well after he becomes a massive celebrity – it is a chronicle of the way that he slides from experiencing his subject-position to believing what he *thinks* (and not what he *is*), which is to say, of the way that he experiences religious belief *as identity* prior to thinking of it *as belief*. An early anecdote, in which Gibreel's adoptive father (who "was an amateur psychic") relays the spooky recollection of a conversation that he has with an enchanted, spirit-filled glass, brings readers into the orbit of Gibreel's early, identity-based belief in the supernatural. The adoptive father, Babasaheb Mhatre, first asks the glass, "*Is there a God*, and that glass

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[86] Hart comments that "the Bible does not seek to legitimate a science or attempt to legitimate itself" (113), and that "the grand narratives in Christianity are ecclesial and theological. They appeal to scripture but do not arise from it. To show incredulity towards those grand narratives, which Lyotard believes to be symptomatic of the postmodern, would be to express skepticism at ecclesial claims for legitimation and theological quests for a complete and coherent system" (115). I bear this in mind and proceed with what I hope is a cautious finesse in my contention that scripture *is* "self-legitimizing," language that I begin here and carry through the rest of this chapter. I actually agree with Hart that scripture – whether the Bible, the Qur'an, or most others – does not *in itself* self-legitimate, which is just to say that scripture can and should be recognized as collections of potentially open literary texts to which meanings and interpretations might later be attached by readers with ecclesial and theological agendas. As Pnina Werbner so succinctly puts it, with regard to interpretations of *The Satanic Verses*: "The meaning for whom? That, of course, is the key question" (1996, 55). The value of a phrase like "the Bible *as literature*" is precisely the recognition that students may notice things like chiasmus or erotic poetry, literary elements that need not involve any grand narrative (and which are often occluded by the long shadows cast by the taking for granted of the grand narratives). So when I discuss scriptural self-legitimation, I use it as shorthand for scripture – canonical and apocryphal scripture – as a textual mode that *cannot be unbundled* from the necessarily ecclesial and theological interpretations of the characters in question. We can put it more bluntly by drawing on David Dark's explanation that the "texts that get called *scriptures* by various religions traditions are often *used* by individuals (mostly quoted out of context) to pepper speeches, buttress bad arguments, and, on occasion, to avoid awareness of responsibility for our actions" (*Sacredness* 38). To discuss Gibreel's *belief* in (or about) the Qur'an is precisely to discuss Gibreel's *interpretations of* the text, which no doubt involve Islamic grand narratives. This is a long but necessary way of saying that "self-legitimizing scripture" is a condensation of "interpretations of scripture with grand narratives baked in for and by various figures," so that when Gibreel comes to doubt, he comes to doubt Islamicist cosmology, not the Qur'an per se.

which had been running round like a mouse or so just stopped dead, middle of table, not a twitch, completely phutt, kaput" (21). Feeling as though he had gone unanswered, Mhatre proceeds with another question:

> *Is there a Devil.* After that the glass – baprebap! – began to shake – catch your ears! - slowslow at first, then faster-faster, like a jelly, until it jumped! – ai-hai! – up from the table, into the air, fell down on its side, and – o-ho! – into a thousand and one pieces, smashed. Believe don't believe, Babasaheb Mhatre told his charge, but thenandthere I learned my lesson: don't meddle, Mhatre, in what you do not comprehend.
>
> This story had a profound effect on the consciousness of the young listener, because even before his mother's death he had become convinced of the supernatural world. (21)

The impact of Mhatre's story on Gibreel appears to be a galvanizing one, reinforcing a key prerequisite for belief in the Qur'an: one must be open to the supernatural if one is to believe in a strict monotheism conveyed miraculously from angel to prophet, and to believe further that the scriptural vessel of conveyance – the Qur'an – is eternal. And here again, Gibreel does believe. "From his mother Naima Najmuddin he heard a great many stories of the Prophet, and if inaccuracies had crept into her versions, he wasn't interested in knowing what they were" (22). Gibreel prefers ignorance over the dangers of being accurately informed if that means that his belief can be thought of as an inherited worldview safe from disruption, which is precisely to articulate belief *not* as something that aims at truth, but *as identity.* And, despite an active imagination that sometimes leads to "blasphemous thoughts," such as when "his somnolent fancy began to compare his own condition with that of the Prophet," Gibreel tends toward a cool reverence befitting his insider position. "Mostly," it is narrated, "his religious faith was a low-key thing" (23).

The rest of this early chapter in Rushdie's novel unfolds to reveal the novel's inner logic and overall structure. Not only do we learn of Gibreel's skyrocketing fame, which "deepened his belief in a guardian angel" (25), but we learn too that his fame is predicated on being typecast in the cinematic sub-genre known as "theologicals," wherein Gibreel takes the lead playing a range of (mostly Hindu) deities; that he becomes a sexual icon of the subcontinent; that he contracts a mysterious illness that almost kills him; that during his illness he prays fervently for recovery, but that after "an act of the Supreme" answers these prayers, Gibreel stops believing in God. Simply and starkly, "he had lost his faith" (29). Amid these twists and turns, the narration sprinkles in aspects of Gibreel's subconscious – anxieties, neuroses, etc. – in order to set the stage for the "nocturnal retribution, a punishment of dreams" (32) subsequent to his loss of faith. In turn, this "punishment of dreams" expands from the personal consciousness attributed to Gibreel-the-character to overtake the impersonal consciousness of the whole novel,[87] so that "if inaccuracies had crept into [Gibreel's mother's] versions" of her stories of the Prophet (for instance), then those potential inaccuracies are not just subliminally guiding *Gibreel's* dreams and nightmares; they also guide *The Satanic Verses* in all of its form and content. In addition, Gibreel's dreams constitute alternative realities in which he is the archangel that he self-labels as, and in these dreams, he delivers revelation to the Prophet, as if in indulgent answer to the question that arises from hearing his mother's potential inaccuracies: "'What a man!' he thought. 'What angel would not wish to speak to him?'" (22).

Gibreel gets his chance to speak to the man. Just as he is the "avatar" of the deities that he portrays by acting them out in Bollywood theologicals, so the alethic dream-versions of Gibreel are avatars of the real-life "star" that he becomes through fame. As Gibreel's dreams go, so goes the plot

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[87] In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), Rachel Greenwald Smith describes novels that are personal and impersonal in their affects as the two forms of the neoliberal novel; I am extrapolating from her focus on exclusively American novels to include *The Satanic Verses*. Randy Boyagoda and others who carve space to examine Rushdie in an American context might argue that the extrapolation is unnecessary. Boyagoda, for instance, explores "an America populated by immigrants" and an America identity heavily influenced by the forces of neoliberal globalization in *Race, Immigration, and American Identity in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner* (2008, 20; see also my prologue).

of the novel on multiple levels, all of which bleed into each other;[88] the movie star and the angelic star collapse into each other, and a collapsed star is a fallen angel. *Is there a Devil?* The "morning star" – another translation of the surah *Al-Najm*, along with "collapsed star" – is notorious in its ambivalence, as it can be taken to refer to Christ *and* to Lucifer in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles.[89] Are the Prophet's "verses" the message of Allah or of Shaitan (/Iblis) (to which does "morning star" refer?), and does having dream-based avatars help in answering these questions? Or could it be that the dreams are more real (by expressing more alethic truths) than the character having them – that Gibreel Farishta is as much (or more of) an avatar of the archangel than the other way around, as I suggest in this chapter's next section, "The Avatar Dynamic"?

This avatar dynamic will be explored in depth; meanwhile, at issue is still Gibreel Farishta's status as a believer-in, as an insider who identifies as part of the community who counts the Qur'an as scripturally exempt from the other scriptural prophecies of competing traditions. To recap, Gibreel has always had a healthy belief in all things supernatural: "He grew up believing in God, angels, demons, afreets, djinns, as matter-of-factly as if they were bullock-carts or lamp-posts, and it struck him as a failure in his own sight that he had never seen a ghost" (22). From this prerequisite belief in

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[88] Pnina Werbner notes, for instance, that the novel is structured according to chronotopes "that both mirror and comment upon each other" and which "parallel each other and throw light on the meanings implied by the events and actions each chronotope contains" (1996, *S*60).

[89] C.f. Isa. 14:12, 2 Pet. 1:19, Rev. 2:28 and Rev. 22:16. In three of these four appearances, "morning star" aligns unequivocally with Jesus Christ and the immortality that he offers through salvation; in Isa., however, the morning star – or, Lucifer, son of the morning – is unequivocally associated with Satan, and a footnote to the this verse in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* reveals that the "morning star" derives from a name that was "translated as Lucifer in Latin." Other annotated translations clarify the meaning of Lucifer as "light bearer," or, "lit., the bright one" (for example, *The Ryrie Study Bible*). This instance of an evil morning star can be cross-referenced with Luk. 10.18, in which Jesus "saw Satan, like lightning, fall down from heaven." The remaining three occurrences of a singular "morning star" – 2 Pet. 1:19, Rev. 2:28, and Rev. 22:16 – imply an opposite meaning from the one in Isa. These verses offer the morning star as a symbol for Christ over Satan/Lucifer and immortality over death. Finally, the morning star in 2 Pet. suggests an apocalyptic element that overlaps with the Christ and immortality motifs: "So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The morning star is therefore indexed to the three distinct but interrelated possibilities of eternal life (Christ), death (Satan/Lucifer), and apocalypse (prophecy and revelation). *The Satanic Verses* reflects this ambivalence, for instance, when: "Hubal and Kain look down on the Grandee and poet as they stroll. And the Nabataean proto-Dionysus, He-of-Shara; the morning star, Astarte, and saturnine Nakruh. Here is the sun god, Manaf…" (101); when Gibreel and Chamcha see that the "first hint of light was in the sky, and this cosy sea-coast danced Lucifer, the morning's star" (135); when Shaitan and Gibreel fuse into each other (93, 109, 126-127).

the supernatural follows a much more specific belief in Islam, never questioned (inaccuracies dutifully ignored), and this belief has been so strong all his life that even after losing it, Gibreel retains the ability to recognize it in others, as he does on the train with Mr Maslama. "Farishta spotted the glint of the True Believer, a light which, until recently, he had seen in his own shaving-mirror every day" (197).[90] The residue of belief-in clings to Gibreel even after his fall – that is, after his loss of faith, but also after his literal tumble through the sky (like a falling/fallen angel) resulting from the explosion of the *Bostan* far above London. Rushdie literalizes Gibreel Farishta as a fallen angel and as a collapsed star in the novel's opening sequence, but Gibreel considers his fall, which he somehow survives, along with Saladin, to be a sort of rebirth ("Is birth always a fall?"), and a supernatural instance of divine intervention at that: "Gibreel never repudiated the miracle; unlike Chamcha, who tried to reason it out of existence […]" (9).

Gibreel sets up, then, as a character for whom Islamic prophecy is anything but problematic, which is why it is so intriguing when the problematic develops precisely *for him*, with his own angelic and prophetic experience at the center of it. In a tidy inversion of Jack Smith's development from having beliefs about PASE to believing in PASE, Gibreel goes from believing *in* Mohammed's infallibility to having beliefs *about* the origination of the Prophet's text – beliefs that can be guessed at by the pejorative use of "Mahound" to refer to the Prophet. Gibreel's transformation into an actual, halo-clad angel compounds this intrigue (as does Saladin Chamcha's transformation into a horned, cloven-hooved, sulfur-reeking Hell-fiend), since it would be difficult to imagine a more overtly straightforward expression of the posthistoricist expectation that *what* Gibreel and Saladin *are* should structure their belief systems: as Mohammed's (/Mahound's) archangel, the expectation is that Gibreel

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[90] According to Paul Brians (2004), "Maslama alludes to the Arabian 'false prophet' known as 'Musaylima the Liar' (Al-'Azm 284 & Simawe 186), linked to Akbar by his unorthodox beliefs; Brians also reads the phrase*, crying into the wilderness* as scriptural cross-reference in which Maslama "present[s] himself as John the Baptist to Gibreel's Jesus, quoting Matt. 3:2-3, which in turn quotes Isa. 40:3-4. He is a sort of demonic prophet." See the reference to "morning star" in Isa. in fn. 89.

would actually believe the verses that he channels to the Prophet, since his involvement in the formation of verses that constitute self-legitimizing scripture would seem to require his agency and willing participation; a fire-breathing devil with a perpetual Pan-like erection would similarly be expected to believe in the supernatural evil that he seems to be actively working to bring to fruition. The intrigue of the prophecy problematic finally hits its zenith with the very subversion of the posthistoricist expectation[91] that takes place when Gibreel and Saladin refuse to let their beliefs be guided by *what* Gibreel and Saladin *are*, the things they become, their embodied ontologies. Rather than continue to experience religious belief as the subject-positions of their respective identities, Gibreel and Saladin develop new senses of religious belief *as (dis)belief.*

For Gibreel, the development of religious belief from something that he identifies with into what he thinks is actually the case hinges on two pivotal scenes. The first of these blends his prayers for recovery from his illness –

> Ya Allah whose servant lies bleeding do not abandon me now after watching over me
> so long. Ya Allah show me some sign, some small mark of your favour, that I may find
> in myself the strength to[92] cure my ills. O God most beneficent most merciful, be with
> me in this my time of need. (30)

– into a sort of contemporary Islamic Job narrative (c.f. Qur'an 21:83) –

> it occurred to him that he was being punished, and for a time that made it possible to
> suffer the pain, but after a time he got angry. Enough, God, his unspoken words

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[91] Booth notes that "from a more usual perspective of popular mythology, the phenotype or appearance corresponds with the team a being plays on. It seems odd to need a special posthistoricist explanation of this expected matter-spirit homology. Rushdie plays out a n+1 irony across a career." I am explicating not just a correspondence between phenotype or appearance and the team a being plays on, but also a correspondence between these things *and a being's inescapable doxastic attitude* toward this taken-for-granted correspondence, *regardless* of whether the being has the capacity to switch teams. It is not just a disruption of the expected matter-spirit homology that interests those who worry about a posthistorical logic, but a disruption of the assumptions bound up in the homology, so that even those who take issue with the term "posthistorical" (as I myself do) cannot ignore the problems that term itself, however problematically, attempts to articulate and contextualize.

[92] Job becomes a prominent touchstone in Part Two: The Avatar Dynamic, particularly as it pertains to Ferris's novel, but also in Chamcha's reply to Sufyan's attempt to assuage his suffering.

demanded, why must I die when I have not killed, are you vengeance or are you love?

(30)

– into "a terrible emptiness, an isolation, as he was talking to *thin air*, that nobody was there at all." The finale to this progression is Gibreel's subsequent binge on "forbidden foods," which is his first activity "[o]n the day he was discharged from the hospital" (30).

This sequence carries Gibreel from earnest prayer to indignant anger to resigned emptiness to a symbolic expression of his newfound disbelief. It also poses an interesting challenge to doxastic logicians because it culminates in what is simultaneously an evidential *and* a non-evidential reason to believe in Allah's existence, which Gibreel longs for even as he ceases to believe it: "he began to plead into the emptiness, ya Allah, just be there, damn it, just be" (30). This final prayer – now *for* Allah's disbelieved existence rather than *to* a believed-in Allah – parallels the theoretical shifts, outlined above, from belief *in* to belief *about*, from insider to outsider status. But notice too how Gibreel's debauchery with the "forbidden foods" at the Taj hotel's buffet – the "gammon steaks of his unbelief and the pig's trotters of secularism" (30) – is for him a confirmation of God's non-existence: "No thunderbolt," he says to Alleluia (Allie) Cone, amused by the sight of Gibreel "with pigs falling out of his face" (31). He continues:

> 'That's the point.'
>
> She came back to stand in front of him. 'You're alive,' she told him. 'You got your life back. *That's* the point.' (31)

So Gibreel eats pig-meat and yet Allah does not smite him, evidence enough for Gibreel that Allah does not exist; but he also heals from his illness, as if in miraculous response to his prayers, evidence enough for Allie that Allah saw fit to spare (what was once) a True Believer. Gibreel's evidence is non-

evidence[93] for Allie and vice versa. Each character reacts to something that did or did not happen and makes an *ex post* statement[94] of belief in, arguably in the form of teleology (depending on how one reads "the point" that each character makes to the other). Each character considers a given proposition (Allah exists, Allah doesn't exist), and as such, neither character escapes having some doxastic attitude toward that proposition.[95]

This brings us to the second of two pivotal scenes that propels Gibreel from experiencing his religious belief as coextensive with his identity, to a way of believing that is severed from what he *is* and reattaches it to what he *thinks* (or, to his inescapable "doxastic attitude" toward propositions about Allah). Part of the reason for this is that it's also the scene in which what he is so radically changes, in terms of embodied ontology, that there can be no mistaking the development. After he and Saladin miraculously survive their fall from the *Bostan*, Gibreel transmogrifies into a real and actual angel, literalized by Rushdie's magical realism that allows for "a pale, golden light" "streaming softly outwards from a point immediately behind his head" (146) to be an actual halo that he covers with a dingy, gray trilby (meanwhile, of course, Saladin is sprouting devil horns). And not only does Gibreel become an angel, but he becomes the angel that he recognizes from his dreams, understanding only after the transformation is complete that "the universe of his nightmares had begun to leak into his waking life" (148). More weirdly but also more important to my argument, Gibreel's transformation

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[93] For discussion of non-evidential reasons to believe, see Jonathan Adler and Michael Hicks, "Non-Evidential Reasons to Believe," chapter 8 in Chan's *The Aim of Belief*.

[94] For discussion of ex post vs. ex ante attitude formation, see Ralph Wedgwood, "The Right Thing to Believe," chapter 7 in Chan's *The Aim of Belief*.

[95] Though I have done my best in this section to balance and to synthesize a range of insights from Timothy Chan's edited volume, *The Aim of Belief*, my chosen language and selected quotations center on the latter chapters that work ultimately to think through the difference between beliefs that aim at truth vs. beliefs that aim at knowledge. Ralph Wedgwood's seventh chapter, "The Right Thing to Believe," states that "as soon as you have considered a proposition, you cannot escape having some doxastic attitude towards it" (126). For Wedgwood this entails that disbelief is really a belief that a certain proposition is false (126), which differs from the *lack* of a belief, which is possible when propositions go unconsidered. Both disbelief and lack of belief play into my claim, above, that unbelief (or non-belief) is really just an ontological affirmation of belief's existence. Rushdie agrees: "Disbelief" is "[t]oo final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief" (*SV* 94). It is worthwhile, therefore, to disambiguate "disbelief" from "unbelief." I am with Wedgwood and Rushdie in maintaining that disbelief, as a kind of belief, differs from unbelief, which would be a lack of belief, but unlike Rushdie, who posits "doubt" as the "the opposite of faith" (94), I think that doubt is, like disbelief, a specific kind of belief.

is also the beginning of the end of his own agency, as "it had seemed to him that his will was no longer his own to command, that somebody else's needs were in charge" (148).

The "somebody else's needs" that take "charge" of Gibreel's "will," no longer in his own "command," is of course the Somebody Else that Gibreel has stopped believing exists. Or perhaps more properly, Gibreel *disbelieves* in this Somebody Else's existence. But whatever it is that Gibreel believes or disbelieves importantly now takes a backseat to what *he believes that he believes* (or disbelieves); namely, Gibreel's disbelief in Allah's existence becomes less important to him *than his belief* that he no longer believes in Allah:

> Mr Gibreel Farishta on the railway train to London was once again seized as who would not be by the fear that God had decided to punish him for his loss of faith by driving him insane. He had seated himself by the window in a first-class non-smoking compartment, with his back to the engine because unfortunately another fellow was already in the other place, and jamming his trilby down on his head he sat with fists deep in his scarlet-lined gabardine and panicked. The terror of losing his mind to a paradox, of being unmade by what he no longer believed existed, of turning in his madness into the avatar of a chimerical archangel, was so big in him that it was impossible to look at it for long; yet how else to account for the miracles, metamorphoses and apparitions of recent days? 'It's a straight choice,' he trembled silently. 'It's A, I'm off my head, or B, baba, somebody went and changed the rules.'
> (195)

The evidentialism inherent in trying to account for the supernaturalisms "of recent days" notwithstanding, the key to this passage is that Gibreel develops a belief *about* his own newly formed belief, the latter of which takes the form of disbelief. Even more troubling is Gibreel's belief that Allah is punishing him for his disbelief by turning him into "the avatar" of the Prophet's "chimerical

archangel," which amounts to a belief that what he (dis)believes is untrue, which is a backdoor way of believing in Allah after all (if we still believe that belief aims at truth, and that the only way to be really and truly punished by Allah is for Allah to exist, then for Gibreel to believe in his punishment is necessarily to believe in Allah's existence), not to mention a backdoor way of *disbelieving* what he believes that he believes (if Gibreel *really* believes that he is being punished, as the text indicates, then Gibreel *really does* believe in Allah's existence and therefore *disbelieves that he disbelieves* in Allah's existence).[96]

Perhaps the most straightforward way of describing Gibreel's doxastic attitude regarding Allah's existence is to say, then, that he develops a belief about his belief, even if his second-level belief (the one *about* what he thinks he believes) takes the form, ultimately of disbelieving his own disbelief. Another way of putting it, and as is clear from doxastic theory (see fn. 96), knowing or understanding what one believes is remarkably difficult even for the one holding the beliefs in question. Does Gibreel know or understand what he believes, let alone what he believes *about* what he believes? The likely answer is that the full nature of Gibreel's beliefs is elusive even to himself, let alone formed by his own will, which would help to explain his burgeoning paranoia, frequently read as a function of schizophrenia: Gibreel's own mind is mysterious even to him,[97] and the mystery causes panic and terror. If he is unsure of who or what he is, how can he know what he believes, or how he is supposed

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[96] In "Belief, Truth, and Blindspots" (Chapter 6 in Chan's volume), Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi provide a fascinating sketch of "the blindspot problem" in belief, which states that the principle of "*Doxastic Ought* implies that for any true proposition, you ought to believe it. However, there are not only infinitely many true propositions, but given that any conjunction of true propositions is itself a true proposition, there must be some true propositions that are extremely complex—certainly far too complex for most humans to believe" (107-108). In other words, human belief can be blinded by sheer complexity, and one such type of complexity obtains when beliefs about beliefs compound, as they clearly do for Gibreel. Consider Gibreel's predicament in light of this articulation of a blindspot based on the Moore-paradoxical "It is raining and I don't believe that it is raining": "…take the blindspot that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*, where you can only affect its truth-value by changing your doxastic attitudes. In the best possibility you will disbelieve that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*, believe that *it is raining*, and believe that *you believe that it is raining*…this view tells you that you ought to believe that *you believe that it is raining*, even though that proposition is actually false" (117). This one reason why JTB, per fn. 83, fails to satisfy.

[97] "A mind in consideration of itself" is Doctorow's recurrent phrase from *City of God*, which takes up the emulation of scripture by contemporary postmodern novels. Hart speculates "that Doctorow is inheriting here from the practice of *consideratio* in Cicero, Bernard of Clairvaux, and others," and after having read one of his forthcoming chapters on this practice (and in which it is distinguished from the higher practice of *contemplatio*), I agree. See fn. 18.

to believe, or what kinds of beliefs that he should will himself to form? The dilemma is especially poignant for a protagonist who, up to a certain point at least, had always known belief and identity to go hand-in-hand.

Prophecy now becomes wholly problematic for Gibreel, whose dreams (/nightmares) of reciting verses to Mahound (from the top of a mountain called "Old Coney," no less!) haunt him so severely that he tries ultimately to reject his role in the formation of Mahound's scriptures, which is to say that Gibreel rejects *himself* – *as an angel* – according to his newfound belief *about* what such an identity is supposed to entail when it comes to believing *in* the truths of the very scripture that an angel named Gibreel is (said to be) instrumental in revealing. Gibreel is an angel, to be sure, both in his dreams and, eventually, even in his post-*Bostan*-bombing real life. That's *what* he is (or what he becomes), but what he *is* (/becomes) ceases to serve as template for what he *believes*; his insider status as a believer-in the Qur'an remains intact from a purely identitarian standpoint (and this is putting it rather mildly, since he goes from being a devout Indian Muslim to becoming the Prophet's archangel), but now Gibreel's interest has less to do with following through on the dictates of that status and more with examining the default settings of that status in the first place – and of whether those settings are accurate and/or valuable to him. Gibreel disarticulates his belief not just from his initial social identity, but from what many would consider to be a much more *essential* physically embodied ontology (that of an angel over a name-changing Indian Muslim), and he reattaches it to an inescapable doxastic attitude toward the proposition that Allah does not exist – that is, with what he *thinks*, despite himself (literally and physically), to be the case.

Having established that Gibreel shifts from primarily having a belief-in to having beliefs *about* that belief-in, we are now in position to explore the role of the avatar in facilitating those second-tier beliefs (aka doubts). Part Two, below, explores how *having* an avatar helps Gibreel to doubt belief. Before getting to that, however, I need to establish how *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* sets up inversely,

so that *being* an avatar also facilitates belief in doubt – that is, not just how an insider like Gibreel becomes susceptible to the prophecy problematic, but how an outsider like Paul O'Rourke, wary of the problematic from the start, comes to embrace doubt, to believe *in* doubt. To Joshua Ferris we turn.

To Rise Again at a Decent Hour: Belief in Doubt

My reading of Joshua Ferris's penultimate novel (he has since released *A Calling for Charlie Barnes*, 2021) marks a series of turning points from my readings of Doctorow and Morrison's novels in Chapter One and my reading of Rushdie's novel that carves out over half of this second chapter. In the first place, Doctorow, Morrison, and Rushdie are firmly established as canonical masters; switching now to Ferris, I move from the canon to a far more open if not apocryphal critical space. Ferris certainly has his accolades and awards, and he is gaining traction as a highly respected contemporary American novelist, but to describe him as canonical along with my previous three authors would, I suspect, raise some eyebrows. That's not to say that he won't join the others eventually: at forty-seven years of age, he's a young novelist but already he has four outstanding novels and a luminous collection of short stories. Having already written and published on his first two novels, my move from recognized masters to terra nova is really a move onto my own turf, my critical comfort zone. It is a space that should accommodate me nicely for the remainder of the dissertation in that I will also take up Adam Levin in Chapter Three, and in that my return to Doctorow is a return to Doctorow's later and therefore less anthologized work[98] (e.g., *City of God*), which I see as being very much of a piece with Ferris and Levin.

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[98] Michael Wutz and Julian Murphet maintain in *E.L. Doctorow: A Reconsideration* (2020), for instance, that "Doctorow's body of work vastly exceeds its critical legacy, in scope, ambition, and conceptual richness, and this remains a challenge to literary criticism today…" (1), and this is particularly true of the works that come after *Billy Bathgate* (1989). That said, the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* does include an excerpt from *City of God*, which is listed as a short story called "Heist" (1022-1035).

Second, Ferris swings us from the darkness of despair toward glimmers of hopeful redemption. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* sees its protagonist lose his parents to state-sponsored murder and his suicidal sister to a nervous disorder while he himself spirals into disfunction, invoking and eliding scripture ironically to draw out a message stripped, apocryphally, of the hope that was meant for it. Morrison and Rushdie's protagonists, who "soar" and "fly" respectively, end up killing themselves in the final pages of *Song of Solomon* and *The Satanic Verses*. By contrast, Paul O'Rourke is a protagonist who develops a sense of meaning and purpose and who discovers a fuller, richer life over the course of his encounters with reimagined scripture.[99] While darkness never fully disappears from apocryphal thinking (as we'll see in Chapter Three, particularly in *City of God* but also in *The Instructions*), *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* does introduce an element of levity and optimism that will carry through the rest of this dissertation.

