

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Headless and Homeless: Zen Non-Thinking Awareness in American Countercultural Trip Narratives Post-WWI to the Vietnam War

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5nb7x0hw>

### Author

Bond, Matthew James

### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Headless and Homeless: Zen Non-Thinking Awareness in American Countercultural Trip  
Narratives Post-WWI to the Vietnam War

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Matthew James Bond

June 2014

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Robert Latham, Chairperson

Dr. Kimberly J. Devlin

Dr. Steven Gould Axelrod

Copyright by  
Matthew James Bond  
2014

The Dissertation of Matthew James Bond is approved:

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## DEDICATION

To Matt and Anne, for working to keep the way open for new travelers.

And to Lauren, for traveling the way with me.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Headless and Homeless: Zen Non-Thinking Awareness in American Countercultural Trip  
Narratives Post-WWI to the Vietnam War

by

Matthew James Bond

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, June 2014  
Dr. Robert Latham, Chairperson

This project surveys the appearance of a phenomenon that I will call “non-thinking awareness,” something not exclusive to but usually identified with the practice of Zen Buddhism. I argue that the importation of Eastern religious and philosophical ideas introduced into American literature a mode of perception radically divergent from the dualistic Cartesian *cogito* upon which modern Western thought primarily owes its origins. Instead of identifying with one’s thoughts, a person who practices non-thinking awareness sees his or her existence as a holistic embodiment rather than as an identity split between mind and body.

The four chapters of this project read texts that evince trip narratives, stories that depict some sort of pilgrimage or journey toward a higher consciousness. More specifically, these trip narratives respond to American wars, starting from World War I and continuing through the Vietnam War. The protagonists featured, in some part affected directly by a given war or by the war’s deleterious effect on their culture, radiate away from the urban or suburban social site that was their home and move to the fringes of society in pursuit of

wholeness in the face of fragmentation. I correlate the movement away from society with a practice of relinquishing logocentric thought because language is a social tool. By leaving sites of the social, these characters are able to abandon identification with a linguistically mediated self.

This project focuses on work by Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, Samuel Beckett, Elizabeth Bishop, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, and Marco Vassi.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

1

Chapter 1—Noguchi, Hemingway’s Zen Heritage, and Nick Adams’s Zen Practice

23

Chapter 2—Cutting off the Head: The Headless Body in *St. Mawr*, the Bodiless Mind in *The Unnamable*, and the Threat of Language Against Reality

64

Chapter 3—Linguistic Nonsense, Subverted Social Roles, and Social Escapism in Cold War Literature

118

Chapter 4—“A splendour among shadows”: Radiant Selfhood, Dual Realities, and Postmodern Sacred Production in Marco Vassi’s *The Stoned Apocalypse*

173

Project Conclusion—Coming off It: Failure as Success

222

Works Cited

230



“Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.”

—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

“Here in the West, I do not think it advisable to follow Buddhism. Changing religions is not like changing professions. Excitement [lessens] over the years, and soon you are not excited, and then where are you? Homeless inside yourself.”

—The Dalai Lama, “The man from the town of Roaring Tiger (TA)”

## INTRODUCTION

### NON-THINKING: AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM TO AMERICAN ZEN

“Perception is connected in western thought with a representational mode of thinking,” explains Carl Olson in *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy* (8). Olson argues that Zen Buddhism is a philosophy that shares a tendency in postmodern thought, largely seen in the work of Derrida and deconstructionist theory in general, of seeking a style of thought not subject to the ontological pitfalls of relying on symbolic representation—he claims both philosophical traditions desire the advent of a non-representational “paradigm” of thought to replace logocentrism. While it is not my ambition to validate Olson’s argument, this point serves as an apt place to start a discussion interested in some of the larger concerns voiced in Olson’s study. Despite the connection in western thought that ties perception to representation, there does exist a history of an advocacy of non-representational perception in America thought, and this history arrives through the importation of certain Eastern philosophical beliefs.

Henry David Thoreau, a thinker whose ideas were influenced by various Eastern spiritual traditions, including but not limited to Hinduism and Buddhism, claimed that a person could witness the passing of worldly phenomena from a place of “expanded” or “transpersonal” awareness—my terms, not his; and in *Walden*, a deeply spiritually inflected text, he seems to advocate an activity that in these named Asian spiritual traditions we would call meditation; and Thoreau explains the benefit of such an activity, which is the ability to move from one type of identification, that with a person’s human form and thinking mind, to a kind of unfettered, unmoored awareness, necessarily impersonal and consequently infinite. He writes, “With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By conscious

effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent” (94). What he seems to be saying is that there exists the ability of the human mind to dis-identify with the thinking mind as the seat of one’s identity and to instead reside in a place not affected by the passing of phenomena, including one’s thoughts, and to do so might even be “sane” or healthy. To do so presents the option of extricating one’s self from involvement in the drama or “theatrical exhibition” of the world’s movements, and from this vantage point he believes he “*may not* be affected by an actual event which [only] appears to concern [him]” (emphasis original 94). The verb “appear” is key in this sentiment, because Thoreau draws a distinction between the seeming reality of these phenomena and the illusory nature of this reality, describing life as “fiction, a work of imagination only” (94). He writes that though he “know[s himself] as a human being,” a being that is itself the “scene...of thoughts and affections,” it is also possible to “stand as remote from [himself] as from another” (94). Though tempting to read this possibility as a form of quietism, Thoreau is not advocating an escape from mundane reality, so much as imploring his reader to discover in him or herself that which can stand unmoved in the face of global crisis and inevitable change, and so to experience the existence of “the spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than you” (94). This spectator, by existing beyond the limits of the human form, as Thoreau suggests is the case, necessarily transcends the personal ego and thus the separation between self and other.

More than a century after the publication of *Walden*, ex-Harvard psychology professor Richard Alpert, right-hand man to Timothy Leary’s acid politics of ecstasy, returned from a self-seeking pilgrimage that had led him to India and that had found him under the guidance of Neem Karoli Baba, his guru. Now living as Ram Dass, like Thoreau,

he published his own philosophical memoir, *Be Here Now*, one that like *Walden*, questioned the sanity of the American way of life. Though Dass had converted to become a follower of ashtanga yoga, his approach to teaching spirituality encompasses a wide range of (mostly Eastern) spiritual practices, where he draws on their cosmological commonalities. One prominent practice he frequently suggests is the cultivation of what he calls “the witness,” which “could be thought of as an eye” (Dass 67), a function I understand to be identical to the “spectator” so described by Thoreau because it “is not evaluative” and offers a place where a person can “[watch] the drama of life unfold” (Dass 69).

Called by either name, the “spectator” or the “witness,” this viewpoint fundamentally alters the experience of consciousness in those who would employ it because it breaks the commonly held identification with the thinking mind. Rather than view the linguistically dependent “I” and the stream of consciousness “I” thinks—that is, the Cartesian *cogito*—as the basis of one’s identity, such a stance as sees the body as something vaguely separate and subordinate to the thinking mind, Thoreau’s spectator and Ram Dass’s witness provide in addition to a sense of equanimity in response to worldly “drama,” an awareness outside and beyond the logocentric self. Though supposedly surviving death as Thoreau claims, a claim that cannot be tested nor validated here, this spectator/witness is an embodied non-egocentrically based awareness that instead observes both the passing of internal phenomena—that is, thought—and the passing of external “drama” or “theatrical exhibition.”

This project is interested in precisely this possibility, that of non-logocentric awareness, one in which the ego loses primacy and instead an embodied non-representational awareness becomes ascendant. I will read texts in which both third-person

protagonists and first person narrators resist identifying themselves with the language-based ego and experiment with this impersonal, ego-transcendent awareness. There are many spiritual or metaphysical traditions that suggest such a possibility, but for a few reasons I will explain now, I will approach these readings through the consideration of Zen meditation practice. For one, in twentieth century America, Zen Buddhism became a prominent alternative to both Christianity and atheism, and many of the texts discussed herein where this stated awareness appears refer to Zen by name, exploring its potential benefits and extolling its perceived virtues. Further, my use of Zen as the guiding understanding of this resistance to identification with the thinking mind is a result of the tradition's own occupation with such an agenda. Zen Buddhism, today mainly divided into two schools, Rinzai and Soto, possesses a rich and complicated history, from its origins in 6<sup>th</sup> century China resulting from Indian Buddhism's encountering Chinese Taoism, to its favorable reception in 14<sup>th</sup> century Japan (Department of Asian Art), but the focus of the tradition, one that is not so much a religion but a metaphysical theory, is on meditation, the meaning of the word Zen itself.<sup>1</sup> At its root, Zen focuses on the power of meditation to reveal what is thought to be the true self, which the ego is not, and this dissertation examines texts in which characters seek an experience of this metalinguistic self; this project itself focuses on the pursuit and adoption of non-thinking, the Zen practice of dropping identification with thought, as well as the double nature of the thinking-self and the transcendent spectator-self that meditation purportedly reveals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Zen is a Japanese transliteration of the Chinese "Chan" that comes from the Sanskrit "Dhyana" meaning something like "contemplation."

As mentioned above, two schools dominate the majority of Zen Buddhist practice, Rinzai and Soto. Rinzai, “less formal and ritualistic than Soto,” emphasizes the contemplation of *koan*, word problems “whose enigmatic quality is meant to drive the mind toward enlightenment” (Seager 29). Soto Zen, on the other hand, emphasizes *zazen*, sitting meditation, particularly “*shikantaza*, ‘just sitting,’ a method of meditation in which the mind rests in a state of brightly alert attention, free of all thoughts and directed to no particular object of contemplation” (Seager 29). Though this thoughtless state of being is practiced in sitting mediation, it becomes increasingly available as an option for day-to-day living, and this is the practice I believe Thoreau explains in the passage at the beginning of this introduction.

This project, interested in instances of trying to achieve non-thinking, something which *zazen* makes a direct effort to reach, explores then a practice of life as taught in Soto Zen. This does not mean that I try to find evidence of formal Soto Zen practice in the texts discussed, but rather that my theoretical approach stems from the worldview as described by Soto Zen. All of formal Zen is but instruction in a practice that creates this kind of awareness believed to be universal, and in theory, achievable without technical knowledge of formal Zen practice. Zen is not a conceptual philosophy but a transmission of teachings thought helpful in explaining the possibility of the experience sometimes called “Zen,” universal and ultimately self-evident. Thus, this project does not hope to find evidence of formal Zen elements in traditionally non-Zen texts so much as it elucidates the presence of the struggle to achieve a mindset and thus a worldview as described in traditional Zen teachings, although certain texts are certainly informed by or expound these formal elements.

This Zen experience in question, for lack of a less loaded term, is often referred to as “enlightenment” in the West and is called “Buddha-nature” in Zen Buddhism, the term “Buddha” itself not here referring to a historical person but itself naming one who is enlightened or awakened. Heinrich Dumoulin in *Zen Enlightenment: Origins and Meaning* explains the “quintessence of the Buddhist doctrine of salvation,” which is that “[a]ll living beings...have Buddha-nature in themselves like a seed,” and so when all obstacles within oneself are overcome and the mind is open and ready, a person can “attain Buddhahood,” enlightenment (104). Whereas popular conception may make it seem as if Buddhists worship the mystical, historical Buddha as a deity superior to themselves, the Zen viewpoint claims that each person can realize his or her own Buddha-nature. Though the term “Buddha-nature” itself conveys a sense of romantic exoticness, it is simply a term for a universal condition not bound by ethnicity, language or religious practice. Buddha-nature or enlightenment results from having a mind empty of judgments, opinions and linguistic categories because in essence “Buddha-nature is [itself] empty” (Dumoulin 119). This “enlightened view of reality,” had when a practitioner attains what is often called “no-mind” or “Big Mind,” terms suggesting a consciousness beyond the logocentric ego, necessarily ends up being “inexpressible” (118) precisely because it is beyond linguistic representation; but the means for attainment itself can be communicated, and so in one sense Zen Buddhist teachings can be seen merely as instructional devices, devices that are discarded or forgotten when Buddha-nature is realized—enlightenment depends on non-clinging to all thought forms, even the idea of enlightenment itself. Lastly, according to Soto Zen doctrine, enlightenment may not be a permanent state but merely a passing state of being because Zen “practice and enlightenment are basically the same thing” (126).

At the root of Zen teaching is the collapsing of the duality between the practice of Zen and the achievement of its aims—there is no goal because there is no separation between practice and attainment of enlightenment, though that truth itself may not become immediately evident to the practitioner. To arrive at this understanding, Zen practice seeks to reveal an awareness of the non-dual nature of reality and so works to reconcile the tension between the core of dualist human experience, i.e. the mind-body relationship. But dual natures of many sorts become topics of discussion in formal Zen practice—ignorance and knowledge, life and death, and form and emptiness being perhaps the most common pairings. Even the fundamental practice of Zen, *zazen*, proceeds through a binary; in a sense, Zen practice is a dialectical thinking model. In *zazen*, the practitioner is counseled to think not-thinking. This model of thesis-antithesis leads to non-thinking, which “unites and sublates thinking and not-thinking because it is equivalent to emptiness” (C. Olson 67); the apparent form of thought, being countered by the actual inherent formless of thought, reveals the empty nature of the activity. The practice of Zen non-thinking leads to a state of concentration where the practitioner realizes “that thought is the thought of the thoughtless” universe, as one Buddhist sage explained it—the human experience of thinking arises inexplicably in the unthinking universe. In non-thinking, “there is a ceaseless unfolding of directly experienced impermanence” (C. Olson 177). And though *zazen* should present this with time, the chapters of this project will wrestle with the complexities of the dual natures perceived in the human experiences considered. Specifically, chapter 1 will explore thinking and thoughtlessness (form and emptiness), chapter 2 body and mind, chapter 3 sense and nonsense, and chapter 4 entertains a host of dualisms, such as the traditionally binary



concepts of righteousness and sinfulness, chastity and carnal desire, as well as sober (non-drugged) and mystical (drugged) consciousnesses.

#### COUNTERCULTURAL ZEN

The lasting impact of Cartesian philosophy on Western thinking cannot be underestimated.

The signature conclusion, *ergo sum cogito*, roots the core of human personal identity in the power of cognition, and in effect, links the faculty of reason with the phenomenological proof of one's existence. This theory validates a dualism of "I" versus body, where the logocentric self finds itself located "inside" the physical body. This of course supports the tradition of Christian thought in that a permanent self, the soul, exists in the body and can survive death; and so in a sense Christian and Cartesian duality relate the thinking soul, the power of reason being itself proof of humankind's inherent link to divinity and that which supposedly separates it from animal kingdom, to the corporeal, mortal body in what might be termed a cybernetic manner. What I mean is that the body becomes an object, a secondary tool that extends the network of the primary subject, here the cogito-as-soul, to which the tool communicates information. The body-as-tool becomes indispensable in utility but supplemental in value to the centered self that controls it.

Advances in Western philosophy have of course challenged this philosophical tenet, and "a semiotic model of decentered selfhood has been developed both in classical American pragmatism and French poststructuralism" (Odin 151). Speaking of the latter, Derrida's work challenges Western metaphysical logocentrism, "a perspective [...that...] implicitly connects the faculty of speech with the notion of reason" (C. Olson 195). But the developments of critical theory perhaps do not bear much on the philosophy of a society in

general. That is to say, despite poststructuralist theories moving away from a concept of a centered self, American social consciousness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century remained largely indebted to Christianity, a logocentric religion, one that directly equates God with Logos in the New Testament; and this logocentric dualism is maintained even beyond the Christian faith as evidenced in linguistic practices. Cartesian dualism is supported in English syntax, so when one says, “I touch my arm” for example, there exists an “I” as subject-user and an “arm” as object-tool, and though this is merely linguistic fiction, a politics of self-identification with language creates in effect a split between mind and body. Just as poststructuralism worked to decenter this linguistic construction, Zen denies this dualism wholesale. Alan Watts, perhaps the premier figure to have explained Zen to a lay Western audience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explains how this mind-body division is merely a conceptual abstraction: “There is not the mind on the one hand and its experiences on the other; there is just a process of experiencing in which there is nothing to be grasped, as an object, and no one, as a subject, to grasp it” (*The Way of Zen* 53). The perceiving self and its perceptions are one.

Such a view flies in the face of “common sense,” and in that Zen opposes logocentrism—thus undermining the mind as sovereign (as Georges Bataille describes it, which will be discussed on chapter 2)—as well as undermining the faculty of reason placed at the hierarchal zenith of human experience as well as the Christian God as Logos, figurehead of Logos Itself, American Zen is countercultural. This project examines the role of Zen awareness, formally or informally practiced, in relation to antisocial/countercultural movement to the fringes of society. Each major text discussed involves a character that makes a decision to flee the site of the social, temporarily or permanently escaping the confines of society. This outward movement comes in response to the conscious decision to

dis-identify with the logocentric mind as the core of personal identity. Language is necessarily social, and to resist linguistic identity leads to a larger resistance to social participation.

This theme of a person encountering a new kind of self-awareness when outside society should now be evident. Thoreau, a figure voicing countercultural values, moved to live near Walden and there set forth the aforementioned “spectatorship” theory of consciousness. In the same way, the texts to be examined follow suit in that all except one depict an American character who tries to be liberated from the thinking mind, leaves normative society, and in turn journeys across the American landscape. Chapter one reads Ernest Hemingway’s “Big-Two Hearted River,” a story of a soldier returned from WWI who seeks solace and regeneration in the woods outside Seney, Michigan. Chapter 2 deals with D. H. Lawrence’s *St. Mawr*, and though written by a British author, the American character that flees English society returns to her original American roots and ends up in the deserts of New Mexico. Chapter 3 begins with Gregory Corso’s antisocial escapism, one dependent on linguistic nonsense but then focuses on Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, a largely pastoral story about rugged rucksack wanderers and mountain climbers who leave Cold War American society to practice “Beat Zen” and advocate antiauthoritarian views against consumer-capitalist America. In chapter 4, Marco Vassi’s *The Stoned Apocalypse* follows the author on a drug-fueled New Age spiritual journey through various American countercultures, a trip predicated on the personal discovery of awareness beyond mind-body dualism. The exception here is Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, the second text of chapter 2. On the one hand, this narrative stands out. But although written by an Irish writer, the character itself has no discernable identity, national or otherwise. In fact, completely disembodied, the

narrator is decontextualized and ahistorical. It cannot know with conviction its name, its sex, its age, or any other biographical detail—the narrator’s inability to transcend ontological doubt leaves all the character’s biographical details unfounded and tentative. I have selected to read it because it complements the reading of *St. Mawr* and helps to flesh out the identity politics discussed in that chapter. It is also a text that has been read from a Zen perspective, as much of Beckett’s work has been, and so conceptually it develops the larger argument of the project.