Third, Ferris's novel breaks a red-hot streak of rampant name-changing that absolutely predominates in the first three novels, a feature that ties into the fourth departure, which is a gloomy postmodernist obsession with losses of origin (including a preponderance of magical navels, or a magical lack thereof). Ferris reconnects with origin and allows his protagonist to retain his given name from start to finish[100] (only once mentioning the "ovoid belly button" of a girlfriend, nothing magical about it) but, even if he does abandon the anti-foundationalist strain of postmodernism, he nonetheless persists in his postmodernist aesthetic by pursuing antirealism and especially anti-essentialism, and his reimagination of scripture particularly illustrates these concerns.[101]

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[99] Which is not to say that suicide is absent from the pages of Ferris's novel, it's not. Paul O'Rourke's father kills himself, as does Pete Mercer, a troubled billionaire Ulm.

[100] And, actually name-changing does feature in this novel (176), too, but not in a "Macon Dead III" to "Milkman" kind of way; the fact that Paul O'Rourke is allowed to remain "Paul O'Rourke" for the duration of *TRAAADH* is a first for protagonists in this dissertation.

[101] Hart identifies anti-essentialist, anti-realism, and anti-foundationalism as the three umbrella theories under which most of postmodernist thinking resides. Notably, in leaving behind the foundationalist concerns about origins, Ferris still engages with "postmodern experience," "the fragmentary," "the postmodern bible," "postmodern religion," and even "the gift," the chapter titles that structure Hart's volume.

The fifth and final turn from Rushdie to Ferris can be hard to spot, like the indecipherable twist of a Möbius strip,[102] because where Rushdie's Gibreel Farishta ends up (viz.: at doxastic odds with his own embodied ontology) is exactly where Joshua Ferris's Paul O'Rourke, the protagonist of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (henceforth *TRAAADH*), begins: as one, like Emmons's Jack Smith, who has beliefs *about* reimagined scripture, as an outsider would, despite that his genetic make-up designates his insider status.[103] For Paul O'Rourke, this belief-about precedes the belief-in that he eventually acquires, though the belief-in this time is in the Ulmish[104] scripture called the Cantaveticles with a deity named Safek,[105] which is the Hebrew word for "doubt," ensuring that the eventual arrival at belief-in is really a transposition of belief-about, wherein belief-about becomes available to the insider as much as to the outsider. However, prior to believing in doubt (or more properly: Doubt), and thus continuing to have beliefs *about* his beliefs, Paul O'Rourke harbors superficial or first-level doubting beliefs about all scriptural texts, believing that none are exempt from scripturality and that all are subject to the prophecy problematic.

It is a conspicuous default position for a depressed (though highly successful) Brooklyn-based dentist who longs for kinship and communal acceptance, but it also provides some grist for the doxastic mill that grinds belief into an inescapable attitude. Paul O'Rourke's longings are all the more conspicuous when his fantasies of belonging center, by turns, not on secular (nor even on postsecular)

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[102] In *Dark Ecology*, Morton uses the image of the Möbius strip and the ouroboros interchangeably to explain his ontology of objects (c.f. 108-109 and passim), and certainly both shapes are pertinent to both ecological and apocryphal thinking. I prefer to distinguish them, to let the ouroboros serve as analogy to the prophecy problematic and to let the Möbius strip serve as analogy to the avatar dynamic: per my prologue, the latter is an improvement on, or solution to, or preferred ontology over the former in that it is a mathematical marvel indicative of natural ontological wonder, as opposed to a self-defeating epistemological fallacy to be overcome.

[103] Jack Smith's genetics are also at play in this way since he's the son of Montgomery Shoale, though he is unaware in the same way that Paul O'Rourke is unaware of being an Ulm.

[104] Ulm is the German city in which Einstein was born; Einstein was a legendary doubter. The novel explicitly disconnects the German city from descendants of the Amalekites.

[105] An eventual development, according to Ferris's reimagined Hebrew history: prior to recognizing a monotheistic Safek, however, the Amalekites, original ancestors to the descendent Ulms, experimented with some polytheistic alliances to ward off aggressive Israelite advances (a move that resonates with the expedience of Rushdie's Mahound, who henotheistically recognizes the three goddesses in *The Satanic Verses*). They also adopt Molek (who appears in real-life scripture of Leviticus) for a short time before settling on Safek according to Agag's prophecy.

forms of identification, but specifically on the Roman Catholicism of his assistant Betsy Convoy, the Judaism of a former girlfriend named Connie Plotz, and finally the Ulmish faith that he discovers from an eccentric patient named Al Frushtick.[106] Amid these conspicuous longings, it turns out, ironically, that Paul's DNA contains the genetic composition of Ulmish phenotype, meaning that he is actually – unbeknownst to him – already a member of an ethnoreligious in-group, with the "insider" status that he craves. Ferris's philosophical workshop rivals even Rushdie's in nuanced complexity, since the severance of what Paul O'Rourke *is* from what he *thinks* is maintained by the very mechanism (along with the avatar dynamic, as we'll see) through which his thinking and being ultimately reconnect.[107]

While O'Rourke's trajectory carries him toward a terminus of Ulmish devotion in the doubt of Safek's Cantaveticles, he starts out from a station in which he doubts biblical scripture vociferously, and his journey includes another important stop at a station in which he doubts even the doubting scripture of Safek – that is, at doubting Doubt.[108] Beginning at the first station, O'Rourke's attitude toward the Bible and toward a specifically biblical belief in God is part and parcel of his attitude toward everything in his life, an attitude that is explicitly in spite of himself. For instance, arriving at his dental office each day, Paul O'Rourke

> wanted nothing more than to say good morning first thing in the morning. Saying good morning was good for morale, conveying to everyone in their turn, Isn't it something? Here we are again, wits renewed, armpits refreshed, what exciting surprises does the day hold in store? But some mornings I couldn't bring myself to do it. (*TRAAADH* 18)

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[106] A delightful note from Booth: "Connie is probably Constance Plotz, and to plotz is to collapse from exhaustion—so she is boring like the scripture? Also perhaps she cons him, and is related to plots?"

[107] Thanks to Booth for pointing out the parallel structure in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876/1996), in which phenotype leads to revealed affinity and belief.

[108] See Vilém Flusser's *On Doubt* (2014) for a sustained meditation on "doubting doubt."

Why not? Paul's office was "a cozy office of four; three good mornings, that's all that was ever asked of [him]. And yet [he'd] withhold his good mornings. Ignoring the poignancy of everyone's limited allotment of good mornings, [he] would not say good morning" (18) because he genuinely doesn't feel good in the mornings, even though he obviously *wants* to feel good and to be able to help others feel good, as well. Saying that the morning is good makes Paul feel dishonest and hypocritical. Yet such feelings do not prevent Paul O'Rourke from saying good morning to his patients because it is good for business to do so: "But good morning! good morning to ye and thou! [He'd] say to all [his] patients, because [he] was the worst of the hypocrites, of all the hypocrites, the cruel and phony hypocrites, [he] was the very worst" (19).

Paul wants "nothing more" than to be able to bring himself to say good morning to his small staff, to act decently and amicably toward the closest and most important people in his life, but he is thwarted by a feeling of what he truly believes to be the case (that mornings are not really good, and/or that the greeting is not an accurate representation of how he himself really feels in the mornings). Short of being motivated by good business sense, he cannot "bring [himself] to do it." The banality of this example extends to other banalities: Connie Plotz, a former girlfriend who is still an employee in his office, is in the habit of moisturizing her hands with lotion, but Paul, knowing that our bodies perish into dust, cannot see the point of moisturizing, just as he would not be able see the point of flossing were he not a dentist: "What's the point? In the end, the heart stops, the cells die, the neurons go dark, bacteria consumes the pancreas, flies lay their eggs, beetles chew through tendons and ligaments, the skin turns to cottage cheese, the bones dissolve, and the teeth float away with the tide" (3). Death, looming, is what Paul O'Rourke believes in, driving his beliefs about (the uselessness of) basic hygiene and conventional conviviality. "But then":

> …someone who never flossed a day in his life would come in, the picture of
>
> inconceivable self-neglect and unnecessary pain—rotted teeth, swollen gums, a live

wire of infection running from enamel to nerve—and what I called hope, what I called courage, above all what I called defiance, again rose up in me, and I would go around the next day or two saying to all of my patients, "You must floss, please floss, flossing makes all the difference." (3-4)

The inclusion of defiance as a positive affect alongside hope, courage, and the will toward healthy living promises to help define an acceptable belief structure for Paul O'Rourke, and we will revisit it as a part of Ulmish faith once Paul converts (we will also revisit it even more forcefully when we read the defiance of Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee of *The Instructions* in Chapter Three). For now, what is important to establish is that Paul's banal bleaknesses are punctuated by bursts of hopeful resistance against impending decay; that, for the most part, Paul O'Rourke's existence is other than he wants for it to be, but rare moments of an affective will-to-life (à la Arthur Schopenhauer) expose a latent rival to what Paul-as-philosophical-realist thinks to be the case. Paul bemoans his inability to believe, citing the drawbacks, sacrifices, stigmas, and "the loss of a vital human vocabulary" that accompany atheism (114), and avers "for the record" that his reason for becoming an atheist was neither "to be smug" nor to "stand above believers and should [his] enlightenment down at them," but much more straightforwardly and honestly, because "God didn't exist" (142). Just as honestly, though, it occurs to Paul that perhaps the life we are given is reason enough to say good morning, to moisturize, to floss, to avoid "unnecessary pain."

Perhaps the too-short life we are given is reason enough to consider the quality of it, or the possibility of transcending it. Such thoughts are not lost on Paul O'Rourke, who "would have liked to believe in God" and even believed that believing in God "was something that could have been everything better than anything else" (6). As with saying good morning or rubbing lotion on his hands, however, O'Rourke cannot do that which he honestly feels to be untrue or useless, or useless because

untrue, and his "reasoned, stubborn, skeptical thoughts" "always unfortunately made quick work of God" (6).

Paul O'Rourke also "tried reading the Bible," but he could "never make it past all the talk about the firmament" before he would start "bleeding tears of terminal boredom" (7). In a passage that I find as hilariously relatable as genuinely contemplative, Paul O'Rourke "grow[s] restless" as he attempts to read the scripture:

> I flick ahead. It appears to go like this: firmament, superlong middle part, Jesus. You could spend half your life reading about barren wives and the kindled wraths and all the rest of it before you got to the do-unto-others part, which as I understand it is the high-water mark. It might not be. For all I know, the high-water mark is to be found in, say, the second book of Kings. Imagine making it through the first book of Kings! They don't make it easy. (*TRAAADH* 7)

Irreverently humorous (like Rushdie's suppressed hilarity, even like Morrison's playfulness), Paul gives voice here to what has simply got to be the epitome of the scripture-reading experience in a post-Christian, postsecular, postmodern, and posthistoricist era. "The Historical Books" really do require some fierce concentration (not to mention a lot of contextual help, by way of annotation and cross-referencing, concordances and translational resources). But Paul O'Rourke's concentration wanes well before this historical density, as early as the mythologically poetic and spellbinding Genesis, and well after, too, at the presumptive "high-water mark" of the New Testament Gospels of Jesus – it would seem that the sheer volume of scriptural text overwhelms him as much or more than anything else. Paul struggles against restlessness and "a terminal boredom" not confined to just 2 Kings, the hinterlands of 2 Chronicles, or even just to scripture, which assaults him when he visits churches, too. On a trip to Europe with his girlfriend (at the time), Connie, Paul takes care to note that "the boredom that overtakes [him] inside a church"

is not a passive boredom. It's an active, gnawing restlessness. For some a place of final

purpose and easy out-pouring; for me, a dead end, the dark bus station of the soul. To

enter a church is to bring to a close everything that makes entering church with praise

on the lips a right reasonable thing to do. (10)

So: Paul O'Rourke wishes for a belief-in that he cannot stomach; he makes attempts to read scripture,

but finds the ennui of doing so unbearable. It's as though Paul is ontologically averse to a suspension

of disbelief in scriptural texts, an aversion that is fed by the very thing that leads others to religion in

the first place: an obsessive anxiety about impending death.[109] In Paul's reckoning, quality of life is a

zero-sum game in which investments in the earthly here-and-now are direct subtractions from any

possible afterlife, and vice versa. Certainly Paul wants to improve his life: believing in God is

something that he wishes he could do, as it is on par with flossing to the extent that they are both

conventionally thought to make life better. Right? But that's just it, Paul doesn't actually know:

"Sometimes [Paul] think[s] [he's] wasted [his] life":

Of course I've wasted my life. Did I have a choice? Of course I did—twenty years of

nights with the Bible. But who is to say that, even then, my life—conscientiously

devout, rigorously applied, monastically contained, and effortfully open to God's every

hint and clobber—would have been more meaningful than it was, with its beery nights,

bleary dawns, and Saint James and his Abstract? That was a mighty Pascal's Wager: the

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[109] Boredom here is figured as a negative, but, like doubt, there is a long tradition of theorizing it more positively. Heidegger's *Langeweile*, translated in his usage as "profound boredom," is a good starting point. See *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1983). Interestingly, the same Bernard Williams who coined the "belief aims at truth" aphorism also explores boredom in great detail through a reading of a play by Karel Čapek which was made into an opera by Leoš Janáček called *EM* (though if you try searching for it, you'll find how truly apocryphal EM is – a hidden away writing indeed. It's actually easier to locate Čapek's *Apocryphal Tales* [1932]). In this reading, Williams claims that the boredom that would result from being immortal is precisely what makes death so meaningful, thus connecting boredom to death and imbuing even death with some positivity alongside doubt and boredom. This reading is available as a chapter called "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" in *Problems of the Self* (1973).

possibility of eternity in exchange for the limited hours of my one certain go-round.

(8)

Believing that belief in God improves life is itself a leap of faith, as is believing that not believing is just a failure to hedge one's bets. Either way, the involuntary doxastic attitude toward a proposition that is belief cannot be escaped. Paul's lamentation that "you can't opt out" (125) from an online presence in the digital age applies equally to belief, with the caveat that there has *never* been any opting out of belief. As a dentist, Paul O'Rourke knows that flossing improves your life, whereas he wonders whether believing in God *might* improve your life. "Who is to say?" To use the word *believe* is precisely to admit *not knowing*,[110] even as having belief *about* belief is different in kind from having belief *in* something like God or the Bible. At this early stage, the only thing that is clear is that Paul O'Rourke has fickle and incongruent beliefs about believing: on the one hand, God doesn't exist; on the other hand, believing in God (by way of scripture) makes life more meaningful, unless maybe it doesn't. Paul wishes that he were the type of person that could read the Bible to glean purpose and meaning, and to find communal intimacy with others for whom the Bible provides purpose and meaning; it is a wish that depends on his belief that the Bible provides those things, but then he makes the attempt, and failing, finds none of those desired things.

Paul's stance toward real-life biblical scripture provides the necessary scaffolding for understanding his stance toward the reimagined fictional scripture that propels the plot of *TRAAADH*, especially since he thinks initially that the Cantaveticles are something from the Bible, setting him up to be suitably anti-Cantaveticles from the outset. To make matters worse, the Cantaveticles are introduced to Paul via a website set up in his own name, despite that he maintains

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[110] Though it does bear mentioning another sense in which "knowing" and "believing" are indistinguishable for thorough-going anti-foundationalists like Willard Van Orman Quine who, according to Hart, maintain that, without any extramental "ground" upon which to establish knowledge, knowledge must be grounded on adjustable and collective networks of scientific belief: "for Quine our knowledge is a vast web of beliefs all of which can, in principle, be revised" (*Postmodernism* 54). The revision of beliefs emerges in Chapter Three with the introduction of "a scriptural logic" whose role is primarily "reparative" (to state it in the pragmatist terms of Peter Ochs).

no website for his practice – Paul is staunchly against establishing an online presence for himself, either personally or professionally. So when a website in his name pops up mysteriously, replete with pictures and bios of his whole staff, Paul is livid. He sends an email to an address that he finds via Google for Seir Design, the "name at the bottom" of the page, clarifying that he is "the real Paul C. O'Rourke" (35) and that he does not want a website for his dental practice. But Paul's demand for the website to be removed goes unanswered. The following week, Dr. O'Rourke's bio is followed by new content, dubbed "the weird part" by Connie. "The weird part," we later learn, is Cantonment 34 of the Cantaveticles:

> Come now therefore, and with thee shall I establish my covenant. For I shall make of thee a great nation. But thou must lead thy people away from these lords of war, and never make of them an enemy in my name. And if thou remember my covenant, thou shall not be consumed. But if thou makest of me a God, and worship me, and send for the psaltery and the tabret to prophesy of my intentions, and make war, then ye shall be consumed. For man knoweth me not. (60 and paraphrased/quoted differently at 160-161)[111]

Incredulous to see such content posted under his bio on a website that he hasn't even authorized, Paul demands to know, "What the hell is this?" and asks, "Something from the Bible?" To which Connie replies, "Sounds like it" (60). Paul later interrogates Betsy (the Roman Catholic who seems, comically, familiar only with the New Testament) since she is "somebody who knows the Bible," but Betsy, after reading the passage again, tells Paul, "I don't think Jesus ever said anything like that," guessing that it might be from the Old Testament since "it's a very stern, Jewish thing to say" (62). The source of the passage isn't revealed until the not-Paul of the Internet, impersonating the real Paul, comments on a

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[111] I use the sans-serif font in quoting these passages where the novel also does so in its bid to look digital.

Times article "about endangered peoples or something," which is linked from the Seir Design website. In "Paul's" comment, "the Cantaveticles reads as one long serial extinction" for "the exterminated Amalekites" (93). Connie recognizes "Amalekite" from Hebrew school and begins Googling and reading her search results – which are from the fifth footnote of a real-life book called *Making Peace with God and Nature: the Path to Salvation* by Kamran Pirnahad (2007) – to Paul:

> "Name of a nomadic nation south of Palestine," she read. "That the Amalekites were not Arabs, but of a stock related to the Edomites (consequently also to the Hebrews), can be concluded from the genealogy in Genesis, chapter thirty-six, verse twelve, and in first Book of Chronicles, chapter one, verse thirty-six. Amalek—" She stopped herself. "Amalek," she said, turning to me. "You know who that is, don't you?" (94)

Paul doesn't know that Amalek is "the ancient enemy of the Jews," "the most enduring enemy," "the son of Esau's first-born son Eliphaz and of the concubine Timna, the daughter of Seir…" (94). Connie continues to cite Numbers 24:20 before the scriptural invocation[112] finally gives way to Ferris's scriptural reimagination in which the Cantaveticles comprise a collection of apocryphal "cantonments" revealed to Agag, king of the Amalekites in the Mount Seir region of southern Israel during the time of the tribal kings, a time in which actual, canonical scriptures depict Saul and David warring savagely with the sons of Esau.

That which is scripturally real and extant paves the way for Ferris to reimagine Jewish history – a sort of "what if" narrative along the lines of David Rosenfeld's edited volume, *What Ifs of Jewish History: From Abraham to Zionism* (2016), only it adds its own set of what ifs: *TRAAADH* asks, "What

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[112] Not mentioned in the novel are references to the Amalekites in other scriptural places, including in: Gen. 14:7; Exod. 17:4, 17:8, 17:13-14, 17:16; Num. 13:29, 14:25, 14:45; Deut. 25:17-19; Judg. 3:13; 1 Sam. 14:47-48, 15:1-33, 27:8 and 28:18; 1 Chr. 4:42-43; and, Jud. 1:7. Amalekites also show up in the index of the Book of Mormon (Alma 21:1-4; 23:14, 43:13, 20, 44), and arguably in the Qur'an (Surahs 2, 7, and 32). There is a sense, then, in which an invocation of Amalek is truly an invocation not just of *a* scripture, but of a whole host of scriptures, or scriptural tradition writ large; by extension, a reimagination of Amalek reimagines all of these scriptures in which it appears – Gen., Exod., Num., Deut., Judg., Sam., 1 Chr., Jud., as well as The Book of Mormon and the Qur'an – such that Scripture *itself* is reimagined quite capaciously.

if various offshoots of 'Israel,' and those Abrahamic tribes lost to history, had their own scriptural texts and historical archives? What if we imagine an authoritative account that gives voice to the marginalized victims of canonical, hegemonic history? What if this voice has its own prophet? What if this prophet's vision entails an injunction to doubt that is spelled out as such: 'God, if God, only God may know'" (*TRAAADH* 160). That is a big "if" and a big "only" preceding a minimized "know." By asking this string of what ifs, the reimagined scripture of the Ulms joins up with the logic of Rushdie's what ifs in *The Satanic Verses* ("What if the Prophet got the Message wrong," or, "What if he didn't get it wrong but used it corruptly as a political expedient?"), but as a matter of progression, it does the work of making ever more explicit how appeals to scripture can be used as a technique for doubting in contemporary novels.

The prophecy problematic emerges amid these what ifs since the reimagination of an Amalekite scripture works better if it has its own prophet underwriting the movement. Paraphrasing the Cantaveticles as they are posted in piecemeal fashion on the mysterious website and across social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia, Paul describes the process by which Agag becomes not just the first Ulm but also the first Ulmish prophet. The event is chronicled in "30-34 of the Cantaveticles" in the wake of the final slaughter of the remaining four hundred Amalekites at the hands of the Israelites and despite that the Amalekites had recognized the Hebrew God and even went so far as to circumcise their warriors in a bid to avoid being attacked by the Jews. The lone Amalekite survivor, Agag "wept for Amalek" and "falls to his knees to curse a god he really thought might be God" (159-160). Such is the scene when "lo and behold, who should appear before [Agag], 'moving upon a cloud of blood,' which was a little hard to visualize, but, you know, whatever, semantics—it's God himself, the First and Last" (160):

> "Draw nigh hither," says God, "and be not afraid." But there's little chance of that.
>
> Agag cowers upon the charnel cliff, wondering—in a twist on this type of story, in

which the prophet always knows from the first gust of heavenly wind on his cheek just

who's talking—if it's really God he's seeing or, considering all the shit he's been

through, just a hallucination, the first documented case of PTSD. But there's no

doubting for long, as God seems really confident. "Ye shall know me as the Lord thy

God," He says, "who hath kept a dominion of silence unto this day." That silence, He

explains, was a practical one: He saw no profit in adding to the roster of all the other

gods—the God of the Israelites, the God of the Egyptians, the God of the Philistines,

etc.—running around Canaan contributing to the bloodshed, or, as He puts it,

"commanding war among the factions, to vie for the firstfruits of every nation." Why

He doesn't just wipe those gods clean from memory and usher in peace on earth is a

question neither asked nor answered, but it's made plain that He is, in fact, the one

and only God, and He's there to deliver Agag from the hand of strife. "Come now

therefore," He says, "and with thee shall I establish my covenant. For I shall make of

thee a great nation." (*TRAAADH* 160)

It's the "twist on this type of story" that does a lot of heavy lifting for a novel that reimagines scripture

in order to doubt by installing a doubting prophet. Since Agag departs from the stereotypical prophet

figure to the extent that he wonders whether it's really God that he's seeing, we have at one and the

same time a confirmation of the predictability of prophets that feeds into what makes them

problematic, as well as a welcome dissimilitude from that predictability, a dissimilitude that will make

the prophecy of the Cantaveticles ultimately less problematic (and even attractive) to Paul O'Rourke.

But early on, there is no doubt that problems pertaining to scriptural prophecy persist for Paul. In his

email correspondence with whomever it is that launches the site in his own name, for instance,

questions about the Ulmish logic, which claims that "An Ulm is someone who doubts God," are

addressed. "It's not logical," Paul replies, "How can you doubt a God that appears?" Paul is told,

You're not using the correct part of your brain, Paul—the atrophying part, the part

that's hungry.

But that's just it, I AM using my brain, and will always use my brain, and so this looks

just as dumb as any other religious bullshit. (*TRAAADH* 161)

In response to what "looks just as dumb as any other religious bullshit" comes perhaps the most

representative articulation of apocryphal thinking to have yet appeared in this exploration of

contemporary novels that invoke, reimagine, or emulate scripture, which is that "Every religion

brushes up against the illogical":

> The Buddhist discovers Nirvana only by realizing that the self does not exist, but
>
> it's the self that must discover its nonexistence. The Hindu traverses the universe
>
> saying neti, neti – "not this, not this" – and when everything is negated, there
>
> stands God. The Jew believes that God made him in His image, but man is full of
>
> evil. The Christian believes that God was also a man of flesh and blood. The illogic
>
> tests faith – without it, there's just party time. (161)

To think the logic of the Cantaveticles is to think *their* illogic, just as readers of Buddhist, Hindu,

Jewish, and Christian scripture must all embrace, or at least accept, contradictions of one kind or

another, or so Paul is told, since "illogic tests faith" (161).[113]

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[113] Ferris's novel echoes David Dark, who five years earlier noted that "Yale professor Harold Bloom observed that Karl Marx had it only partly right when he said that religion is the opiate of the people. More broadly speaking, it is the poetry of the people, both the good and the bad, for better and worse. According to Bloom, trying to attack or conquer such a massive target is almost as useless as blindly celebrating it. But religion can, and should be, objected to, questioned, and talked about. Contrary to many adherents who demand unquestioning respect for their faith, religion is perfectly and wonderfully objectionable. In fact, what else in life could be *more* worthy of objection? Interestingly, most religious traditions are constantly objecting to *themselves* over the decades and centuries, challenging old categories with new, religious proclamations. This is how religions work. Devastating criticism of religion is always *part of* religion" (2009, 33).

Though Paul is not yet ready to think illogical thoughts, let alone to entertain Ulmish scripture in any serious manner (he "prefer[s] party time"), he is intrigued enough to start asking questions about doubt, which is saying quite a bit, considering that his questions are necessarily directed to an anonymous someone who might be stealing his identity – an anonymous someone whose online presence enables the very avatar dynamic that is the focus of the next section. I have not yet demonstrated Paul O'Rourke's crossover, from outsider with beliefs about to insider with beliefs in, because that crossover depends more on the avatar dynamic, the topic of the next section, than does Gibreel Farishta's crossover from insider to outsider; for now, it suffices to conclude that Paul O'Rourke sets up as an outsider for whom the prophecy of real and imagined scriptures are *extremely* problematic (he and Jack Smith would see eye-to-eye at the beginnings of their respective journeys). Moreover, this most recent gesture toward Ulmish illogic anticipates precisely where my focus on the avatar dynamic takes us, which is into a challenging mode of apocryphal thinking that involves the consideration of what something is according to what that same something is not, an ontology in which Morton suggests that beings can end up "between themselves" (as described in detail at the end of the next section). This betweenness that Morton describes[114] may or may not be a function of the way that reality and virtuality interface categorically; what I can suggest a little more firmly is that the virtuality evinced by avatars brings to light this feature of the ontology that Morton theorizes. Let's see how it works.

Part Two: The Avatar Dynamic (Möbius Strip-shaped Logic)

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[114] Though I credit Morton with this description insofar as he applies it to the figure of the avatar specifically, such betweenness is indeed a feature of postmodernist ontology more broadly. Hart for instance, in rehearsing a discourse centering on the dichotomy of the real and its image, notes that, "[r]ather than consoling us with the thought that the real and the image are distinct and stable orders, [Blanchot's notion of resemblance] tells us that the imaginary is within a thing, or, if you like, that the distance *between* a thing and its image is always and already *within* the thing. It is none other than *being* that subverts any attempt to compare the real and the imaginary" (*Postmodernism* 67). Perhaps something like an avatar just enunciates this ontology more crisply.

Before it is cognitive, let alone conscious, thought is primordially an affective and aesthetic phenomenon.
- Steven Shaviro, *Discognition*

What kind of an idea are you?
- Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*

In Part One of this chapter, I conceptualize "the prophecy problematic" as a way of distinguishing between those who believe *in* a given (prophetic) scripture, and those who have beliefs *about* scripture. Crucially, contemporary novelists deploy this problematic with a couple of sui generis wrinkles: that the problematic be rolled out via *apocryphal reimaginations* of already existing scriptures (viz.: "n+1 apocryphal reimaginations" of the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible); and, that such distinctions between belief *in* and belief *about* are fluid, that characters move across this distinction even (or especially) when those characters' identities – rooted in community membership and (super)natural physicality – are at odds with such categorial crossover. This "at-odds" dynamic looms even larger when the embodied ontologies of the protagonists underscore their identities dramatically, as when a literal angel doubts the very message that he helps a prophet to reveal, and when a protagonist with the DNA of an Ulm first exhibits beliefs *about* Safek. If Part One uses these wrinkles to experiment philosophically with separations of identity and belief (*as identity*), and if it considers things like belonging and embodiment as foundational to identity, then Part Two adds one more wrinkle to the problematic by noticing another trope common to these reimaginations, not one of embodiment per se but of a very specific subset of embodiment – that of the avatar.

 As I transition now into reading of each of these novels as not just emblematic of how avatars facilitate doubt, but even as groundbreaking in this respect, I am compelled to contemplate the difference between doubt and the doubter. The former is a mode of thought, the latter is a subject who thinks in that mode. Given my contention that doubt transes belief, and that (*I believe that*) belief is an inescapable doxastic attitude with regard to a proposition, and that a doxastic attitude is an

involuntary mode of thought, then really my contention is that doubt is a way of thinking about a way of thinking. This means that I need to account for doubt by accounting for thinking itself, as I'll be unable to account for doubt without being able to account for its n-level substratum in its infinitive form prior to its conjugation by a plus-one transer. From there, I need also to account for things like minds and thinkers and avatars as things that are generally and traditionally thought to produce and contain and enact the thoughts that subjects have, but also for the phenomena that present themselves as candidates to be accessed or realized by thought. A preliminary goal of this section is to articulate what might be called a materialist relationality between all of these moving parts. And because things like minds, thinkers and avatars connote other things like selves, identities, and virtuality, then a secondary goal of this section is to sort out the materialist connections between the implied terms as well. I focus here on the ontologies of thoughts and avatars in particular, since, in combination, "thinking like an avatar" (to borrow Steven Shaviro's phrase from *Discognition*) proves instrumental in sculpting the compatibilizing shape of doubt that slides like a key into the gap between beliefs in absolute and transcendental truth (as espoused by problematically prophetic scripture), and beliefs in relativist and immanent truths (as espoused by problematizing postmodernist novels).

To begin with something like an "ontology of thoughts" is to start out already on contrarian grounds. How can a thought be ontological? Aren't thoughts, by definition, epistemological? Doesn't something need to be a physical, preferably extramental entity in order to have an ontology, or to be described in ontological terms? Morton tells us that "[w]e are so used to thinking in a dualistic way, that the implications of the fact that thoughts are independent of the mind sound unbelievable" (*Being Ecological* 37). The remarkable boldness of Morton's statement has less to do with what "sounds unbelievable" and more to do with his calling it a "fact," as opposed to something like a theory. Even more remarkable is that Morton stands not on some fringe movement in the speculative realist vein in order to claim this "fact" but on the subjective idealist canonicity of Kant, and then on the follow-

up, phenomenological canonicity of Husserl. A synthesis of these two thinkers reveals how Morton can indeed incorporate them into his own brand of ecological thinking, which espouses a radical degree of interconnection.

How radical? So radical that the interconnection of "ecological" objects extends to everything in the universe; or, there are no *un*-ecological entities, including thinkers and thoughts (which are interconnected, yes, but not because the former produces the latter). To state it more provocatively, thinkers and thoughts are both *objects* (even if one of them specializes as a subject while the other specializes subjectively), and both are ecological. Appreciating that "what we think and how we think it are deeply connected" (*BE* 34) requires the full force of the provocation, which crystallizes when we conceive of Kant's pure reason as a transcendentally real "ocean," and then when we conceive of Husserl's logical sentences as "fish" in that ocean:

> There is something *transcendental* about reason. You can't point to it, but it's real. This ocean of [Kant's pure] reason sort of floats just a little behind my head. It's a rather cold, uninhabited, eerily clear ocean, because it just does one thing: it mathematizes, measuring things and telling me that this galaxy is *this* big and has lasted *that* long and has *this* kind of movement through the universe. But Husserl showed that because logical sentences have a reality all their own, other types of sentences do too, such as hopeful sentences, wishing sentences, hating sentences…It was as if Husserl had discovered that the Kantian ocean had all kinds of differently colored fish swimming in it, fish with their own DNA structure independent of little Tim [Morton] and Tim characteristics such as having reddish facial hair. Kant had shown that there was a very significant part of reality that you really couldn't point to—the ocean of reason—and Husserl then showed that this ocean is inhabited after all, and that the fish that swim in this ocean are entities in their own right, with their own DNA. (*BE* 36)

I am adding *sentences that doubt* to Morton's list of Husserlian sentences that hope, wish, and hate, which means that doubt-fish swim independently in Kant's ocean of pure reason. That we think of thoughts occurring not in an objective reality unto themselves but in *mental* ecologies exclusively – that, after all, is the thinker's only experience of them – gives rise to Husserl's phenomenological notion of the "intentional object" such that doubt gets processed by doubters, should thinkers encounter doubt-fish in their habitats:

> Just as there's a certain way to handle a shark, there's a certain way to handle a feeling of disgust—there is a mode of having that feeling that goes along with the feeling. And like a magnet, the shark and shark-handling mode are two poles of a phenomenon: they go together, in an inextricable way. Which means that it's not quite right to say that "I" am "having" a "thought." It's more like this: "I" is something I sort of deduce or abstract from the phenomenon of this particular thought, just as what the thought is about is also part of that phenomenon. (*BE* 36-37)

So too is there a certain way to process, or "to handle" doubt, and it's not quite right to say that "the doubter" "has" "doubts"; it's more like "the doubter" is something she sort of deduces or abstracts from the phenomenon of this particular doubt, just as what the doubt is about is also part of that phenomenon. So: the doubter encounters doubt as a phenomenon in its own right, even though the doubt is a phenomenon containing its own intentional content, concerned as it is with whatever phenomenon *it* is about (or encountering). In our case, *a doubt regarding the veracity of scriptural prophecy* is its own real-but-inaccessible noumenon, which appears phenomenologically to a thinker who considers its logic in the linguistic shape of a sentence. On one side of this thought (/doubt-fish) swims another phenomenon called *belief in God*, or better, an extremely specific version of *belief in God* that comes allegedly via scripture via a scribe via a mountain-top prophet via prophecy via an archangel via Allah, which means that what the doubt-fish encounters, ultimately, is Allah via an archangel via

prophecy via a mountain-top prophet via a scribe via scripture via an extremely specific version of belief in God via general *belief in God*, and so the doubt-fish interconnects with Allah through a chain of intermediated "handling."[115]

On the other side of this doubt-fish (which, remember, is a an extramental doubt-flavored thought with its own ontology) sits a doubter that can accommodate it like a shark tank accommodating a shark as well as "handle" it like a shark-handler, trained to deal with the shark's natural and sometimes dangerous tendencies (to use Morton's own extended metaphor). The doubter encounters and interconnects with Allah through the same chain of intermediation, but with the one extra chain-link: the thought itself. Notice too that every link in the chain is flanked on both sides by encountering objects, with the exceptions of Allah and the human doubter, which delimit the field of thought by serving as its outer edges (or, in Morton's terms, as magnetized poles). The scripture encounters the prophet, for example, but indirectly and via the mediation of the scribe; the scripture also encounters the doubter, but at a level twice removed, since *belief in God* and the *doubting thought* are its go-betweens that do some accessing and processing of their own along the way. A doubter *thinking* her doubts is just a human being entangled in the phenomenological ecology of pure reason, which is a way of describing transcendence in immanent terms. Doubters certainly encounter (the idea of) Allah, but they do so *differently* than believers *in* Allah; that is, through different chains of intermediation, including different species of thought, each link leaving its own effect on whatever it handles. Both doubters of and believers in Allah require thought in order to access and to realize that which they encounter (at however many removes), but what is accessed and realized appears *differently*

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[115] This chain of intermediation takes the doubting sentences of Rushdie's novel as its template; we could sketch another that would correlate to Ferris's doubting sentences in *TRAAADH*: flanking our doubt-fish is a belief in doubt, that comes via the Cantaveticles that comes via Agag that comes from prophecy that comes via Safek (no angels or scribes explicitly mentioned in this chain). Conceiving of intermediation in this way complicates the prophecy problematic to the extent that certain prophecies claim quite clearly to be the *un*mediated word of God, as the BBC documentary on *SV* has it.

to each group, arriving as each group does at access and realization through different phenomenological chains that literally shape the things they encounter in different ways.

Does this mean that the doubter-of and the believer-in encounter actually different versions of Allah? That depends on what we mean by "versions" – etymologically, differently *turned* instantiations of something (from the Latin *vertere*, "to turn," which shares a root with *verus*, meaning "true"). If by "version," we mean that the doubter's Allah is literally a different entity from that of the believer's version, then no: the noumenal reality of Allah simply is (and if Allah doesn't exist, then the many ideas of Allah simply are), regardless of its different appearance to different phenomena (phenomena here including thoughts and thinkers, per Morton). But if by "version" we mean that the same noumenon (or noumena, for the ideas of Allah) manifesting differently to different phenomena, then yes: the phenomenological reality is relative.[116] Doubters-of and believers-in *experience* Allah differently, *and* they encounter differently shaped thoughts *about* Allah on the way to those different experiences. Their respective chains of intermediation *distort* (*dis*: apart, *tort*: twisted) the final phenomenon being interpreted, and this explains not only their differing interpretations, but also the incompatibility that maintains a gap between absolute and relative truths, truths that have been turned and twisted into mutually exclusive versions of the same something.

Enter the avatar: another link in the chain. Like thoughts, thinkers, and the phenomena that include thoughts and thinkers along with whatever thoughts and thinkers encounter and concern themselves with, avatars are ontologically distinct objects, and like thoughts and thinkers, avatars come in different species and they form phenomena larger than just themselves once they become entangled, "inextricably," with thoughts and thinkers. The kinds of phenomena that combine with avatars involve

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[116] Hart echoes a postmodernist ambivalence as to whether *version* should be understood as a *differently appearing thing* or as *different interpretations of a thing that appears without difference* when he asks, "If we are not allowed to measure an interpretation against a fact, how can we judge whether the interpretation in question is fitting or not? And in the case of rival interpretations, how can we be sure that they are considering the same thing, if 'thing' makes any sense at all in this context?" (*Postmodernism* 46).

things like selves and identities working in conjunction with virtuality to create virtual selves, virtual identities. If thought is a mode of access and realization, avatars operate in a mode of virtualization, which means that they manifest nonlocal presence (following my own definition of the virtual, redolently Deleuzian in composition, as that which is present without being local). An avatar is the projection of a thinker's mind, or self, or identity onto the screen of a nonlocal body; or, an avatar is the virtual embodiment of a subjective essence.

Though discourse surrounding virtuality has evolved in the digital age to indicate online presence, and therefore presence that is frequently thought to be stripped of physicality and materiality, the virtual need not be conflated with disembodiment. Indeed, I am careful in my own formulation to disambiguate virtuality and abstraction. "Avatar" should be similarly disambiguated, especially considering that it is a term derived from Sanskrit origins designed to "describe what happens when an ethereal deity embodies its heavenly essence to visit the material world," as explained by James K. Scarborough and Jeremy N. Bailenson in "Avatar Psychology" (2014):

> When deities had a desire to walk among the people or visit a world they had created, they would instantiate their essence into a physical body. In order to experience life from the perspective of the local inhabitants, the received avatar would typically look and act very similar to the people who populated the world. Doing so would allow the deity to experience life as it was for mortal man. (131)

Scarborough and Bailenson continue from this description of the avatar role to read James Cameron's film *Avatar* from 2009, a move that Morton makes too, in *Dark Ecology*. The appeal of this move is that it allows theorists to shift from an understanding of the avatar as the physical instantiation of an ethereal, divine essence on Earth, packaged up in a mortal human body, to an understanding of how mortal human bodies can move *from* Earth and be instantiated elsewhere, such as in an ethereal digital realm (or on the planet Pandora that serves as the setting to Cameron's film), where the informatics

of consciousness take precedence over the physicality of the body. Regardless of where the embodiment takes place (whether on Earth, online, or on another planet), what is important is that an essential self "transfers its consciousness to the avatar body," to use Scarborough and Bailenson's phrase (131). Such a transfer gives the consciousness of the essential self in question *a dislocated presence* (so it is virtual), but that virtual presence occurs through real, physical embodiment[117] (so it is material). As it happens, virtuality and materiality are not mutually exclusive; in the case of avatars, they even work in tandem.

Avatar embodiment is therefore deeply religious to the extent that religious thought is geared toward reconciling human and nonhuman realities, toward bridging "the great schism" that separates these "worlds" (see fn. 62). So it makes sense that the Sanskrit origins of the term indicate "the earthly incarnation of godly powers according to the mystical scriptures of the Hindu Upanishads," as Michael R. Heim explains in "The Paradox of Virtuality" (2014): "The Hindu concept is the descent (*ava* = down) to Earth of a deity, particularly Vishnu, in human, superhuman, or animal form" (119). By descending to Earth in avatar form, Vishnu bridges "the great schism" to fulfill the promise of "the mystical scriptures." Vishnu's virtual form is Vishnu's actual consciousness *embodied* in a nonlocal context; Vishnu uses an avatar in order to be really and actually present without being local. Bruce Damer and Randy Hinrich, in "The Virtuality and Reality of Avatar Cyberspace," describe that, "as the interface appearing as a body in context," "an avatar can ably embody the user's identity" (2014, 18), once again demonstrating that the *direction* of the projection[118] is less important than the *nature* of

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[117] Greg Lastowka, in "Virtual Law" (2014) counters this perspective by focusing on avatars in a video game context, wherein he claims that "avatars are not physical bodies" (481). But even within the context of video games, the tendency to strip virtuality of materiality is tenuous, at best, as is made clear at the theoretical level by N. Katherine Hayles (see "The Condition of Virtuality"), who argues correctly that a material base *always* subtends informatic presence. Lastowka's claim that video game avatars have no physicality ignores that those avatars would not be able to manifest visually on the gaming screens of smartphones, smart TVs, computers, and arcade-specific machines (sometimes holographic) were it not for a specific arrangement of physical and material technologies.

[118] For more sustained commentary on "the direction of the projection," see my essay "Remapping the Present," in *Spatial Literary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Space, Geography, and the Imagination.* Ed. Robert Tally, Jr. Routledge, 2020.

the projection itself: whether coming to Earth from the heavens (like Vishnu, like Christ) or bridging the schism between analogue reality and cyberspace, the avatars of gods and online gamers alike compatibilize separate worlds.[119]

If an avatar is "a body in context," then the conscious identity of the avatar user is cast from *outside* the context of this virtual embodiment, and the avatar's body is both immersed in, and interactive with, a setting that is ontologically distinct from the site of user projection. Avatars are metaleptic to the core. A return to James Cameron's film *Avatar* is more instructive than most theorists (such as Morton, Scarborough and Bailenson) seem to think, especially in its depiction of the impact of avatars on the communicability of fundamentally different worlds. After a sequence in which Jake Sully, a Marine with a disability (a spinal injury sustained during combat confines him to a wheelchair), finishes "driving" his avatar, his consciousness returns to his "real" human body. "Everything is backwards now," Jack intones in voice-over, "like out there is the true world and in here is the dream" (1:17:40-1:17:50). The barely audible "like," which turns this observation into a simile, is placed brilliantly to soften what otherwise sounds just as unbelievable as something like thoughts independent of minds, but it is still too conservative: the declarative "everything is backwards now" is actually true (no need for figurative language). What Doru Pop calls a "reverted projection" (*The Age of Promiscuity* 245) is what Heim calls "the paradox of virtuality":

> Virtuality vanishes with its own success. When successful, virtual reality fades into the background. As a transparent platform for activities, virtuality attains invisibility in the culture that adopts it. When its functions square perfectly with human desires and gestures, virtuality is absorbed, and something virtualized becomes a reality with the

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[119] In compatibilizing separate worlds, avatars may or may not be transcendent. Booth notes that "few would expect the gamer 'profile' to be transcendent. There are interesting problems with the apparent freedom of avatar identities, as if [they are] post-race, post-gender."

> culture that constructs it…Over time, the gap closes entirely between the virtual and
>
> the real. (111)

And when avatars are the "something virtualized," then they, as embodied identities, become realities within the culture that constructs them. Despite that Morton detects in *Avatar* "a threatening corniness," his reading of the film is also one that discerns "the ultimate gnosis" that is suggested by the imagery of "the living devices that connect the Navi to the biospheric Internet, as when they plug their tails into the skulls of flying lizards" (*Dark Ecology* 155). But: instead of plugging into flying lizards (or sacred trees, as the Navi also do), Morton envisions plugging "the tail into oneself" in order to arrive at a new kind of Husserlian reality – "Is it too ungrammatical to say *between the same being*?" (156).[120] For something to be "too ungrammatical" is for it to be *illogical*, in the manner of Ferris's (and David Dark's) demonstrations that *all religions* brush up against illogic and contradiction. Yet here we are, being too ungrammatical, celebrating illogic, flirting with contradiction. Why? What's the appeal? Perhaps Morton derives his license to get ungrammatical from his claim that the so-called law of non-contradiction is no law at all, or at least not one enforceable by nature. Noncontradiction, Morton argues, is an appeal to Neolithic agrilogistical anthropocentrism, which makes it ultimately an antirealist religious construct. As reality is undeniably riddled with contradiction (per all of quantum physics), there are truer religious stories than agrilogistics; these are the ones that account for and even endorse the "devastating criticism" of none other than *themselves* (to slide from Morton's language into David Dark's terms; see fns. 81 and 86).[121]

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[120] Morton leans heavily here on Jeffrey Kripal's *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (2007), noting that "gnosis is *thought having sex with itself*" (*Dark Ecology* 155; *Serpent's Gift* 125). The idea is that the interplay of internal differences (even – or especially – within a single thought) is erotic.

[121] Morton recommends Graham Priest's *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent* (2006) as a starting point for explorations of contradiction as part and parcel of reality. Meanwhile, he comments that the law of noncontradiction "is an important lynchpin of Western philosophy, but it's never been proved, only stated, first by Aristotle in section Gamma of the *Metaphysics*. It is easy to violate and also to draw up logical rules that allow for some things to be contradictory. Since ecological entities are contradictory by definition (they are made of all kinds of things that aren't them, they have vague fuzzy boundaries…), we had better permit ourselves to violate this supposed law, at least a bit" (*BE* 85).

If the "ultimate gnosis" is the state of a *being between itself*, then perhaps the ultimate doubt is a state of pure metalepsis, of ontological crossover that curves back on itself. The appetite of the ouroboros for its own tail never seems to run out. Whether we call it "reverted projection" or "the paradox of virtuality" or "a body in context," the avatar is a material, bodily interface allowing for a literal transposition of what is essential to the subjectivity of the user, a prosthetic[122] that allows believers-*about* (outsiders) to inhabit the worlds of believers-*in* (insiders), and vice versa. Avatars allow believers-in to smuggle their beliefs-in *out*, to sequester those thoughts in doubt-shaped tanks, relocalized in a Kantian landscape terraformed by the prophecy problematic (Rushdie). But they also afford believers-about a material container for the reality of *sentences that believe in*, those Husserlian belief-fish that must be handled properly (Ferris). In both cases, avatars facilitate doubt, because in both cases, beliefs-in and beliefs-about are transed.

The Satanic Verses: Cognitive Conditions

Who's usin' who?
What should we do?
Well you can't be a pimp
and a prostitute, too.
- White Stripes, "Icky Thump"

Rushdie peppers *The Satanic Verses* with his usage of the word "avatar," a trend that begins in his writing at least as early as *Midnight's Children* (1981) and in which it is clear that Rushdie is more than familiar not only with its application to Vishnu and other deities of the Hindu pantheon (Ganesh), but with the "reverted projections" that avatars (associated with dream worlds in particular) initiate. Gibreel Farishta's embodiment as the avatar of the Prophet's archangel neatly captures both divergent

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[122] Piotr Czerwiński's essay, "'You Can't Opt Out': The Inescapability of Virtuality in Joshua Ferris's To Rise Again at a Decent Hour" (2017) leans heavily on Steve Mann's *Cyborg: Digital Destiny and Human Possibility in the Age of the Wearable Computer* (2001) to make this point, though it strikes me as even more effective to mine theory ranging from Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time* series to N. Katherine Hayles's work on technogenesis in *How We Think* (2012) to, of course, Donna Haraway's seminal "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985).

uses of the term, as the second sense (alethic) is the mechanism that executes the first sense (religious).

That he is also dubbed an "avatar" for his role in the Bollywood theologicals reinforces the usage in

both senses, because while acting the gods, he incarnates the popular perception of those gods'

appearances in an attempt to capture their essences, but also because, while acting, he becomes an

avatar to the second degree: the avatar that he is, virtually, to the archangel of his dream world takes

the roles of the avatars that he acts in his real world – one of which is none other than the archangel

of his dreams that he believes himself to be. In the final instance, Gibreel-the-actor, who is already

the avatar to his dream self (remarkably, the novel carefully formulates this relationship instead of

Gibreel's dream-self being the avatar to the "real" Gibreel), assumes an acted avatar status by role-

playing the avatar that he already is.

Given the other figures orbiting its pull, however, the complexity of this avatar dynamic is far

from being confined to just Gibreel's multilayered relationships with a diversity of divinities (as if *that*

were in any sense confined): there is also the complication that Gibreel – interpellated in his dreams

as the Angel Gibra'il of *Hadith* lore and mentioned in the surah *Al-Baqarah* (Qur'an 2:97) – may actually

be *Mahound's* avatar, or that he may be the avatar of Mahound and the archangel simultaneously, or

the avatar of Allah, or even that Mahound may be *Gibreel's* avatar; the complication that Salman Farsi[123]

may bump Gibreel from his avatar position to replace him as the avatar to the archangel (or as the

avatar to Mahound, per the first complication); the complication that Salman the character may be the

avatar not just of Gibra'il or Mahound but of Salman the novelist,[124] and by extension, the

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[123] Paul Brians, in addition to noting that "Farsi" is an overt signpost that this Salman is Persian, connects the character to the historical figure of Abd-Allah Ibn Abi Sarh as well as to the author, adding that "The most notable difference between Salman and 'Abd-Allah in this is that Salman makes the changes without Mahound's consent, or knowing about it' (Dashti 98, Muir xv Muir xv Muir& 410, Watt Bell's Introduction 37-38). See also Armstrong, pp. 244-245. Saadi A. Simawe notes that Salman's suspicions of the genuineness of Mahound's revelations may also be inspired by certain criticisms made by his wife Ayesha of the historical Muhammad" (67).

[124] Pooja Mittal Biswas, in "Salman Rushdie as Diasporic Myth-Maker: Myth and Memory in *Midnight's Children*" (2020), suggests that Saleem Sinai from *Midnight's Children* is a *partial* "embodiment of Rushdie," or a "self-inserted avatar" that "embodies a particular set of Rushdie's concerns, namely, his concerns of identity, fluidity and origin" (123).

complication that *most* of the novel's main characters are Rushdie avatars, or, if not "complete" embodiments of Rushdie, then at least partial embodiments of "a particular set of Rushdie's concerns" (see fn. 124); and last but not least, the permeating complication that even as the "reverted projections" of dreams and reality bleed into each other such that they become indiscernible (as will be shown, below), that cinema bleeds into *both* with the effect that such indiscernibility now spans three ontological plateaus.[125] Surrounding each of these complications, of course, are complicated questions of identity and belief.

It is worth clarifying – amid all the complication, and all the possible confusion as to which character embodies whose essence – that the novel alternates in specifically referring *backwardly* to Gibreel as the actual avatar of the archangel (the one whose body he inhabits with his own real-life consciousness in first-person "pee oh vee" [*SV* 110] in his "punishment of dreams"), and as the avatar of the (primarily) Rigvedic gods (whose bodies he inhabits with his own real-life consciousness on movie sets), which tend, of course, to manifest as avatars themselves (otherwise, how would anyone know how to design Gibreel's costumes and masks?). In fact, both types of reversed avatar reference are used within the space of a single scene. Picking up where we left off in Part One, we return to the scene on the train to London where Gibreel spots the glint of the True Believer in Maslama. This scene opens with Gibreel worrying over his beliefs about his disbelief, concerned that he is "turning in his madness into the avatar of a chimerical archangel" (*SV* 195). When asked by Maslama to utter the "that true name" of "It," Maslama's notion of a "pantheistic" Supreme Being, "Gibreel remained silent," causing Maslama, now suspected by Gibreel to be a "voluble and maybe dangerous nut," to lose his composure: "'You don't know it!' Maslama yelled suddenly, jumping to his feet. 'Charlatan! Poser! Fake! You claim to be the screen immortal, avatar of a hundred and one gods, and you haven't a *foggy*!'" (198-199).

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[125] An eerily similar dynamic is at work in Doctorow's *City of God*, as is shown in the long version of Chapter Three.