All these texts (besides Beckett’s) share another important thematic connection: they come out the culture of American war. As Stacy Burton explains in *Travel Narrative and the Ends of Modernity*, one of “the most compelling transformations in twentieth-century Anglophone travel narrative...is its turn to the subjective consequences of war” (18).<sup>2</sup> This narrative turn results from the “perpetual wartime” that was the twentieth-century, powered by rapid and dramatic progress made in modern technology and the trans-global effect of modernity itself (119): as a result, “[r]uin left by wars past, anxiety over future conflagrations, and contemporary chaos permeate the travel narrative.” Accordingly, chapters 1 and 2 deal with the trauma resulting from WWI. Chapter 3 discussing Beat writers examines issues pertaining to a post-WWII Cold War America, and Marco Vassi’s countercultural trip in chapter 4 highlights a country dealing with the effects of the Vietnam War. Now after having explained the theoretical apparatus, named the texts to be read, and traced the dominant characteristics that link them in theme and unfurl a historical progression, I want to

---

<sup>2</sup> Burton also lists three other factors leading to this transformation in said travel narratives, from which these narratives themselves stem and so examine: “violence, postcolonial transformation, and Western decline” (18). In regards to my study, violence is assumed by war, and the latter two issues more directly pertain to European texts in the scope of her study.

articulate the argument of this dissertation: *the cultivation of an awareness described as Zen, whether arising from tradition or felicitous circumstance, is directly correlated with the trauma of American war efforts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and with a society whose policies and social values are shaped by said wars. The practice of Zen non-thinking awareness provides an alternative to a personal identification with the socially contingent logocentrically constructed self, and the adoption of this perspective leads the affected characters on a countercultural pilgrimage away from society. These acts of flight from society bear the trauma of the relevant war, and in escape, the characters in these texts demonstrate an attempt to reconcile the fragmented self by dethroning the thinking mind-as-sovereign.*

The discussion of this dethroning in this project both builds on and complicates the theory Burton sets forth about the (post)modern quest for authenticity. She argues that in large part because “transience and rupture replace stasis and continuity as the norm,” modernity jeopardizes the potential to experience “authenticity,” and so the rural and the generally “pre-modern” become figures of “authentic models” of living (162-163). In response to this romantic desire, modern and postmodern subjects “travel to observe and participate in authentic life” (163), and in extreme cases, such as the cases presented in this project, these subjects “undertake a life-changing pilgrimage” that leads them from the trauma and fragmentation of this world to another, necessarily better one (163). The analysis of the texts in this dissertation finds this claim true—these conditions do lead to this kind of seeking. The pursuit of this authenticity suggests a life lived “fully in place...engaged in the present, [so] that the fragmentation...experience[d] as anxious self-consciousness or malaise dissipates” (164), and the practice of non-thinking evidently becomes the motivation for and/or accompanying mode of living on these travels, travels which seek to come to terms with impermanence “or repair anomie” and thus make their origin “sites of familial or

national origin” (164-165); this is especially true of Hemingway’s “Big-Hearted River” and D.H. Lawrence’s *St. Mawr*. But whereas Burton argues that these narratives propelled by the quest for authenticity “cast the narrator as subjective witness” (165), we also see the characters in question attempt to witness their own subjectivity from the place of the impersonal spectator/witness that is the topic of my research here. In fact, the spiritually/metaphysically transformative nature of these journeys counter, resist or undermine the basis of subjectivity by means of a “headless” or thoughtless non-subjectivity that results from non-thinking (“Zen”) awareness itself.

Moving away from the inauthentic also means challenging the social-political conditions of this inauthenticity, and so the travel-based practice of this non-thinking awareness rebukes logocentric and social authority. The texts read and the critics I will cite in chapters 3 and 4 point to the explicit anti-authoritarian potential of Zen Buddhism, or at least the manner in which Western converts highlighted what appeared to them as a belief system that undermines the power of authoritarian structures. Richard Hughes Seager in his study *Buddhism in America* details that this “was particularly the case during the 1960s, when an anti-institutional spirit, epitomized by the counterculture but broadly diffused throughout America society, was in ascendance,” and as a result of the merging between Japanese teachers and American students, Zen in America developed “an innovative, sometimes antinomian...spirit” (91). As such, this project begins post-WWI, a war that helped define 20<sup>th</sup> century social modernity and give rise to the height of literary Modernism, and it ends with an America trying to cope with the troubling effects of the Vietnam War, a war that helped motivate an entire counterculture. The project begins with an isolated case of a single person moving against social order and ends in the context of much larger social movement.

But each case deals less with the character's relationship with society than it does with the character's relationship with his or her own thinking mind. The flight from society is instead seen as symptomatic of the internal struggle with the rift between thinking self and non-thinking awareness.

These chapters showcase physical, spatial travel resulting from instances of spiritual conversion. As a note, the term "spiritual" is itself fraught and misleading within the context of Zen Buddhism as Zen does not actually promise an awareness of a "spiritual" dimension of reality, because that concept is inherently dualistic, separating a mundane reality from a "higher" or idealistic reality; Zen practice in effect should destroy such a conceptual binary. Nevertheless, for Western practitioners, the "discovery" of a perspective of reality outside of the linguistically represented one gives rise to the sensation that one is experiencing an alternative or "non-ordinary reality," a term I borrow from Carlos Castaneda's fictionalized ethnographies. Anyway, not only is travel associated with spiritual development, or might I say, with the aims of developing a "truer" or "purer" consciousness, but also "movement as motif has been especially salient in the cultural lore of the United States" (Smelser 5).

These "spiritual" journeys toward a new awareness prominently feature corresponding movement. In Neil Smelser's *The Odyssey Experience*, he defines a "quest" as a "deliberate kind of traveling" though the goal may not be clearly identified and a "pilgrimage" as a more goal-oriented journey where the person undertaking it will have a concrete objective (6). All the emphasized texts feature a character embarking on either a quest or a pilgrimage. More specifically, both of these types of movement characterize a "rite of passage," which is "movement in psychological and social space from one role or phase of life to another" (7), similar to Burton's claim about the purpose of travel in the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. The rites of passage described in this project fall under the religious subtype of “conversion,” better named as “regeneration,” denoting movement from “one psychological status to a higher or better one” (7). The cases herein also evince what Smelser lists as the “generic social features” of the general “Odyssey experience” that his study surveys. These trips are “finite,” meaning that they come to an end, and they involve “social destructuring” followed by a “restructuring,” which is a “reincorporation into a more routine experience” (12). In addition, “the core” of the trip is “the transformation itself” (12-13), which often poses some danger, if not physical than social, emotional. Lastly, and indicative of the nature of the trips detailed in this study, in such a self-transformative odyssey, “participants *leave this world*” (emphasis original 15). The joys and difficulties ensuing from this apparent voyage beyond this world will feature prominently in plot arcs of the texts concerned herein. In accord with the aforementioned tendency to “destructure” and then “restructure” one’s identity during the duration of a quest or pilgrimage, the majority of the texts depict what may commonly be called a round trip, in which one may escape from society so to allow the development of a non-dualistic appraisal of selfhood that in turn allows the personal growth needed for the journeyer to return to society, enlightened to one’s true nature and thus accepting of the social role one plays. Chapter 2, however, reads narratives where this attempt is yet incomplete or impossible to undergo.

#### THE CHAPTERS IN SUMMARY

This project begins by considering Japanese-American poet Yone Noguchi. Once all but erased from the history of literary modernism, a small but growing group of critics has argued for his inclusion in literary scholarship, especially that concerning imagism. Research



shows that Noguchi knew Ezra Pound and had influence on him. Chapter one examines precisely this influence and its subsequent transmission to Ernest Hemingway. Though I close read some of his poetry, the chapter emphasizes how Noguchi's Zen beliefs impacted his poetic theory; Zen as explained through Noguchi stresses laconicism, and so silence and omission employed to minimize and economize language exemplifies a Zen literary aesthetic. This resistance to language links Noguchi to Pound, the premier figure to have championed imagism, a poetic school itself aimed at reducing the subjective expression of ideas to instead simply, directly treat the object of study framed in a poem, as Pound famously extolled. I argue that Noguchi's documented influence on Pound carried through to Pound's mentoring of a young Hemingway, and although Pound was reticent and perhaps even outwardly hostile to Buddhist ideology, he expressed his Zen-influenced imagistic approach to writing in his editing of Hemingway's work and helped a writer already prone to a terse journalistic style solidify a writerly commitment to do without language as much as possible. "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925) provides a case study for this claim, and through reading Nick Adams's decision to control and cease his thinking, my reading foregrounds the dominant theme of this project, that a character's decision to resist identifying with the head-based linguistically constructed ego and instead cultivate a larger, embodied awareness becomes coupled with flight from the sphere of the social: because language is social, to extricate oneself from identification with one's thought parallels a countercultural escape from normative society. My reading explores specifically how Nick Adams's smoking habit demonstrates a kind of Zen practice, for in those moments taking a cigarette he practices non-thinking. Though done in an unorthodox manner, Nick practices *zazen*, sitting Zen. 13<sup>th</sup> century-born Japanese Zen master Daito Kokushi explains it as such: "Every time a thought

arises, throw it away. Just devote yourself to sweeping away the thoughts. Sweeping away the thoughts means performing zazen” (qtd in Leggett 22). In addition to explaining non-thinking and relating it to this Hemingway story, this chapter introduces themes that will be developed later in this project, namely identifying Zen as an anti-philosophy that challenges logical thought and denies dualism, which allows paradox to go unresolved and functions through an either-or-and thinking style.

Chapter two explores the contrasting extremes of headlessness versus bodilessness through reading D.H. Lawrence’s novella *St. Mawr* (1925) and Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1953), the third book in his “Trilogy.” In *St. Mawr*, Lawrence presents the reader with a character, Lou Witt, an American woman in England, who makes the decision to completely break free from the relationship with her mind, and to aid her liberation from it she escapes high society and flees to the New Mexico desert in an attempt to find a world imbued with a primordial and pure life force. Her inner escape from her mind is mirrored in her outward fleeing from the site of the social. I employ Georges Bataille’s figure of the Acéphale, a headless creature that decapitated itself in order to destroy the mind’s ability to reason and make meaning of life experience, as the major theoretical model from which to understand the novella’s plot arc and thematic aims. In that the Acéphale thwarts its own inner dialogue, it represents a violently radical version of Nick Adams’s Zen practice.

Moving from a text interested in the search for the original life flow to a text based solely on stream-of-consciousness, I read *The Unnamable* as an alternative reaction to the suffering caused by thinking. The story’s narrator evidently lacks a physical body and is completely absorbed in abstract conceptual thought. Whereas *St. Mawr* depicts a protagonist able and motivated to travel physical distances, a symptomatic reaction to the inner struggle

for freedom from thought, Beckett's unnamed and bodiless narrator remains immobile, fixed in some one-dimensional non-space, doomed to forever chase after an impossible conclusion: he seeks peace-as-quietness, an unreachable telos, by means of rational thought, paradoxically producing language in service of silence. If *St. Mawr* depicts an extreme Zen practice meant to silence thinking forever, Zen practice in *The Unnamable* is impossible because *zazen* is necessarily an embodied practice. I read this self-defeating exercise in contrast to Lou Witt's Batailleian attempt to defeat the mind-as-self. Both narratives feature protagonists struggling to reach a reality prior to language and an identity not based in self-conscious logocentrism, and both narratives end unsuccessfully because they deny the necessarily dual nature of humankind, a mediation of animal body and linguistic thought. I employ Giorgio Agamben's theoretical model as explained in *The Open*, which argues that *homo sapiens* become "human beings" through a synthesis of these dual natures, to examine these characters' failures to transcend the thinking mind while remaining human.

In chapter 1, Nick Adams's journey through the woods happens after he returns from World War I. His personal quest for recovery comes on the tail from his participation in a global conflict, but his pilgrimage is an isolated, personal experience. In chapter 2, the first of the two narratives, *St. Mawr*, also appears as motivated at least in part to the social and emotional fallout of WWI. In chapter 3, the texts discussed arose out of the context of America's "Containment Culture" as named by Alan Nadel in his book of the same name, a culture that defined Cold War American social politics. Specifically, this chapter examines the themes of *disruptive linguistic nonsense* and self-transformation as means to escape the confines of social conformity in Beat writing. I start with Gregory Corso's poems "Marriage," "Last Night I Drove a Car," and "Transformation & Escape." In "Marriage,"

perhaps his best-known poem, Corso uses nonsense to resist the authority of American social institutions and thus to preserve his autonomous individuality. This will to self-preservation that necessitates escape from society becomes more blatantly antisocial in “Last Night I Drove a Car” when he runs away from suburban life and runs down even his own family to escape. Finally, in “Transformation & Escape,” Corso finds himself in Heaven, despite the expectation that this would be a favorable situation, and seeks to flee this place representative of America Christian morality and so violently transforms his physical body (the poem sets aside the metaphysics of embodiment in Heaven) so as to aid his escape.

The project focuses on authors and texts that embrace a spiritual or metaphysical transformation, and this is not found in Corso’s work. Instead, my readings prepare the ground for the primary text of consideration in chapter 3, Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*. Corso’s poetry shares the themes of nonsense used counterculturally and social escapism, and in my reading of *Dharma Bums* I examine how this novel based around the conversion to Buddhism uses this spiritual tradition as justification for using said nonsense as one possible means to resist social norms and narratives as well as to justify nomadic wandering as social escapism. Kerouac’s dharma bums use physical mobility to express their countercultural beliefs. As in the previous chapters, the adoption of new spiritual beliefs motivates a spatial pilgrimage, tying together the concept of spiritual transformation as a personal re-identification with the concept of spiritual journey as spatial movement. Further, this reading builds on Alan Watts’s criticism of “Beat Zen” to understand how the Beats co-opted this tradition to serve their aesthetic politics of spontaneous composition as well as their social politics of anti-materialist anti-consumer-capitalism, where Zen metaphysics become a force to oppose the very reality of American culture.

Chapter four is a single author study. In it I read erotica writer Marco Vassi's fictionalized memoir *The Stoned Apocalypse* (1973) against the concept of the Postmodern Sacred from Emily McAvan's book of the same name. McAvan traces the Postmodern Sacred as it appears in "unreal" texts, a concept that signals the appearance of sacredness in a media culture based on simulacra and hyperreality. The key tenets of the Postmodern Sacred are that its practice is based on a pastiche of disparate spiritual traditions, that it depends on consumption—usually that of entertainment media—and that it entertains in productive tension usually mutually exclusive realities. An example of the latter is that in the postmodern sacred, the reality described by empirical science can coexist with the reality of New Age mysticism. McAvan's theorization of the Postmodern Sacred builds on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of postmodern self-assemblage, which claims that a tendency of postmodernity is that consumer citizens build big-picture totalizing identities not on a historically progressive teleology, but rather postmodern subjects construct their lives by selecting practices and beliefs à la carte; personal identity is itself a consumer pastiche.

And so, this chapter centers on the Do-It-Yourself nature of countercultural New Age spiritualism and does not specifically address Zen in regards to *zazen* or non-thinking—it more directly examines the tension between the twinned, binary appearances of human identity, e.g. the corporeality and consciousness, purity and sinfulness. It also foregrounds the existential tension produced by drug-induced "mystical" experience—a problematic idea itself in that LSD and other psychedelics facilitate a "religious" experience via chemical means, calling into question the legitimacy of the supposed dualism between "spiritual" and material reality. Drug-induced states of bliss are not equivalent with enlightenment, but psychedelic drug use and Zen experiences have become intertwined in American social

consciousness, as the previous chapter notes. The most deleterious consequence of this conflation in the narrative of 1960's drug culture, of which Timothy Leary was the preeminent voice, ends up being the advocacy of the idea that to hold on to the "spiritual" bliss experienced in cases of life-affirming psychedelic drug use (as opposed to the "bad trips"), one should purposely overcome one's ego; Leary's adaptation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* explains that the "ego-death" experienced at the peak of a drug trip is responsible for the ecstasy felt, and so a person should consciously labor toward achieving the same in sober life. This goal becomes conflated with Zen Buddhist practice because of the overgeneralized idea that Zen encourages ego-death itself.

The chapter explores the problematic nature of such a quest. The ego, which in psychoanalysis serves as a defense mechanism, is self-protecting and thus can narrativize any life story, even one founded on the willful destruction of the ego: thus ego-destruction becomes ego-affirming. The practice of Leary-esque ego-destruction also reinforces the tension between "sober" reality and the "magical" reality of altered states of awareness, whereas formal Zen teaching collapses the dualism between ordinary and "extraordinary" reality because the "beginner's mind" viewpoint attained during an enlightenment experience shows the two to be the same.<sup>3</sup>

The conclusion briefly summarizes the findings of this dissertation and focuses on the idea that while enlightenment experiences can destabilize the "sovereign" nature of head-

---

<sup>3</sup> Buddhism is often recognized as promoting a sober, objective perspective of reality, but there bears at least ostensibly some resemblance between Buddhist enlightenment and the moments of transcendence described by the Romantic writers: in a moment of clarity, the ordinary world takes on new significance, becoming *extraordinary*. But Buddhist enlightenment differs from Romantic transcendence in that in the same vein, these moments of enlightenment are described as insignificant. Just as Marco Vassi quotes Gautama Buddha as having said, "I truly attained nothing from total unexcelled enlightenment," Buddhist enlightenment is devalued, looked at as worthless—in short, as nothing special. This dialectic negates or complicates the otherwise Romantic parallel.

based representational consciousness, the eventual “failure” to achieve some sort of permanent transcendence and thus the eventual re-assimilation into normative society marks a successful journey of the type detailed throughout this dissertation. The texts that I call “successful” in this project depict the personal transformation of the character, and the failed quests involve those characters who cling to a radically altered experience of reality hoping to overcome logocentric thought forever and access a version of the “Real” separate from that of everyday life, representational thinking included.