"Avatar" is used in the space of four pages both divergently and backwardly by referring to the real-life Gibreel *as* the avatar: divergently because, in the first use, he is the avatar of a dreamed angel, while in the second use, he is the avatar of his screen characters; backwardly because, in both uses, it is Gibreel's consciousness taking on different bodies, and not his own earthly body being inhabited by different consciousnesses (though, admittedly, both his real-life schizophrenia and his dream-based lack of will pose challenges to this sense of backwardness). In addition, these different uses of Gibreel-as-avatar converge on the question of Gibreel's identity. When recognized as "the screen immortal," Maslama's use of "avatar" is occasion for Gibreel to be "startled into absurdity" ('I? Who am I?' [198]), just as, in his dreams, he asks the same question, "*Who am I…*" (112). The vividness of his dreams is occasion for Gibreel to plead, on board the hijacked *Bostan* with Saladin Chamcha, for some reassurance about his sanity:

> …Gibreel was sweating from fear. 'Point is, Spoono,' he pleaded, 'every time I go to sleep the dream starts up from where it stopped. Same dream in the same place. As if somebody just paused the video while I went out of the room. Or, or. As if he's the guy who's awake and this is the bloody nightmare. His bloody dream: us. Here. All of it.' Chamcha stared at him. 'Crazy, right,' he said. 'Who knows if angels even sleep, never mind dream. I sound crazy. Am I right or what?'
>
> 'Yes. You sound crazy.'
>
> 'Then what the hell,' he wailed, 'is going on in my head[126]?' (85)

Here we encounter the indiscernibility between dream world and real life as promised above: Gibreel is a proto-Jake Sully (an ur-Jake Sully, an UR-Jake Sully? "You are" Jake Sully?) from *Avatar*, for whom

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[126] Another approach would be to notice that what happens in Gibreel's head happens *literally in his head*, meaning that whatever kinds of embodiment transpire in his dreams are really happening within another, outer-shell material embodiment (Gibreel's real, actual head). This approach, however, runs up against an infinite regress, since all avatars involve virtual relocations of originating consciousness: if we're experiencing embodiment, we never know definitively that we're not "matrixed-up" like brains in vats, and even that thought has its own ontology independent of where the mind thinking it truly exists.

driving a Navi body on Pandora creates the sensation that "out there is the true world and in here is the dream." Does it make a difference that Gibreel is referred to as the chimerical archangel's avatar and not the avatar's driver? Only to confirm the consistent backwardness of the novel's formulation: if Jake Sully has it straight, then *a sensation* of reality obtains for the driving consciousness being virtualized elsewhere. Jake and Gibreel's virtual embodiments, avatars "on location" – bodies in new, nonlocal contexts – feel more real to them as drivers than do the spaces of their *actual* realities emptied of their conscious presences. Gibreel's dreams and not his earthly whereabouts are the virtual spaces where he can be present without being local, while places like India, the *Bostan*, and Ellowen Deeowen are places in which he is frequently local without being present.[127] Gibreel's dreams are sites of virtual relocation for Gibreel's material reality, or rather for the material reality of the essential consciousness that Gibreel embodies (like a descendent god, like a falling star, as an avatar) in those spaces.

That Gibreel's experience of the dream world feels to him more real than "the bloody nightmare" that he increasingly associates with his actual life as a troubled, sleep-deprived celebrity might be softened in some readings by the alternative that Gibreel provides: that instead of being like reality, his dreams are more like a video being paused each time Gibreel awakes, and which restarts each time that he falls asleep.[128] Such readings run into trouble, though, because of the nature of film both in and out of his dreams. Inside his dreams, a filmic mechanism establishes a (usually) first-person POV for the dreamer (or for the dreamers in Gibreel's dreams, not always Gibreel himself); out in the real world, Gibreel's eventual belief that he really is the archangel (after his meeting with "Ooparvala," "the Fellow Upstairs" [329]), and his reluctant acceptance of his belief about that belief, coincides with his being cast as the archangel in a big-budget Bollywood production. No wonder

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[127] Gibreel's quality of being local without being present reminds me of a line from *Villa Incognito* (2003) by Tom Robbins, wherein Captain Dern V. Foley's characteristic "expression seemed to say, 'I couldn't be here in spirit, so I came in person'" (87).

[128] Which, fearing for his mental health, he tries to avoid…leading to an exacerbated vulnerability to his mental health: even Gibreel's pattern of keeping himself awake takes the viciously circular shape of the ouroboros.

Rushdie had to write Gibreel as a schizophrenic actor: in both cases, the reality/video distinction suffers from the same blurriness (for the avatar in question, anyway) as do reality/dream distinctions – and these blurs ultimately render prophecy ever more problematic, as we're about to see.

Just when it feels as though we've straightened out Rushdie's reversed references to "avatar" in order to understand Gibreel Farishta's character as having a controlling consciousness that slides like a Hermit crab from carnal husk to carnal husk in the ontologically diverse ecologies of dream worlds and movie sets – as being the conscious driver instead of the embodied driven – Rushdie stays one step ahead by splitting the difference: in his dream world, Gibreel experiences virtual angelic embodiment from the perspective of his earthbound consciousness (which we remember being wrapped in actual angel parts, too), but he does so without much control over that angel body, without much will of his own. A strange development: despite the transposition of Gibreel's consciousness to the angel-body of his dreams, and despite Gibreel's experience of this transposition through the prism of his earthly consciousness, another consciousness (not Gibreel's) takes control at the site of virtuality. Whose? Intuitively, it would seem to be that of the real, celestial Gibra'il, the archangel from scripture (is not Gibreel "the avatar of a chimerical archangel"?), but as we turn to the first in our series of complications, we discover it to be that of Mahound, the scheming entrepreneur.

This is the moment in which a protagonist, previously a believer-in the Qur'an, comes face to face with the prophecy problematic such that he is transposed, via avatar, from his native belief *in* to a nonlocal, virtual belief *about* (i.e., projected from "inside" to "outside"): *of course* the Prophet himself drives the avatar! And of course the driver's motives, like those of Jake Sully (eventually) are suspect, and of course these suspect motives are offset, apocryphally, by the renaming of Mohammed: is *Mahound* not a businessman? Yet the novel does not afford any straightforward path to the conclusion that Mahound drives Gibreel, that Gibreel is Mahound's avatar. Before we encounter Gibreel's experience of wrestling Mahound to the ground against his will, in accordance with Mahound's will

("He throws the fight" [125]), is another encounter in which Gibreel experiences having his jaw worked and his vocal cords manipulated and his lips moved and revelatory words pushed through his avatar mouth by some higher Voice that Gibreel does not yet recognize as Mahound (114); before *that*, we find a disoriented Gibreel for whom "it begins to seem that the archangel is actually *inside the Prophet*" (112, emphasis in original), in which case, Mahound would be (following traditional avatar dynamics) the *archangel's* avatar. I catalogue these moments to suggest that if the angel-body of Gibreel's dreams is indeed an avatar for Mahound, it is a highly unusual one. Generally the driving consciousness is "inside" the avatar body, but here, we start with Gibreel's sensation that he, Gibreel, is inside Mahound. Shouldn't Gibreel, then, be in charge of what the Prophet hears as Revelation, of what gets dictated to a scribe and turned into holy scripture?

Another splitting of the difference: just after it begins to seem that the archangel is inside the Prophet, *archangel and Prophet merge and split at the same time*:

> But when [Mahound] has rested he enters a different sort of sleep, a sort of not-sleep, the condition that he calls his *listening*, and he feels a dragging pain in the gut, like something trying to be born, and now Gibreel, who has been hovering-above-looking-down, feels a confusion, *who am I*, in these moments it begins to seem that the archangel is actually *inside the prophet*, I am the dragging in the gut, I am the angel being extruded from the sleeper's navel, I emerge, Gibreel Farishta, while my other self, Mahound, lies *listening*, entranced, I am bound to him, navel to navel, by a shining cord of light, not possible to say which of us is dreaming the other. We flow in both directions along the umbilical cord. (112)

Rushdie's detonation of narratological pyrotechnics here provides metaleptic fireworks, all the more spectacular given that the passages preceding this one help to build to a sort of finale. The first "he" ("he has rested") has a very clear antecedent in Mahound, yet Mahound, in the passage that precedes

the block-quotation just provided, starts off as a second-person "you" before shifting to the third-person "he" (111-112). The "hovering-above-looking-down" refers to the filmic aspect of Gibreel's experience within his dream worlds, where "the dreamer" inhabits points-of-view that alternate between

> that of the camera and at other moments, spectator. When he's a camera, the pee oh vee is always on the move, he hates static shots, so he's floating high up on a crane looking down at the foreshortened figures of the actors, or he's swooping down to stand invisibly between them, turning slowly on his heel to achieve a three-hundred-sixty-degree pan, or maybe he'll try a dolly shot, tracking along beside Baal and Abu Simbel as they walk, or handheld with the help of a Steadicam he'll probe the secrets of the Grandee's bedchamber. But mostly he sits up on Mount Cone like a paying customer in the dress circle, and Jahilia is his silver screen. (110)

So Gibreel is a voyeur-director in his own dream, but also "a paying customer": producer and consumer, simultaneously, which feeds confusion about identity ("a confusion, *who am I*"). Confusion then blurs into something like mythical and mystical labor pains as Gibreel finds himself "being extruded from the sleeper's navel." The *sleeper's* navel? Not the sleeping Gibreel, whose dream this is, but the sleeping Mahound, who is having a dream within Gibreel's dream and who bounces between second- and third-person, bringing us gradually to the first-person "I," Gibreel, who is actually Mahound's "other self." Mahound then, in the space of less than two hundred words and with a pronounced circuitousness, rounds out all three grammatical points-of-view, first-, second-, third-person, and he does so as a two-way surrogate, carrying and being carried by the dreamers.[129]

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[129] Edgar Allan Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream" (1849) resonates here and as an alternative articulation of the scandal of philosophy as mentioned in my prologue: "Is *all* that we see or seem / But a dream within a dream?"

We saw earlier that Morton's reading of an avatar figure leads to this question: "Is it too ungrammatical to say *between the same being*?" It certainly seems that Mahound and Gibreel are beings between themselves, a Husserlian mindbender of a sentence that, because it is even utterable, must have its own ontological reality independent of our difficulty in "handling" it. Because it is "not possible to say" whether Mahound or Gibreel "is dreaming the other," they appear as beings caught between themselves. We *think* that Gibreel is aware of being a part of Mahound's "not-sleep" mode of "*listening*," that his own top-level dream houses a "different sort of sleep" for another character, and that we can therefore attribute the innermost, doubly virtual sort of dream to the consciousness of Mahound even though Mahound's consciousness is itself a function of Gibreel's dreaming.

The point of parsing and tracking this avatar dynamic – of trying to figure out which body corresponds to which cognitive context – is ultimately in order to shine a light on the prophecy problematic. The facing-mirrors effect that is achieved when Gibreel and Mahound become indecipherably reverted is important for establishing Gibreel's sense that "his" words of revelation are spoken at the behest of a puppeteering Prophet, but it also serves to evince meaningful differences between reality and virtuality, since their unintelligible blurrings in scenes like the one in which Mahound and Gibreel double back on each other (bodily if not also mentally) imply the possibility (indeed the desirability) of intelligibly clear distinctions between the two characters. In other words, it is necessary for Rushdie to at once *merge and split* the characters ("to cleave" is famous for its ambivalence and captures both meanings), to create an identity riddled with internal difference, to put Gibreel and Mahound between themselves. To phrase it in language that cuts against the posthistoricist grain, Rushdie ensures that Gibreel's experience, which follows from his subject-position, is cut off from his identity. No longer is this character's identity purely coterminous with his relative position. If it were, then Gibreel would identify with/as Mahound in those moments of sharing a body in context. Instead, Gibreel's beliefs are more about what he thinks *about* those

experiences of contextual embodiment, which is to say that Gibreel has nonrelative thoughts about

his relative experiences of different positions.

Why "nonrelative" thoughts? In a time of predominantly posthistoricist thinking, a nonrelative

thought probably sounds contradictory, or just as unbelievable as a thought independent of the mind.

Yet the independence of thoughts is what makes them nonrelative: thoughts can be encountered

anywhere, from any subject-position, even by minds conditioned not to encounter them, or by minds

ill-equipped to handle them. I am not using "nonrelative" to mean thoughts that don't *relate* to things

like links in intermediating chains of communication (they do relate), but to thoughts that don't need

to be encountered by thinkers in certain places, in certain subject-positions, relative to other places

and subject-positions in order to be handled properly (they don't require relative positioning by

thinkers thinking them). "Nonrelative" in this sense reconnects with the transcendence of pure

Kantian reason. Blasphemous thoughts about the Prophet and his Word may seem more unlikely to

be encountered by those who believe in the Qur'an than by those who doubt its prophetic contents,

for instance, but blasphemy is a relative thought precisely because it can *only* be thought by a subject

in the position of believing *in* the Qur'an: "Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy" (*SV* 393).

Gibreel's "blasphemous thoughts" early on, when he was a believer-in, were "to compare his own

condition with that of the Prophet," so we know that the believing-in Gibreel blasphemed, but that it

became impossible for him to do so after he stopped believing in God and began having beliefs about

his belief in God – at which point, doubt was just as available as ever before.

Doubt, unlike blasphemy, is nonrelative: a young Gibreel is just as capable of thinking a

sentence that doubts as one that blasphemes, but he's also as capable of thinking a sentence that

doubts as is a person for whom blasphemy is *not* a possibility – like the older version of himself. A

doubting sentence is available to be encountered *a priori* by differently conditioned minds (i.e., there

are no subjective experience prerequisites necessary to encounter the thought), a point made clear

enough by a passage in which "his doubts" are just as likely to be Mahound's as Gibreel's: "Today, as well as the overwhelming intensity of Mahound, Gibreel feels his despair: his doubts" (112).

"His despair: his doubts." Whose? Grammatically, it could go either way: the *his* here is between Mahound and Gibreel. At one level, we can read Gibreel like Doctorow's Daniel: as a despairing doubter who doubts specifically from an outsider position. But the feeling of despair is *in addition to* ("as well as," n+1) "the overwhelming intensity of Mahound," which "Gibreel feels," so it's a compound feeling that *Gibreel* is having, being overwhelmed by Mahound's intensity, and despair. But in feeling Mahound's intensity, is he not feeling something that the Prophet also feels? And even if not (if the quality of *being* intense isn't felt by Mahound, the one who *is* intense), then is there not another legerdemain in this passage in which Gibreel and Mahound "flow in both directions along the umbilical cord" that binds them "navel to navel" (112), in which these characters merge and split, cleaving alternately to and apart from each other? Flowing along the umbilical cord of Rushdie's language, the "his" becomes a "he" that, while still ambivalent, hints at referring to *Mahound* despite the lack of a clear antecedent:

> Also, that he is in great need, but Gibreel still doesn't know his lines…he listens to the listening-which-is-also-an-asking: Mahound *asks*: They were shown miracles but they didn't believe. (112)

Mahound asks, and he keeps *asking*, throughout the remainder of this passage. The way it unfurls, the emphasized asking appears to connect to *Mahound's* "great need" and "his doubts" all at once: Mahound's asking is a way of overdetermining "his lines" from Gibreel, to whom he listens (Mahound *needs* those lines, the "need" for them is "great"!), as well as a grievance-laced petition cataloguing all of his reasons for doubting and despairing in the event that the forthcoming lines reveal "Allah" to be "so unbending that he will not embrace three more [Lat, Manat, and Uzza] to save the human race" (113). To read despair and doubt as attributes of the Prophet, as complements to an overwhelming

intensity and a series of heartfelt requests that are unquestionably "his," is not to foreclose the possibility that they also apply to Gibreel, but to allow for the ambivalent "his" and "he" to work in *both* directions (i.e., to be nonrelative), to continue the reversions between Prophet and Angel that have already been carefully established.

As with Morton's observation that "there's a certain way to handle a feeling of disgust," there is a certain way of handling a feeling of doubt: a speculative mode of doubting goes along with the feeling. In his childhood comparisons of his and the Prophet's respective conditions, Gibreel operates in that speculative mode, but it is not until his "punishment of dreams" that he discovers the difference between "his own condition" and "that of the Prophet" that equips him to handle sentences that doubt Mahound's prophecy. Problematically, however, these dreams are *experienced*, relativizing otherwise nonrelative speculations. Perhaps this is why Gibreel's "pee oh vee" is anything but specific and even includes the all-seeing God's-eye view: Rushdie knows that his own subject-position is the undoing of his nonrelative speculations that also doubt, which means that Gibreel's subject-position is equally troublesome. It won't do to have *witnessed* Mahound's corruption (if that's what it is) in a straightforward way, from a clear vantage; doubt encountered *a posteriori* isn't really doubt because it's not so much a belief *about* anything, it's just a different kind of belief *in*, a kind of inescapable doxastic attitude toward a proposition wrapped up in evidentialism.[130] An attitude like this, formulated from different perspectival positions, *differs* from others without *disagreeing* with them: as a relative thought, it cannot really be mistaken so much as just mis-experienced, or experienced differently.[131]

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[130] Although, per the novel, humans do have the unique capacity to doubt even their own eyes, the evidence for their beliefs-in: "Human beings are tougher nuts, can doubt anything, even the evidence of their own eyes" (*SV* 95).

[131] This statement ventriloquizes Walter Benn Michaels, particularly as he pushes against the pragmatism of thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard and, more pointedly, Richard Rorty: "…postmodernism, properly understood, is required to be just as skeptical about the possibility of having false beliefs as it is about the possibility of having true ones" (*Signifier* 189, fn. 18). Hart affirms Michaels's characterization of Rorty's stance by characterizing it as one in which "the distinction between what something really means and what I can do with it has become merely academic," and further, that "[w]hat is interesting is not whether an interpretation is *true* but whether it *works* in ways that a culture thinks valuable (to promote justice, to make art, to make people happy)" (*Postmodernism* 47). This is the tip of an enormous pragmatist iceberg, the stakes of which are gestured toward in

Gibreel's perception of Mahound's corruption needs to be so convoluted as to make Gibreel unsure of his own experience (to allow for the possibility of being mistaken), beginning with his own identity. Rushdie's task is to *un*condition Gibreel so that his blasphemous comparisons of his condition to that of the Prophet lose traction: no longer will their respective positions be relevant for what is about to happen.[132] *Who am I* translates for Gibreel neatly into *what is happening* since the proposition of a happening depends on a discerning and discernible *I* that can deduce or abstract herself from the attitude inescapably formed with respect to that proposition. If Gibreel himself cannot even be sure of who or what he is, if he cannot "give an account of himself" (to borrow Judith Butler's phrase), if he cannot be certain of what he sees or feels, or what he is experiencing, let alone where he experiences *from*, then surely the nonrelativity of his thoughts enjoys a transcendental (if nauseating) boost, since his subject-position has been discredited as the least reliable part of his narrative. When revelation happens, it happens inexplicably:

> Mahound's eyes open wide, he's seeing some kind of vision, staring at it, oh,
> that's right, Gibreel remembers, me. He's seeing me. My lips moving, being moved by.
> What, whom? Don't know, can't say. Nevertheless, here they are, coming out of my
> mouth, up my throat, past my teeth: the Words. (114)

If nothing else, Gibreel's lack of a handle on the situation here ensures that what he's about to say next cannot be the result of any sort of certainty about what has just been described, let alone certainty

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Chapter Three (through a reading of Nicholas Adams reading Peter Ochs reading C.S. Peirce), since it is one way of coping with the notion of mistaken, or false, beliefs. This progression across chapters is fitting: a meditation on whether (and how) belief aims at truth necessarily involves a follow-up which considers whether (and how) belief might fail in that aim. The progression runs parallel to the reimagination-emulation sequence insofar as the reimagination of scripture facilitates the doubt of belief as identity, while the emulation of scripture services doubts that reality conforms to what we *want* to be true. In turn, doubting belief as identity and doubting that reality conforms to our hopes and wishes converge on doubts about will.

[132] There is an interesting connection between the God's-eye-view of Gibreel's dreamed "pee oh vee" and the process of his unconditioning, which can be discerned in Hart's description of the postmodernist obsession with loss of origin and which also involves an implicit pluralistic relativism: "There is no unconditioned ground to reality – no absolute perspective, no God's-eye view of the world – only a plurality of forces that form themselves into groups, break apart, and reform in other combinations" (*Postmodernism* 45). Hart's adequation of "no unconditioned ground" with "no absolute perspective" can be flipped such that the absolutist annihilation of plurality is exactly how a figure gains "unconditioned" traction.

about the position from which he experiences it, given that he "hung, scared silly, in the sky above the sufferer, held up like a kite on a golden thread" (114). Indeed, the whole process of revelation "can't be explained" (114), which is how we know that these lines culminate in pure doubt:

> Being God's postman is no fun, yaar.
>
> Butbutbut: God isn't in this picture.
>
> God knows whose postman I've been. (114)

The first of these three lines describes Gibreel's unpleasant experience, an unpleasantness rooted in a strident unconditioning and disorientation for Gibreel's recontextualized dream body. The second line is a sentence that is likely to be read as blasphemy by Muslims but which cannot be Gibreel's blasphemy, as he's not in any position (literally) to blaspheme. The last line is one that can be read numerous ways, all of which doubt. Prima facia, "God knows whose postman[133] I've been" colloquially aligns with "who knows, nobody knows, it's unknowable" and reconnects with the earlier "Don't know, can't say." More literally, the statement allows for God and knowledge to both exist, even as God is the only one with access to that knowledge in a nod toward the Kantian sublime: whatever might be theoretically knowable remains noumenally unknowable to Gibreel. At another level, however, there is a sarcastic undertone indicating that what God knows is something that Gibreel suspects, that he's not been God's postman but Shaitan's, and that God and Gibreel are both aware of this. More strongly put, Gibreel is aware of this, and God's awareness (or knowledge) of Shaitan is largely rhetorical and irrelevant. This is the thought that Gibreel encounters, and the most we can say for his position in encountering the thought is that it's a part of his dream – nothing more specific can be determined regarding Gibreel's subject-position in the wake of his unconditioning.

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[133] Perhaps a nod toward Derrida's essay, "Le facteur de la vérité" (1975), "which," as Hart notes, "like many of Derrida's titles, is impossible to translate: it can mean 'the postman of truth' or 'the factor of truth', and both are important in the essay" (*Postmodernism* 4). Such insider references to contemporary postmodernist theory are sprinkled throughout *The Satanic Verses*, for instance when Mimi shows her theoretical chops with reference to Frederic Jameson by informing Chamcha, "I am an intelligent female. I have read *Finnegans Wake* and am conversant with postmodernist critiques of the West, e.g. that we have here a society capable only of pastiche: a 'flattened' world…" (*SV* 270).

This scene of revelation is the novel's first reimagination of the Qur'an, and it entertains the prophecy problematic in its suggestion that Mahound's verses, which recognize Lat, Uzza, and Manat as goddesses to be idolized along with Allah, are bought by Abu Simbel, the Grandee so named because he encourages his followers to "worship stones" (112), false idols of carved-rock statues. In this reimagination, Mahound's verses are a compromise of "his message: one one one" (106), one God, Allah, to which he and his disciples have unwaveringly committed. Even considering the Grandee's offer to peacefully coexist with the polytheists of Jahilia is "*Unthinkable*" by Khalid (107, emphasis in original) – such verses are relativist not only because they are the kinds of sentences that believers-in cannot "handle," but also because they encourage the relativism of pluralistic societies. "Amid such multiplicity" as is seen on the sand-shifting city of Jahilia, the "one" of monotheism "sounds like a dangerous word" (106). Given the context, Mahound's message that Allah approves of the worship of the three goddesses looks an awful lot like the selling out of an opportunistic businessman under duress.

This appearance of Mahound's selling out does not improve with the further reimagination that Mahound reverses his inclusive and accommodating message after coercion by the Grandee's promiscuous wife, Hind, rather than according to a genuinely divine counter-revelation. And again, the puppeteering of Gibreel at the hands of Mahound is a horrible experience for the archangel, who is made to wrestle nakedly with Mahound and to win the wrestling match, staging Mahound perfectly to perform "his old trick, forcing [Gibreel's] mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of [Gibreel] once again, made it pour all over [Mahound], like sick" (125). The likening of the words that get made into the Word to the induced vomit of a browbeaten angel is certainly one way to take the shine off the Qur'an, to see it through the lens of the prophecy problematic, but the aspect of Gibreel's involuntarily muculent responses to Mahound's *listening* that really amplifies the problematic is "just one tiny thing." Namely, Mahound

returns to the city as quickly as he can to expunge the foul verses that reek of brimstone and Sulphur, to strike them from the record for ever and ever, so that they will survive in just one or two unreliable collections of old traditions and orthodox interpreters will try and unwrite their story, but Gibreel, hovering-watching from his highest camera angle, knows one small detail, just one tiny thing that's a bit of a problem here, namely that *it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me*. From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked. (126, emphasis in original)

Of all of the obscurity that engulfs Gibreel in his dreams, the one thing that stands out in relative clarity is the proposition, echoing Emmons, that Mahound endows his verses with legitimacy by saying that a higher power wrote it. Moreover, this is a proposition that relies on apocryphal thinking for its contentual and formal thrust, since even the thought of "just one or two unreliable collections of old traditions" surviving the attempt by "orthodox interpreters" to "try and unwrite" "the foul verses" that Mahound is such a hurry "to expunge" might be encountered by someone (like Rushdie himself) for whom apocryphal legend is precisely what occasions a reimagination of how the Qur'an came to be, which in turn occasions beliefs *about* others' beliefs *in* the Qur'an. Put differently, *The Satanic Verses* is a collection of sentences that doubt submerged in an ocean teeming with a robust biodiversity of thoughts and merging phenomenologically not just with prophecy, prophets, scripture, and its author, but also with a strict and uncompromising monotheistic belief in Allah. The effect of heno- and/or polytheistic thoughts colliding with strictly monotheistic thoughts is a "primordially affective and aesthetic phenomenon" "before it is cognitive, let alone conscious" (to scramble my epigraph from Shaviro).

Reimagining this kind of a collision of thoughts in the form of a postmodern novel is to trans those colliding, biodiverse thoughts into compatibility, since what is being "handled" by the novelist

isn't a preference for Allah over the three goddesses, or vice versa; instead, what is being handled is a broader textual modality made visible by the prophecy problematic and navigated by avatars of doubt. To handle the incompatibility between a self-legitimized *one* vs. another self-legitimized *three plus one* is really to handle what scripture, as a textual mode, purports to do. In thinking the apocryphal thought, Rushdie handles both sides of a primordially affective and aesthetic phenomenon (i.e., the kind of thought that scripture conveys) not via *this* scripture or via *that* scripture, neither of which grants access to or "realizes" the other and both of which consider themselves exempt from and cancels the legitimacy of the other, but via scripture *as a mode*, from *outside* that mode, and therefore via *textuality in its modalities*.

Needing an "outside" from which to be "about" the inner workings of the scriptural mode – more specifically, to encounter the internal problematic of that mode – Rushdie nests the prophecy problematic at a level removed from the storyworld's real ontology, at the dream level nested within the real Gibreel's outer reality: in his head. I have shown how such nesting is on display in Part II, "Mahound." I turn now to Part VI, "Return to Jahilia," to show that Rushdie stows even that dream level from "Mahound" more deeply inside as a way of ratifying the outsideness of Gibreel's waking reality: Gibreel dreams other people dreaming; his dreams have their own insides, and what is in the heads of these dreamed dreamers are ever more deeply-nested thought-handling avatars.

In "Return to Jahilia," "the Prophet Mahound was on his way back to Jahilia after an exile of a quarter-century" in Yathrib (*SV* 371). The continuation of the storyline from Part II is fueled by Yathrib's response to the Prophet's verses as they pertain to the doctrine of Submission in the wake of a failed attack on Yathrib by an army from Jahilia. Having resisted the Jahilian advances, Mahound attempts to convert the women of Yathrib to the submissive ways of Jahilia and to stem the appeal of women's liberation in Yathrib to the women of Jahilia all at once. The situation is narrated via Gibreel's dream sequences, as it was in Part II, but in Part VI, Gibreel dreams that it is Salman Farsi, Mahound's

Persian disciple and scribe (the critically-inclined sidekick to the non-critically devoted Khalid and Bilal) who narrates a part of the Prophet's history to Baal (the satirical poet employed by the Jahilian polytheists to slander monotheism). It is a narration motivated by Salman's desire to warn Baal of Mahound's impending return and, in turn, to save Baal's life. But such a motivation implies a sympathy on the part of Salman toward Baal, so it also explains the events that "finally finished Salman with Mahound: the question of the women; and of the Satanic verses" (378).