## CHAPTER ONE—NOGUCHI, HEMINGWAY’S ZEN HERITAGE, AND NICK ADAMS’S ZEN

### PRACTICE

#### *PART I: YONE NOGUCHI, IMAGISM AND THE NONDUALISTIC POETRY*

#### INTRODUCTION

One critic calls him a “fifth-rate poet,” a judgment that seems justified when we read the line, “The known-unknown-bottomed gossamer waves of the field are colored by the traveling shadows of the lonely, orphaned meadow lark” from the poem “What About My Songs” But given its propensity to use non-standard meter and curious rhyme (when used), and to fill a small space of text with a dense amount of meaning available for the reader’s unpacking, Edwards Marx<sup>4</sup> describes Yone Noguchi’s work as “forecast[ing]” the poetic style of Modernism” (“What about My Songs” 41). Yet today, Yone Noguchi is a figure underrepresented in American Modernist studies according to Marx, a writer whose work aims to rectify this curious disappearance. Recently a small but growing body of literary theorists/historians, a group spearheaded by Yoshinobu Hakutani, a critic who will figure largely throughout the first section of this chapter, has made a case for Noguchi’s significance, and much of that case rests on exploring the fundamental influence this Japanese born poet had on the development of literary Modernism, a movement to which he contributed via his influence on monolithic names in the scene, namely William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound. Noguchi’s own style—a hybrid of American transcendental poetry emulating the work of Walt Whitman and of aesthetics derived from his native country’s artistic and philosophical tradition—informed the artistic practices of both these named poets. But more specifically, Yone Noguchi helped give shape to the imagist movement

---

<sup>4</sup> Marx was citing Eunice Tietjens, an editor for *Poetry* magazine.



popularized by Pound, H.D. and William Carlos Williams among others. This chapter develops from the foundational argument that not only did Ezra Pound know Noguchi and admire, albeit reluctantly, his work, but more importantly that Noguchi's poetic sensibilities impacted the initial shape of imagism. Besides clarifying the movement's origins, the bond between Noguchi and Pound matters because through Pound, Noguchi may have a once-removed connection to Ernest Hemingway's early prose styling. Hemingway's story "Big Two-Hearted River" from the collection *In Our Time* presents a narrative that is shaped by silence and emptiness and shows an author who embraced omission. This chapter will demonstrate that Noguchi's poetics of Zen emptiness carried over in part to Pound and imagism, and from that, to Hemingway and the art of omission, characterized in the named story by Nick Adams's refusal to supply inner dialogue or speech to his reader. Although it would be an overstatement to suggest that Noguchi directly caused Hemingway's writing philosophy, my research will show that Noguchi contributed to the historical force that would come to shape it, and as such, I will illustrate parallels between Noguchi's interest in Zen, its characteristic emphasis on silence and emptiness, and Hemingway's use of the same laconic aesthetic, not named Zen but resembling it in both appearance and effect.<sup>5</sup>

Although the connection has not been previously postulated, I argue there exists a direct stylistic line of descent that links Noguchi to Pound and Pound to Hemingway. The latter connection is itself well documented and accepted as valid. For example, Hemingway himself credited Pound as having offered him writing instruction, a service for which he in

---

<sup>5</sup> My two main sources for information about Zen in this chapter will be Daisetz (D.T.) Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* and Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. These two texts may be the two most influential Western (read: English) sources of Zen ideas and practice. Huston Smith explains in the introduction to the latter book, "Daisetz Suzuki's Zen was dramatic, [and] Shunryu Suzuki's Zen is ordinary" (ix), so, they illustrate very different viewpoints on a subject that is notorious for being elusive, paradoxical, and esoteric. Perhaps the use of variant presentations of Zen will help provide a more rounded presentation of the practice here.

turn repaid through boxing lessons. So then, what is needed here is to establish a convincing line of influence that flows from Noguchi to Pound. That connection exists, but in the end, it was not Noguchi's actual poetry that had the most influence on Pound, but rather it was Noguchi's critical work that advocated the use of silence and simplicity that impressed Pound. Noguchi's poetic style and his critical topics, often labeled as "Japanese" or "Zen," prefigured the rules of imagism that have become so well-known even today. These rules, supposedly set forth in 1912 by Pound, H.D. and Richard Aldington and subsequently published in "A Retrospect," demand that the poet give "direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective," "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" and "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome." These guidelines bear the trace of Noguchi's own poetic dictum.

#### NOGUCHI UNDER ERASURE: SELECTIVE MEMORY AND MODERNISM'S HISTORIOGRAPHY

Despite having been in literary circles with big names in the scene, not least of which being Ezra Pound, Noguchi "has been conspicuously absent in accounts of the development of modernism in literature and of modern poetry in particular" (Marx, "What about My Songs" 41). Noguchi's relative absence may have been in part motivated by his disharmonious relationship with American political ideology near the end of his life. Initially, Noguchi was impressed by what America seemed to have to offer, a promise suggested in part by Whitman's poetry, which Noguchi valued highly. Part of America's potential greatness stemmed from the presence of America's "beginner's mind," a phrase often used in Zen literature referring to the absence of expectations and an openness to possibility ("What about My Songs" 57). But Noguchi's American romance soured with age, and their

relationship was left permanently strained as a result of World War II. He advocated Japanese nationalism during the war, a stance he would soften after the war ended (60), yet his American ties grew weaker until his death in Japan in 1947 in the wake of the war that polarized his alliances and divided his interests. Late in his life Noguchi even criticized his role model Walt Whitman in an article entitled “Whitmanism and Its Failures.” Noguchi’s idealism, an idealism that favored and found great hope in America dried up with age, leaving his tone bitter and disapproving in his letters and critical articles. Edward Marx points that Noguchi’s “role as gadfly to the West eroded some of the popularity he had gained as the enthusiastic, self-appointed bardic ambassador of prewar internationalism” (“What about my Songs” 60); and finally, since Noguchi returned to Japan, where he lived until his death, he effectively evacuated his presence from the literary circles of which he once was part, allowing his “absence from the scene to make it easy to write him out of the histories of modernism which were being constructed by [Ezra] Pound and others” (61).

Despite having had his name put under erasure, a handful of literary scholars are seeking to reestablish Yone Noguchi’s name in American Modernist studies, and they are carving out a place for his work. For example, *The New Anthology of American Poetry: Modernisms 1900-1950* gives a brief section to his work. The introductory remarks for Noguchi’s section in this anthology point out a significant fact: “Yone Noguchi was the first Japanese national to publish poetry in English” (Axelrod, Roman, and Travisano 119). So, not only did Noguchi contribute to a major moment in literary history through his association with and influence on Pound and Yeats, but Noguchi also inaugurated a political-linguistic relationship between the two countries, helping to bridge American and Japanese poetic traditions and contribute diversity to the American richness and openness with which

Noguchi was so initially enamored. Further aiding his cause, Noguchi's work has received significantly more coverage and representation via the editorial work of Yoshinobu Hakutani. He depicts Noguchi as a poet who best embodies his hybrid nationality, a poet who bridges Japanese and American traditions.

Hakutani helps make his case for Noguchi through dismantling the arguments others have made concerning the source of Ezra Pound's ideas on Japanese aesthetics. For example, Ernest Fenollosa is consistently credited with having informed Pound, becoming the de facto answer to the question: who taught Pound his ideas about Japan? Hakutani wrests credit from Fenollosa's reputation to bestow upon Noguchi. Fenollosa did spend a great deal of time in Japan, and he converted to Buddhism in this time. He wrote extensively in an effort to preserve Japanese traditions, as he felt they were threatened by the West's encroachment (Rosenow 371), but he also wanted to provide the West contact with a culture he believed had much to offer to Western thought. This professor was a major Orientalist figure in academia at the start of the twentieth century, providing a link between Japan's history of ideas and arts in the West, and as such, he would prove valuable to Pound's conception of Japan and things Japanese in his writing, but some Modernist histories neglect the influence of other Japanese writers upon Pound, especially Noguchi's.

One powerful reason why Fenollosa is seen as such a prominent figure in Pound's thought is that Pound shaped Fenollosa's legacy to reflect this importance: Pound self-reports his debt to Fenollosa. Ce Rosenow in "Fenollosa's Legacy: The Japanese Network of Ezra Pound" illuminates the range of scholars and artists who mattered in Pound's imagining of a country he only knew from others' accounts, and her major point is that "Pound is both the recipient and the creator of Fenollosa's legacy, a legacy that relies on a

version of Japanese traditions that Pound himself helped to construct” (385). As executor of Fenollosa’s literary concerns following his death, Pound had access to and control over Fenollosa’s documents, and as such, Fenollosa’s literary legacy. Pound’s conception of Japan (and China) relied on Fenollosa’s extensive work, and Pound admitted that a majority of the translations that make up *Catbay* were influenced by Fenollosa’s notes (Patterson 63). Further, Rosenow asserts that Pound “actively created his own version” of Japan based on Fenollosa’s work (372). But just as Fenollosa gave shape to Pound’s ideas, Pound shaped Fenollosa’s legacy: how Fenollosa’s reputation survived his death depended largely on Pound’s careful and thoughtful representation of Fenollosa’s life studies. In this way, Pound seems to have shaped the content of the lessons one of his teachers taught him.

Rosenow acknowledges Pound’s larger network and other influential writers included Sadakichi Hartmann and Yone Noguchi (377). Specifically, Noguchi disliked Japan’s modernized, Westernized art and in response, evoked a romanticized, nostalgic image of what might be its traditional spirit (Rosenow 378). Pound’s own Orientalized idea of the country is itself remediated orientalism, a romantic representation of a romantic representation. This in parts stems from Noguchi’s own sentimentalized construct: “In Noguchi’s poems, Japan is an exotic and at times ghostly world that is out of physical reach but not out of meaning” (378). Pound represented an idea of an idea of a country, and Noguchi supported that version for him (379).

Rosenow’s research makes explicit the connection between Noguchi and Pound. Hakutani goes a step further by showing the significance of this relationship, doing so by looking at the history of imagism, a history in which he sees Noguchi as a kind of missing link. Hakutani argues that the history of imagism as a movement has not been deeply

enough investigated. Its origins are not clear, he says. After calling the discussion of the origins in question a “cloudy topic,” he complains, “[m]any discussions content themselves with restatements of Pound’s celebrated essay on vorticism” (“Ezra Pound” 63). What Hakutani seems to suggest is that scholars who want to understand the roots of Pound’s poetic movement depend on “Vorticism” as being the precursor of imagism. This does not actually answer any question about imagism’s origins, of course, because even if “Vorticism” lays the ground for imagism, we do not know what forces gave birth to Vorticist thought. This recursion defers the question being asked but does not answer it. Recognizing this failure, Hakutani exposes the abortive search and the hasty conclusion that results. He demonstrates the problem and implicates as the perpetrator Hugh Kenner, eminent Pound scholar, who calls imagism’s history a “red herring” and coaches the reader to tautologically rely on Pound’s texts to answer questions about their origins rather than to question the actual foundations (“Ezra Pound” 63). Hakutani wants to see Kenner’s coaching as an act of obstructionism, a thwarting of inquiry. This protectionist move isolates and monumentalizes Pound. In the end, not only is the history of imagism left largely uncovered, but it has also been, according to Hakutani, left murky by those perhaps best suited to thoroughly clarify it. But throughout “Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Imagism,” Hakutani demonstrates Pound’s indebtedness to Noguchi (even if that debt was one of many) and demonstrates how Noguchi helped shape one of the major stylistic movements in modern poetic tradition.

Some have indeed linked Pound to Noguchi, but at least one source claims an inverse relationship between the two poets, putting Noguchi on the receiving end of influence. Hakutani exclaims that this is absurd, if for no other reason than that Noguchi’s poetry predates Pound’s. Also, Pound himself acknowledges Noguchi’s work and its public

exposure in correspondence to him (“Ezra Pound” 69). Noguchi certainly takes historical precedence, but this is not yet enough to prove that his power impressed upon Pound any measure of influence. This next section will address the extent of the impact Noguchi had on Pound.

#### IMAGISM’S JAPANESE ROOTS

Japanese art forms and the philosophies governing these forms contributed to the development of literary Modernism, and we can evidence this by reviewing the oeuvre of W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, whose works display an unabashed affinity with what may be called “The East” in general, and whose works cite a Japanese influence more specifically. W. B. Yeats pursued an interest in *Noh* theatre and produced a *Noh* play called *At the Hawk’s Well*. Noguchi played a crucial role in facilitating Yeats’s knowledge of this dramatic style. Although Ernest Fenollosa often receives the credit for Yeats’s education in Japanese artistic matters, as he does for Pound’s, Hakutani frequently argues throughout the breadth of his critical and editorial work that Fenollosa did not know the Japanese language well enough to have been of great help to Yeats, and instead, we should understand that Noguchi aided Yeats and fed his interest.

Yeats and Noguchi had a personal relationship that started sometime around 1903, as we learn from a letter Noguchi sent to his first wife retelling his excitement for having received and entertained multiple invitations from Yeats and his circle of literary associates (Hakutani, “W. B. Yeats” 24). From this relationship, Noguchi worked his way into a field that in America was largely dominated by white writers. He enjoyed time with the Modernist literati, as it were. On the other hand, Yeats gained from Noguchi insight into an artistic

tradition he valued and undoubtedly romanticized. Yeats enjoyed what he perceived to be the lack of ego infused in Japanese art, rather than the brand of genius that constitutes Western art, which privileges and praises the individual creator. Noguchi explains in his critical writing, and perhaps he did so in person with Yeats, that traditional Japanese art often appears “created as if anonymously,” a condition highly attractive to Yeats and which he expressed in a letter to Noguchi (“W. B. Yeats” 25).

Besides producing art that approaches egolessness, Yeats saw in Japanese artists a treasured expression of simplicity. In a letter to Noguchi, collected in *Selected English Writings Vol. 2*, written years into their friendship in 1921 (or so, as the precise date is unclear), Yeats wrote, “I would be simple myself but I do not know how. I am always turning over pages like those you have sent me, hoping in my old age I may discover how” (14). This simplicity, and through simplicity, directness, also appealed to Ezra Pound.

Noguchi came to know Pound in a formative time in Pound’s career. Marx and Hakutani both place Noguchi in Pound’s physical presence in 1913, at which time Noguchi spent time with Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats discussing art—especially the subject of *Noh* theatre—in a salon together.<sup>6</sup> But it may be misleading to presume that Pound’s relationship with Noguchi’s thought also began at this time, especially given that Noguchi had by the 1910s already produced a prolific body of work and saw voluminous publication in such periodicals as *The Bookman*, *The Critic*, and *The Nation*. He was also published and parodied in *Punch* after the success of *From the Eastern Sea*, a type of honor he shared with Pound, whose “In a Station at the Metro” Richard Aldington parodied in the *Egoist* in 1915 (“Ezra Pound” 69). But there exists no direct written record that states that Pound became aware of

---

<sup>6</sup> Noguchi recounts this in his essay “A Japanese on Some English Poets.”



Noguchi via the latter's work before Noguchi, ever ambitious, contacted Pound directly, sending him *The Pilgrimage* in two volumes, to which "Pound acknowledged receipt [of the books and the included note from the sender] in a letter postmarked 2 September 1911" ("Ezra Pound" 68). Pound responded cordially and said, though we do not know if he spoke from politeness rather than honesty, that he enjoyed the poems and understood that Yone Noguchi was hoping and attempting to share the spirit of the Japanese with the Western world.

It is difficult to judge with any degree of certainty how much influence this Japanese literary ambassador had on Ezra Pound, but as Marx argues, "[his] influence on Pound and Yeats has been underestimated, [although] it remains difficult to judge the precise nature and full extent" ("What about My Songs" 55). This uncertainty is further maintained due to the fact that Pound did not explicitly thank or credit Noguchi as a mentor, though this absence of credit does not suggest a lack of due. Pound only credits the Chinese and the Japanese in general in his "Vorticism" essay, the essay in which Pound first offered readers "In a Station at the Metro," where he cites the poem as an example of poem in hokku form. This poem is important in this study because it links Pound to Noguchi, both as a textual artifact and as an example of a "*hokku*-like sentence" ("Vorticism").

One reason that Noguchi has received little credit for his influence on Pound results from the tense relationship the two poets shared. According to Marx, Pound may have fostered rivalry with Noguchi, and the "Metro" poem figures as an exhibit of circumstantial evidence in this case. In 1914, Pound rejected two articles submitted by Noguchi for publication in *Poetry* magazine. Pound called them "bad jobs" and advised the magazine's assistant director to send any other submissions directly to him for his personal review (and

rejection?) (“What about My Songs” 55). Marx entertains the notion that Pound, if he were not hoping to do Noguchi a favor by personally conveying a rejection slip to him, was ensuring that nothing of Noguchi’s would be published without Pound’s prior approval (55). Marx suspects the latter motive, and by that, subtly advances his case of rivalry, saying “[Pound’s] characterization of the submission as ‘bad jobs’ suggest that Pound felt some degree of animosity toward Noguchi” (55). This is interesting, especially given that a copy of “In a Station at the Metro” was discovered in a stack of Noguchi’s papers. Attached to it was a note inscribed by Pound: “To Yone Noguchi.” One may ask, as does Marx, did Pound give Noguchi this autograph, as it were, to show off his work, or perhaps, was this his way of paying homage? Pound’s feelings toward Noguchi helped hide Pound’s own admission of Noguchi’s influence on him, but the history of this poem helped recover that link.

The case of the copy of the “Metro” poem complicates the relationship between the two writers. To build on this case that centers on the poem, I want to see the importance of the “Metro” poem being called a “*hokku*-like sentence,” as Pound describes it in his “Vorticism” essay. Pound obviously places his poem in a Japanese heritage but does not name anyone as having connected him to the heritage or taught him about it. Hakutani investigates Pound’s possible sources of knowledge about Japanese literary genres, especially *hokku*, and rules out the oft-cited Western sources T. E. Hulme, F. S. Flint, and Richard Aldington. An earlier researcher, Earl Miner, credits these fellows of Pound, all in a club together that would act as predecessor to Pound’s imagist circle, with informing him, but predictably, Hakutani dismisses this claim; he also dismisses the possibility that Ernest Fenollosa played this part, explaining, “Pound would not have been able to learn from them the subtle elements of Japanese poetry because they did not have firsthand knowledge of the

language” (“Ezra Pound” 67). More importantly, Hulme, Flint, and Aldington studied hokku through French translators who used the transliteration *haiku* or *haikai*. What is important to note here is that Noguchi and Pound both used the form *hokku* (70). Though another piece of circumstantial evidence, Pound’s choice to use the form *hokku* bears, if anyone’s, Noguchi’s trace, and so, his discussion of “In a Station at the Metro” in “Vorticism” shows his using language as Noguchi would have used.