And Gibreel dreamed this: the refrain stitching together the events in "Return to Jahilia" also describes that "One night the Persian scribe had a dream in which he was hovering above the figure of Mahound at the Prophet's cave on Mount Cone" (379). Thus Gibreel dreamed that Salman dreamed, but then:

> …it struck [Salman] that his point of view, in the dream, had been that of the archangel, and at that moment the memory of the incident of the Satanic verses came back to him as vividly as if the thing had happened the previous day. 'Maybe I hadn't dreamed of myself as Gibreel,' Salman recounted. 'Maybe I was Shaitan.' The realization of this possibility gave him his diabolical idea. After that, when he sat at the Prophet's feet, writing down rules rules rules, he began, surreptitiously, to change things. (379)

Gibreel dreams Salman dreaming of himself as Gibreel, from Gibreel's "hovering" point of view. In this dreamed dream, the cinematically hovering Salman considers the consciousness that drives his dream-self to be that of Gibreel or Shaitan, alternately, which means, in effect, that Salman considers the possibility that he dreams himself as Gibreel or Shaitan's avatar…*within the dream of another avatar.* These considerations then bleed into Salman's waking reality, which is of course a function of Gibreel's dream world. For the sake of argument, let's entertain the possibility that Salman is Gibreel's avatar, not Shaitan's. In this case, Salman is the avatar of an avatar, just as Gibreel is an avatar to the

second degree when he takes the Bollywood stage as "the avatar of a hundred and one gods." In this scenario, pinpointing where Gibreel ends and Salman begins is difficult enough that reading these characters as being between themselves (as with Gibreel and Mahound) becomes a distinct possibility. As difficult as this is to think, however, we have seen already that characters indistinguishably between themselves is a thought that can be handled through doubt and speculation *about* the characters, meaning that when the thought is expanded to include Shaitan as another "being between," we can handle that, too.

Doubting speculatively, the inclusion of Shaitan between Salman and Gibreel in Salman's dream means that the original dreamer might not be Gibreel after all; that Gibreel might in fact be Shaitan, or that, as with Gibreel's "vision of the Supreme Being," Ooparvala might just be "Neechayvala, the Guy from Underneath"; that questions as to whether "God" be "multiform, plural, representing union-by-hybridization of such opposites as *Oopar* and *Neechay*, or whether [God] be pure, stark, extreme" (329) run parallel to questions about whether Gibreel actually dreams himself as an angel or as a devil after being called "Shaitan" by his mother during his mischievous youth (93). These are questions that "will not be resolved here" (329). The nature, appearance, and identity of everyone (humans, angels, deities) seems impossible to pin down, even (or especially) the ones whose differences lend themselves to be read as ciphers for essentialists. All that can really be determined about Salman Farsi is that someone else dreamed that he dreamed his "diabolical idea," making the idea itself doubly virtual and apocryphal.

Importantly though, that diabolical idea, however virtual and apocryphal, still manages to find embodiment. By locating this idea within Salman Farsi, Salman Rushdie finds his own not-so-subtle avatar. In turn, Farsi's embodiment of Rushdie's driving consciousness flows "in both directions" between the context of Gibreel's dreams-self and the author's reimagination of scripture, just as Gibreel and Mahound, when dreaming, flow along an umbilical cord and through each other's navels.

Viewed this way, we might return to Biswas's observation that Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children* serves as a "self-inserted avatar" that "embodies a particular set of Rushdie's concerns, namely, his concerns of identity, fluidity and origin" (2020, 123; see fn. 124), transport this observation to *The Satanic Verses*, and then expand it from one central protagonist and apply it to a fuller range of that novel's characters: Salman Farsi, Baal, Mr Qureishi, Gibreel, and Saladin Chamcha, to begin with just a few of the novel's most prominent doubters. By allowing a range of characters to embody particular aspects of Rushdie's concerns, Rushdie's novel becomes a sort of distributed, impersonal avatar of the sort that supplies a ready answer to the novel's recurring question that the range of characters must answer for themselves: *What kind of an idea are you?* (passim). Rushdie's (re)imaginative success lies in capturing the *embodiment* of the virtual and the apocryphal, so it is no wonder that avatars (and their avatars) figure so prominently and at so many levels in his novel.

Nor is it any wonder that Rushdie's avatars are so ambivalently situated, with ambivalence here indicating a two-way cognitive strength (*ambi*: two ways, *valence*: strength) over and above the less technical, more colloquial sense of something like "ambiguity." The ambivalence of Rushdie's avatars, in which cognition flows strongly between two different bodies (for instance, back and forth along the umbilical cord connecting Mahound and Gibreel) coupled with the explicitly *backward* avatar formulation (in which a given body in context is not inhabited by a driving consciousness but in which consciousness is driven against the essentialist grain of multiple bodies) serves to put cognition ahead of bodily experience in the belief-formation process. In this respect, Rushdie parts ways with Shaviro, for whom "thinking like an avatar" necessarily means that experience precedes cognition (*Discognition* 102). But this is itself a reversal not just of avatar-thinking, in which the "analytic-philosophical privileging of cognition over affect" characterizes "recent philosophical accounts of mind" (102), but also of "how philosophers think" and perhaps most importantly, "how human beings think." For

Shaviro, to think like a philosopher is to think "speculative aesthetics," to probe what David Roden calls a "dark phenomenology" (2013), or indeed what Morton calls "dark ecology" (2016).

Perhaps, then, Rushdie's ambivalent reversals of avatar formulation are less departures from the likes of Shaviro than they are round about ways of arriving at what "thinking like a human" is all about. Clearly, for Rushdie, the embodiment of certain kinds of ideas (rigid ideas, compromising ideas) is part of the equation, just as Shaviro's reading of Scott Bakker's *Neuropath* (2018) puts an embodied Argument at center stage – and remarkably, the character (Gyges) embodying this Argument "is trapped in an endless nightmare in which he cannot recognize himself, and even though he is continually compelled to perform monstrous actions that he does not countenance, Gyges nonetheless produces a fabulation that makes it all seem meaningful and reasonable" (Shaviro 134). Sounding familiar, it is not the Argument itself, but precisely the *embodiment* of the Argument that "demolishes all our pretensions to self-understanding, or indeed any sort of positive knowledge," and which leads to "a kind of ferocious mysticism, a *via negativa*, a mortification of both the mind and the flesh" (134). I'm hard pressed to describe Gibreel Farishta, and, by extension, *The Satanic Verses* as a whole, any more accurately than this, since Gibreel is neither an angel nor any kind of thought, yet, nightmarishly, he is given a reductive body for each while retaining his irreducible human consciousness. Rather than capitulate to an essentialism in which Gibreel's mind "matches" his body, escaping the nightmare depends on just the opposite, on recognizing that irreducibility cannot, by definition, ever be "matched up" with *anything* – that's what makes it irreducible. Gibreel's mind and body should be made to "match" only insofar as neither are pigeon-holed and defined according merely to their "*kind*."

To Rise Again at a Decent Hour: Conditional Cognitions

If the cognitive conditions of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* can be thought of in terms of how avatars are media through which the apocryphal thought flows, facilitating and dispersing doubt across an ontologically diverse network of bodies that undergo unconditioning, then the conditional cognitions of Ferris's *TRAAADH* can be thought of in terms of how the apocryphal thought is concentrated in the single avatar that Paul O'Rourke becomes, as phenomena that depend on a conditioning of Paul into something he's not. Namely, Paul comes to believe in the Cantaveticles and the message of Safek that they convey, but only after being manipulated *as an avatar* by the online thief of his identity. To say that the identity thief "gets into Paul's head" is not only to describe exactly how the avatar dynamic works but it also collapses the figurative sense of that phrase into the literal sense, since, by "getting under Paul's skin," to use another colloquialism that collapses annoyance into avatar embodiment, this identity thief actually gains control over the way Paul "handles" the doubting and apocryphal thoughts that he encounters.

To explore the process through which a flesh-and-blood Paul becomes the avatar of an identity thief is to begin by recognizing how counterintuitive it is, how backward it seems, for *Paul* to be the avatar while a consciousness manifesting online in cyberspace supplies the essence to be embodied. Ferris once again inverts Rushdie's configuration, but in an unexpected way: Rushdie's narration refers to Gibreel Farishta as an avatar, but I have demonstrated it to be an exactly backward reference. Ferris's narration never refers to Paul O'Rourke as an avatar (which is to say, given that Paul narrates, that *Paul* never refers to *himself* as an avatar), despite that that's exactly what he becomes. As Piotr Czerwiński argues, *TRAAADH* showcases "the inescapability of virtuality" in the digital age (2017). However, there is an undisclosed irony to the suggestion that the real Paul undergoes virtualization, since, after all, his presumed identity thief indeed takes on Paul's identity, not the other way around. But this is purely nominal: Paul's impersonator, or imposter, does not really identify *as Paul* (i.e., Paul's

person[134]) as is evident from the substance and style of what he writes in Paul's name – the mismatch between what is written (and how it is written) and what someone who identifies as the actual Paul O'Rourke would write is a glaring one, which is exactly why it is so fascinating, and so auspiciously characteristic of the avatar dynamic, when Paul eventually does start speaking, writing and behaving like his online impersonator.

We can recall from "The Prophecy Problematic" that Paul is furious, initially, that a website is created in his name. At the start, Paul wants nothing to do with the site and demands that it be taken down, not only because of the obvious intrusion of his privacy, but also because of what he perceives to be the obnoxious religiosity, not to mention the offensive anti-Semitic content, of the posts on the site. He sends profanity-laced emails to the site administrator, repeating his demand to remove the site, but the emails develop gradually into something like an increasingly civil conversation as Paul realizes that this is not your typical identity theft (he seems not to be incurring charges on his credit cards, for instance), and as his curiosity about the scriptural content grows. As for the anti-Semitism, Paul is told that the Ulms simply "use the Jews as a point of reference" (173), and this leads to a further curiosity centered on endangered ethnic groups, most of whom have irredentist claims to lost/stolen homelands stretching into apocryphal antiquity: Jews, Native Americans, Waldensians, Chukchi, etc. When it is suggested, finally, that Paul himself might be an Ulm, the allure of belonging to such a group is irresistible. As Al Frushtick attests: "I can't tell you how satisfying it is to have someone lay out for you how you extend back through time like that" (176). Paul wants to share in

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[134] I borrow this formulation from Adam Levin, who showcases the difference between the nominal and the personal in his short story, "How to Play *The Guy*":

> *What happens if Rick chooses a Geoff who actually did something brutal to Jenny in real life?*
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> There is no such thing as a Geoff who actually did something brutal to Jenny in real life. Jenny doesn't exist in real life any more so than Rick, Steve, or Geoff. However, the girl who plays Jenny (i.e., Jenny's person) does exist, and if whoever's playing Geoff (Geoff's person) did something brutal to Jenny's person, then he should be treated the same as if he had sassed Jenny, except that during the chant, the word *Jenny* should be replaced with the girl's given name (*Hot Pink* 183-184).

that satisfaction so badly that his obsession makes him unrecognizable to Connie, who confronts him, wondering, among other things,

> "what's happened to all your outrage? You were out of your mind when you thought
> they had made you into a Christian. Now you're this other thing, and somehow that's
> okay? You're emailing back and forth with this guy? You're letting him tweet in your
> name? You have a Facebook page, for God's sake! Where's the old you, Paul?" (170)

The old Paul was pre-avatar Paul; this new Paul embodies the essence of one drawn to scripture (albeit to scripture that exhorts a program of doubt). The old Paul found in prophecy an insurmountable problematic; the new Paul seeks to resolve the prophecy problematic. Czerwiński makes the same case, arguing that Paul "undergoes transformation from a litigious victim of identity theft to an individual increasingly willing to accept his new identity online" (117). How such a transformation could happen is at the heart of *TRAAADH*'s investments, and there's no cashing in on those investments without recourse to the word *essence*. For Ferris, *essence* pairs so nicely with *core* that the latter provides a defining frame for the former. "Connie's extended family was the very essence of…a 'we.' It had a central core…" (66); a young Grant Arthur, the man behind Paul's identity theft and who had once converted to Judaism, "answered the door" to a girl who had been in love with him just the day before "in a skullcap and beard—a Jew like any other but stripped now of some essential core…" (296). As doubt is the "essence" of the Ulmish faith (209), it is also surely its "core," according to the novel's other explications of what is essential. Paul is prevented from living out his fantasy of singing "San Antonio Rose" while strumming a banjo on the subway by his own "essential, reluctant, ineradicable, inhibited core," and he believes that in order to overcome his fears and inhibitions, he "would necessarily have to be an entirely different person" (165), a person whose core is made of things other than reluctance and inhibition. Can people change so drastically that they become *essentially* different, old cores replaced with new cores post-transformation? The question is asked in

The Satanic Verses, too, when Sufyan, trying to console Chamcha in the wake of his transformation into a devil, begins by saying, "'Question of mutability[135] of the essence of self'" before going on to wax dialectically on Lucretius and Ovid's musings on the subject (285); or, when faced with Maslama's ramblings, Gibreel is "startled into absurdity," asks who he is, and is told gravely that "'When a man is unsure of his essence, how may he know if he be good or bad?'" (198).

Whereas Lucretius offers radical contingency in exchange for the determinism that comes pre-bundled with a sense of continuous selfhood, Ovid offers continuity of self in exchange for the freedom that makes Lucretius's offer an attractive one. Neither are very appealing to Chamcha, who, in the end, opts for "Lucretius over Ovid" upon recognizing that "A being going through life can become so other to himself as to *be another*" (297, emphasis in original). Sufyan opts for Ovid, preferring a sense of stability for his own soul even if it means that any changes that his soul undergoes are pre-programmed and thus beyond his control. Which does Paul O'Rourke prefer, Ovid or Lucretius, and how does he arrive at his conclusion? In meditating on this question, Paul recalls the famous children's story, *Doctor De Soto* by William Steig (1982). He calls it his "favorite children's book" and paraphrases its basic outline in order to convey a strong form of essentialism. In the children's book, "Dr. De Soto is a mouse dentist who will fix the mouth of any animal who doesn't eat mice. It says so right on the sign outside his shop: CATS AND OTHER DANGEROUS ANIMALS NOT ACCEPTED FOR TREATMENT. It's a reasonable policy" (165). It turns out that the mouse dentist is every bit as compassionate as he is reasonable, which leads him to take pity on a fox in dire need of work on his "rotten bicuspid and unusually bad breath" (166). The treatment requires that the mouse doctor crawl around inside a predator's mouth. Paul refrains from spoiling the ending except to throw in the story's famous line that children are supposed to take as its moral,

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[135] Edmund Spenser's "Two Cantos of Mutabilitie," from *The Faerie Queene*, come to mind alongside the works of Lucretius and Ovid.

which is that "a fox is a fox is a fox" (166). In Paul's reading, "The foremost heroism on display in *Doctor De Soto* isn't the mouse's noble determination to help despite the mortal dangers all around but the touching suggestion, briefly entertained, that the fox might have an innate capacity to change" (166).[136]

The essentialist thrust of Steig's story is obvious enough: nature trumps nurture, what you are, at the genetic level, determines what you'll do (or think, or believe). It is said that tigers cannot change their stripes. A fox is a fox is a fox. Such observations, which strike many thinkers to be the very antitheses of social constructivism, are usually dubbed "essentialist" automatically: detections of essence, or of biology read as essence, are not seen for the detections of essence or biology that they are but as essentialism itself. A step is missed along the way, or a shortcut is taken, such that the very *existence* of something biologically real or essential just leads straight to essentialism (see fn. 65). Scholars conclude preemptively that wherever physical or biological explanations vie with or even dislodge social constructivist explanations for such things as power dynamics and oppressive systems, that essentialist interpretations must be inevitable.[137] Evidently, it is somehow easier to think deterministic or mechanistic causation through nature than through culture, which is odd. Paul is far from immune from such tendencies and, in fact, he pushes the determinism of biologically-based essentialism even further when his recollection of Steig's story leads him to contemplate the potential

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[136] Disney-Pixar's *Zootopia* (2016) goes in exactly the opposite direction, the antiessentialist answer to Steig's book. The trend continues with Universal's *The Bad Guys* (2022), which features Mr. Wolf, Mr. Snake, Mr. Piranha, Mr. Shark and Ms. Tarantula who team up with none other than a winsome fox to *become* (spoiler) *good guys*.

[137] And, for this reason, it leads scholars away from studies that purport to examine "the nature of nature" in favor of schools of thought that focus on social theories that are tucked safely away from essentialist conclusions. Parallel to this tendency is for scholars to seek safe harbor in the continuation of epistemological hegemonies over ontological upstarts. Oddly, these turns away from nature and ontology mark returns to identity as constructed phenomenon and therefore back to identity politics and, therefore, back to "essentialisms": an academic ouroboros. Sensing the glitch, these nature- and ontology-averse thinkers try to patch up the circular train of thought by adding "strategic" in front of "essentialism," but this doesn't pull the tail out of the snake's mouth so much as it dresses up the loop to look more like a beautifully complex Möbius strip than a logical dead-end. For my most sustained analysis of this scholarly trend, see "Of Non-Mice and Non-Men: Against Essentialism in Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed*" (2020).

for change in a former patient. Struggling to account for how people can be so negligent of their dental health,

> I'd think, This could have been prevented. I'd fall back on my old cynical view of human nature: they don't brush, they don't floss, they don't care. A fox is a fox is a fox. But when they did brush and floss and still lost a tooth, I had to blame something else, and just as predictably, I'd point the finger at cruel nature or an indifferent God. I was always saying bad oral health was entirely in their control, unless I was saying bad oral health was entirely out of their control. (166)

Paul recognizes, in reflection, that his own commitment to essentialist thinking precludes any possibility of transcending nature (it never occurs to him that transcendence might apply to anything besides nature). Whether it is the degenerate "human nature" that is in his patients who exhibit bad oral health, or else the "cruel nature" of the physical universe that binds these hapless creatures, bad oral health is an overdetermined and inescapable outcome of natural processes, meaning that Paul's "old cynical view" vanquishes any intuition of what might have been prevented. There is no preventing naturalistic determinism. These are Paul's generalized, cynical abstractions, but they crystallize when he thinks concretely of a specific, low-income patient that causes his mind to wander:

> This guy probably had poor genes, ignorant parents, a mean childhood. He was never going to take care of his teeth. He never stood a chance of taking care of them. He was going to neglect them until they fell out or he died. Unless, by some miracle, he got up from the chair and changed his life. ...But even then, I thought, that change, that character, would have to be in him already. …Change or no change, his fate was out of his hands. The only question that ever remained was: are you a fox, or something better? (167)

The inclusion here of nurture in tandem with nature notwithstanding, even the possibility of change is, for Paul, embedded deterministically within the essential core of anyone who is capable of changing: Ovid over Lucretius. Transcendence itself is just an encoded feature of a pre-hardwired program. To change, adapt, improve, or transcend is just to be the kind of organism predisposed to doing those kinds of things in the first place: what you are and what you think are, are not different in "the inverted age" of posthistory (to borrow Chamcha's phrase, see below). For Paul, being "something better" than a fox is cheapened by the notion that "his fate was out of his hands," a notion that his role as Grant Arthur's avatar surely compounds.

Is there any room for Lucretius in postmodernity? There is for Chamcha, whose new "discrete" self, "severed from history" disabuses him of the "optimism" of things like "will, of choice" (*SV* 297). Not very reassuring: a "pretty cold comfort," indeed[138] (185). Is Chamcha's "discrete" otherness from his old self, "severed from history" (297) the only viable subjectivity for characters like Paul and Chamcha, who change so dramatically that they fail to recognize even themselves? If so, is Lucretius preferable to Ovid, because the possibility for change is so great, or is Ovid preferable to Lucretius because he allows the soul to be tracked?

Stated in these terms, Ovid and Lucretius reduce to an impossible fork in the road for any protagonist, a lose-lose predicament. "'I have put my argument badly,' Sufyan miserably apologized. 'I meant only to reassure'" (*SV* 286). In these terms, a protagonist is better off just never changing. The problem is precisely *in these terms*: framed up dialectically, their zero-sum nature produces a spiritual stalemate. What would happen if something like a poststructural transing of the dualism, or Morton's ecological thinking, or Barad's agential realism, or my apocryphal thinking, or the illogic of Ulmish doubt, or Hart's "trespass of the sign[139]," were inserted into the equation? Then you'd have

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[138] Chamcha's line sounds to my ear like a paraphrase of Job 16:2: "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* 742)

[139] Of course, by "Hart's" I really mean Hart's reading of Dante through Derrida in *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989).

each half of the dualism doubling-back on itself while also bleeding into the other; watching how something can be defined according to its competing characteristics, you'd be able to see the ouroboros become a Möbius strip right before your eyes. The process depends on the deep irony that attends Chamcha as, "looking for someone to blame," he "enter[s] into his new self":

> *I am*, he accepted, that *I am.*
>
> Submission. (*SV* 298)

Chamcha, in becoming the very incarnation of pure evil, takes on the voice of Allah (and Yahweh), pure love, and he submits to his fate. But he doesn't just submit; he *Submits*. The very mechanism that enables his new "discrete" self to move on is also the one *moved on from* in the first place (the doctrine, along with the Satanic verses, that sowed Salman Farsi's seeds of doubt), and it is therefore the one by which he *reattaches* to his history; the severance from his history and his reconnection to it are both consequences of Chamcha's developing relationship to s/Submission. Did Chamcha not turn evil by dint of his pursuit of the good?

> Had he not pursued his own idea of *the good*, sought to become that which he most admired, dedicated himself with a will bordering on obsession to the conquest of Englishness? Had he not worked hard, avoided trouble, striven to become new? Assiduity, fastidiousness, moderation, restraint, self-reliance, probity, family life: What did these add up to if not a moral code? What is his fault that Pamela and he were childless? Were genetics his responsibility? Could it be, in this inverted age, that he was being victimized by – the fates, he agreed with himself to call the persecuting agency – precisely *because* of his pursuit of 'the good' – that nowadays such a pursuit was considered wrong-headed, even evil? (*SV* 265)

Saladin Chamcha and Paul O'Rourke have quite a bit in common, their concerns centering on their hard work, fate, genetics, things to blame, and even a sympathy for the devil. While Chamcha turns

physically into a devil, Paul, contemplating "total submission to God" recalls the influence of Milton's

Mammon:

> *Non serviam*! cried Lucifer. He didn't want to eat the faces off little babies. He
>
> just didn't want to serve. If he had served, he would have been just one more among
>
> the angels, indistinct, his name hard to recall even among the devout. (*TRAAADH* 7)

Joyce, too: "Satan, really, is the romantic youth of Jesus re-appearing for a moment" (*Stephen Hero*

222). A Satanic refusal to serve is not just to reject an eternity of indistinction (itself a hellish sort of

death), or Submission; this refusal is also an exposure of *the good* within *the bad*. Gibreel wonders

whether "the Fellow Upstairs" might not be "the Guy from Underneath." The "morning star" refers

apocryphally and by turns throughout scripture to Christ *and* to Lucifer. Even the phrase "non

serviam" has its competing translations in which the Hebrew script is read as "I will not transgress"

rather than "I will not serve."[140] A "both/and," n+1 ironic logic supersedes the "either/or" dialectic

that stipulates an adherence to Ovid or Lucretius: for something to be Satanic, something prophetic

(or messianic) must have been in the vicinity in the first place.

Likewise, something scriptural was already in the vicinity for Ferris to reimagine it, and there

is a brilliance to Ferris's reimagination of scripture in that his reimagination involves turning what was

already in the vicinity into a *reimagination of the reimagination*. The real, extant scripture that serves as

Ferris's "already there" foil is *itself* made into a sort of reimagined scripture according to the fiction of

what Ferris imagines when the Cantaveticles are not just added but superadded to the book of Job by

being imagined as Job's urtext, or prototext, putting Job on par with something like the various

accounts in Genesis that follow even older Babylonian and Mesopotamian texts. Carlton B. Sookhart,

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[140] Mainly all the many King James translations (*King James*, *New King James*, *King James 2000*, *American King James*, etc.), but also *Webster's Bible*, and even the *JPS Tanakh 1917* use the alternate translation. Charles John Ellicott's commentary even prefers "I transgress not" in order to highlight the sort of defiance that one expects from a Satanic "I will not serve" and which Paul O'Rourke finds affectively when inspired to exhort his patients to floss.

owner of a rare books shop, is willing to look over the scraps of the Cantaveticles that inundate Paul's website and email. The hope is that, as an expert of ancient scriptural texts, he'll be able to locate the text of these cantonments within their rightful contexts (perhaps something from the Dead Sea scrolls), or else confirm that they are inauthentic, part of an elaborate hoax. When Paul shows him Cantonment 42, Sookhart develops a theory that it is the "first draft of Job." Sookhart explains to Paul how the "account of creation in Genesis…is rather like that of the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish*. And of course the story of the Flood had its origins in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, possibly even Hindu mythology. They are cruder accounts than the ones we know from the Bible. Nevertheless, they came first. They are urtexts, prototexts" (236). Piecing together elements of the cantonment – mysterious authorship, strong hints of Aramaic composition, suggestions of an Edomite heritage, the appearance of the name Eliphaz – leads Sookhart to conjecture that the biblical book of Job is Cantonment 42 of the Cantaveticles reimagined (or at least rewritten, though, arguably, you cannot have one without the other), and not the other way around.

My suggestion that Paul O'Rourke is Arthur Grant's avatar ties into the suggestion that believing in the Cantaveticles, and more specifically in Cantonment 42, means believing in a textual predecessor to the canonized book of Job. More specifically still, to believe in Cantonment 42 is to stop believing in Safek and to start believing Safek's *brother*, an apocryphal version of the biblical Eliphaz. In the text examined by Sookhart, Eliphaz calls for an end to Job's nonsense, explaining that "keeping God's covenant" "protects [the Ulms] from marauders, thieves, and warmongers, but as for affliction, poverty, starvation, suffering, grief, and just plain dumb luck, well, nothing was ever promised them about any of that. They're subjects of fate no less than anyone else, the difference being they're being spared the offense of ascribing it to God's will" (234). In other words, Eliphaz articulates a radical, Epicurean materialism that re-secularizes Ovid and Lucretius by removing them, rightfully, from theological discourse. Things will happen, particles will swerve, and all of it is more or

less accidental. "What do [the Ulms] know about God, asks Eliphaz, other than that He obviously doesn't exist, for if He did, would He have allowed all that crazy shit to befall poor Job?" (234).