Despite his posturing, Yone Noguchi was not a master of hokku. He was not an expert on the genre, and some “lament” his “influence” on the genre, about which he said many “misguided or misleading” things (Marx, “A Slightly-Open Door” 109). Hiroaki Sato, whose comments are paraphrased in the above article, tears down Noguchi’s hokku and remarks that many of them are not hokku at all. Earl Miner cuts him down too, questioning how much of the “real deal” Noguchi was to anyone but a generation of people who knew no Japanese and little about Japan (“A Slightly-Open Door” 110). There is a sentiment in the camp of those who question or denounce Noguchi’s authenticity that see him as a posturer, an immigrant looking for fame, all too ready to play up his exoticism and play the role of foreign informant to the secrets of the East, as it were.<sup>7</sup> Marx points out that Hakutani seems like Noguchi’s sole defender of Noguchi’s authenticity. Otherwise, “rehabilitating Noguchi’s reputation as the father of English haiku seems heroic, if not misguided” (“A Slightly-Open Door” 110). Regardless of the esteem Noguchi’s hokku might deserve, Noguchi *did* help transmit Japanese aesthetics to the West. Specifically, his interest in hokku

---

<sup>7</sup> Marx argues that Noguchi employed a “pragmatic strategy of adaptation” that allowed him ingress and entry into the English literary scene (“A Slightly-Open Door” 124). He understood the West’s attitude toward Japan, and catered to those positive judgments and worked to offset those negative ones. For example, his hokku are often westernized by making them take up large philosophical questions.

impacted Pound, as the previous examples illustrate. Further, another exhibit in the case for Pound's tutelage under Noguchi exists. In his "How I Began" in *T.P.'s Weekly* (June 1913), Pound made the mistake of saying hokku have 16 syllables; Noguchi made that same mistake in *Rhythm* a few months earlier. Although Pound may have been informed on hokku-matters by F.S. Flint, he obviously was (mis)informed by Noguchi ("A Slightly-Open Door" 111). Not only does Pound's use of "hokku" versus the more common "haiku" suggest his and Noguchi's relation, Pound's very understanding of the parameters of this verse style hinged upon Noguchi's description, however (in)accurate it was at times.

The idea of the shape and brevity of the hokku form, communicated via Noguchi, informed Pound's own style, as so much evidence suggests. Pound only hints at paying Noguchi credit by citing the Chinese and the Japanese as stylistically influential. In the "Vorticism" essay, Pound explains that the Chinese and the Japanese have a poetic sensibility that favors directness and brevity. He says, in markedly outdated nomenclature, "A Chinaman said long ago that if a man can't say what he has to say in twelve lines he had better keep quiet. The Japanese have evolved the still shorter form of the *hokku*." This advice is seen in action when Pound recalls his formative experience at La Concorde, where upon leaving the train he "saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman" ("Vorticism"). Recreating this scene in verse, he did not want to create a symbolic work, but rather a hermeneutic and complete depiction of this scene as he perceived it. The poem shows the moment the objective appearance of the outer world transforms into the shape of the poet's subjective inner world. His original composition, his first attempt at recreating this moment, did not cut muster—it was too long and it was a work of "second intensity"—and so Pound began

again. The final result was the poem that we now read in any survey course teaching American Modernism. He started with many lines, and ended with two. This hokku-like sentence that Pound offers as a final product of an extensive revision process stems in large part from Pound's contact with Noguchi's communication of information on hokku.

#### NOGUCHI'S ZEN POSTURE

A major aspect of imagism is its terse directness that eschews sentimentality and obvious flights of subjectivity, instead hoping to minimize the appearance of the personal mind and allowing objective reality to bear most heavily upon the shape of the poem. Imagism was a school of thought that put down a simple manifesto, a bare minimum of directives designed to motivate the poet to leave the abstract intricacy of his or her mind behind, opting to illuminate the sublimity of the external world as it exists unadorned as much as possible by the evocative power of language. Obviously, this aim is complicated by the mere fact that poetry is a linguistically based art form, and to do without language is to ask the poet to negate his or her efforts. Imagism was necessarily a compromise from the beginning then: concrete language, language that references the visible and phenomenological rather than the philosophical, abstract, or personal would have to perform this task. Imagist poetry was language that tried to forget itself, and in that space cleared by omission, we find silence.

Edward Marx points out Noguchi's radical charge for American poetry to embrace silence ("What about My Songs" 54), and he turns to Noguchi's critical writing collected in *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*, in which we read Noguchi's advice to remedy uninspired and cluttered poetry, which he begins with the admonishment to "[leave] the 'words' behind...poetry will take care of itself all by itself without any assistance from words,

rhymes, and metres” (18). Noguchi argues, if the American poet would embrace a Japanese sparseness of letter, an austerity of utterance, the poet of the former nationality and tradition would be better for it, a sentiment clearly echoed in Pound’s poetic manifesto (i.e. “use no unnecessary word”). Noguchi himself struggled to write in this terse, austere Zen poetic sensibility though. His style was initially a very American style, showing a clear influence from Whitman. It is only after his initial publications that Noguchi moved to a quieter, more spacious style, and one that Pound may have found as impressive and motivational in his formulation of imagism. Instead, Pound would be indebted to Noguchi’s *idea* of what a poem was, rather than what Noguchi initially composed. In these works, we witness themes stereotypically considered common to Japanese art forms mixed with a particularly Whitmanesque romance of the self delivered through sprawling, unrhymed lines (Hakutani, “Yone Noguchi’s Poetry” 68). Noguchi’s work feels as if it were homage, if not slightly derivative.

Although Hakutani ties Noguchi’s stylistic traditions together, his assignment of the descriptor “Japanese” to Noguchi sometimes relies on a forgiving reception of Noguchi’s tone. Hakutani claims that Japanese poets (a wide generalization, perhaps) shun sentimentality and romance (“Yone Noguchi’s Poetry” 74). Accordingly, Hakutani sees Noguchi doing the same. The presence of Whitman’s obvious influence in Noguchi’s poetry should clash with Hakutani’s ear that hears sobriety in verse, something hard to accuse Whitman of. The sentimentality that Hakutani plays down in order to fit Noguchi into the Japanese poet category is exactly, if only in part, a marker of his American poetic sensibilities though. This American style contributes to his identity as a poet of hybrid nationalities and traditions.

The Japanese element of Noguchi's work is then, if not its sobriety as Hakutani claims,<sup>8</sup> the trace of Zen philosophy present in his poetry. Noguchi's style, especially his earlier work, does not always closely follow the stripped-down plainness of "Zen" poetics, such as seen in hokku, but it does incorporate Zen philosophical tenets, extolling themes such the inherent oneness of the universe, an emphasis and respect for silence, the wish for the extinguishing of personal identity (or achieving Nirvana), and an advocacy of non-dualism, which is usually represented poetically as an aversion to the qualitative labeling of phenomena and states of being. Said another way, Zen avoids using language to name things, instead directing a person to view something as it is, without symbolic language shaping the perception of the thing in question.<sup>9</sup>

Hakutani writes around the presence of the Buddhist idea of non-dualism in Noguchi's poetry. The doctrine of non-duality would, for example, state that there is no tenable distinction between the speaker and his or her objects of speech. To put it another way, there is no seer or recorder of phenomena that stands separate from the observed phenomena. Hakutani writes specifically, "In haiku, there is little division between the perceiver and the perceived, spirit and matter, man and nature" ("Yone Noguchi's Poetry" 76). All that is perceived depends upon the perceiver. There is no "objective" reality that the viewer sees, but instead, the viewer creates the appearance of objective reality and so is the

---

<sup>8</sup> Hakutani actually qualifies his generalization about Noguchi's style later in his essay, which suggests that his initial statement concerning Noguchi's non-sentimentality refers to his work in hokku. He calls Noguchi's other work, as we see in the examples read in *Seen and Unseen*, "sometimes overindulgent" ("Yone Noguchi's Poetry" 77).

<sup>9</sup> This anti-naming idea is not exclusive to Zen and has a history in Western thought, the most famous example that comes to mind being Juliet's question "[w]hat's in a name?" in *Romeo and Juliet* (II.ii.43). The idea is that linguistic markers are arbitrary and perhaps even misleading. The true nature of a thing precedes naming. Zen takes this idea to its logical limit, opening up the possibility of seeing all of reality stripped of labels, an experience at once disorienting and liberating—all of being may "retain that dear perfection...without...title[s]" (II.ii.46-47).

medium for it. While we may concede that the mind is the basis of subjectivity, we still assume that non-representational sense perception (observing something but not having discursive thought about the object) communicates the reality of the objective world around us, beyond and independent of the subjective mind. A Zen hokkuist would deny this belief: the only reality is that of the Mind of nature, in which human beings and all other forms are one. This leads the hokku poet to avoid expressing emotionally resonant lines, as emotional perceptions represent a second level subjectivity with even less concrete existence than the visual and aural reality that the eyes and ears give birth to in the mind. Further, in hokku the speaker and the landscape written about are put on equal footing—this is the effect of the parallel ideas in “In a Station at Metro.” Both the outside and the inside world reside in a larger unified reality, and so the speaker and the landscape are equally important and equally illusory. The result is, as Hakutani states, that “[i]n Noguchi’s poetry, then, as in traditional haiku, poetry and sensation are spontaneously joined in one and the same, so that there is scarcely any room left for rationalism or moralism” (“Yone Noguchi’s Poetry” 76). Hokku depicts scenes of reality, not thoughts about such scenes.

But much of Noguchi’s poetry is not in hokku form, or even close to it. As so, stylistically, it is hard to read Noguchi’s earlier poetry and see in it a quality that might be called “Zen,” a word associated with hokku, the style tied to Noguchi’s reputation. Although Noguchi’s name may be firmly linked to the hokku tradition, his early work was largely divergent from this poetic approach. While Noguchi advocated directness and simplicity in expression, it took time for him to develop this personally. For example, Noguchi wrote these lines in “What about My Songs”:

The known-unknown-bottomed gossamer waves of



the field are colored by the traveling shadows of  
the lonely, orphaned meadow lark.  
At shadeless noon, sunful-eyed,—the crazy one-inch  
butterfly (dethroned angel?) roams about, her  
embodied shadow on the secret-chattering grass-  
tops in the sabre-light. (“From *Seen and Unseen*” 63)

This poem is a testament to poetic excess. The reader struggles to visualize “known-unknown-bottomed waves of the field,” and Noguchi’s use of logical contradiction seems like a parody of the anti-rationalism of Zen, an “antipode to logic” (D.T. Suzuki 38). But Noguchi hardly transcends the binds of dualism with this image. Further, Noguchi also fails to economize when he describes the meadow lark as “lonely” as well as “orphaned.” Not that the two adjectives are synonymous, as the doubled sense of isolation (“lonely”/“orphaned”) may intensify the dejection of the lark in transit, but this phrasing does not seem to adhere to Noguchi’s “rejection of inessentials” and plea to “cut short!” (“From *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*” 66). Lastly, the interjection describing the butterfly hits a peak of sentimentality, which puts the poem at risk of being received as doggerel.

The above is only one example; many other poems support this point. So while Noguchi’s poetry may not exemplify the spaciousness of thought and directness of word he championed to Pound, from his earliest publications his work does take up the Zen themes Noguchi values. In “From *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*,” he asks the poet to embrace death and passivity, for example (61). To these, Noguchi also adds the themes silence and emptiness, which are probably even closer thematic ties to Zen than are death and passivity. Zen appreciates as higher ideals neither passivity nor activity, neither life nor death, but sees all as being inherently empty of essence. As D.T. Suzuki explains, “neither denial nor affirmation concerns Zen” (39), and since “Zen has nothing to do with letters, words, or sutras” (46),

one may easily appreciate the place of silence and its productive use in Noguchi's poetry. Just as language is full of meaning and silence undermines meaning, so too is language empty of meaning and silence full of it.

His first book is titled *Seen & Unseen*. From the offset of his career, Noguchi couples seeming opposites and creates an either/or/and relationship from the supposed binaries. We may see this as an attempt to create true wisdom, if we agree with D.T. Suzuki that “[i]gnorance is another name for logical dualism” (52). Suzuki continues, “If we want to get to the very truth of things, we must see them from the point where this world has not yet been created, where the consciousness of this and that has not yet been awakened and where the mind is absorbed in its own identity, that is, *in its serenity and emptiness* (emphasis mine; 52). This place of truth Noguchi tries to manifest and inhabit in his poetry: he locates fullness by means of meditating on vastness. The stock Zen idea that emptiness is form and form is emptiness should come to mind.

This play on dialectics was not lost on Noguchi's commentators. Gelett Burgess, who wrote the introduction for *Seen & Unseen*, identifies this handling of dualism in Noguchi's writing. He uses phrases like “tuneful silence” and “voiceless sound” (59) to point out the tendency of the poems in the collection to seek to negate the universe, or “Being-formed Nothing” (58) and to find a voice in silence. The role of the poet here is to act as intermediary to the mind of God. In “Is This World the Solid Being?” Noguchi finds “The resigned poet, alone delight[ing] in the corridor of Poetry” while “the god watches the keys of the entrance, nodding, lonely, in being-formed nothing” (61). The poet resides between relative reality (the realm of human existence) and absolute reality (timeless, indivisible), where poetry is a breezeway between the two planes. Notice too that Noguchi repeatedly

draws lone figures—the poet, the god, and the butterfly of “What about my Songs?” all stand alone. But if all of reality is a singular interconnected whole in Zen, then Being is a singular notion, and so in “To an Unknown Poet,” Noguchi ends with the suggestive question, “Am I the god upon the face of the deep, deepless deepness in the beginning?” (62). Suddenly, the poet of “Is This World the Solid Being” moves from the corridor and acquires keys to the entrance. In a universe of deepness or depth, this is a spatial movement, but in the flattened, “deepless” holographic reality Noguchi offers as an either/or/and possibility, the poet’s becoming god is merely a shift in perspective. He does not become god, but is god when he sees his existence from another angle. This is satori, the “unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of the dualistic mind” (D.T. Suzuki 88).

This reality where dualism collapses is what Noguchi draws more clearly in “My Universe.” First, he negates the qualities commonly thought to be most human by writing:

We roam out,—  
Selfless, will-less, virtueless, viceless, passionless,  
thoughtless, as drunken in the Dreamland of Dawn,  
or of Nothing, into visible darkness—this world  
that seems like Being. (72)

The “we” that must mean the human subject is stripped of agency and emptied of content, and it moves from a state of nothingness, which is to say a place with no thing in it, to an illusory plane that looks as if it offers the existence of things. From here, “we go back again,” reminding the reader of the circular nature of existence, where there is not a division between No-thing and Thing, but only the appearance of the latter that arises from the former. But all remains “contentless” (*Seen & Unseen* 72), empty of individual identity, and nevertheless all selfsame. And so, the act of naming falls apart. Noguchi writes, “The world

is round: no-headed, no-footed, having no / left side, no right side!” “Left” and “right” are relative notions and may only be formed from a position that allows one singular perspective, but from the point of view of God, a position that the poet takes, distinction falls away, as do judgments of morality:

And to say *Goodness* is to say *Badness*:  
And to say *Badness* is to say *Goodness*:  
The world is so filled with names...  
The Name is nothing. (73)

This section of “My Universe” lacks imagery and gives the reader ideas rather than life-as-it-is, which again, seems to, at least overtly, contradict Noguchi’s Zen attempt. This is to say, the poem expresses Zen ideas but is not an act of Zen itself because it creates ideas, even as it seeks to knock them down—Zen is no friend to abstract thought. This is the paradox of anyone who tries to communicate the idea of Zen in any form at all. But nonetheless, the message still stands and the idea is still planted: the logical/linguistic mind is not the true mind. In this poem, Noguchi empties the results of mental cognition and human speech and imagines a place at which “Goodness, Badness, / Wisdom, Foolishness meet face to face at the / divisionless border between them” (73). What is left is being without quality, a state of pure being. But as he suggests, this being is predicated on nothingness. We may imagine that this philosophical stance may have sounded shocking to Western reader in 1897. In response, I imagine Noguchi may have invited the reader to do as his narrator of “I Am What I Like to Be” did: “I knelt down as humble servant before my soul— / forgetting my life, my fancy, my knowledge, my / wisdom, my thought” (*Seen & Unseen* 72). This speaker has a life uncluttered by abstraction, a mind cleared of its ideas and he offers the same to the reader.

## PART II: TOWARD A SINGLENESSE OF MIND IN HEMINGWAY'S "BIG TWO-HEARTED RIVER"

*"Can you take hold of empty space?"*

*"Yes, sir," he replied.*

*"Show me how you do it." (D.T. Suzuki 84)*

Having made the argument that Yone Noguchi had a direct influence on the development of literary Modernism by influencing Ezra Pound and his poetic approach, as well as showing the philosophical contribution Noguchi made to the tradition of American poetry through his treatment of Zen themes, the second part of this chapter will make the argument that Hemingway's early writing, exemplified by "Big Two-Hearted River," is subtly but clearly linked to that tradition Noguchi fostered. A student of Ezra Pound, Hemingway continued imagist practices by giving direct treatment of his subjects and by using no unnecessary word. And if imagism were in some part indebted to Noguchi, then in some smaller part, Hemingway was too. Particularly, this section will examine the uses of silence and emptiness in this story as productive forces toward awareness. Both Hemingway's writing style, which is to say the textual form of the story, and Nick's act of emptying language from his mind exemplify the power of silence and of emptiness.

### NICK'S WALKING TRIP TO A NEW DIMENSION

John Gaggin in *Hemingway and Nineteenth-Century Aestheticism* sees Hemingway's characters posturing as aesthetes. This habit of writing detached, aesthetically-inclined characters puts Hemingway, as Gaggin sees it, in debt to writers who evacuate their characters from the world of drama to watch this world from an aloof vantage point inside themselves, disengaged and passively perceiving. This aligns Hemingway more directly with writers such

as James Joyce, and specifically finds in Hemingway's characters a trace of the Stephen Dedalus artist-type who secedes from the scene of life and instead pares his nails away in the middle distance. This claim of his characters holding a cool, distant aesthetic posture is held in tension against the other side of the spectrum where reign characters of dramatic engagement, a force which too motivates many of Hemingway's characters: "His characters desire simultaneously a life of engagement and one of observation...They move from place to place, trying to find a safe spot from which they can watch dramatic events" (24). Of these characters, Gaggin claims, "Hemingway's most detached character is Nick Adams...who speaks in short, emotionless sentences and consistently evades conflicts by moving away from difficulty" (25). But Gaggin overstates Nick's aloofness and draws a profile of him that highlights what would seem to be both a mechanical, drone-like demeanor as well as cowardice in the face of pressure, an uncharitable character sketch that forgets, for example, that Nick enlisted in the military, fought in the war and subsequently took a bullet to the spine in the "Chapter VI" inter-story of *In Our Time*. Recall that in this vignette, Nick, leaning against a church wall in injured repose, tells Rinaldi, another soldier who lies face down dying, that the two of them have made a separate peace. Nick turns his head away and smiles "sweatily" (63). This is the stuff of action/adventure films, where coolness and drama coincide. Where Gaggin would like to see Nick as a mental malingerer in flight from the reality of conflict, I believe we should see the appearance of the "cool" action hero stereotype, essentially masculine, wry and reserved. Even if Nick's initial motivation to enlist came from a selfish interest and not a "greater desire for worldly involvement" as Gaggin maintains (25), it is unfair to try to negate the obvious danger in which Nick has placed himself. This is all to say that Nick Adams's motivation cannot be so simply named.

This is not to quarrel with Gaggin's point that Nick's "enlistment permits the creation of a private world, a practice paralleled by his return to the woods of 'Big Two-Hearted River'" (25). It is clear in this story that Nick sets off on his fishing trip for the satisfaction of some deep, personal need, and while on this trip, Nick perceives "new impressions that enliven consciousness in a society that stifles intellectual thoughts with deadening, communally held ideals" (26). But it is absurd to claim here that Nick's trip is motivated by intellectual need and not by something more visceral, intuitive and non-abstract. As Nick does not take even a single book with him on his trip, Gaggin is hard-pressed to verify his image of Nick's reclining intellectualism. True, "[Nick] focuses on sensual details of the campsite not only to control his nerves but also to awaken his mind" (26), but the mind that Nick awakens is not simply his frontal lobe that entertains abstract ideas, but is rather the mind that is spirit, the mind that is awareness-at-large.

The purposeful awakening of awareness reveals to Nick a state of reality otherwise obscured in daily life. It lifts his life to a higher plane. According to Larry E. Grimes in *The Religious Design of Hemingway's Early Fiction*, Hemingway's early works portray characters that "achieve" an existence in what he calls the "fifth dimension" (4). Simply stated, this fifth dimension is an additional one superadded to the four dimensions we experience—length, width, depth, as well as the dimension most puzzling to us, the one that seems to evade direct observation or susceptibility to graphic depiction, time. This fifth dimension Grimes cannot define both effectively and succinctly, instead building and modifying a definition with each example given throughout his study. But an initial description is the definition of this fifth dimension as the "'still center' of Zen" or "the still point at the center of a moving

world” (4).<sup>10</sup> He goes on to explain that this fifth dimension, what will be a focal point of his book, is “the mythical-religious dimension of life perceived only when there is nothing left to perceive [and is] achieved only dialectically in, but beyond, time and within the tension of the sacred and profane, transcending both” (4). And so, this fifth dimension provides a ready label for and helps us to conceptualize a characteristic of Hemingway’s writing. The existence of the fifth dimension allows a reevaluation of the relative stillness of Hemingway’s work. In particular, I think we can see “Big Two-Hearted River” as a story that shares the description of *Waiting for Godot*: the former, like Beckett’s play, is another text in which nothing much happens, and does so twice, and this nothingness happens in the fifth dimension.

It is this sparseness of plot that I want to consider in this section. I do not simply want to affix an easy, orientaling label to Hemingway and his writing legacy. It is too cheap to say simply that he was a “Zen writer” or that he wrote “Zen” stories. That does not, however, mean that this may not be the case. Specifically, in “Big Two-Hearted River,” the writing style considered together with the near-plotless narrative of the story proper work in tandem to produce an effect that Grimes would describe as the fifth dimension. This effect is a production of a still point. On the surface level, this story is about a man taking a solitary fishing trip, and it shows the detailed happenings of this trek as this man travels through a scorched countryside, leaving civilization and its politics behind. The interior action of the story is of a man confronting and breaking free from the compartmentalizing effects of

---

<sup>10</sup> Erik Mortenson’s writing about Buddhism in Beat literature also evokes the image of the “stillpoint” (as one word here), calling it a state “beyond rigid ego consciousness” (“Keeping Vision Alive” 123) that functions by “opening up the moment to include past and future” so as to weaken the perceived boundary “between the self and the world” (128). Mortenson’s definition helps us to understand Grimes’s less precise definition.



civilization. Just as Zen practice—the meditative act of simply sitting still, observing one’s breath, and watching from the quiet place one’s thoughts as they arise in the mind—moves one away from identification with his or her thoughts and into direct experience with the reality of the present moment, we see Nick Adams reflecting on and actively engaging with his mind, but doing so with minimal effort. That is to say, Nick is not doing mental labor, though he is using his mind nonetheless, but it is not necessarily for the act of thinking, if thinking means producing inner language. In this reading, I want to trace and discuss this meditative engagement and consider its fruits.

The comparison between Hemingway’s writing and Zen makes more sense when we consider the argument that Hemingway, at least initially, wrote in a style indebted to the stylistic tenets of imagism. Grimes points out that Hemingway studied under Pound and traded boxing lessons for writing lessons, so the initial connection is easy to draw (5). Not to minimize the effect Hemingway’s journalistic training certainly had on his writing style, it is still necessary to understand Pound’s influence on Hemingway’s early work. Pound, whom Hemingway credited as the most significant shaper of his style, edited his mentee’s work, often urging Hemingway to economize his language. Hemingway did this so well that Pound would later label Hemingway’s work itself imagist (Lamb 38).

We can consider the first two rules that Pound famously established for imagist writing and see them in accordance with the aesthetic austerity of Zen. Pound instructs writers to treat the object of consideration directly and to use no superfluous word. Despite the fact that all language ends up being a metaphor in a sense, Pound aims at reaching an “objective” presentation of subject that is neither embellished nor adorned. This effort creates an “image,” which Pound describes in “A Retrospect” as “an intellectual and

emotional complex instant of time” (32). It probably takes little argument to reach the conclusion that Hemingway’s earlier writing tends to follow these guidelines. Not as clear, though, is if he adheres to the third rule that dictates that writing be composed to sound musical, and not metronomic. And though infinitely debatable, I think it ungenerous to accuse Hemingway’s straightforward prose as being mechanical, when it reveals, at least, repeated refrains and moments of musical silence—silence being just as important to the shape of a melody as the notes played or sung; in music, emptiness is form and form is emptiness.

#### NICK’S PRACTICE

Zen is not a religion but is often thought of as one, if not as a metaphysical system of thought. And so, to speak of Zen is to invite a conversation concerning the religiosity of Hemingway’s writing, whose writing many treat as having religious significance. In Joseph Flora’s *Hemingway’s Nick Adams*, Flora reads “Big Two-Hearted River” as a religious story; he argues that “[e]ven though [Nick] journeys to an unnamed destination, he could hardly seem to be acting more precisely by directive. There is no grail image for what he seeks, but his quest is nonetheless religious” (150-151). Relying heavily on the central importance of fishing in the story, along with symbols of renewal, such as the story’s river namesake, Flora supplies a reading that finds this story as revealing a Christian undertone and symbolic economy. Yet, I find Flora’s specific naming of Christianity both too constraining and unconvincing. There is ample evidence that Hemingway had, if not a strong Christian experience, at least a wide exposure to the church doctrine and tradition as a youth, but Flora’s reading relies heavily on the presupposition that Hemingway would have cared to use

quite stock Christian imagery to produce a tired literary trope. For example, that Nick fishes and that a prominent gospel account places Jesus in a positive relationship with fishermen stretches beyond good faith the likelihood that we should read Hemingway's story itself as evoking Jesus's biography. Further, Flora describes Nick's methodological approach to setting up camp and calls it "thoroughly Pauline," in that Corinthians 14:40 records St. Paul as saying, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (160). Surely we can read about Nick's fastidious camp demeanor and recognize a man who cares much for detail and order, but to claim that Nick is following St. Paul's orders, rather than being a man with a similar disposition to St. Paul, places too heavy a burden on the weight of Christian doctrine to act as a guide for Nick's comportment. Flora undercuts Nick's authority to create for himself a system of self-governance, naming his methodical bivouacking a result of the influence of a powerful religio-historical figure who advised a specific style of personal conduct.

Further refuting Flora's specifically Christian reading is the point made by Donald F. Bouchard in *Hemingway: So Far From Simple*, a study dedicated to examining Hemingway's theory behind and use of a "simple" prose aesthetic. Bouchard explains that after WWI, Hemingway's writing expresses the strain a writer experiences while trying to reach an audience and while trying to reach himself. Bouchard writes:

If 'Big Two-Hearted River' is the last story of *In Our Time*, it is because WWI placed a special burden on the writer, because experience and a difficult language, in the failure of ordinary language, were now inextricably linked...Language, then, is not the basis of normal communication and the writer no longer speaks for the dominant culture. (36)

It is for this reason that Hemingway, as Bouchard argues, wrote, "to counteract the dissociation of WWI, to locate a space, however narrowed, where an individual could recover a personal stake in practice" (41). It should be safe to say that Christianity was the

dominant culture of the first half of the twentieth century, and that Hemingway, as a writer, would not write as the voice of this dominant culture. Instead, the war and the need for renewal that followed urged iconoclasm. Barring the recourse to see Christianity as a basis of self-renewal, this section will focus on naming this recovery of a “personal stake in practice” in the wake of the trauma of WWI as the exact revelation of Hemingway’s writing in “Big Two-Hearted River.”

But I do not intend to dismiss Flora’s major premise, that this story facilitates a religious air, because his minor premise, that the story is markedly Christian, overreaches. Returning to Grimes, we do see that “Big Two-Hearted River” draws on a specific image of a past world painted into Western literary history. He suggests that the image Hemingway paints of the forest and the river evokes a romantic past world, such as found in fantasy stories, but despite this, Hemingway “keeps his prose hard and exact, never allowing his language to leave the realm of the visible for more direct flights into the world of symbol and myth” (Grimes 50). It is Grimes’s point that Hemingway avoids a mythologized world that in part prevents me from attributing to this story too closely a symbolic analogy, especially an analogy to a Christian myth, as Flora wants to establish. That said, this objective and “exact” prose does not lend to Nick a re-creation of religious stories from the past, but allows him to carve out for himself a practice of solitude that tends toward direct experience of the divine or the Real, whatever that force may be for him.

It is difficult to make the argument that “Big Two-Hearted River” can be read symbolically with very much success. The action of the story is quite undramatic, the scene of it is quite standard as far as charming yet foreboding sylvan landscapes go, and there is little speech or even internal monologue to close read. The weightiest of the story’s

suggestive details is the initial setting in burned down Seney, and though this placement evokes a distinct mood, it is not the main point nor is it the driving tension in the story. It is fair to say that Nick's starting point near the Mansion House hotel, with its foundation "chipped and split by fire," suggests that this story is founded on destruction, and that it precedes to foster and show regeneration through Nick's personal pilgrimage and meditative solitude in the embrace of the forest and in the healing waters of the river. But this truth is not symbolic. Nick did come back from the war. He did find Seney a victim of change, change that appears in the guise of destruction, which proves the impermanence of home-like areas in one's life. Finally, Nick does seem to recreate a space for himself and find renewal in the river's rushing water. These things, though, are not allegorical, nor are they symbolic. Hemingway's sparse, objective language prevents a "[flight] into the world of symbol and myth," and the numinous experience present does not suggest a meaning beyond the story but emphasizes lived-in experiences as meaningful themselves. This is why I think that a Zen reading (and not a recourse to Zen metaphor) best illuminates Nick Adams's private sojourn into the dual heart of the beloved river.

At this point, I need to name more specifically what I mean by "Zen" as I use it as a reading tool in this section. First, I do not mean to associate Zen very closely with Buddhism, which at first may sound counter-intuitive. Zen is chiefly a name for a practice that is largely divorceable from Buddhism as a historical religion: this practice in question is called "zazen," or in English, "sitting."<sup>11</sup> To illustrate Zen practice's functional separation

---

<sup>11</sup> My ability to separate meditation from Buddhism falls in line with the claim made by David McMahan in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* that "Western Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers have often been the most eager to extract meditation from the larger doctrinal and praxiological frameworks of Buddhism" (184). This tendency makes meditation practice appear as the Buddhist "element most detachable" from Buddhism-at-large, especially owing to the fact that meditation and the quality "mindfulness" that lies at the root of

from Buddhism, I turn to *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki. Suzuki was a major player in the emergence of Zen in America and founded the San Francisco Zen Center in 1959, teaching meditation to Westerners regardless of the spiritual or religious background of his students. In the chapter "Traditional Zen Spirit," Suzuki says,

The most important things in our practice are our physical posture and our way of breathing. We are not so concerned with a deep understanding of Buddhism. As a philosophy, Buddhism is a very deep, wide, and firm system of thought, but Zen is not concerned about philosophical understanding. We emphasize practice. (87)

This practice is not a search for enlightenment, but sitting itself is enlightenment; there is no process and no goal: "Enlightenment comes all of the sudden to us" (87). Zen practice teaches that humans are trapped in logocentric thought, limited to representations of life, but through sitting, practitioners can extricate themselves from this delusion. The higher truth gained through zazen, "sitting," is seeing the world as it really is, progressively freed from one's interpretation of it, as far as attachment and identification with one's ego imposes a limited awareness that skews worldly experience. Zen practitioners believe that through sitting with good posture and focusing on breathing, letting thoughts come and go as they arise and fall away, the rambunctious human "monkey mind" is quieted both at the time of sitting and during the rest of one's daily activity, a residual effect of practice. This quietness, or "emptiness" as Zen teachers frequently call it, amplifies the joy of the experience of life through the found ability to be present in life. This is a practice in which I see Nick Adams informally engage. He shuts off his mind and uses his fishing trip to practice awareness; this is his Zen practice.

---

meditation practice are often "presented as psychological, spiritual or scientific techniques rather than as *religious* practices" (emphasis original; McMahan 185). Despite McMahan's tone, a strong argument for this separability can be made, and above my research supports just that.

“On the first day of the trip, Nick performs the ritual tasks of camp making to shut off his thought process. That night he experiments with memory control and concludes that he is ready for the river,” writes Grimes (49). This gives an overview of the first part of the story and summarizes the most significant mental achievement Nick Adams gains in it. To achieve the experience he seeks to find on this trip, although we as readers cannot know exactly what this might be to him, Nick must first control his mind. This is an act of extroversión because in limiting his mental activity, he extroverts his awareness toward the outside world. This is an act with significant Zen quality. S. Suzuki writes that in order to find a way of life that is true, “we have to forget everything which we have in our mind...you should have a general house cleaning of your mind” (101). Like Grimes says about Nick’s mind control, Suzuki explains that through zazen practice, “One after another you will have various thoughts in your mind, but if you want to stop your thinking you can” (102). Nick actively forgets; he cleans house.

We can look at Nick’s mental preparation from yet another perspective, one that uses a different metaphor to say the same thing. In the second essay from *Genealogy of Morals*, “‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience,’ and the Like,” Friedrich Nietzsche asserts that the “real problem regarding man” is the unique challenge the human animal experiences in being able to make promises (57). If promise-making, which is to say the creation of obligation, can be seen as an inimical force in the life of the human animal, then the complementary and balancing force to it is forgetfulness, which Nietzsche describes as an “active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression” that aids in preventing most of what we see, hear, taste, feel, smell and learn from finding a safe-hold inside the mind (57). Forgetfulness, according to Nietzsche, is a boon and a tool that improves the quality of a person’s life. Further,

forgetfulness is not a passive utility of the mind, but instead, it is an “active” function that “make[s] room for new things, above all the nobler functions and functionalities, for regulation, foresight, [and] pre-meditation” (58). Forgetfulness, used effectively, is “a form of *robust* health” without which “there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no *present*” (emphasis original; 58). Nietzsche believes that memory opposes happiness and a full awareness of moment-to-moment living.<sup>12</sup> Active forgetfulness is an agent of joy. It affirms life and allows in it new meaning, as if rumination on life directly opposes any given person’s ability to find such meaning in it.<sup>13</sup>

In “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick actively engages his forgetfulness function in order to receive the current moment, from which he derives his life experience. His active forgetfulness Hemingway depicts early on. In the seventh paragraph, we see Nick trudging the path to the river, weighed down by the gear he packs in with him. This “road climbed steadily. It was hard work walking up-hill. His muscles ached and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy. He felt he left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him” (134). Nick departs from the weight of civilization and its obligations, but this departure does not separate him from pain and physical stress, nor would the reader surmise that Nick would have preferred to leave those latter things behind; he instead desires to leave behind abstract, mental labors. Notice what Hemingway decides to list as sloughed-off burdens: thinking and writing. He does not explicitly acknowledge his taking leave from personal finances, social obligations, romantic or familial relationships, or

---

<sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille bases a large part of this philosophy of headlessness on this same point. See, for example, “The Sacred Conspiracy” and the figure of the Acéphale as continuing this idea Nietzsche sets forth.

<sup>13</sup> Although “[c]omparing Nietzsche with Buddhism has become something of a cottage industry” (Loy n.p.), S. Suzuki and Nietzsche certainly do share an theoretical advocacy for forgetfulness.



even his schedule. Instead, Nick explicitly leaves behind linguistic operations taken at large; in back of him, he walks away from the interior processing of ideas and the act of recording those ideas.

That Nick clamps down on his mind by ceasing to feed it new thoughts does not mean that Nick is choosing to become unaware. His avoidance of thought is not an avoidance of his life, but rather, an alternative approach to running it. The narrator tells the reader of the happy comfort Nick finds in abandoning logocentric awareness, and in putting behind him the need for words, Nick can move his mind from the role of thought-producer to that of experiencer of phenomena. In the first few pages of the story, the verbs used to describe Nick's actions can be seen in one of two categories. The first is that of simple bodily movement. Verbs like "sat [down]" signify Nick's basic animal activity of self-willed movement. "Sat down" is the first verb used to describe Nick in the second line of the first part, but after this, along other simple verbs like "walked [down]," the reader finds the repetition of (what I will call) perception verbs. The majority of the verbs in the initial six paragraphs are a combination of "looked," "watched," and "saw" (as well as one negative construction: "did not see"). It seems that in giving up his language function, Nick prepares himself to register the appearance of the world about him, here signified by verbs pertaining to sight. And so Nick "looked at the burned-over stretch of hillside," "looked down into the clear, brown water," "watched the trout" and "saw them at the bottom of the pool" (133). Nick silently receives the appearance of Seney, drastically changed from his last visit: "Seney was burned, the country was burned over and changed, but it did not matter. It could not all be burned" (134-135). Through his sense of sight, he sees a site/sight of destruction, accepts it as change, and realizes that despite impermanence, Seney's basic nature will remain. Seney

somehow remains, even as an idea: “It could not all be burned.” Things change; things remain: Nick notes all this without judgment.