Eliphaz poses an interesting challenge to interpretation since, as Safek's (not Agag's) brother, he is a being ontologically distinct from humans, yet his message comes not from some ontologically distinct realm beyond the void, but right there among the ancient Ulms. Safek and Eliphaz are both referred to, at this point in Paul's paraphrase, as *men*, not as gods or as God and His brother. Suddenly the text of the Cantaveticles feels like more of a warning against the kind of monotheism that will eventually absorb the book of Job into its cannon. But the more curious aspect of Cantonment 42 is that, immediately after chastising the Ulms for extrapolating Safek's promise of protection to inapplicable circumstances, "He follows this train of thought with a long litany of enigmas like 'Hast Thou given the horse strength? Hast Thou clothed is neck with thunder? Canst Thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? The glory of his nostrils is terrible,' whereupon a great silence settles over the camp, as flies do over Job's dead body" (234). A direct line can be drawn from this paraphrase of Eliphaz's enigmatic string of rhetorical questions to the novel's epigraph:

Ha, ha

— Job 39:25

Eliphaz's enigmas are in the spirit of Job 39, a chapter that describes the nature of animals ranging from mountain goats to wild asses to wild oxen to ostriches to horses to hawks (in that order). The epigraphic "Ha, ha" from 39:25 is another instance of elided citation reminiscent of Doctorow in Chapter One; the full verse reads:

When the trumpet sounds, [the horse] says 'Aha!'

From a distance it smells the battle,

The thunder of the captains, and the

shouting. (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* 767)

Whether the horse says "Aha!" or "Ha ha" varies between translations ("Aha!" is more common) and seems not to matter too much; sometimes the horse says neither but "snorts defiantly" instead (*Christian Standard Bible*), or "He mocketh at fear, and is not afraid" (*1599 Geneva Bible*), or "the blasts of the shofar fill him with courage" (*Jubilee Bible 2000*), or "he laughs without fear" (*New Life Version*). What seems clear enough is that the horse's nature is being emphasized, and further, the horse's nature is defiant and fearless. The horse relishes a chance at battle. These are traits that seem to describe the horse's essential core; without them, the horse would be an entirely different animal.

Yet there is more to Job 39 than meets the eye in this verse, just as there is more to Ferris's reimagination of it in Cantonment 42. In both instances, the "long litany of enigmas" is designed not to emphasize the essential cores of animals in the natural world so much as to make the rhetorical point that the doubters have no idea of what it is they even doubt. It is a worthwhile correction, since the doubt that I espouse is not an angry doubt born of perceived cosmic injustice (as it is for Job, as it is isn't for a tragic hero) so much as a useful tool for thinking the unknown and the unknowable. By far my favorite commentary on Job comes from Jennifer Michael Hecht's *Doubt: A History* (see fn. 62 for a description of the scope of this impressive volume), for a whole host of reasons, including but not limited to her recognition of Job as "a poetic masterpiece," adapted from an even more ancient folktale "and reimagined…as a philosophical question – as a moment of truth" (*Doubt* 62), an observation that corroborates Ferris's reimagination in which Job is "reimagined" from a prior, perhaps cruder, urtext. In her reading of chapter 39 specifically, Hecht finds richness in the interactions between God and Job, who at this point "asks why God is absent and why wisdom is hidden and wishes he could just have his day in court. And God, strangely enough, shows up and responds. He does not, however, offer a court; this isn't wish fulfillment, it's philosophy" (68). Hecht excerpts highlights of "one of the best tirades ever written," verses plucked from Job 38-39, including

one featured by Cantonment 42: "Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? The glory of his nostrils is terrible."

Hecht's reading of these verses, which include descriptions of peacocks and lions (among other things) along with the horse, is to my mind, an emphatically antiessentialist reading in that God's reason for this "tirade," this "long litany of enigmas," is not to convey the essential core of any aspect of creation but just the opposite: to convey precisely the irreducibility of anything from "the depths of the ocean" (Job 38:16) to "the treasures of the snow" (38:22) to "the sweet influences of the Pleiades" or the "bands of Orion" (38:31) to even human cognition, described as "wisdom in the inward parts" and "understanding in the heart" (38:36):

> God here raises all the pertinent questions: the origin of consciousness and wisdom, the nature of death, the majesty of the stars, the wild animals, the complex wonders of nature, the magic of mechanics, the hugeness of the planet. He's even got the sheer awesome display of the horse, not only as a gorgeous, striding power, but also as a little, mortal creature, timorous as a trapped grasshopper, yet breathtaking in its glorious terror. That glory and quivering are embodied in the same animal seen from two perspectives is a reminder of the paradox of scale; and a reminder that this God is presented as solving that problem by inhabiting all realms, from the infinitesimal to the inconceivably immense. (68-69)[141]

On his best days, Paul himself is a defiant horse that mocketh at fear and laugheth at danger, but he does plenty of quivering, too. As far as essential cores go, his, like anyone or anything else's, cannot

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[141] In the "Introduction" to Volume 6 of Brian Kerns's translation of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* (2022), Mark DelCogliano says specifically of 39:25 that "[t]he chief purpose of the Lord's speeches, according to Gregory, was to keep Job from pride" (3), and that "[i]n the course of his interpretation of Job 39:25 (*He hears the urging of the captains and the roars of the army*), Gregory teaches that "pride is 'the queen of the vices, and once she has taken over the vanquished heart completely, she soon hands it over to the seven principal vices, who are as it were her captains, to be destroyed'" (3-4). What I want to appreciate is how this "canonical account" (per Stahlberg's usage in fn. 24 of my introduction) synthesizes nicely with Hecht's account – from which I glean anti-reductionism – to suggest a correlation between a prideful Job and a reductionist Job, and/or between a humbled Job and an anti-reductionist Job.

be pinned down. And even if it could be – even granting the existence of things like essences or Ulmish DNA – there would still be a failure to apprehend the full nature of a horse, a person, or a galaxy. Doubt simply recognizes and re-cognizes this inevitable failure productively.

Paul O'Rourke's essential core might just be his ability to doubt: his natural capacity to doubt is something to behold, right up there with the warhorse's ability to "swallow the ground" "with fierceness and rage" (Job 39:24). But Paul's is an essential core that *changes* even as it remains identifiable as one that doubts because it goes from doubting in a reductive, essentialist way to doubting in a more capacious, generous way. Paul O'Rourke *becomes* a "both/and" type of thinker by grappling with the tenets of Safek, and he does so as Grant Arthur's avatar, which is to say that what Paul becomes is also what allows Paul to reconcile with his becoming, to accept a change in outlook that coincides with a discovery about his Ulmish DNA even as his "nature" remains a constant from start to finish.

Ironically, Paul's biological identity as an Ulm goes hand in hand with his newfound belief in the Cantaveticles, just as his belief in the Cantaveticles provides excellent structure to the sorts of doubt (or beliefs-about) that Paul has *before* he self-identifies as an Ulm. Paul's initial doubts are, like those of Saladin Chamcha's, a function of his severance from a genealogical lineage that carries the promise of harmonic communal belonging, while his initiation into the Ulmish community validates those very doubts and even gives them a scriptural home. That Paul's severance from history is unwitting while Chamcha's is deliberate does not undo "the foremost heroism on display" in *both* novels and which *TRAAADH* expresses as doubt's availability to thinkers of any "kind." Belief-in need not be seen as the hardwiring of various identities, biological or otherwise. Neither Paul O'Rourke's defiance nor Ferris's "touching suggestion" that Paul-as-fox "might have an innate capacity to change" are as important as Ferris's vision of transcendence that relies on his invention of

genetically-confirmed Ulms in order to make the point that the *non*-genetically confirmed can "handle"

doubting sentences, too.

CHAPTER THREE

Emulating Scripture:
E. L. Doctorow's *City of God* and Adam Levin's *The Instructions*

Part One: Cracked Foundations

Once more, deconstruction merges with Nietzsche and, even more specifically, with the doctrine of God's death.
- Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*

…something is wrong—*as Genesis had already pointed out.*
- Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology*

In Adam Levin's *The Instructions* (2010), an intoxicating protagonist named Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee is a ten-year-old Jewish boy from Chicago who thinks that he might become the Messiah. The novel therefore dramatizes itself as Gurion's recorded scripture, and it opens with a "Blessings" section that includes a call to "forgive" Adonai for His "mistakes": "Because you know that Your mistakes, though a part of You, are nonetheless mistakes, we accept that Your mistakes, though Yours, are ours to repair." E.L. Doctorow's *City of God* (2000) makes a similar move when a priest converted from Episcopalianism to Reform Judaism prays aloud, "I think we must remake You. If we are to remake ourselves, we must remake You, Lord. We need a place to stand." While the language of repair has deep Kabbalistic roots in the Hebrew concept of *tikkun olam*, we see in contemporary American literature a radicalization of this tradition that exceeds Judaic mysticism and extends to philosophical foundationalisms more broadly. Drawing from these novels and a smattering of other contemporary American fictions (e.g., *Jitterbug Perfume* by Tom Robbins and *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski), this chapter explores *emulations of scripture* to think in critical, speculative realist, and even mystical terms about how human beliefs interact with non-human realities. A theoretical synthesis centering on the work of Kevin Hart provides a lens through which we see that these contemporary American novels update and intensify the notorious proclamation by Nietzsche's parabolic madman that "God is dead."

New, novelistic interpretations hold this cryptic aphorism to be less a rejection of God per se and more a rejection of "the metaphysicians and moralists" (Hart's phrase: 2004, 41) who use "God" as a sobriquet for "the totalizing perfection of a *chosen* ground" (my phrase): what's "dead" now is a correlationist adequation of *what is wanted* with *what actually is*. Resurrected from this death is realist speculation: *what might be.* To imagine imperfection but also potentiality into foundationalist traditions is to imagine discursive futures not governed by metaphysics or moralism, which is to imagine repairs to cracked foundations that extend from religious to political discourse. We need new ground – rather urgently, it turns out. A sober, speculative, mystical form of realism might just offer us firmer footing, "a place to stand," as suggested by novels that emulate scripture in order doubt metaphysical and moralist foundations.

From Arcadia to Ash Tree Lane: A Survey of Possible Grounds

"God is dead." The parabolic phrase "has become tired and doctrinaire," but a renewed appreciation for its pervasive influence in contemporary literature, along with its "largely forgotten" context refreshes it (Hart 2000, 279).[142] Hart reads it in light of the "competing reference points in epistemology, ethics, metaphysics and religion," not to mention that "it was spoken by a madman in search of God" and that it "is indebted to Hegel and others" (2000, 279), which leads him to consider what Nietzsche's character might have had in mind. One possibility is that Nietzsche's madman gives voice to Nietzsche's "testimony of atheism, his anguished cry that, alas, there is no God," although such a statement "is an odd kind of atheism, one in which God is held to have been alive once but has now passed away because of our lack of interest in him" (2004, 41). While I agree that such an atheism would be odd according to realist ontologies, the point might be simply that metaphysics

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[142] Though Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* was first published in 1989 by Cambridge University Press, I cite the 2000 edition from Fordham University Press in this essay because I prefer its inclusion of Hart's new "Introduction" to that volume.

succumbs to phenomenology, that human minds are the ultimate "realizers" even of such things as divinity, which would be less odd for subjective idealists, and less odd still for subjective idealists more invested in mindsets that are current and collective than they are static and individual.

Jitterbug Perfume (1984), a novel by Tom Robbins, explores the implications of a similar atheism by placing the mythological Pan in the unfortunate situation of being endangered by a dwindling human belief in his existence. I say "similar" because a transcendent monotheistic God is replaced here with an immanent pagan god, but each deity suffers the same fate according to the same mechanism. Pan's cameo serves rhetorically to underscore the infusion of Greek metaphysics into medieval Christian theology. Another character, Alobar is a medieval king who has discovered an anti-aging technique and lives centuries beyond a normal lifespan. One of Alobar's quests is to transfer Pan safely from one epoch[143] to the next, but the difficulty he encounters is precisely the oddity that "our lack of interest in him" is killing Pan. A prophetic nymph called Lalo[144] (sister of Echo) explains to Alobar that Pan "lives only so long as men believe in him" (1984, 184), and further, that such belief is born of necessity:

> "A warning," snapped Lalo, who at that moment sounded more like a Fury than a nymph. "Thou must never wax smug or arrogant about they influence upon the divine. If thou didst create gods, it was because thou *needest* them. The need must have been very great indeed, to inspire such a complex, difficult, and magnificent undertaking. Now, many art the men who think they no longer needeth Pan. They have created new gods, this Jesus Christ and his alleged papa, and they think that their

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[143] While I am using "epoch" here to mean "era," Hart's clarification of the Heideggerian usage, in which "epoch" derives from "*epoché*" to signify "a moment of withholding" (2000, 76-77) comes into play toward the middle of this chapter as I demonstrate how the two senses converge in *The Instructions*. Hart pulls from Heidegger's *Early Greek Thinking* (1975, 26): "As it reveals itself in beings, Being withdraws." This line has powerful resonance for much of this essay's thinking, including how my working through ontotheology leads me to the Heideggerian-derived object-oriented ontologies of Graham Harman and, by extension, Timothy Morton, the latter of which lends itself to mystical speculations – particularly Morton's paraphrase of Kierkegaard, which is that "it is not possible for us to attain the perfect stance toward God" (*Hyperobjects* 154).

[144] A Lalo-Honua features in Hawaiian mythology as the first woman, a sort of Eve figure.

new creations will suffice, but let me assurest thee that Christ and his father, as important as they may be, are no substitutes for Pan. The need for Pan is still great in humanity, and thou ignoreth it at thy peril." (1984, 184-185)

In an insightful foundationalist twist, Alobar doubts Lalo's augury of Pan's imminent demise by connecting *metaphysical* dots: "Surely he shan't succumb. Pan is in this land, in its crags, in its cataracts, its winds, its meadows, its hidden places, he can never go from the land, he will be here always, as long as the land is" (1984, 184). Just as, according to philosophical realism, the actual, physical ground of planet Earth is independent of Alobar's (or anyone's) mind, so are the divinities upon which even the (earthly) ground itself is (metaphysically) grounded. Pan is portrayed here as a grounding figure: an immanent figure yes, but also a transcendental one insofar as Pan's immanence is predicated on a permanent presence that extends to…himself.

Equally insightful is Lalo's response, because instead of correcting Alobar in a move that would disconnect the actual ground of the land from the metaphysical ground of a divine and extramental Pan, she keeps the figuring ground and the grounding figure tethered to each other, and she grounds those ground-figures on an even higher, phenomenological foundation of human consciousness. Lalo tells Alobar that he is

"correct, Pan doth be in the land, he and the wildwoods are part of one another, but thou art mistaken when thou implieth that the land doth last eternal. There be a time coming when the land itself be threatened with destruction; the groves, the streams, the very sky, not merely here in Arkadia but wildwoods the world over…"

"Inconceivable," muttered Alobar.

"If Pan be alloweth to die, if belief in him totally decomposes, then the land, too, wilt die. It will be murdered by disrespect, just as Pan is murdered." (185)

Alobar looks around him, taking in the idylls of a pastoral, pre-industrial landscape (albeit an agrilogistical one) that "seemed so inviolable that he could not entertain the notion of its vulnerability, and he said as much to Lalo" (1984, 185). Lalo reverses Alobar's reasoning such that conceiving of Pan as ground for the land (and not the other way around) is metaphysically cogent, but it is as disturbingly difficult to think as it is metaleptic precisely because Arkadia and Pan – world and character, ground and figure – trade roles.[145] Failing to conceive, or to entertain certain notions is, of course, exactly what Lalo warns against. The irony lies in Lalo's wisdom that whatever Alobar *fails* to hold in his mind will involve consequences every bit as real as those that follow from his *apprehension* of Pan, from what his mind *realizes*. The interpretation in which a divinity "held to have been alive once but has now passed away because of our lack of interest in him" is a counterintuitive foundationalism, even as it turns extramentality on its head. If the statement appears at first to be anti-foundationalist, that's because the transcendent ground of an eternal God is switched first for a belief-dependent Pan, and then for the immanent ground of fleeting human consciousness and textured with a Cartesian consistency.

The second interpretation that Hart offers as a way of reading "God is dead" is that "it could be a gnomic way of suggesting that genuine belief in the Bible has faded in modern times and that, while people still go to church, they live as though the transcendent world no longer had any determining power over them" (2004, 41). Hart calls it a better option than the first because it entails "the weaker claim that Christian morality has become so compromised, so hypocritical, that Christians themselves act as though there is no God," rather than "the strong assertion that the eternal God no longer exists" (2004, 41). In this interpretation, Hart un-grounds reality from human consciousness and re-grounds it in an extramental elsewhere, thereby giving minoritized expression to a metaphysical

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[145] In "Ontoflecting through U2" (2021), I sketch a method of "diffractive reading" (Karen Barad's Donna Haraway inspired-term) in which ground-figure reversals allow us to appreciate multiple properties of texts in keeping with the analogy that light can be observed as a wave *or* as a particle.

version of philosophical realism, and to the possibility that this version is an upgrade to phenomenology that speculative realists have been calling for recently.[146] That many others who answer that call do so with immanence and atheism only affirms that the call itself resonates with a diversity of important thinkers, that the disparate approaches taken by these thinkers indicate a unity in terms of where to focus critical attention. Another unifier is that such realism in the service of philosophical upgrading almost always comes bundled with epistemological crisis, regardless of which approach is taken. The monotheistic-transcendentalist version of the crisis takes the following form: If belief aims at truth, and if God remains a reality even as belief in Him fades, then belief's accuracy fades with it, which is why realists should want a corrective *belief about belief* (per Morton: 2013, 155) that I call doubt. "God is dead" here indicates an epistemological crisis that is really an intuitive crisis, if, as Ridvan Askin has it, following Deleuze, "intuition aims at reality's direct apprehension by the soul" (2016, 128). Askin makes this comment in his reading of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999), a novel that he pairs with Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), among others, for speculative realist purposes because they each experiment with the unknowability of ultimate foundations.

In his reading of *House of Leaves*, Askin posits God as a house with no foundation: "our house is God," writes the protagonist, Will Navidson, in a letter to his wife Karen (2000, 390). The letter comes in the wake of Navidson's obsessive explorations of "the labyrinthine void permeating the novel's titular house, revealing that there is literally nothing at its foundation. The labyrinth *is* the

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[146] Graham Harman, for instance, in *Skirmishes* (2020), finds affinity with Tom Sparrow in their "agreement that phenomenology is something to cherish, then vigorously critique, then leave behind for something else" (19).

house's unground" (2016, 154).[147] The house's foundation of nothingness[148] is, for Askin, to be understood according to baroque Deleuzian folds comprising a maze of virtuality and actuality, of difference and repetition, of repetition with a difference, of swarming darkness, of an ontological uncertainty driven by the very "repetition and transformation" (2016, 166) of which an echo – and Echo[149] – is emblematic: "– there is a reason that the myth of Echo and Narcissus is an episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – for an echo is never identical to the echoed and only ever repeats differentially, a point that is both stressed in and responsible for driving the very myth itself. Echo is governed by difference" (2016, 166). Echo's emergence in *House of Leaves*, Askin argues, works as the preeminent groundless figure, a presence folded back on herself with nothing underneath her.

To establish her as consummate groundlessness, however, Echo needs to be inverted, since echoes depend on originary sounds from prior sources (other figures serving as first principles; other figures serving allegorically as grounds), and because resonance (re-sonating, re-sounding) depends on something with which to re-sonate – something else "in the vicinity," Morton might say (2013, 173). Lalo, Echo's sister from *Jitterbug Perfume*, is likely a proto-Eve, an ur-Eve, a sonant first woman. In *House of Leaves*, we are reminded that Echo is "*the daughter of the divine voice*" (2000, 44), rendering Echo (and therefore Lalo, too, according to Robbins) "an offspring of God's voice" (2016, 167). And because myth is "the dwelling place of Echo" – Echo's house, so to speak – *House of Leaves* sets up so that God is "projected as the grand narrator composing and telling the story of being… Literature (or

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[147] Askin connects "labyrinth" to "double hatchet" in a way that captures its ambi-valence; that is, its two-way strength: "That in *House of Leaves* this fundament is a labyrinth is no coincidence. Etymologically, labyrinth derives from the Greek word for double hatchet as it originally denotes the 'palace of the double hatchet.' … The double hatchet becomes the symbol for the labyrinth's doublings and bifurcations, *and* their cutting through and differentiation of the unity and stability of the surface house" (2016, 154). That a hatchet's valence can be double (/*ambi-*) maps satisfyingly onto the ambivalence of cleaving given that *a hatchet cleaves*. The trope of labyrinth – or, maze – is also put to use by Mark C. Taylor in his anti-foundationalist theorizing of "a postmodern a/theology" in *Erring*, particularly in the seventh chapter called "Mazing Grace" (1984, 149-169).

[148] Specifically, meontic nothingness as opposed to oukontic nothingness (Morton following Tillich following Kant/Hegel).

[149] Instead of the Minotaur, confined to King Minos's Labyrinth on Crete, who may be the more expected figure to emerge in a fiction with a labyrinth at its center.

myth) then becomes the expression of the Creator, the transformed and transformative incarnation of the creative powers of God" (2016, 167).

Were this the full account (that is, were the narrative indeed "grand," and thus totalizing per Lyotard's coinage of "grand narrator"), Askin reckons that Mark C. Taylor's ontotheological interpretation of *House of Leaves* in *Rewiring the Real* (2013) would be confirmed, which is to say that an absolute and transcendent ground subtending Echo subtending mythological literature subtending Danielewski's novel and the novel's cosmology would be discernible as totalizing presence, as a "presence which absolutely originates or terminates" *House of Leaves* as "a sign-system," to use Hart's language (2004, 23). For Taylor, the Internet performs this totalizing, and thus metaphysical, function (2013, 155; qtd. in Askin: 2016, 153). Yes: we have gone from "God is dead" to "God is human consciousness" to "God is unknowable" to "God is a house with no foundation" to "God is networked information"[150] (Askin notes at the start of his chapter that most studies of *House of Leaves* center their analyses on digital and media studies). But Askin maintains that Taylor's is not the full account: by showing that "*the daughter of the divine voice*" is itself John Hollander's echo (from *The Figure of Echo*) of Henry Reynold's echo (from *Mythomystes*) of Ovid's echo (from *The Metamorphoses*), and then back again the other direction, through the squiggling corridors of the novel's citational networks, Askin teases out the novel's inversion of Echo, the novel's echoing of Echo, its meta-echo that

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[150] Foundationalist groundings in informatics broadly and in the Internet narrowly are not as idiosyncratic as they may first appear. Nolen Gertz, in *Nihilism and Technology*, identifies Google as "God 2.0" (2018, 201) before going on to proclaim that "Google is dead" (Chapter 9, pp. 195-214). In *Nerd Ecology*, Anthony Lioi discovers similar dynamics at work in Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) as well as in the Wachowskis' *Matrix* trilogy, where "the visual language of the films is dominated by computer code, especially the signature cascade of digits that adepts can see behind the Matrix, and the nerd skill of coding attains heroic proportions" (2013, 105). This "signature cascade of digits that adepts can see" sits *behind* the Matrix in the same way that God sits *behind* scripture – not as that which is represented by the medium, but as that which finds expression in the medium (Askin). We know too that such informatic grounds as those subtending the Matrix, or the "virtual refuge" in *Bleeding Edge*, can have cracked foundations, since "glitches" in the code lead to things like déjà vu for figures (viz., Neo) treading informatic ground. Hayles, too, discusses "the perceived primacy of information over materiality" in "The Condition of Virtuality" (1997, 186), a cultural condition that I've engaged extensively in combination with her thoughts on "what lies beyond the exponentially expanding infosphere" from *How We Think* (2012, 183). In Hayles, the privileging of information over materiality is the result of the mistaken cultural perception that information is transcendent and can lead to immortality, another symptom of belief collapsing into desire.

somehow escapes being a grand-echo. In doing so, Askin shoves Taylor into a free fall of infinite regress[151] (into a maze?) to arrive at a "God is Narrative" formulation, to be taken in the Nietzschean vernacular to mean that Narrative itself is now the highest ground:

> Ultimately, *House of Leaves* emphasizes that it is constituted by echoes all the way down. In this vein, the divine voice whose daughter is Echo is dispersed as the fractured immanent principle of echo rather than a transcendent commanding higher source. There is no narrator-God located outside the narrative orchestrating the spinning of the tale. Rather, narrative voice, multiplied and diffracted, while generating the story always remains immanent to it. Indeed, there is nothing but the unfolding of narration – of morphosis and metamorphosis. Accordingly, the above relation between God and Echo is explicitly reversed two pages further on: while the *Mythomystes* characterizes echo as the offspring of and thus as determined by the divine voice, "divinity" now "seems defined by Echo." It is in this fashion that *House of Leaves* explicitly projects narrative as metaphysical while avoiding the lapse into onto-theology. (2016, 167-168)

In reading *House of Leaves* as grounded in an unground of sourceless echoes reverberating in endless differential repetition off maze walls, Askin challenges the n+1 logic premised on Morton's notion that "irony is the echo of a mysterious presence" (2013, 173). Read anew in the light shone by Askin, Morton's definition of irony appears not only as a foundationalist one, but perhaps even as divinely

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[151] Or: Taylor throws himself off Askin's ledge, since he too "argues that difference is the novel's guiding principle. However, Taylor's difference is that of Derrida [not Deleuze]. For Taylor, the novel thus constantly defers: the real, meaning, signification, the center, and so on. In his reading, *House of Leaves* instantiates elusiveness as such, thus merely intimating what remains essentially unrepresentable. Difference here comes to mark the fundamental gap between human representation and the impenetrable, divine other. In the final run, Taylor's reading is thoroughly anti-metaphysical, cementing the gap between physics and metaphysics, a gap that can only be bridged by a leap of faith. He thus willingly cedes the space of metaphysics to theology. In what follows, [Askin] will show that nothing of the sort can be attributed to *House of Leaves*. Rather than cementing the gap between two realms, it folds physics and metaphysics into one another, thus thoroughly eradicating God. *House of Leaves* is an atheist's house" (2016, 176 fn. 1). I'm less partisan as I don't recognize these caricatured versions of difference to be mutually exclusive; in fact, I see them implicating each other. Difference *between* realms enables the possibilities of metalepsis, while difference *within* realms enables ontologies of competing characteristics: Derridean *différance*.

inspired foundationalism: irony is *the daughter of the divine voice*, says Hollander. Hollander's divine voice comports with Morton's mysterious presence, certainly. Echo is governed by difference, says Askin. Synthesizing, we might conjecture that an echo is ironic, and that "mysterious presence" is really difference itself. If so, then God is difference, and He repeats. Foundation pluralizes into a thousand differently repeating plateaus acting as pedestals to elevate an ironic Echo. Echo is raised up here, from spritely woodland nymph, a figure traversing Arcadian grounds, to Goddess who, like Pan, is *in* the land – mainly in hauntingly acoustic caves or in Gothic American houses.