Throughout the story, Nick’s ability to perceive the world clearly is amplified by his smoking activity. I will argue that although the modern reader may attach to smoking a health stigma, the incidence of smoking in this story is tied to Nick’s increased awareness and his cultivation of a feeling of equanimity. For Nick, it is a kind of “sitting.” It is meditative act. As David Lenson explains in *On Drugs*: “The fundamental change that nicotine effects is a fragmentation of the wave motion of time (*chronos*) into discrete particles (*kairoi*). Cigarettes become the commas of daily life, dividing otherwise uninterrupted waves of experience into punctuated intervals or separate temporal units” (37). The act of smoking halts the rushing progress of time as a potentially overwhelming force and breaks it down into digestible, perceptible moments, demarcating them and thus amplifying the reality of the present. Nick smokes to pause and to reflect—not to think, but to sit and act as a mirror to the expansive immensity of the natural world that surrounds him. When he smokes, Nick must become aware of his breathing. Again, Lenson explains, “A physical concomitant is the change in the smoker’s smooth and unconscious patterns of breathing, which are now reassigned from the medulla oblongata to the cerebrum as inhaling and exhaling become conscious actions. Breathing becomes transitive” (37). Cigarettes raise awareness and move time toward a crystalline solidity. Time contracts for the smoker, or the smoker fills up the space of time—either way, smoking emulates the sensation of the eternal present, time as a singularity. This is all of being unified in one point.

The first instance of smoking finds Nick surveying the land and relying on his sense of sight to guide him. He sits “down against a charred slump” to smoke and looks “out over

the country” (135). His mind clear from the nicotine and sharpened too by his active forgetfulness of language, Nick is ready to go forward and find his way: “He did not need to get his map out. He knew where he was from the position of the river” (135). He needs no authority outside himself, and his clarity contributes to this autonomy.

The next cigarette Nick enjoys follows a period in which he seems to test himself and his resolve not to think. At the end of the first day, after he makes his camp and eats his dinner, breaking a fast he could have broken earlier but instead patiently, intently waits to eat, Nick makes coffee, a stimulant, and realizes that after starting to drink it, “His mind was starting to work” (142). He then lights a cigarette inside his tent while “sitting on blankets.” With this, Nick observes the fire and the night’s quietness and Nick himself becomes quiet—so quiet that when a mosquito buzzes his ear, he lights a match and scorches his noisy visitor. All comes to stillness, and sleep follows this stillness.

The last cigarette Nick takes in the story happens when he is on the river right after he loses the biggest trout he has “ever heard of” (151). Sullen from his loss, Nick smokes, again sitting, here on logs. Again, the cigarette moves him to record his surroundings with his heightened awareness. He feels “the sun warm on his back, [and sees] the river shallow ahead entering the woods...big water smooth rocks, [and] cedars along the bank and white birches” (151). In this moment, Nick experiences non-attachment, as the lost trout swims on in his mind: “Slowly, the feeling of disappointment left him. It went slowly away, the feeling of disappointment that came sharply after the thrill that made his shoulders ache. It was all right now” (151). The joy of the cigarette itself does not replace the missed triumph Nick pursued, but it helps move him past disappointment. He accepts his present circumstance and his dashed hope, and he experiences equanimity in the face of loss.

So despite the surface level disparity between smoking and zazen, I think we can see in “Big Two-Hearted River” how for Nick, the former acts as a type of practice of the latter. In all three instances, Nick stops himself, sits down, and becomes conscious of his breathing through smoking, an activity that brings breathing from the hindbrain to the forebrain and to the front of personal experience. Here, Nick looks outward, finds inner guidance, finds non-attachment to failed ambition, and ultimately, finds rest.

My reading of “Big Two-Hearted River” has hinged on the argument that Nick Adams expresses and refines a heightened awareness throughout the story, purposefully forgetting himself in order to better know himself and the land to which he feels connected. This is a claim that is not free from rebuttal. In the essay “*In Our Time, Out of Season*,” Thomas Strychacz argues against my stance. He writes, “For all its promise of regeneration, the story leaves us with the conundrum of a character who, like the trout who ‘looked like live fish’...in the water even after they have been gutted, seems sentient yet not self-aware, isolated yet incomplete” (84). Some of these descriptions of Nick are obviously indisputable. He is isolated in that he is away from human society. Further, Nick does lack “completion,” as it were, which is a driving reason behind his journey in the first place. We garner no sense that by the trip’s conclusion that Nick has healed his psyche beyond further and later corruption, or that he has extinguished all suffering by having reached a state of “nirvana,” to keep with the theme of my reading. This suggestion of completion, if I can read the term to mean something akin to self-actualization, is a lofty goal and probably an unreasonable one if to pursue it means to find some sort of personal perfection. But to claim that Nick is unaware of himself ignores the entire text of the story. Strychacz gives no further support to this assertion. Nick’s conscious effort to close down the rational functioning of his mind, his

appreciation of his escape from writing and thinking, his awareness on the first day of his intense hunger but his willingness to continue a fast until he establishes camp and set up his sacred, homey space—these things and more indicate a man who has a keen awareness of his mental and bodily functions, as well as his sense of higher purpose or his place in a natural divinity. Earlier in his essay, Strychacz notices Nick’s self-control as unusual compared against the other characters in *In Our Time* (e.g., Sam Cardinella, the hanged man who becomes incontinent). Strychacz credits Nick with “an unusual experience of control over himself and his environment” (83). But how does one unaware of himself control himself? The foundation of Zen sitting practice is the premise that in order to control oneself, one must be fully aware of oneself. Self-control comes from self-awareness.

Nick’s experience reveals an implicit argument that there is no higher authority than one’s self,<sup>14</sup> but the road to this awareness of self-authority is not easily found. Hemingway’s message accords with a Zen master’s: “There is no way set up for us. Moment after moment we have to find our own way...Each one of must make his own true way, and when we do, that way will express the universal way. This is the mystery” (S. Suzuki 101). Or, as Norman O. Brown in *Love’s Body* says, “We must rise from history to mystery” (214). Nick, a soldier home, knows and shows that when one is lost, finding a way home may be a mystery, but in searching this mystery, one finds a way home.

---

<sup>14</sup> Except maybe in the instance of coffee making, where a friend’s method may prove best. Nick does admit that his friend’s brewing instructions trump his approach (140-141).

## EMPTINESS, OMISSION, AND MEANING-MAKING

Writing selectively produces something out of empty silence. The form of language overwrites the absence previous to it; language is shaped around silence. Erik Nakjavani, in “The Aesthetics of Silence: Hemingway’s ‘The Art of The Short Story,’” writes that good fiction “depends upon how much it assumes, implies and then *surpasses* that which we already know through the mediation of silence at the moment of its invention” (41). Silence communicates and is too a kind of information. Absence, silence, and emptiness are pregnant with information, but seem to “[beg] decoding” (Loots 74). Loots in “The *Ma* of Hemingway: Interval, Absence, and Japanese Esthetics in *In Our Time*” explains that the meaning of absence “must paradoxically remain unexplored and unsounded” (74), because the unvoiced meaning recedes under direct investigation, as if searching for darkness with a spotlight. The emptiness underneath the text of “Big Two-Hearted River,” marked by Nick’s own silence, cannot be rummaged through. Absence or *Ma*, as Loots refers to it in his own discussion of Japanese aesthetics in Hemingway’s work, is “a meaningfully empty space-time interval” that resists the form of language and abstraction (74). These points of course relate to Hemingway’s own theory of omission as notably described in *Death in the Afternoon*, where he explains that a writer may omit that which may be assumed, things the writer and his or her reader know. These things may be communicated to the reader without language.

Nick Adams in “Big Two-Hearted-River” communicates in depth through his silence as a narrator. Nick keeps a vow of near total silence. The reader, the audience to Nick’s voiced thoughts, is obliquely addressed only through the few lines of dialogue and otherwise listens to the yawning spaces in between those few lines, those simple utterances. Nakjavani writes that omitted language “does not sink into nothingness, but, God-like, makes its

presence more powerfully known in its absence,” and the discourse of silence eventuates the piecing together of that which appears fragmented (42). This is the possibility of “Big Two-Hearted River,” a narrative of resounding silence, where silence is the wellspring of meaning. It is the basis and the source of creation, and so Nick finds repair in this silence as he meditates in it to search out possibility beyond linguistic signification, to find the personal meaning precluded from such signification.

Hemingway, Pound, and Noguchi rely on silence as a force for meaning-making, and they share this common condition of creativity, because “[s]ilence saturates poetry and the short story” (Nakjavani 43). The relative brevity of both the short story and poetry necessitates a style based on omission, and due to space constraints both forms must start from a larger base of assumption than would a novel, and so silence signals the presence of certain assumptions. Before and behind these texts and in the emptiness of their margins, “the spirit [of creation] circulates freely” (Brown 196), and in this blank space lies the power behind Nick’s renewal. The text only offers a seed of the suggestion of Nick’s recovery but allows silence to carve a space to grow it. Just as the text as linguistically based arises from empty space, Nick’s self-renewal grows out of the silence of his mind. His meditative act cuts away what is dead and what is overgrown. His Zen forgetfulness burns his mind clean like a forest fire, mirroring charred Seney before.

And so, in conclusion, we come to see that a practice of Zen is a practice of leaving something out, not to reduce meaning but to amplify it. Noguchi and Pound expressed the belief that poetry needs to do without words, and Nick Adams’s emptied mind demonstrates the power of omission. This is the achievement of the published version of “Big Two-Hearted River,” whereas Nick Adams in an omitted section now called “On Writing” from

an earlier draft of the story, a version of the story loaded with abstract musing, ends with Nick heading back to camp not emptied of thought but instead “holding something in his head” (241). This description conveys an awkward and uncomfortable fullness, but the final draft simply leaves Nick empty minded and hopeful, instinctively knowing “[t]here were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (156).

The process of revision from the earlier draft now called “On Writing” to the final “Big Two-Hearted River” encapsulates Ezra Pound’s editorial contribution to Hemingway’s career. As Alex Shakespeare points out in “The Names of River and the Names of Birds: Ezra Pound, Louis Agassiz, and the ‘Luminous Detail’ in Hemingway’s Early Fiction,” “Big Two-Hearted River” first appeared in the first issue of *This Quarter* in 1925 as did another piece by Hemingway called “Homage to Ezra” (36). Shakespeare goes further to explain that along with the catalog of thoughts that are edited out of the story, leaving the fishing trip the central and only real activity, Hemingway edited “Ezra” out of the story—Nick in the earlier piece thinks of his friend Ezra and his contribution to Nick’s intellectual life. But the final draft, influenced by Pound’s own laconic aesthetics, cuts both Nick’s mental abstractions and Ezra’s appearance in the story, leaving instead only Nick as a “conscious body” (39). The cutting of the allusion to Pound was itself a higher honor to Pound than the initial namedropping, and this perhaps acquits Pound for having left Noguchi’s influence unacknowledged too, if for no other reason than that names only obscure the silence that predates them.



CHAPTER 2—CUTTING OFF THE HEAD: THE HEADLESS BODY IN *ST. MAWR*, THE  
BODILESS MIND IN *THE UNNAMABLE*, AND THE THREAT OF LANGUAGE  
AGAINST REALITY

INTRODUCTION

The “inward turn” is one of the defining characteristics of Modernist literature. Categorically speaking, Modernist texts tend to reposition the reader inside the head of the fictional characters, giving readers direct access to their thought process, including their unfiltered reactions to events and social drama, their speculations about others and themselves, and their desires and disgusts. For example, some of the most commented on writers of the period, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, created narratives that make not the character but the subjectivity of the character the protagonist of the story. For example, we might say that *Ulysses* is largely framed around Leopold Bloom’s thought process and his self-reflections; despite the threat of adultery and his awkward moment of public masturbation, much of the drama of the novel takes place inside Bloom’s mind, the vantage point from which the reader sees the outer world. The mind of the Modernist character is itself an actor in the text, and although its actions are out of sight from all the other characters in the novel, the reader directly witnesses not only the actions taken by Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* or Lily Briscoe of *To the Lighthouse*, but is also granted the intimate privilege of reading the minds of these protagonists.

Broadly speaking, to view the inner world of a character is not only to watch the emotions and reactionary thoughts of these characters arise and pass, but also to witness the formulations of logical thought and the attempts to understand the world as the Modernist character observes it. As a result, where fiction prior to Modernism had portrayed the

interpersonal complexities and difficulties of protagonists in conflict with other people, the “inward turn” of the Modernist novel highlights the trials and tribulations of the inner world of personal experience, and the introspective investigations reveal the acute drama of the mind. Specifically, this chapter will read texts by D.H. Lawrence and Samuel Beckett that focus squarely on examining the suffering that results from a character’s own “inward turn.” To reflect on one’s self is to become conscious of one’s self, and Lawrence and Beckett explore the fear and danger of recursive thinking about one’s self.

Lawrence’s and Beckett’s narratives that I will discuss focus on how critical self-reflection interrupts the possibility of action without artifice. In *St. Mawr* (1925), Lawrence presents a protagonist who comes to understand self-consciousness to be the root of a life lived disingenuously; internalizing societal expectations and performing for one’s peers, the characters in *St. Mawr* showcase the effects of people who are hyper-aware of their public presences. Paralyzed by the fear of social scrutiny and so unable to act spontaneously and artlessly, these characters alter their performed behaviors so as to become *tableaux vivants*, mere dramatic and aesthetically designed representations of life. Likewise, in *The Unnamable* (1953), Beckett portrays a mind that can think of nothing beside itself in its incessant attempt to find final silence. These texts are complementary in that their protagonists, acutely self-conscious, seek peace from the demands and the self-centered drama of interior experience. *St. Mawr*’s Lou Witt and her mother Mrs. Witt seek reality prior to linguistic abstraction, where language as abstraction, like the performed *tableaux vivants* criticized in the novel, merely represent reality though mistakenly they come to stand in for it. Likewise, the narrator of *The Unnamable* wants to find peace from the torment of neurotic hyper-rational self-reflection, but existing merely as stream-of-consciousness, the narrator cannot transcend

that which solely comprises its existence: language. In both narratives, the narrators' troubled relationships with language prevent access to the immediacy of existence and both protagonists struggle to take action to overcome the constraints of linguistic signification.

In that this chapter investigates texts that explore the possibility, though always-already failed, as we will come to see, of reaching a plane of existence separate from and prior to language, this chapter will return to and build on select Zen themes previously discussed. The conclusion of the previous chapter, though highlighting the presence of Zen aesthetics in Hemingway's story "Big Two-Hearted River," focused on but a few specific aspects of this tradition. Namely, my reading of the story centered on the role of conscious awareness independent of linguistic mediation and Nick's process of cultivating this mental state. To best set the stage for his trek into the wilderness, Nick makes the conscious decision to shut off the flow of inner critical thought. This does not diminish the capability of his mind to perceive the world or his experience of it. In fact, much of my argument about the purpose of this inner silencing demonstrates that the cessation of interior language provided Nick a mind more attentive and receptive to sensory experience. The need to and benefit of shutting off his thoughts presupposes the encumbrance posed by the internal chatter of the linguistically oriented mind. This chapter will demonstrate how the protagonists in D. H. Lawrence's minor novella and the last narrative of Beckett's *Trilogy* struggle to find the inner silence Nick Adams finds, but unlike Nick Adams who uses this silence as a recuperative strategy, Lawrence's and Beckett's narrators hope to make this state of inner silence permanent, attempting to transcend linguistic abstraction completely. Namely, these two texts depict an attempt to escape the virtual reality formed from language, which threatens or does completely subsume the physical reality that underwrites it.

Consequently, both texts demonstrate practices that aim to find a reality stripped of abstract representation, yet both texts also fail to produce protagonists who as a result of their attempted self-actualization can exist as coherent selves consisting of a functional relationship between the body and mind. *St. Mawr*, anticipating Bataille's politics of consciousness advocating irrationality and revolt against the mind as sovereign, produces a narrator with a metaphorically headless body, and *The Unnamable* renders a mind both obsessed with logical deduction and divorced completely from its body. Disembodied, the narrator seeks a silenced mind but because its presence as a character depends solely on mental abstraction, it cannot but perpetually produce its being formed by the linear, syntactical shape of language.

I want to situate the two primary texts in this chapter as metaphorical before-and-after portraits of the crisis in Georges Bataille's polemical manifesto, "The Sacred Conspiracy" (1936) in which Bataille prefigures the conditions that will usher in a time where "[m]an has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison" (181). Bataille, like Hemingway in my first chapter and like the authors whom I will read in this chapter, identifies the linguistically active and abstraction-forming mind as a sort of adversary to a sort of authentic identity. In *St. Mawr*, Lawrence brings the struggle between Lou Witt, a woman looking for a life more authentic than she finds in logocentric England, and her relationship with her mind to a crisis. She resolves this emergency by progressively weakening the relationship she maintains with her mind, working to cut herself off from it completely. This behavior seeks to create the creature Bataille describes in "The Sacred Conspiracy"—the Acéphale, a headless monster that has renounced its humanity by cutting off its head, the seat of reason and the maker of meaning. The meaning-making mind, for

which the head in Bataille's work stands, the creature violently discards. The refused mind becomes refuse, and this resultant trash Beckett makes the centerpiece of *The Unnamable*, a text concerned primarily with the frantic internal monologue of what seems to be a disembodied head that has no recourse to or contact with an outside, physical world. The sensory deprivation that the talking-to-itself head experiences allows it to focus on and only think of itself, creating a case of total egocentricity. Divorced from its body and all confirmable personal and historical context, unable to verify its numerous hypotheses and superstitious thoughts, the narrator that Beckett renders for his reader exists merely as a stream-of-consciousness, a forward-moving progression of thought; the narrator is nothing more than an ego-at-large, unanchored to a physical reality. Knowing only its own *I*, the narrator spends the length of the novel attempting to rationalize its existence and establish truths about its ultimately incomprehensible reality. This grotesque depiction of the Cartesian head-in-a-vat hypothesis knows only the truth of logical doubt, a condition that proves to be both the narrator's undoing and its singular *raison d'être*: the narrator is reason writ linearly, existing solely to perform the faculty of reason, a perfect tautology. Bataille and Lawrence make a case against the rational mind, and Beckett hyperbolizes its existence in a painfully sympathetic illustration of the result of intelligent doubt become totalizing neurosis.

#### PART I: ABOUT A MINDLESS HORSE AND A HEADLESS WOMAN

*"We don't exist"* –Lou

#### BETWEEN PAN AND PANCAKES

Lou Witt seeks vitality for her being, and she knows that some force does or *should* run through the bodies of each sentient creature, though she comes to believe that all humans

have lost their contact with this primordial energy. One day when Lou Witt is in social conversation, Cartwright, one of Lou's acquaintances, gives a name to this primal force understood as a kind of immanent divinity from which humankind has become estrange, and of which Lou has only recently started to perceive as a possibility in the world: Cartwright calls it Pan. Evoking a romantic, primitive and primal yesteryear, Cartwright explains that God was once "hidden in everything" and existed as "the hidden cause" (Lawrence, *St. Mawr* 54). He says this divine energy could not be seen by the naked eye, and to do so would destroy the viewer anyway. In step with the numerous religious texts that imagine a face of God that cannot be beheld, Cartwright claims that direct apprehension of the world's native divinity would destroy the perceiver, but he supposes that each person has access to an organ that acts as a camera obscura, a tool allowing a person to view the sun's shape indirectly. This organ could allow one to look upon this all-too-powerful light: borrowing language from Indian mysticism as well as looking forward to the New Age of the 1960s counterculture, Cartwright claims that one can see Pan with his or her third eye. But he and Lou's mother, Mrs. Witt, come to conclude that even if the third eye could be accessed, one would struggle nonetheless to see this energy named Pan circulate inside a human being even if mystical methods were taken simply because Pan has fallen in humanity. The wellspring of life has dried up in humankind, but Cartwright and Lou believe it stills flows through the story's namesake, St. Mawr.

A fundamental theme of *St. Mawr* explores the claim that once where life had an added dimension, fleshed out by that divine power that has since fallen, there now only exists a two-dimensional and superficial representation of reality. Where there had once been Pan, now only flat pancakes remain. Following the conversation discussed above, Lou's

mother asks her daughter in private, “Did you ever see Pan in a man, as you see Pan in St. Mawr? (55). She answers that no, even using her third eye, when looking for the inner essence of men, all she seems to see is a “pancake,” and her mother agrees, that “one always sees” just a pancake (56). What these women mean is that the depth of being has given way to flatness or superficiality as a result of the vanishing of life’s energy source. Lou has herself become aware of this lack of dimension, lack that leaves life shallow and hollowed out of meaning, and this harsh realization plagues her. In short, this novella illustrates her attempt to rediscover a reality with its original depth intact.

St. Mawr, the bay colored stallion with whom Lou falls in love at first sight initiates Lou’s spiritual awakening and converts her to a belief in a richer reality to come. We may see this novel as a conversion narrative: ignoring for now the unsettling double entendres we could make based on some of the more suggestive images Lawrence describes in the novel, and looking forward to the language of the 1960s counterculture, we can say that St. Mawr is responsible for “turning on” Lou. Compelled by the horse’s charisma and vitality, much of which radiates from his beastly head and eyes that reflect a state of consciousness untouched by a rational mind, Lou experiences a kind of instantaneous conversion before this animal and she knows she must worship this being she calls demonic, though, as we read later, she had almost worshiped a different master: where she now prepares to bow to this horse, previously “she had been ready to bow before mind” (95). Standing before him, her defenses crumble and the resolute hardness she had fostered breaks. After her first meeting with St. Mawr, Lou goes home and cries, and she knows another world exists beyond the superficiality of this one. She knows this because the “mysterious fire of the horse’s body split some rock in her” (14).

Sacred experiences motivate or highlight many of Lawrence novels. For example, in *The Man Who Died*, Jesus Christ survives his crucifixion only to crawl out of the tomb and meet in his confused wandering an Egyptian priestess of Isis who helps the wandering Son of God experience the mortal body and its sensuality as something altogether holy. It is possible to see Lawrence as staging “initiation rite[s]” that move both his characters and his readers to experience a shift in perception and to reach an “awareness” of “union with the divine” (Burack 2). Lawrence’s fiction starts at the premise that obstacles like self-consciousness and allegiance to the demands of the rational mind prevent such experiences of transcendence, and so “sacred experiences [only] occur when a person develops an unselfconscious, impersonal, and spontaneous relationship” with another being (Burack 3). As we will see in this chapter, self-consciousness can act as a prison, and breaking free of self-consciousness can batter down the confines of the walls of one’s otherwise limited and profane reality. Also, because the expression of one’s personality is an epiphenomenal effect of the shape of a person’s ego, not an inherent trait of the pantheistic life energy running through it, the would-be initiate must transcend the idea of the personal. For example, St. Mawr refuses Lou a sense of intimacy, which she could find in her husband Rico and all the other males that leave her so cold. Precisely, St. Mawr offers so much to Lou’s newly discovered soul “because he isn’t intimate” (*St. Mawr* 49). Lou cannot connect with St. Mawr on a personal level and this thrills her. What she finds in him runs deeper than personality, personality being something that this novella treats as something of a trap. What St. Mawr promises Lou, what she sees in him, is a glimpse of another world, a deeper, richer, more fulfilling reality than she knows. Instead of the “hollow mockery of things,” and after St.



Mawr crumbles “the walls of her own world” (6), Lou envisions a reality where life and death, consciousness and sexuality finally carry the gravity she believes they deserve.

#### THE HOLLOW MOCKERY

Though Lou comes to realize the shallowness of her own life, she begins the novella attacking others for their own shallowness. She tends to target men, seeing them all as emasculated. It is a classic case where Lou’s perception of lack in others may be a projection of the lack she feels at the core of herself, but this does not spare her husband Rico any grief. Lou is complacently married to Rico, and he comes to compete for his wife’s affection against the virile stallion that embodies so many of the qualities Lou sees missing in her husband. The couple is described as “charming” and Rico appears refined and dignified, but these qualities only add to Lou’s dissatisfaction with her husband. All of these socially efficacious social qualities only demonstrate Rico’s posturing and self-consciousness. He is weak and unmanly in her eyes. In line with the narrator’s propensity of describing a great deal of the story’s characters as equine, the novel begins by explaining Rico’s submission to his wife, comparing him to a horse, a horse in fact quite inferior to St. Mawr: “You had only to see the uneasy backward glance at her, from his big blue eyes: just like a horse that is edging away from its master: to know how completely he was mastered” (3). Conquered and submissive, Rico’s powerlessness in his relationship underscores his passionless and feeble presence as a man in Lou’s eyes. As a result, the couple exists in a sexless marriage that has degenerated into an awkward friendship (6). Lawrence’s narratives tend to share a thread of sexual essentialism and the male characters he wants his reader to respect, such as Oliver Mellors from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, display stereotypically masculine traits such as brutish

confidence and social assertiveness, and so the reader will quickly realize that Rico is a contemptible figure; as for Lou, he fails as a husband for these same reasons.

Yet Lou's frustrations extend beyond her conjugal disappointments. It seems that she, the Texas transplant who has already toured Europe and now lives in England, cannot find a real man anywhere. She served as a nurse in World War I because "[s]he loved men—real men. But, on close contact, it was difficult to define what she meant by "real" men. She never met any" (7). The novella's narrator fails to convey what comprises Lou's standard of masculinity, but we know that no one has yet fulfilled the unspecified measurement. This only changes when Lou prompts Rico to purchase a horse after Lou appeared in the social section of the newspaper the morning following her first ride through Hyde Park, an excursion through which she garnered so much positive attention and thus feels her first incentive to purchase a horse. Despite her hatred of self-consciousness and posturing, the very idea of purchasing a horse stems from the flattery she feels after being recognized for his fashionable riding presence. The papers allude to her as one of two "striking figures" (emphasis original; 9) seen riding the Row. As a result, she begs Rico to buy a horse with her, if only because she "luxuriated in the sun of publicity" (24). Rico puts up a little fight but acquiesces uneasily, becoming angry and appearing so; the narrator describes him as a dog ready to attack but that lacks the nerve and "daren't quite bite" (10). Again, Rico cowers before his wife, who looks elsewhere to find in a male the virility her husband so clearly lacks.

Rico's infirmness in this situation brings a new figure of masculinity into the couple's life, and so we may pity Rico for his complicity in securing the further dissolution of his strained marriage because Lou finds what she wants when she comes face to face with St.

Mawr, and their relationship follows a narrative that is typical if not unsettling in this instance. Lou wants a fierce and manly presence in her life, and St. Mawr offers this, and he is a troubled figure, an animalization of the “bad boy” figure. When she shops for a horse, the man showing her St. Mawr explains that all horses are “temperamental” but that this one “was a trifle raw somewhere” (12). Lou, inquiring into the horse’s history, wants to know the source of St. Mawr’s damage. The response sets the tone of their relationship:

Why, that’s hard to say, my Lady. If he was a human being, you’d say something had gone wrong in his life. But with a horse, it’s not that exactly. A high-bred animal like St. Mawr needs understanding, and I don’t know as anybody has quite got the hang of him...he is a special animal and needs a special sort of touch, and I’m willing he should have it, but I don’t know exactly what it is. (12)

But Lou is willing to try her hand on this troubled male that is responsible for two accidents, one in which a man “had his skull smashed in” and another that crushed a man to death against a stall (13). No doubt these fits of animal strength and capricious, untamed temperament entice Lou. She immediately wants to buy this beast described as “slippery with vivid, hot life” (13).

This stallion offers a glimpse of hope to Lou that this essential force she fears as lost in the human world exists at least in the animal world. But the human world lacks it, for Lou’s memories are a catalogue of the continent-wide pandemic of emasculated men, and the causes of this condition are many. On one hand, in the novel, the aftereffects of World War I haunt Europe, and neurasthenic, fragile men constitute one such hangover from the war.<sup>15</sup> Everywhere, among the country landscape and deep inside the men of England, the “dead hand of the war lay like a corpse decomposing” (59). The undermining of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Amelia Jones treats the subject of WWI’s effect on masculinity, discussing shell shock and the resultant “neurasthenia” as forces that left men feminized, in *Irrational Modernism*.

masculinity of the young generation of English men matches the visible scars on the county side. Amelia Jones points to the effects of WWI as largely constituting the profile of modernity, the effects of which she calls “uncontainable, violent, feminizing, debased and debasing” (9). The ruptures in gender codes Jones explores in *Irrational Modernism* are in part the very changes Lou laments so frequently.

But Lou criticizes men in general for their self-consciousness, a condition just as inimical to masculinity as shellshock in her judgment. For example, even at the end of the novella when the mother and daughter duo move to Texas where they hope to find a life with depth, life has not taken on the full gravity they sought. Even on this ranch, the men are driven by self-consciousness, and this prevents consciousness as a whole from penetrating “below the surface...It was like life enacted in a mirror” (130). Lou and her mother see the appearance of life, but it strikes them as flat. A world without “any substance of reality...[n]o deeper consciousness at all” (130) still confronts the searching women. Specifically, the men Lou meets still fail to impress her or impress upon her a sense of vitality. They are “[c]owboys just as self-conscious as Rico, [but] far more sentimental, inwardly vague and unreal” (130). She admits that they live “a hard, hard life” and that the work they do is “dangerous and gruesome” (131), but Lou desires more than a performance of strength and a life lived by the toil of the body; indeed, that fact that these men know how they must look to others looking upon them and so posture as rugged, hardworking ranch hands carves away the depths of consciousness such a “manly” lifestyle could otherwise afford them. Faced with men seemingly acting out “stronger” gender roles, Lou remains unsatisfied, precisely because these men still *act* their lives. For Lou, a man’s intentions determines his authenticity, and so to perform one’s role, no matter how manly the role

played, flattens consciousness to a two-dimensional, flimsy mere representation of reality. She finds not Pan but a pancake even there in Texas. It seems that for Lou, self-consciousness panders to the ego's need for validation but undercuts and stifles vitality, a force that requires no acknowledgment or gratification. Disappointed and confused, Lou asks herself, "What under heaven was real?" (131).

The answer is, of course, not Rico. Of all the novel's cutting social criticism, Rico takes the brunt of it from the narrator, from his mother-in-law as tradition would have it, and from Lou. Repeatedly throughout the novel he is called a poser, and this term develops an irony because Rico paints for a living and thinks of himself as an artist. As a visual artist, we expect to see him creating images based on the appearance of others, but throughout the majority of the story, the reader fails to see him engaged in any real artistic endeavor; rather, Rico engages in creating a portrait of himself and the trappings of his life. The narrator states that he has "composed this little *tableau vivant* with great effort" (10). This description reinforces the story's fascination with opposing the full depth of authentic reality against the mere representation of reality that so commonly stands in for the real thing.

In this description of Rico's contrived life as a *tableau vivant*, the idea of a living picture troubles the relationship between reality and representation because the *tableau vivant* occupies an awkward middle position between those extremes. A *tableau vivant* is a controlled and stylized artistic manipulation of the human body that seeks to mimic life or uphold a specific impression of life. This defines Rico. He is not a free human being, but rather a man living an art life, an actor who donates his body and his presence to manifest a neat impression. He is a medium for art and artifice rather than authenticity. But the cultivation and maintenance of the necessary self-consciousness that allows this performance piece of a

life to flourish and to awe those who see it constitutes Rico's gravest sin. Lou complains that all the men she knows play act their lives, and this ends up being true in Texas just as it is with the various parts of England in which she lived and with those places to which she traveled. Self-consciousness destroys the integrity of life and the free flow of whatever pantheistic energy circulates through existence because it creates a "reversal of outward flowing spontaneity" that marks naturalness (Poplawski 95). Instead, self-consciousness directs one's energy inside, where the will of the poser forces life to appear as one desires it to, and the will of the poser, posing equally for the gaze of the world and for himself as in Rico's case, controls and confines life to the careful, stagnant appearance. The flat "self-conscious picture" (95) tries to stand in for fullness and depth, but here it fails, leaving instead the disingenuity of "Rico's hollow misgiving" (18). And while most people cannot see through Rico's act, blind as they are to affected life, Lou starts to see that "true insight depends on not relying on visual perceptions of surface reality" (Poplawski 97).

So far, we have investigated Lou's dissatisfaction with the men in her life, and this has proven to be symptomatic of a broader crisis she faces. Although the wages of World War I appear to be a kind of spiritual death, this narrative focuses its damnation on self-consciousness and mourns the resultant performance-of-life. But an alternative to this seems to exist, and Lawrence writes Lou to foster the hope of reaching it. Yet to do so, Lou must do more than flee the world of posers and players. The problem runs deeper than the company she keeps. She must identify the force within herself that bars her access to vitality. If Pan has fallen in her, she must identify the wound that slew him.

As always, St. Mawr guides her to this discovery, and in this case, it is in St. Mawr's neighing that Lou "seem[s] to hear the echoes of another darker, more spacious, more

dangerous, more splendid world than ours, that was beyond her. And there she wanted to go” (27). The horse’s communication, expressive but not symbolic, signals a reality beyond logocentrism. Lou doubts the world she lives in, finding it illusory, and she comes to understand that although self-consciousness damages the integrity of the world and acts as a degrading power, she knows some more fundamental malady limits her access to reality—this sickness that bars her is her mind’s evocative use of language. The acts of eating, of drinking, of socializing and of making love strike her as “bodiless”—of food specifically she believes what she eats “had been conjured up out of thin air, by the power of words.” Names, ideas, things, “[e]verything [was] just conjured up, and nothing real” (27). But St. Mawr interjects a caesura into this unreality, allowing something realer to sneak in, cracking the patina of linguistic manifested reality.

Lou’s mother Mrs. Witt, though something of a poser herself, shares with her daughter this philosophical bent, and realizing that her existence is a construct of language, she teaches her daughter that language constructs their sensate bodies. This realization comes to Mrs. Witt on the morning that Lou finds her mother peering out a window at a funeral taking place nearby. Lou questions her, asking if she enjoys watching, which Mrs. Witt admits she does. Lou’s mother also admits that she believes “hardly anyone in the world really lives, and so hardly anybody in the world really dies.” Death has lost its gravity, a condition Mrs. Witt mourns, and to highlight the absurdity she feels, she remarks that a week after a deceased person is buried, “there should be a solemn burial of a roll of newspaper,” which would be “just as serious” (85). We can interpret her suggested funerary practice in two ways, one signifying that the human condition is no weightier than the production and destruction of the printed word, or that the printed word should receive the

privilege that a human being does. Mrs. Witt conflates the two, and implicitly argues that the modern people exist as printed language. She doubts her existence, saying, “I seem to have been a daily sequence of newspaper remarks, myself. I’m sure I never really conceived you and gave you birth. It all happened in newspaper notices. It’s a newspaper fact that you are my child, and that’s about all there is to it” (86). Mrs. Witt feels as if her entire subjectivity results from and is catalogued in language, specifically language as social media. These newspapers and their stories narrate and perform her life. Even her relationships depend on and result from their being published. Carried to its logical end, Lou’s mother understands that in this paradigm of human existence, to “[b]ury everything I ever said or that was said about me” means that “you’ve buried *me* (emphasis original; 86). She cannot stand this version of reality, where the immateriality of language softens to inconsequence the sting of death, and so Mrs. Witt proposes that she and her daughter go back to America, a land that may promise a graver, harder reality and a death worth dying.

#### A CONSPIRACY TO SACRIFICE

Lou rails against self-consciousness, fearing its toll on life, and begins a search for a life past such an affliction. But in doing so, in hoping to relinquish self-consciousness, Lou implicitly desires to sacrifice her humanity. Her conception of what it means to be human as articulated in her philosophical claims and witnessed by her attempt to find a life that has spontaneity untrammelled by self-consciousness finds a parallel in Giorgio Agamben’s theoretical work in *The Open*, an essay tracing the means of the production of the concept of the human being as signifying something beyond the animal *homo sapiens*. In the essay, Agamben states the foundational claim that “[m]an has no specific ability other than the



*ability* to recognize itself”; or to clarify this idea and to place human being in context of all other animal being, “man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human” (emphasis original; Agamben 26). Starting from this understanding, Lou’s battle against self-consciousness gains a cost, that is, her humanity, a cost that she levies against the benefit of resurrecting the fallen Pan inside her. And so we see that by the end, this novella is one about sacrifice. By the conclusion of *St. Mawr*, Lou effectively gives up her marriage and her established life, including her social ties, the small honor of being named baroness that she receives as Rico’s wife, as well as the pleasure and validation of being seen with the public eye, because when finally alone in the desert of New Mexico, Lou resigns herself to hermitage. But these sacrifices only scratch the surface, which is all she has really ever known, though *St. Mawr* has woken her up to her ignorance and her shallowness. To go deeper and to know more beyond the social performance and intellectual conceptualization of life, Lou sacrifices her humanity, and she does this by sacrificing her self-reflective mind.

The most crucial concept Lou with which must dispense is the idea of human being, an idea of privilege and invested value. *St. Mawr*’s “non-human question” (14) begs Lou to reevaluate her assumption of the superiority of the human animal as different, apart and above the animal kingdom as a whole. The idea that human beings exist and function on a plane higher than other animals of the world—this privileged, elevated ascension on the great chain of being that maintains human beings as, if not superior then more significant, than the other animals of the world—results from the estimation that human beings are animals with a crucial element superadded. Some might say that this difference is the presence of the soul, while others might posit that symbolic language marks a higher development and grants this being more worth. Taken more generally and less

metaphysically, the presence of a self-reflexive mind, one that is conscious of its consciousness and conducts a life centered squarely on this awareness, separates the human from the rest of the animal world. Agamben challenges this presumption, arguing that rather than seeing human identity as a conjunctive relationship between its bestial identity and its self-conscious mind, which is to say “animal life and logos” (Agamben 90), the human being-as-such owes its existence to the fundamental tension between these two entities. The result of his inquiry explains that this caesura created by “the simultaneous division and articulation of the animal and human” is actually a “central emptiness” (92).