Askin argues convincingly that Danielewski inverts Echo such that she ceases to be the offspring of any divine voice or mysterious presence. Like her sister Lalo, or Eve, or Morrison's Pilate from *Song of Solomon* (1977), this inverted Echo has no belly button, no trace of origin. Sonance, repeating with inverted difference, comes now with a built-in negation per Hart's rehearsal of Derridean "erasure and palænomy": ǝɔuɐuosǝɟ. Without any divine voice or mysterious presence from which to have sprung, Echo either assumes her own metaphysical authority through narrative textuality, or else she dissolves in a meaningless flux of floating and flickering signifiers, forever adrift in a "fractured immanence" devoid of transcendentalist harbors, forever trapped in unlit labyrinths atop those thousand plateaus which are now fully ungrounded. In the film *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron (2009), the native Navi of the planet Pandora refer to (what humans call) the Hallelujah Mountains as *Ayram alusìng*, meaning "floating mountains," a plurality of ungrounded grounds. Dispensing with metaphysical authority in favor of immanent dissolution, Askin's reading of an inverted Echo is also an inversion of Morton's n+1 levels of signification, and it brings us to something like a 1-n logic: "precisely by decentering and dispersing any notion of authority, be it authorial or narratorial," the divine voice/mysterious presence *drops out* of the equation. A 1-n logic obtains when Echo is no longer *of* a mysterious presence, when her house (mythology) built over a

maze amounts to a house hovering over meontic nothingness. This 1-n logic might be just as potent as Morton's n+1 logic of irony, not to mention a novel approach to *negative* theology.

A non-metaphysical or anti-foundationalist theology is most uncomfortable with just n: it wants to add to or subtract (from) whatever presence – Aristotelian Prime Mover or its immanent equivalent – is traditionally seen as responsible for initiating irony and echo, to problematize that presence as something inherently *textual* and *mysterious*. To supplement, or to de-base, n is precisely to recognize it as mysterious text that fluctuates waveringly, like a Necker cube: it pops to certain readers as totality, to others as nothingness, and somewhere between those two perspectives is what Arthur Kroker, in *Exits to the Posthuman Future*, calls "figural aesthetics" (2014, epilogue). This might explain why, "in the course of his discussion of echo," another character from *House of Leaves*, Zampanò, quotes John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Danielewski 45; Askin 168). It's not just an anti-foundationalist, de-basing, postmodernist, nihilistic anti-scripture of a novel that (un)grounds ultimate presence in textuality, diffracting narrative (figure) as Narrative (ground), it's also canonical *scripture itself* that (un)grounds whatever mysterious presence that stands behind it into the Word. Scripture appears to be the urtextual mode that collapses that which *was with* God into just that which *was* God (past tense!), diffracting word (figure) as Word (ground), vitiating any representationalist function we might otherwise associate with it. Originary sound and echo merge and split; they cleave; they *are* each other just as they *are with* each other; they are both blades of the hatchet whose cuts are the drafting of a labyrinth (see fn. 147), whose cuts *are*, in fact, virtuality.[152] Hatchet cuts are between themselves as materiality and virtuality are *between*

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[152] Prior to having read Askin, I drew from Elizabeth Grosz's notion of virtuality, in *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, as "the strangeness of writing, of inscription" (2001, 77) to make my first argument for textual materialism in "Remapping the Present," which first appeared in 2014. Askin comes to the same conclusion without recourse to Grosz, or anyone: "It is noteworthy," he claims, that a particular passage in *House of Leaves*, in which the house on Ash Tree Lane "keeps shaking and shuddering" and in which "the black ash of below, spreads like printer's ink over everything" (2000, 345), "directly link[s] the activity of the virtual with that of writing, a link that is established more than once" (2016, 158). To say that the hatchet's cuts *are* virtuality is also to equate writing with (agential) cutting, à la Karen Barad.

themselves, an idea that surfaces in Jeffrey Kripal's *The Serpent's Gift* (2007, 125), and which Morton attends to in *Dark Ecology* (2016, 155-156). Maybe the mysterious thing about mysterious presence is that it is so mysteriously virtual, so maddeningly present without being local, so ontologically *other* than the world that it inhabits (like an avatar) – observations that seem to hold for n+1 as well as 1-n logics, for Deleuzian as well as Derridean difference.

If so, then we arrive finally at Hart's third and final suggestion.[153] Here, Nietzsche's "formula" that God is dead "has little or nothing to do with religious belief and is, rather, an elliptical way of saying that there is no absolute ground that will support our longing for the truth" (2004, 41), which is to say that belief's aim is errant not so much because it is "off the mark" as because there's no "true" mark to be "off" of in the first place. In this interpretation, Nietzsche prefigures Foucault's dissolution of truth claims and transcendent foundations, or conversely, the resolution of "regimes of truth" with immanent and discursive structures of power/knowledge. "If this interpretation is correct," Hart continues, "Nietzsche is not offering a dismissive comment on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but is rejecting the God of the metaphysicians and moralists" (2004, 41), those who supply the normative apologetics that predetermine what counts as a bullseye, those who subjugate the discourse of n to ecclesial and theological purpose. Nietzsche's rejection, here, is a kind of doubt that is directed toward a form of foundationalism that postmodernism attacks relentlessly, but postmodernism seems to have forgotten that the doubt springs less from certainties concerning atheistic immanence and more from proto-posthumanist speculations that foundations might just exist differently than we realize, or differently than we (try to) enforce.

We should pause here to appreciate how remarkable it is that the most radically anti-foundationalist way of interpreting Nietzsche is also the one in which Ridvan Askin and St. John the

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[153] This tripartition of interpretive possibilities is a condensed version, from Hart's *Postmodernism* (2004) of the four possibilities offered in *Trespass of the Sign* (2000, 40-41).

Apostle, son of Zebedee, converge. Neither Askin nor John espouse *total* nihilisms, even if the former leans strongly in that direction.[154] God may or may not be, but unless we accept the complicity that comes with acting as gatekeepers of discourse, we should doubt whether our longings have anything to do with answering the *question* (Deleuze's "?-being" works perfectly, here[155]), let alone whether we have any *moralistic* bearing on ?-being's personality. Metalepsis goes both ways: "mysterious presence," whatever it is, gets sucked into textual orbit, but it also gets blown back into inarticulable cosmological wonderment. The movement from *was with* to *was* reverses, so that *was* morphs back into *was with*, and the Word ungrounds as word, as the echo of whatever mysteriously and originally speaks it. That's how metalepsis works, after all: it is ontological crossover and doubling in action. Deleuzian folding and the trope of the labyrinth capture it well; internal difference extrapolates well to Derridean *différance*. ?-being is a way of taking what Plato calls the Idea and opening it up the possibility that "the Idea" is not *necessarily* coextensive with "the good."

Clearly, variations on the "God is dead" motif abound: God is dead, gods will die if unplugged from the life-support of human consciousness, God is unknowable, God is an information superhighway. God dissolves into His own textual-creative expressions and then reconstitutes from them. Intriguingly, such variations abound just as much for metaphysicians and moralists as they do for doubters and Nietzschean nihilists: God is absolute transcendence, God is totalizing, God is untrespassing, untrespassed, untrespassable. My point is largely that the temperament that doubts the metaphysicians and moralists is a pool of reflection for the Narcissists who love a God created in their own images, a God born of their normative desires, sculpted like an idol to fulfill their wishes for identity – for identities in which certain *kinds* of belief are desirable. When Nietzsche's madman says

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154 At a workshop in Ghent, Belgium, spearheaded by Marco Caracciolo as a part of his NARMESH initiative ("Narrating the Mesh": https://narmesh.ugent.be/), I had Askin sign my copy of his *Narrative and Becoming*. The inscription, barely legible, reads: "In remembrance of unleashing negativity and nihilism in Ghent!"
155 See Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1994, 76-77) for a definition of "?-being" as a primary question at the heart of Being, or Platonic Idea; qtd. in Askin (2016, 160-161).

we have killed God, he becomes an inverted Echo, repeating an ecclesial and theological Narcissus, but with a difference. To announce God's death is to fold metaphysics and morality baroquely, to put Deleuzian creases through absolutism and transcendence, to invert Echo by repeating what comes first ("God is is is…") rather than what comes last ("…outside of time and space ace ace"), to start with an open-ended question mark ("?-being") rather than to end with a conversation-ending and totalizing period. Hart's Nietzsche reminds the metaphysicians and the moralists that their interpretations involving grand narratives may "appeal to scripture but do not arise from it" (2004, 115). What God is is is, is still open to speculation, not just in spite of scriptural words, but actually *according to* the Word. Doubt encourages and even impels us to repeat that "God is…" in different ways, to fill in the elliptical blank with anything ranging from *absolutely transcendent* to *dead*, and everything between. God is…"shuffling his feet" (Crash Test Dummies), "not short of cash, mister" (U2's Bono), or suffering from a bad case of dandruff (Rushdie's Ooparvala). God, like Nietzsche, speaks in mysterious parables. God is is is… Questions as to whether God be "multiform, plural, representing union-by-hybridization of such opposites as *Oopar* and *Neechay*, or whether [God] be pure, stark, extreme" were not to be "resolved" in *The Satanic Verses* (1988, 329), but they will be considered here.

In fact, that which does arise from scripture might be closer to immanence-oriented realisms than to transcendentalist idealisms. Hart points out that

> If you begin reading the Bible looking for transcendence, you will quickly find
> obstacles placed in your path by the text itself. No sooner have you reached Genesis
> 1:2 than you will encounter a massive one. For the Bible tells us that God fashioned
> the world from that which was "without form and void" (*tohu vabohu*) and from a
> primal ocean, "the deep" (*tehom*). He did not create everything out of nothing,
> according to this verse, and no passage later in scripture explicitly contradicts this view.

The traditional image of God whose transcendence is so absolute that he creates the heavens and the earth *ex nihilo* is not biblical but theological. (*Postmodernism* 116)

Likewise, if you begin reading the Hebrew Bible looking for a strict and consistent monotheism, you will quickly find that the text overtly presents the Jews as polytheists. Martien Halvorson-Taylor rehearsed this point as a well-accepted truism of contemporary religious studies in a guest appearance at the World Religions, World Literature proseminar at the University of Virginia in February of 2019, describing it as a "fascinating" aspect of Hebrew scripture. In *The Satanic Verses*, we get a good look at what it means for Rushdie to read the Qur'an against the hegemonically monotheistic grain. *People* died *because of this*. Yet the overwhelming consensus is that the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible are both held to be exemplary for their espousals of transcendent monotheism. That's an interpretative phenomenon, to be sure – a complicated series of ecclesial and theological developments that appeal to scripture, but that do not arise from it (to echo Hart, but not differently and without inverting him).

My next step is to explore Adam Levin's *The Instructions* as part of my attempt to think through the reparative logic of scripture, to borrow Peter Och's terminology.[156] What does it say that novelists like Levin (and Doctorow[157]) seek spiritual repairs by emulating scripture? An answer to this question relies on a movement from a wariness of metaphysically inflected moral interpretations to an appreciation for the possibility that reality might just be a *fractured* immanence, independent of and oblivious to our categorical imperatives. And because a fractured immanence also fractures the dialectic counterpointing a perfect transcendence, it opens speculative space for a fractured transcendence, too – for a *less than* moralistic divinity, a *cracked* foundation.

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[156] In *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture* (1998), Peter Ochs develops a "scriptural pragmatism" that operates according to what Nicholas Adams (2008), in his excellent introduction to the work of Ochs, describes as "reparative reasoning," which is "not like transcendental philosophy or empiricism" (452). The reparative reasoning of scriptural pragmatism, then, lends itself to Hart's notion of a non-metaphysical theology.

[157] In *City of God* (2000), Pem confides to his father-in-law, Everett, that "part of [his] thinking" (in terms of his pronouncement that we must "remake" God) "is in the nature of making spiritual reparations" (258).

Part Two: Loops of Damage

I no longer want to study mystical literature. I now want to write it.
-   Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift*

Pem took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. He said now almost in a whisper: "But as it is, I think we must remake You. If we are to remake ourselves, we must remake You, Lord. We need a place to stand…"
-   The Reverend Dr. Thomas Pemberton from E.L. Doctorow's *City of God*

Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, King of the Universe, Who selected us from all the scholars and gave us *The Instructions* and the Gurionic War. Bless You, Adonai, Giver of the second kind of damage. We want only to fix You.
-   Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee, author of *Blessings of* The Instructions *and the Gurionic War* in Adam Levin's *The Instructions*

"Hashem Is Not Perfect"

Ten year-old Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee sets out to write scripture with the thought that he *might* be the *potential* messiah. He claims no knowledge of *being* the messiah (except in potentiality); rather, he allows that he might *become* the messiah. Such a becoming is intimately connected with his writing: what it is, what it might become. In this respect, *The Instructions* is not eternal in the way that the Qur'an is thought by its adherents to be eternal. Gurion's scripture takes time to develop, and once developed, it does not make any retroactive moves to build eternity into its program; its black ink does not pretend to correspond to an *eternally* white parchment but rather to a white parchment that is itself spatially and temporally bound. When he "started writing scripture," he began his Blessings with "There is love. There was always love, and there will be more love, forever. Were there ever to be less love, we would all be at war, and Your angels would learn suffering" (2010, 366). We recognize this as a proto-Blessings or an ur-Blessings,[158] since we can turn straight to the front of the book and read that "There is damage. There was always damage and there will be more damage, but not always. Were there always to be more damage, damage would be an aspect of perfection. We would all be angels, one-legged and faceless, seething with endless, hopeless praise" (2010, Blessings).

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[158] Proto- and ur- here tacking very loosely onto "first draft," or that which "came first," à la Sookhart's "theory" that Cantonment 42 of the Cantaveticles is a "first draft" of Job in *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* by Joshua Ferris (2014, 236).

Gurion, writer of holy scripture, realizes a *wrongness* in his initial draft, and his reflection that he "was mistaken" becomes a part of the overall rewrite (492). Gurion is not editing his previous work to give the appearance that he always had it right (as dissertation writers and contributors to *The New Centennial Review* do), which means not only that his final product contains a non-metaphysical concept of divinity, but also that the final product showcases the process, thereby exposing the need for emendation. *The Instructions* does not bill Gurion's scripture as some perfect(ed) mode of writing. Gurion comes to see an unbound love, with its metaphysical "always" and "forever," as simply untrue. Though he believed at first that those first three lines were the "[r]ight three lines," he later revises and points us to "[t]he right ones [that] follow the table of contents, 496 pages ago" (492). Readers see the composition process as it unfolds, and Gurion keeps us up to date with timestamps as to when certain revisions are made. For instance, at one point he informs us that he "hadn't even swapped love for damage yet, let alone made forever not always" (492), so when we arrive finally at the point *chronologically* that he makes the revision (two nights later), we are already several hundred pages past his admission that he had been mistaken. It would be too soft to read Gurion as just refraining from editing out mistakes; indeed, he goes out of his way to call attention to his mistakes and revisions.

In swapping "love for damage" and "making forever not always," Gurion's eventual revision clearly echoes his first draft in an inverted, non-metaphysical fashion. Both love and perfection are compromised by the prospect of damage (eternal or not); an end to damage *is* hopeful, but it is also an *end* to what "there is," currently. While love may be recuperated as a future blessing, that future will not be without beginning. Love, if that's what damage becomes, will not *have had totalized* time per metaphysics; if the goal is to convey truth, then current damage renders the past perfect a false conjugation, especially from the point of view of a future love in which current damage is future love's imperfect past. "Epoch," and Hart's treatment of it (see fn. 143), comes to mind: an epoch of damage precedes an epoch of love, not just as an era of love, but as a (?-)Being withdrawn in revelation (to

blend the Deleuzian with the Heideggerian). Gurion the ontological realist ends up writing what he considers to be scriptural even though it casts Adonai as mistaken and in need of both repair and forgiveness as early as this Blessings section:

> Some damage is destructive, and other damage, through destruction, repairs. It is often impossible, especially while the damage is being brought, to distinguish between the one kind and the other, but because You've made scholars who know of the distinction, we fight to forgive You. Because You know that Your mistakes, though a part of You, are nonetheless mistakes, we accept that Your mistakes, though Yours, are ours to repair. (2010, Blessings)

As is clear even from this early extratextual moment, *The Instructions* prioritizes "scholars" who know of distinctions. Gurion's realism manifests throughout the narration as a hard preference for scholarship over apologetics; that is, for *a distinction* in which his preference for recognizing the difference between *what scripture says* and *what we* want *scripture to say*, which, for someone who takes scripture as truth, boils down to *what is* and *what we* hope *is* (re-translatable as *what we* want). We may call this a distinction-enabling distinction (meta-distinction), a difference re-cognizer. We may also call it something like honesty, or at least a prioritization of attempting honesty (though I doubt that apologists consider themselves to be dishonest in their *arguments for*). Gurion internalizes his identity as a scholar poignantly, such as when we see him cry after his father calls him an apologist, because "by calling [him] an apologist, [Judah] was calling [him] a bad scholar" (155). Bad scholarship, to Gurion, is precisely the failure to distinguish between what is and what is hoped for, or between types of damage, which are specific instances of failing to distinguish more broadly.

A crucial distinction for Gurion's commitment to realist interpretation of scripture is revealed (with all the scriptural valence of that word) just before his father unwittingly insults him by calling him an apologist. In an argument about justice in the magnificent "Story of Stories," Gurion tells his

lawyer father that "[j]ustice is not for tyrants to define," which leads to a series of trickle-down distinctions. In response to Gurion's quip, Judah retorts, "No," justice is not for tyrants to define, "just for tyrannical gods [to define]" (153). The ensuing dialogue establishes Gurion's mystical non-metaphysicality, which is predicated on distinguishing between Hashem as "not tyrannical" vs. Hashem as "perfect." Gurion answers his father's line about tyrannical gods:

> Hashem is not tyrannical.
>
> "He made a world full of tyrants, a world short on justice."
>
> He made the only world we know.
>
> "But how can you believe He is perfect, Gurion? How can you believe His Law is perfect? How can you call an all-powerful being who makes a world where there is rape and there is murder? Will you tell me he works in mysterious ways? Have I raised a Christian child?
>
> Hashem is not perfect, [Gurion] said, and I've never said He was perfect. I said, He is not all-powerful, either. I said, Only His Law is perfect. His Law and His intentions.
>
> "Isn't that blasphemy? You make Him sound like a person."
>
> [Gurion] said, No person can make a universe, or destroy one; he can at best repair it, and at worst he can damage it. And when I say that Hashem is not all-powerful, I am not saying He isn't more powerful than us—He *is* more powerful than us; He's the *most* powerful. And when I say He isn't perfect, I am not saying He isn't *good*—He *is* good. He is at least as good as we are. It is because He is good, and because He is so powerful, that He has the potential to become as perfect as His Law. He *helped you*, Aba. Why can't you see that?"

> My dad pulled hard on his cigarette and I could not tell if smoke made him
>
> squint, or disappointment. (153)

Judah and Gurion ben-Judah operate in different cognitive modes. Judah is a smart man and a successful lawyer, yet it is his precocious ten-year-old son who demonstrates the ability to distinguish between non-tyranny and perfection, between not being all powerful but nevertheless being the *most* powerful, between goodness and perfection, between perfect Law, perfect intentions to fulfill the Law and a potential to become as perfect as Law and intentions. And it is Gurion who recognizes that potentiality as a condition of being entails the possibility of becoming.

That Gurion's smart and successful father collapses non-tyranny into straw-man perfection at a theological level may strike some readers as an ungenerous portrayal, and my own suspicion is that that impression is likely to be the doxastic reflex of those who agree with Judah. Sadly, this means that it is now time to confront the world: the inheritance of our dichotomous culture is a call to answer metaphysics definitively. Definitive answers take the form of adherence to, or wholesale rejection of, an all-or-nothing God. When it comes to God, metaphysics is the proposition, and a Judah-like response to that proposition is a facile reductionism, an all-too-representative conclusion to the problems of injustice in a world full of damage. Meanwhile, apologists hardly fare any better[159] as they shoehorn the injustices of a world teeming with damage into a cosmology beyond intelligibility. These worldviews are the ones that we find ourselves running into every single day: there is, or isn't, systemic racism; George Floyd was, or wasn't, brutally murdered; masks are, or aren't, effective; an election was, or wasn't, stolen; global warming is, or isn't, real (and even if it is real, it is, or isn't, caused by humans who are, or aren't, participants in ecologies that do, or don't, matter). Lines are drawn, flags are planted, movements are spawned, counter-movements react. Discursive terrain is carved up and

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[159] Mark Schaefer (2018), reading theologians such as Paul Tillich and Martin Buber, makes the point that many atheists and fundamentalists share the same totalizing views of religion insofar as they each literalize the metaphors of scripture and thus mistake figurative language for the likeness that it tries to convey (72, 96, 100, passim).

sold off while mystics search for a place to stand and quietists forego even that. What Morton describes as an "Easy Think Substance" in *Dark Ecology* just goes down so much more smoothly than its *ousia* alternatives, like Difficult Think Properties or (following David Wiggins) Difficult Think "Sortals" that challenge the binarist fantasies of metaphysical perfection.

The Maimon**e**des Effect

In "The Kinetic Principles of Your A and H," Gurion explains the dynamic between attention (A) and hyperactivity (H), including how one's A can become disordered (D'd). Written in a detention that he serves for his fight with a schoolmate nick-named Asparagus, Gurion sketches a mathematical explanation for his hyperactivity as well as that of his friend Benji. Drawing on "An Ultimately Doomed, However Momentarily Useful, Analogy" (415-416), Gurion acknowledges the limits of figurative language while also theorizing in farcical fluency that hyperactivity indicates the fragments of God that must be present in hyperactive children. These fragments of God manifesting in this way are "A Blessing," and they counteract a "very sad kind of math" that would obtain without said Blessing – namely an entropic diffusion of attention such that "you could never concentrate again" (416). Though the written assignment epitomizes the preposterous verbosity of a hyper-fluent and preternaturally articulate boy who thinks of himself as a potential messiah, it nevertheless works toward Gurion's mystical depictions of God even as it forfeits serious credibility. Perhaps the assignment is done in jest as a way of sticking it to Botha[160] and the other "robots" (Gurion's nomenclature for teachers at Aptikisic), or perhaps Gurion is just having fun while showing off. Either way, his conclusion feeds into his serious scholarship that undercuts metaphysical apologetics:

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[160] P.W. Botha, aka *Die Groot Krokodil* (The Big Crocodile), was an Afrikaans enforcer of Apartheid; it is possible that he serves as an analogue to Levin's fictional Botha. The regime of Apartheid bolsters the analogy, just as "the cage" that he monitors lends itself to a Foucauldian analysis of panopticism.

> Unlike God, You are not all God (although God is not all of God, all of God is God: where much of You is made of something else like blood and bones and muscle, He has nothing but Him; He is only God minus the pieces of Himself that are inside of us) so You cannot remain hyper for all too long. (417)

"God minus the pieces of Himself that are inside of us" articulates a non-metaphysical God missing from Himself in the same way that texts – scriptural and postmodernist alike – can go missing from themselves, and indeed, in the way that *The Instructions* is missing from itself. *The Instructions* implies that a larger body of texts comprises its wholeness by suggesting that the finished product is the translation of a translation of an original manuscript, meaning that the original manuscript and the first translation are implied extant texts to which we have no direct access. The "Translator's Note" that splits the novel into two testaments – "The Side of Damage" and "The Gurionic War" – is Eliyahu of Brooklyn's explanation that Gurion wrote "The Side of Damage" "in English between the ages of ten and twelve years (between late 2006 and early 2009), and the latter ten books ["The Gurionic War"] in Hebrew between the ages of thirteen and sixteen years (between mid-2009 and mid-2012)" (577). Gurion then asks Emmanuel Liebman to translate "The Side of Damage" into Hebrew before asking Eliyahu to re-translate Emmanuel's Hebrew translation back into English without consulting Gurion's original manuscript. Gurion originally writes the "The Gurionic War" in Hebrew, but it receives the same treatment, "Hebrew-to-English-to-Hebrew this time" (578). In each re-translation back to whichever language that Gurion started with, the text came out "word for word and jot for jot, identical to the original" (578), even as the re-translator of the third version was barred from checking his work against the original in order to ensure the text's "translingual" capacity.

According to Eliyahu's note, what we read when we read *The Instructions* is actually "The Side of Damage" in re-translation, after having gone from English to Hebrew and back, and "The Gurionic War" in translation," after having gone from Hebrew to English (but not yet back). What this means

is that each "testament" has an un-accessed original as well as another translation associated with it, for a total of four texts that are integral to the textual identity of *The Instructions*, but which are also missing as implied extant texts. Moreover, the accessible public version has been through an editorial process, and it includes the translator's and publisher's notes as a way of rounding out the text's public availability. And just as the implied extant texts purport a wholeness from which elements are subtracted, the translational aspect reveals that Gurion's authorship is missing from itself, too, since what we read are *Eliyahu's* English translations, which means that Gurion's signature, as it appears in translation, is truly the absenting of an absent presence that presumably intends "to control textual meaning."[161] Ironically, the textual meaning of *The Instructions* is all the more controlled through the perfection of Eliyahu's (and Emmanuel's) translations as the factors compounding the absence of the author's absence (meta-absence).

Then again, Eliyahu signs his own name at the end of his Translator's Note to attest to the translational phenomenon in which Gurion confirms that Eliyahu's re-translation of "The Side of Damage" is identical to the original. Word for word and jot for jot. In and of itself, this would be an impressive claim for just about any text of comparable length. However, "The Side of Damage" is not just any text, and claiming an identical translation, let alone *re*-translation, is to make the extraordinary claim that translational decisions concerning everything from the spatial arrangement of calligrams to onomatopoeia to the formatting of poetic stanzas to sporadic and interchangeable usages of em-dashes and ellipses in recorded dialogue to the phoneticization of Botha's Australian accent to the consistent spellings of things like *tzadik* when any number of perfectly conventional alternatives are readily available, were all given *the exact same treatments* by three separate writers, with the third writer of each sequence deciding "blindly" on those treatments.

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[161] In *Trespass of the Sign* (2000), Hart rehearses the Derridean insight that the attempt of the signature is "to declare oneself as an absent presence" in a bid "to control textual meaning," which is always a lost cause (19).

This premise is wild and wonderfully audacious, metafictionally indulgent and enjoyable to think about…but I think that isn't enough for a character like Gurion. I think that Gurion felt the need to amplify these qualities by embedding something in his own original manuscript that would have been so unlikely to come out identically in re-translation as to be considered a practical impossibility (and thus a veritable miracle), and I believe that this embedded something is an intentional misspelling of Maimonides: Maimon**e**des, an embedded imperfection. Maimonides makes a great touchstone for mystical thought, and he can be grouped in with Doctorow's Wittgenstein as a way of indexing a lineage of negative theologies that span the Judeo-Christian spectrum (per Jennifer Michael Hecht, 2003), but admitting this, one also admits that Maimonides plays no substantive role in *The Instructions*. His presence in the text is sporadic and borderline superfluous, referenced not for things like non-metaphysical thought but rather for his odd belief that "you had to piss at least ten times a day to be a good sage. He also said you should keep your stomach in a constant state of near-diarrhea, which is not to be confused with a near-constant state of total diarrhea, which is the way of the stomachs of scoundrels worldwide" (66). "Maimonedes" is leveraged only once for authoritative theological support that there is a tradition of respectable scholarship to counter the view that "the Temple would descend from the sky," to suggest instead that the Temple will need to be built by a Judite messiah (2010, 45) as part of a reparative program in keeping with the more mystical tenets and connotations of *tikkun olam*.

Moreover, even if Gurion did feel the need to lean on the philosopher's authority, why would he refer to him as Maimonides (however spelled) rather than something like Rambam or Moshe ben Maimon? A young self-styled rabbi-scholar thinking like Gurion is unlikely to refer to the Greek form, as I discovered after an email exchange with Adam Rovner at the University of Denver (with whom I had previously emailed with questions about *Safek* for the purposes of writing about *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*). In answer to my inquiry about the spelling, Rovner explains that he "cannot think of

any reason why Levin would have used that spelling ('Maimonedes') and not Maimonides. In rabbinics, no one really references him as anything other than 'Rambam' or occasionally 'Moshe ben Maimon'" (private correspondence). What it comes down to is that Gurion is a character for whom this sort of mistake is plainly atypical, and it is certainly atypical for an author like Levin writing a character like Gurion. *The Instructions* is such a meticulously crafted text that Maimonides would be a curious usage, Rovner suggests, even if it were spelled correctly, and/or referenced for an authoritative mysticism. That it is neither leads me to conclude that Maimonedes is placed deliberately so that the subtlety lends credence to the "translingual, and therefore definitive" quality of the work according to Eliyahu's re-translation, which is now further problematized by Rovner's explanation that the Greek form (with the -ides suffix, meaning "son of") is "never" referred to in Hebrew (and the misspelling cannot be Eliyahu's own, since Gurion confirms that his re-translation matches the original manuscript, "jot for jot"). If the Greek form is never referred to in Hebrew, then Emmanuel Liebman's first translation from Gurion's English into his own Hebrew would resort (one would think) to "Rambam" or "Moshe ben Maimon." Even *those* possibilities are thwarted by Gurion's preemptive firewall against rabbinic convention, however, in a parenthetical formulation: "The Rambam (aka Maimonedes of Cordoba)" (66). Now Emmanuel *must* find a way to incorporate the Greek form into his Hebrew, given that a non-Hebrew alternative to Rambam is explicated in the original. Eliyahu, in turn, must re-translate whatever Emmanuel – not Gurion – comes up with in incorporating the Greek into the Hebrew, and his dutiful sense of fidelity must surely be torn between correcting what he likely perceives to be *Emmanuel's* mistake, on the one hand, vs. trusting Emmanuel *over* Gurion in a deconstructive move that vouchsafes Gurion's authority *by dint of his own intentional mistake*. If this is a game of telephone, it is the equivalent of Eliyahu repeating what he hears *exactly* from Emmanuel even as he likely suspects that the original message from Gurion may have "sounded" (or "sonated") slightly different, the same choice that I am faced with when I play the game with my children and realize that I can either "play

along" and repeat what I hear faithfully, for the sake of silliness and hilarity, or I can discern through the silliness what was originally intended and revert to what I believe to be "correct" for the sake of "winning" the game. "Maimonedes" is the way in which an intense and possibly absurd faithfulness (Eliyahu qua Kierkegaard's Avraham?) to what appears on the page (/to raspy whispers in one's ear) results in having it both ways. We can restate this mystically and non-metaphysically be saying that "Maimonedes" is a way of getting it right by getting it wrong, or more strongly still, that perfection is achieved through imperfection.

When Eliyahu repeats Emmanuel who repeats Gurion, his echo is neither different nor original, but then, it doesn't need to be since Gurion, who is repeated and then re-repeated, is already echoing scripture differently and originally. Consider the epigraph to "The Side of Damage," which purports to quote 1 Samuel 15:23 with the following: "Verbosity is like the iniquity of idolatry." Nowhere can I find a translation to match this line; it's like Morrison's epigraph from *Solomon*, but instead of *missing* its belly button, its belly button is a forged or altered add-on. Normally, the verse reads, "For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry" (NRSV), or something like it. In no translation anywhere am I finding "verbosity," nor am I finding any versions that read "*of* idolatry" instead of "*and* idolatry." King James versions swap "witchcraft" for "divination," and the NIV substitutes "arrogance like the evil of idolatry" in place of "stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry." ESV has "presumption" in place of either "arrogance" or "iniquity." "Rebellion" is ubiquitous across all translations that I've found.

Gurion's version sounds to my ear like an emulative ǝɔuɐuosǝɹ in that the quoted verse is some kind of ironic echo, and he uses the phrase "The Verbosity of Hope" as the title of his penultimate chapter (not counting the "Coda") in "The Gurionic War." For a novel written in 2010, the titular phrase surely piggybacks on Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). "Verbosity," then, borrows something of 1 Samuel's "rebellion" and Obama's "audacity," and "hope" is shot through

with an affect both ancient and contemporary. Hope is willed, regardless of whether belief can be formed at will – a question that remains open (to me, at least) in light of recent contributions by doxastic logicians (see fn. 96). Hope is will*ful*, the willful product of a rebellious, audacious, and verbose affect that flips a realist assessment of *what is* into *what might be*, such as when Eliyahu hopes that "*The Instructions* would…*become* translingual. For you. The scholar. It might. We hope" (579, emphasis in original). Hope is the speculative realist's way of looking toward uncertain futures like a scholar with no need for apologetics (cf. Meillassoux's virtual God of the future, 2009), not because human desire or idolatry replaces the truth of reality and not because our worlds are merely correlationist realizations of our (re-)cognitions, but because the truth of reality can actualize, at least in part, according to the *materiality* of our (re-)cognitions. Gurion muses similarly, while depriving his brain of oxygen in a hilariously juvenile exercise that goes by various names ("I'm Ticking" or "the Electric Chair"), that "What you animate animates you back":

> I lifted the halt on my lungs. My lungs breathed for me. Out, then in.
>
> I thought: They are only your lungs in the way that June is your girlfriend, Nakamook your best friend, Judah your father, the Israelites your people: they are only your lungs inasmuch as you are their Gurion. To be yours does not mean you control them. To be theirs does not mean they control you. It only means there is mutual influence. And the more one element influences the other, the more the other influences the one. What you animate animates you back. (599)

Sometimes scripture is what is animated and animates you back; sometimes fiction. Sometimes, fiction emulating scripture, or reparative scripture being echoed in such a way that it sounds eerily familiar but also new and fresh. Mutual influence, entanglement, enmeshedness. When Kendrick Lamar animates the soul of America with U2, he repeats the beatitudes with a difference:

> Blessed are the bullies
>
> For one day they will have to stand up
>
> to themselves
>
> Blessed are the liars
>
> for the truth can be awkward. ("American Soul," 2017)

Gurion and his mentor Flowers won't have heard Kendrick Lamar ("American Soul" is released seven years after the publication of the novel) but they do break down Lauryn Hill's lyrics on *The Score* with The Fugees (1996). Flowers plays a line from "Zealots" for Gurion: "Even after all my logic and my theory, I add a 'motherfucker' so you ig'nant niggas hear me" (2:00-2:06). Gurion notices that "Lauryn's not only telling you about what she does, but in telling you what she does, she's doing what she tells you she does. She makes truth by saying it" (342-343). Gurion observes form and content driving each other as Hill demonstrates (self-)animation, and he agrees with Flowers that he needs to add his own "motherfucka" so that the awkward truths of his writing will reach a broader readership (inclusive of his own circle of "ig'nant niggas" [327]), the sacred carried by the profane (à la Pnina Werbner, 1996). For all the limits and failures of language, for all that striving and consuming of the black fire on the white parchment, it turns out that the interaction between the materiality of language and the materiality of not-language allows for the creation of truth – though of course, it doesn't guarantee it. Language may create any number of things, but for it to result in truth, it needs to come from prophets, which means that what they write needs to be born out materially – hopefully in the form of an emulative and reparative scripture.

I could refer to the work of David Dark to make a bridge between the prophets of ancient scripture and our contemporary artists, asking along with him, "What's a poet? Someone who makes things new. What's a prophet? Someone who tells the difficult truth. Poets and prophets speak and sing in tongues justified and ancient, calling past and future to the rescue of the present" (2009, 124),

but in doing so, I see that I could be accused of being an apologist (Dark writes from a faith-based orientation), not a scholar. I could turn to Hart, as usual, who pairs poetry and revelation (*Poetry and Revelation: For a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry*, 2017), and I could complete this thought by incorporating metaphor as common to both poetry and revelation with reference to Schaefer. But, as I'd like to end on a less certain and more mystical note, I'll conclude with reference to the (a)theology of Mark C. Taylor, who makes exactly the same points as Dark, Hart, and Schaefer when he says that even though he "was raised in a churchgoing family, it was always clear to [him] that the most important scripture was literature and that the most sacred icons were artistic" (2013, 2). The only thing to add is that Dark is right to name the telling of difficult truth (and sometimes the difficult telling of truth) as that which grounds the importance of both scripture and literature; that's what gives us a place to stand.

EPILOGUE

Scripture and the Theoretical Imagination:
The Mis-Informatics of Domination

Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not remember the cosmos.
-    Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs"

I see blue skies bleeding
Colors screaming
Some invisible thing is the enemy now
And if I knew its name I would call it out loud
-    Roger Clyne, "Buffalo"

In my attempt to make a renewed case for doubt as something that might work as a deconstructionist springboard to what I am calling *desirably doubtful post-subversive literary futures*, I have spent most of my energy and resources demonstrating that (1) postmodern and scriptural forms are widely assumed to be antithetical textual modes, and (2) they are not. Not only are they not antithetical in a negative sense, they aren't really even dialectical in a positive sense. Instead, they form a complementary writerly loop. They help to fulfill each other. There's an analogy here with textual materialism that has been implicit since Chapter Two: the possibility that if texts of differing modalities can be paired for their capacities to fulfill, then a cognate dynamic is available to human beings of differing beliefs and/or identities. The ethico-political capstone to this project involves a brief consideration of critical theory as a textual mode that might team up with (and/or catch up with) scripture and contemporary postmodern novels to imagine post-subversive literary futures.

To launch this consideration, I contemplate what it is that critical theory purports to do. My first chapter especially discusses what the various textual modes purport to do, and that discussion is predicated on how we might draw distinctions to differentiate textual modes. Here, I suggest that a major commonality overrides and collapses the distinctions, and that commonality is that contemporary postmodern novels, scripture, and critical theory are all modes that are heavily invested in both reality and in truth. Granted, each may conceive of reality and truth in its own way, each may

reveal the same reality and/or truth differently, or express different realities and/or truths that seem irrelevant to the others. Each of these three modes may elicit or propose differing responses – aesthetic, political, theological, ideological, etc. – to the truths and realities that it reveals. But if all are invested in reality and truth, then it is also conceivable that they carry the capacity to complement and fulfill one another.

I have reason to believe that contemporary critical theory as a textual mode is characteristically committed to intellectual integrity; that this intellectual integrity is meant to challenge existing norms and therefore authority; that the challenging of existing, authoritative norms depends on an aesthetic imagination that is willing to doubt seriously the dominant assumptions about what certain kinds of writing are supposedly able to accomplish. Delightfully, the first two of these characterizations crystallizes when Karen Barad uses the word "scripture" exactly one (1) time in all 524 pages of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.[162] The single usage is this: "My approach, therefore, is to use Bohr's writings for thinking about these issues, but I do not take them as scripture" (69). This line is footnoted:

> 53   See "Methodological Interlude" in chapter 3. It would not be unreasonable to think that Bohr would find himself in sympathy with this approach, which attempts to be attentive and accountable to our specific engagements with, and as part of, the world as opposed to merely honoring his authority. In his stance toward the world, it is evident that intellectual integrity trumps authority. (415)

True, Barad's invocation of scripture in this moment is not, like Doctorow's or Morrison's, an invocation of ancient scripture or Scripture. Instead, she uses scripture in that loose, colloquial sense in which "gospel" is sometimes used: "I'm not taking Bohr as 'gospel' truth." To my mind, her loose usage is surprisingly productive in terms of how scripture is conceived at large: as a textual mode that

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[162] It should be noted that Barad has an essay called "What Flashes Up: Theological-Scientific-Political Fragments" (2017) that engages all kinds of scripture and midrash; however, as it was specifically commissioned for a religious studies collection, I felt that selecting that one would be stacking the deck somewhat, as what I mean by critical theory is general, secular theory.

reveals unquestionable or infallible (/prophetic) truth, truth which doesn't require further attention or accountability "to our specific engagements with, and as part of, the world." In turn, my use of *unquestionable* or *infallible* lines up with Barad's use of *authority*. Barad allows that intellectual integrity may not be a product of authority or (therefore) canonicity. Intellectual integrity may depend instead on the apocryphal just as, in many ways, Barad's account of using "Bohr's writings for thinking about these issues" exhibits a preference for an apocryphal Bohr over a canonical Heisenberg, a preference that she feels affords her more intellectual integrity.

Alexander Galloway blogs that there is an extent to which "intellectual work is meant to challenge existing norms," and to that extent, he feels "it imperative that we challenge" a "Deleuzian dominant." The line comes on the heels of Galloway having declared that "Deleuze has been one of the single most important figures to me."[163] I think that we can safely locate Deleuze as an authority within the canon of contemporary critical theory, and I see Galloway as pushing Barad's commitment to intellectual integrity even further since, for him, "this particular Deleuzian dominant" *needs* to be interrogated *because* of its canonical status. Intellectual work/integrity depends on it. But to doubt Deleuze in this manner is neither to ban Deleuze nor, necessarily, to relegate Deleuzian insight. To doubt the Deleuzian dominant is to be attentive and accountable to our engagements with how "Deleuzianism today – mind you, Deleuzianism broadly conceived – as a dominant ideology…structures the norms and conventions of many aspects of society and culture, including technical infrastructure, subject formation, and particularly how we understand social and political organization" (Galloway).

At issue, then, are these broad conceptions of dominant *theoretical* ideologies. Galloway's Deleuze is just an illustrative example. Barad's Bohr is an illustrative counterexample. Below, I attempt

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[163] "Assessing the Legacy of That Thing that Happened After Poststructuralism" (2015). Available online at http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/assessing-the-legacy-of-that-thing-that-happened-after-poststructuralism. URL accessed 30 May 2022.

to be attentive and accountable to my own specific engagement with Barad's muse, Donna Haraway. After all, Haraway "has been one of the single most important figures to me" (the "recrafting" in "Recrafting Israel" is hers). We can recall here my pursuit of doubt not just in its literary development but also in its positivity, as that which Hart describes as "a spur to understanding" (see my prologue, fn. 10). Doubt is an essential component of intellectual work and intellectual integrity, and it challenges existing authoritative norms as a matter of responsibility, but how is it expressed in contemporary critical theory? Do we doubt a Deleuzian dominant *imaginatively* outside of contemporary postmodern novels? Can we describe the enunciations of critical theory in *aesthetic* terms? While we may tacitly understand that contemporary critical theory makes all kinds of space for imagination and aesthetics, it's profoundly uncool to say so out loud. I know this from saying so out loud. Then again, this same attitude that refuses to celebrate a theoretical imagination has needed to be rethought when it comes to the question of imagination in scripture, too, as Paul Ricœur has done in an essay called "the Bible and the Imagination." For Ricœur, the thought of the Bible sharing space with the imagination was at first

> baffling, even paradoxical. Is not the imagination, by common consent, a faculty of free invention, therefore something not governed by rules, something wild and untamed? What is more, is it not condemned to wandering about the internal spaces of what we conventionally call the mental kingdom, and does it not therefore lack any referential import, being entirely disconnected from what is really real? As for the Bible, is it not a closed book, one whose meaning is fixed forever and therefore the enemy of any radically original creation of meaning? Does it not claim to give rise to an existential and ontological commitment, one hostile to any imaginative drifting from here to there? (1995, 144)

We hear in this an echo of Hart's statement from my prologue that many people would have no hesitation in nominating the Bible as the greatest resistance to postmodernism. What I appreciate about Ricœur's approach is that he makes space for imagination in scripture not by redefining scripture to fit the parameters of something "entirely disconnected from what is really real" but by straightening out some misconceptions in philosophy about the nature of imagination. He does this by drawing on Kant's theory of imagination in *Critique of Judgment* (1790/2007) and his own theory of imagination from *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977). Ricœur explains that, for Kant, "imagination can be described as a rule-governed form of invention" (144). Paraphrasing himself, Ricœur holds that imagination "can be considered as the power of giving form to human experience" or alternatively, "the power of redescribing reality" (144). Taken together, imagination becomes fiction: "Fiction is my name for the imagination considered under this double point of view of rule-governed invention and a power of redescription" (144).

Selling imagination as fiction is about as easy as saying that a work of fiction is imaginative, but Ricœur's version of it stands out to me in that his requires an adherence to rules and an observance of reality (Hutcheon, from Chapter One: "This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs."). What this means is that Ricœur can make the much more difficult sale of *scripture* as fiction, and he can do so, unlike myself in "Recrafting Israel," without sounding irreverent. All of a sudden, textual modalities become more difficult to differentiate, as a rules-and-reality-based imagination becomes common to forms of writing invested in truth-telling. I don't see how we'll be able to exclude contemporary critical theory from these imaginative, aesthetic modes so long as we think of it as having the power of "giving form to human experience" or of "redescribing reality," which is why I round out my exploration of scripture in contemporary novels with a brief consideration of religious language in contemporary critical theory.

The Mis-Informatics of Domination

   Religious language in critical theory: I am loosening my terminology for the sake of a rhetorical point. Scripture and religious language are not the same, but the collapsing of one into the other is a safe enough Ricœur-like move (akin to his collapse of imagination into fiction) that facilitates a more ambitious alignment of theory with postmodern narrative fiction (akin to Ricœur's alignment of scripture and fiction). If nothing else, the use of religious language by critical theorists should interest us enough to inquire: *what is going on here, what is this theorist doing with a religious rhetoric?* What is going on, for example, when Jane Bennett closes *Vibrant Matter* (2010) with what this dissertation would be comfortable calling an *invocation*, *reimagination*, and/or *emulation* of the Nicene Creed? This was the question asked by graduate students and the professor with whom I read Bennett's book for a seminar, and no answers were forthcoming at the end of our Fall 2013 semester together.[164] So, the question stands: why is Bennett deploying sacred language to finish off what Rita Felski describes, glowingly, as her "manifesto for a new materialism" on the book's cover? Why declare one's *beliefs* when one has just spent 122 pages exhibiting one's scholarly *knowledge*? Bennett's final prayer is worth reviewing:

> So I will just end with a litany, a kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists: "I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually *doing things*. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality

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[164] The seminar was David Glimp's "Foucault and His Interlocutors."

of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests." (122, emphasis in original)

Perhaps one wants to institutionalize or canonize one's scholarship. After all, being doubted, especially after becoming dominant like Deleuze, is a top honor. Perhaps one's scholarship *is* one's religion (it is for one Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee). Or: Is Bennett (or a "would-be vital materialist") admitting to *not knowing*, since even a *revealed* vitality resists full translation and exceeds Bennett's (or a would-be vital materialist's) grasp? Possibly the stated beliefs are not coming on the heels of 122 pages of exhibited knowledge and are instead coming on the heels of 122 pages of beliefs that aim at truth…in which case, Bennett ends with a litany of beliefs about beliefs, tantamount to doubts (see Chapter Two).

Here's a remarkable fact about Bennett's book: the word *subversion* never appears in it. Neither do the variants *subvert* or *subverting* ever appear. Not once. Let that sink in. When we finally get to *subversive*, it appears exactly one (1) time, and that is in the notes to the final chapter, where the ecologist James Nash's "On the Subversive Virtue" (1998) is referenced (155, fn. 31) – in other words, *Bennett's single use of any variant of* subversion *is a titular reference in her footnotes*. This feels to me like a colossal achievement, right up there with Ahmed's refusal to put a male into her citational network. Well, what *would* have been subverted in a study that takes the life-matter binary as its object of inquiry? The very phrase *vibrant matter* does all the work of ensuring a less antagonistic coupling, of reconciling the two sides of this structuring dualism into a harmonious hybrid. I can't help but notice that Bennett's book reads to me like an excellent contemporary novel, and I am tempted to hold it as an example of someone working toward a post-subversive literary future.

Another work of critical theory that reads to me like an excellent work of postmodern fiction is Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985; my reading is based on the *Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd ed., 2010), discussion of which has been waiting in the wings ever since this

dissertation's opening comments on hybridity. As Booth pointed out upon first reading my introduction, discussion of this piece is warranted given how patient it is with contradiction and how it touches on religious discourse. I would be remiss not to include the cyborg figure alongside those like Pan, Morton's mesh, Barad's diffractive reading, and my own apocryphon as emblems of indeterminacy. What follows here is my best effort at doubting Haraway so that I might finish my attempt to articulate a desirably doubtful post-subversive literary future most crisply.

To begin, Haraway is refreshingly patient with contradiction, and she does touch on religious discourse – all over the place. The tenor of her manifesto is such that contradiction and religious discourse almost go together (let's bask for a second in Chapter Two's insights, courtesy of Joshua Ferris and David Dark), the hybrid human-machine cyborg becoming something to be revered even if, forgetting the cosmos, it doesn't do any revering of its own. Eden is invoked throughout in highly polemical terms (e.g., "teaching modern Christian creationism should be fought as a form of child abuse" [2193]), then reimagined as a site of "illegitimate promise" (2192), and finally emulated through a rendering of "cyborg imagery" in which "a feminist speaking in tongues" represents "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (2220). Haraway also paints "modern machinery" as "an irreverent upstart god, mocking the Father's ubiquity and spirituality" and "sun-worshipers" as "mediating a new scientific revolution associated with the night dream of post-industrial society" (2195). Finally, we cannot do without not just the death of "god" but also of "the 'goddess'" (2203).

Tucked away in these celebrations of irreverent hybridity and religious allusions is an apocryphal thought. Because "cyborgs do not participate in the various traditional mythologies that have defined the West" (editor's headnote, 2188), for instance, they are apocryphal figures. Because "the main trouble with cyborgs…is that they are illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" who tend to be "exceedingly unfaithful to their origins"

(2192), they fall outside mainstream institutionalization and canonization processes, making them apocryphal. The irreverence of mocking the Father's ubiquity and spirituality surely earns the cyborg an apocryphal departure from ideological dominance. That "cyborg writing must not be about the Fall" but "about the power to survive" (2215) makes it apocryphal by definition. Being "stripped of identity" and taught "about the power of the margins and the importance of a mother like Malinche" (2216), "mother of the mestizo 'bastard' race of the new world" (2215), is surely enough to get it expelled from the ranks of the canonical. Haraway doubts the dominance of the Derridean dominant when she writes that "Malinche was mother here, not Eve before eating the forbidden fruit. Writing affirms [Audre Lorde's] Sister Outsider, not the Woman-before-the-Fall-into-Writing needed by the phallogocentric Family of Man" (2216). And to "dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (2220) is a very smooth way of turning a canonical Bahktin into an apocryphal Bahktin.

So what's to doubt? Doesn't Haraway fulfill all my apocryphal theory-as-fiction/fiction-as-theory desires? Initially I worried that Haraway was checking all of the boxes minus the big one, the one in which she goes post-subversive. Unlike Bennett, Haraway uses subversion and its variants liberally. Upon closer inspection, however, Haraway almost always uses subversion as a way of levelling up to something higher than the human-machine dichotomy that she blends in the figure of the cyborg, which does more or less the same work as Bennett's vibrant matter in hybridizing the life-matter dualism. The cyborg carries the capacity to subvert not just White Capitalist Patriarchy but even the Informatics of Domination that gives rise to it, and which comes teleologically bundled with a "star wars" apocalypse (2192).

So, again: what's to doubt? Or, what alternatives are left to imagine? Surely history doesn't end here. The final stage is neither Empire nor the Informatics of Domination, the final image is not that of an irreverent cyborg who cannot remember the cosmos. Yet when I try to name a new and/or

future enemy, I look at these columns by Haraway, one for White Capitalist Patriarchy and one for the Informatics of Domination, and I have to squint. Haraway was able to put a name to the second column *in 1985* (prophetic). That's nearly forty years ago. Fast-forward through the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, a Gulf War, the '90s with its sub-Saharan genocides and humanitarian crises, 9/11, another war waged against unnamed enemies, the legalization of torture at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, a global collapse of the world's banking system, the election of America's first black president followed by the election of a white nationalist, white supremacists marching and killing in Charlottesville, the murder of George Floyd, the global coronavirus pandemic, a contested election, an insurrection at the White House, an invasion of Ukraine followed by a protracted military conflict riddled with crimes against humanity, and mass shootings at schools all over the USA.

Informatics of Domination?

If I'm going to make a theory, I believe that I need to imagine that third column to the right of Haraway's first two, and I need to put a name to it in a way that will be aesthetically agential. Morton would call this a "causal" aesthetic. I think that what we have now is a *Mis*-Informatics of Domination: an inability to parse information for the truth of human experience or the description of reality, which means, too that we suffer *imaginative* and *aesthetic* crises. Imagination is the power to redescribe reality, and our reality is woefully under-described. We verge on Hardt and Negri's omni-crisis, but an under-imagined version of it. In tertiary pedagogy, we teach information literacy. Where do students go for their information, we ask them, and how do they know whether to trust it? Do we, who teach and ask the questions, have good answers? We do not. But that doesn't keep anyone and everyone from making truth claims about elections or vaccines or guns or fetuses, which is what Bruno Latour was trying to warn us about when he wrote that "critique has run out of steam" (2022; the opening words of that essay are "Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside…"). We are under a new regime

in which the conditions that need to be met for holding Justified True Beliefs simply cannot be met. To hold a *justified true belief*, as the basis of one's epistemology, one must:

1. Hold a belief…

2. …which is justified…

3. …and which is true.

How can the third condition on this list ever be *known* to be met? The Mis-Informatics of Domination categorically preclude this condition from *ever* being *known* to be met. We need cyborgs who are reverent enough to respect the scandal of philosophy and to know that We Have Never Been Justified *Truly* in Our Beliefs.

We need cyborgs who can doubt.

A doubting cyborg would be a reverent cyborg, a cyborg less sure of effacing the division between human and machine so totally and effectively as to overturn (/subvert) even *a teleology*. We don't need melodramatic cyborgs, but neither do we need tragic ones. Haraway wrote an amazing science fiction, aesthetically rich and full of imagination, but part of her vision was to avoid "the manic compulsion to name the Enemy" (2192). This is a post-subversive impulse that I very much appreciate. Haraway imagined a figure that "would not recognize the garden of Eden" (2192), rendering Genesis illegible. Does Haraway herself forget how important names are, and how effective scripture can also be when it comes to names and naming? "Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute," to be sure (Toni Morrison agrees), but I would think that if a scripture assuages the difficulty "to name one's feminism" (2192), then it does a good job of giving form to human experience and redescribing reality. Can we not imagine the reverent, postmodern cyborg that can read that scripture? I feel that it is imaginable.

I want to imagine a pro-human posthumanism, a retro-realist cyborg that can wonder at the cosmos, name enemies for what they are, and pray with me, as I pray with the Roger Clyne lyrics that precede those in the epigraph from "Buffalo," that the secrets of old languages and hidden away writings might help with bodily and material revelation:

> As long as the moon shall rise
>
> As long as the rivers flow
>
> As long as the sun shall shine
>
> And the grass will grow
>
> *Let me listen*
>
> I will learn to speak the old language
>
> Yes, I yearn to bathe in blue skies and fall apart
>
> From the world of machines, regain my feet and my pounding heart

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