The caesura that creates the tension, which manifests the idea of humanity, can be thought of as a sort of inverted or disjunctive Venn diagram. The two spheres, animality and humanity cannot be “superimposed perfectly” because if they were to overlap neatly, “neither man nor animal...would be any longer thinkable” (21). Perfectly superimposed, the different spheres would carry the same significance and become one another. Instead, between the animal body and logos, the two essential realms that define animality and humanity respectively, there exists some space rather than overlap that the suggestive idea of the “human” holds together in tension. Here is the creature that sees itself embodied but also rearticulates itself through language, and the critical tension between these ideas of existence bear human being. Considered this way, the human or *homo sapien* is not a species of creature so much as it is “a machine or device for producing the recognition of human,” given that “man has no other specific identity than the *ability* to recognize himself” as previously discussed (26). But this human-making machine, this caesura, is a “space of exception” and as such, is “perfectly empty.” Rather than locating some essential truth in

this space, a constantly “updated decision” informs the definition and redefinition of the human being, a concept that shifts and moves and that can never stay put (38).

Following Agamben’s theory of human being, the act of self-reflection should reveal emptiness, and Lou does find this. Her mind, when it becomes aware of itself and the world that it manifests, sees its nature and the nature of human society as a hollow construct. While self-conscious living can leave a person an actor forced to affect attitude and perform life—to *try* too hard to live, to put it simply—Lou unnecessarily fears the emptiness of the human condition. Whereas Agamben locates an empty space where the idea of human being would be, if we remember the concluding points raised at the end of the last chapter, emptiness can be seen as a positive force. But Lou mistakes emptiness for lack. She sees the illusory, which is to say, non-essential reality of human existence as plagued by lack. But as we saw in chapter 1, emptiness is the genesis of creation, the wellspring of creativity in general. Emptiness forms reality, and reality is a form around emptiness. But the emptiness or the non-essential quality of the human condition and its artifacts, including language, seem to guarantee Lou disappointment, whereas further penetration into her insight might have revealed the promise of renewal and continued creation inherent in emptiness as a productive space. But Lou has already committed herself to Acéphalism. She pursues headlessness.

The Acéphale, the headless creature drawn with a sacred heart in one hand and dagger in the other whose belly is a maze of insatiable intestines is a product of Bataille’s extreme philosophical polemic “The Sacred Conspiracy.” In it, Bataille sees human existence as a life sentence imprisoned from within the mind that generates the very idea of human being. He believes that an individual can escape the prison of meaning through escaping his

or her head and thus evading the necessity it imposes to generate meaning from life, but to escape from this prison, the prisoner must tear down the prison around him or herself, destroying the walls of the prison while letting the prisoner suffer destruction in its wake. The human is liberated when the human is destroyed. This sort of negative transcendence results not from making oneself the divine but rather from making oneself a “being who is unaware of prohibition” (“The Sacred Conspiracy” 181). The Acéphale escapes dualism because it “is made of innocence and crime [and it is] not a man. He is not a god either” (181). The Acéphale is a monstrous figure of consumption and heedless headlessness that can know neither good nor evil, for it has no mind with which to know so. The result is barbaric, but the result is freedom, specifically from the need for meaning: “Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe” (180). Headless, like emptiness, is an absence that allows renewal.

Striking down anthropogenic egocentricity, Bataille exposes the vain wish that the universe exists for the sake of humankind, that same wish which finds, among other religions, the Christian belief in a personal, humanoid god who created a universe centered on humanity—the motivation for this kind of idea wants to see the human rational mind as a gift that promotes humanity above other animals, and this idea lingers in modern Western thought’s devotion to rationalism. But despite the privilege that this belief would seem to grant, such a position actually acts as a limitation on the chaotic universe that was uncompelled to create humankind, and thus such human need for meaning places the limit on humankind to act as steward or warden of the universe, giving meaning to itself and the universe at large. Bataille explains, “To the extent that it becomes this head and this reason, to the extent that it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts servitude” (180). That the

universe needs humankind's presence, or that humankind believes its presence necessary, enslaves the denizens of the earth to their own misguided sense of self-importance, and this self-seriousness strips the foundational play—taken to mean freedom of movement or as the production of joy—from existence, because what was meaningless and which could be lived only for joy (before death) acquires the limitation of being purposeful.

Lou's politics of ecstasy, founded largely against the self-seriousness that leads to life lived as a clever performance, take a hard line that are in line with Bataille's, especially given her flight from civilization at the novella's end. Bataille admonishes, "It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light. It is too late to be reasonable and educated—which has led to a life without appeal. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become completely different, or to cease being" ("The Sacred Conspiracy" 179). And so Lou hears this same call from within herself and pursues this transformation, but does so at a cost. Her transformation requires a kind of suicide in the form of her abandoned humanity, which accords with Bataille's call for suicide. In the form of the Acéphale, he mandates self-destruction as humankind's self-imposed punishment for the original sin of rationality and our attachment to meaning-making. Bataille feels that humanity as a self-serving project has failed; something else must be attempted, something that will come closer to the essential, bestial form that gave form to the human being, but further from the characteristic that defines humanity: the ability to reason and the language through which to express it.

St. Mawr's fearful presence in Lou's life promises her salvation from sacrificing her vitality to a life of the mind. The horse itself is free from this temptation to make meaning because he is mindless, or at least the humans around him think that this is true. Lou considers this absence of mind a blessing in itself, and her discussion about the merits of

having a “mind” reveal this. After Mrs. Witt and Lou come around to the idea that some men have no mind and are simply animals, Lou praises this condition: “I think one gets tired of your men with mind, as you call it...It seems to me there is something else besides mind and cleverness, or niceness or cleanness. Perhaps it is the animal [inside]” (49). Lou sees the mind and other defining human traits as subtracting or degrading, spoiling the essence that exists underneath them. But her mother will not be so easily convinced, and she offers a direct retort to her daughter’s unconventional beliefs, playing Glaucon to her: You won’t tell me that the mere animal is all that counts in a man. I will never believe it. Man is wonderful because he is able to *think*” (emphasis original; 48). But Lou responds, saying that most thinking seems quite simple and useless, “like stringing the same beads over and over again,” and this leaves her unimpressed. After her mother remains unmoved by Lou’s reasoning, Lou declares that she “would hate St. Mawr to be spoilt by such a mind.” She instead prefers the “lack of intimacy” and the “great burning life in him” (49). According to Lou’s understanding of being, the essential energy in a creature can only suffer from the development of the higher faculties, and because St. Mawr has remained free of these encumbering additions, he escapes the prescription to decapitate himself that Bataille so clearly recommends to humans equipped with rational minds. The horse, lacking self-consciousness and the need to create meaning for his life can keep its head, whereas Lou feels she must find a way to transcend (read: rid herself of) hers.

But even after mother and daughter trek to America, the deserts of the southwest fail to lead Lou and her mother to the conditions of transcendence. The two women, hungry for a real life that remains elusive among the self-conscious cowboys of a “Zane Grey book-jacket” (131) spend days going through the motions of life still quite uninspired. Lou thinks

they should pack up and leave to find a new place to call home where people will offer that missing thing, but Mrs. Witt cannot entertain Lou's concern. She puts it on her daughter to decide what the couple should do. She tells her daughter that she has made her last decision, which was simply to "[n]ever, never make another decision" (133). Anticipating the politics that Timothy Leary will champion in the 1960s counterculture, Mrs. Witt gives up self-conscious decision making. Just as her daughter wants to find people who live without reflection on their performance of life, Lou's mother gives up self-conscious effort and ambition, resigning herself to a life lived automatically. Certainly she will face options and obstacles, but she chooses not to use her mind to engineer the best possible outcome, to consider her best interest in the outcome that will transpire. Instead, she will simply "be." Lou's mother packs away her mind's consciousness for the sake of living her life experience without condition or contingency, relying on the deeper and wiser blood consciousness Lawrence proposes in his philosophical texts to guide her way.<sup>16</sup>

And so Lou ends up buying Las Chivas ranch, and it is unclear whether she plans to live there with her mother, or if she means to stay there in complete isolation, but she seems to have found the place of divine inspiration for which she has searched. This does not mean that the story ends with Lou having found happiness. In fact, she tells her mother that she is heartbroken and appears quite hopeless, but Lou feels compelled to live a sort of monastic life, keeping to herself and opening herself up to the spirit that has moved her, the spirit she finds on the ranch and in the land itself, land that is living spirit. According to the

---

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence's conception of the competition between mental/nerve consciousness and blood consciousness strikes a chord with Bataille's idea of the head as life-negating sovereign. In a letter, Lawrence explains that "the tragedy of life" stems from the mental/nervous consciousness's "tyranny over the blood consciousness" (*Collected Letters* 393).

novella's narrator, "The gods of those inner mountains were grim and invidious and relentless, huger than man, and lower than man. Yet man could never master them" (153). This description bears resemblance to Bataille's description of the Acéphale. Though it is not divinity, the Acéphale, like these inner mountain gods, does not concern itself with the idea of justice and so consumes voraciously, also standing as a figure "huger than man" but at the same, baser and more bestial. These mountain gods and the Acéphale transcend the limitations of humanity through barbarity rather than by immaculacy, and this defines the spirit that calls to Lou. This living spirit also undermines any human meaning or sense of human necessity. Rendering human life absurd and inherently worthless, the American wild, its deserts and its mountains "lived as the world of the gods, unsullied and unconcerned...sumptuous and uncaring. Man did not exist for it" (148). Living on this land saves Lou from the "cheapness" of life, but the spirit "does not want to save" her (159). The spirit of the land does not care for her and will not nurture her, but here, Lou can live a dangerous and raw life among this primal force, accepting her meaninglessness but experiencing the fullness of her vitality and of her sexuality that here does not depend on interpersonal relation. But to reach this state of being, she had to sacrifice her mind and the world that it manifested.

#### CULT OF THE BODY OVER MIND

In this story, Lawrence perpetuates the split in human existence that the Cartesian dichotomy placed between body and mind, and the qualities associated with the former, especially those concerning sex and sexual characteristics, are prized, whereas reference to the mind signals weakness or frivolousness in human characters. In Lawrence's philosophy,



there is mind consciousness and blood consciousness. Mind consciousness exerts its power as will, and this will often doubts the wisdom of blood conscious; the will of the mind tries to overpower the body and its blood consciousness. Lawrence saw the cultural triumph of rationalism as signifying the overgrowth of the mind's powers at the cost of the body's health. This explains Lawrence's strong anti-academic slant in his writing. He believed that philosophy no longer held its proper position in the study of culture, even in the liberal art of studying the novel. He saw an educational system split the source of life, philosophy—the love of wisdom—from the artifact, the novel (Burns 18). In dividing human existence into mind and blood consciousness, prizing the latter, *St. Mawr* identifies pressing questions about how to best revitalize a hyper-rational society, but it does so by fostering what might be called a “cult of the body over the spirit” (Burns 29). If Lawrence wanted to depict a balanced and whole person, the novella overshoots its target, unless it needed to proceed by hyperbole because of the extent of the grip of rational progressivism over Western society. Fearing its totalitarian rule, Lawrence attacks logos to sing the praises of the body. But humanity exists in the tension between the two existences and Lou Witt tries to escape dualism by destroying one half of the duality. In line with Bataille, Lou cuts off her head despite her body.

## PART II: THE VOICE AND THE VOID

### SOLITARY CONFINEMENT: MIND/BODY DUALISM AS IMPRISONMENT

One writer claims, “Probably no other writer in the twentieth century has delved deeper than Beckett into the void that exists before, within, and beyond the rational mind” (Takahashi 40). This depth is a crucial difference between Beckett and Lawrence. We see, for example,

that Lawrence tends to write in third-person, which is true in the case of *St. Mawr*, and this shows Lawrence refusing the “inward turn” of Modernism; but Beckett on the other hand goes so deep as to all but dismantle the self being probed in any given text, leaving behind not a unified subjectivity but a loose pattern of thought behaviors and repeated ideas. But in that “Beckett...looks as though he was bent on giving this mind a *coup de grâce*” (Takahashi 40), we can align him with Lawrence’s urge to destroy the mind. Lawrence’s fiction, to make a generalization, is anti-intellectual, as the depictions of Lou Witt from *St. Mawr* or Mellors from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, as I referenced earlier, demonstrate. And while Beckett is not so much an anti-intellectual, his fiction and drama make a farce out of the futility and failure of the human mind to ever help itself more than hurt itself as a result of its cognitive practices. Yet, where Lawrence’s *St. Mawr* sets a woman in search of final and lasting freedom from the mind, “Beckett refuse[s] the temptation of nirvana” or the ultimate transcendence of the rational mind (Takahashi 41). Rather than valorize the struggle against the mind/body dualism that we see in Lawrence’s novella, Beckett ridicules the human impulse to endeavor to reach transcendence in the first place. Specifically, *The Unnamable* lampoons both bitterly and humorously the pursuit itself and its inevitable failure.

Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* presents the reader with many of the same thematic concerns as does Lawrence’s previously discussed novella. For example, both texts explore the consequences of life lived in a reality devoid of its fullest dimension: *St. Mawr* depicts a flattened reality and the narrator and sole character of *The Unnamable* exists where “[t]he only dimension is time” (Adelman 76). We could actually consider the narrator to have zero dimensions, existing as pure information, but his speechifying unfurls in the dimension of time, a dimension that information requires in order to manifest itself in a linear, readable

form. This point about the narrator's one-dimensional existence brings us to the next parallel between the two texts: each depicts protagonists who live or feel that they live bodiless existences. Lou complains of leading a life where language conjures up her reality, and *The Unnamable's* narrator lacks a body completely, or no longer able to receive sense data from the body, he can no longer locate or identify with a physical organism. As we will see, this existence constitutes a sort of virtual reality that stands in for actual reality.

Further, both novels illustrate the confining nature of logocentrism. We saw how Lou Witt finds herself on the lam from her linguistically abstracting mind, trying to escape from her own self-imposed imprisonment, according to Bataille's description. She hopes to find an alternate higher reality in which she can self-actualize, which is to say, she hopes to shed her supposedly debased linguistic reality for a truer, fuller reality of direct experience. In the same vein, the narrator of Beckett's novel repeatedly evokes metaphors of incarceration because language, the sole manifestation of the narrator's presence, is both the matrix for his being and jailor of his consciousness: he is literally pilloried in print. In addition, his sole mode of consciousness is a neurotic self-consciousness, the same fearsome antagonist of *St. Mawr*. Beckett's narrator envisions a future where silence and stillness free him from the torment of self-reflection, but this ideal future would also act as his annihilation, because already bodiless, the eventual absence of all language, which is always self-referential language, would mark the cessation of his being. So, the narrator exists, trapped in a cycle of suffering caused by the desire to exist and the desire for silence, two mutually exclusive realities.

The narrator hopes for release from its suffering but knows self-annihilation must accompany release. This bind points to the dilemma contained within the Buddhist concept

of *nirvana*. He wants to produce the conditions that will lead to the “cessation of all entanglement and attachment in life” but the cost is too great because paradoxically, to free himself he has to arrive at “the realization of the non-existence of self” (“Nirvana”). In accord with Agamben’s formation of the concept of human being as essentially empty, Buddhist doctrine sees human being as a non-essential concept arising from a void similar to Agamben’s space of exception. In short, the narrator’s search for self-actualization relies on his realization of non-self, a realization reached and subsequently resisted throughout the text: the narrator asks that the reader and he “go on as if [he] were the only one in the world, whereas [he’s] the only one absent from it” (Beckett 401). The reader does not know what in this textual world may be true but knows the narrator himself is not.

Many critics read Beckett through a Zen lens precisely because Beckett’s themes parallel many of those in this religio-philosophical system. Paul Foster in *Beckett and Zen*, for example, explores the idea of “dilemma” in Beckett’s texts, namely the theme in which his characters lament the absence of God or truth in the universe yet continue to search for God or truth regardless. Others, such as Mario Faraone, link Beckett’s interest in habit and memory with (Zen) Buddhist concepts such as *samsara*, or the cycle of suffering. In general, critics who read Beckett through Zen concepts note the shared themes, such as the inherent emptiness of self, the emptiness of language and the illusion of reality—signifier mistaken as signified—that persists through it, and lastly the framing of the ego as perpetuating suffering through its insisting on presenting itself as the persistent, stable self. This section will focus on one text, building off the research about Zen themes in Beckett in general and on *The Unnamable* in specific, demonstrating that though the goal of meditative activity in the Zen tradition, certainly less dramatic than Bataille’s solution of decapitation, hopes to secure a

reality beyond language and compulsive meaning-making, the narrator of *The Unnamable* cannot achieve this transcendence because of his bodilessness. His solely linguistic presence dooms him to produce infinite language to safeguard his continued existence: the desire for self, the basis of suffering in Buddhist thought, wins out over the desire for peace and silence, synonymous terms here for the narrator. Despite the pain of being, or rather the pain of trying to *be*, he “must go on.” Furthermore, the Zen/Beckettian finding that the reality of the ego is in fact a linguistic fiction will lead us to consider how Zen readings of Beckett can also contribute to and develop posthumanist and cybernetic readings of Beckett.

To further justify reading *The Unnamable* through a Zen lens, though others before me have already found reason to do so, as well as to highlight the underlying theme of self-realization in this and the last chapter, we should remember that many of Beckett’s characters entertain some interest in exercises and studies that aim at self improvement through mystical practices. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir suggests to Estragon that while they are interminably loitering they “could do [their] exercises” and when we consider both the description and purpose of these exercises, it seems that Vladimir suggests that they practice some sort of yoga: they describe the recommended “movements” as “elevations,” “elongations,” and “relaxations,” and these should “warm us up” and “calm us down.” These aerobics raise, lengthen, and relax the body, all while hopefully providing a sense of peace for the anxious tramps. In addition, Vladimir suggests they do “a little deep breathing” to sharpen their minds and bodies (86). And while this explication may seem to take small liberty in specifically naming Vladimir’s suggestion to mean yoga specifically rather than simple calisthenics, the presence of Eastern mysticism in Beckett’s other work reinforces my claim in the reading above. We find said mysticism in *Murphy*, where the

story's namesake "studied under a man in Cork named Neary [who could] stop his heart whenever he liked and keep it stopped, within reasonable limits, as long as he liked." Further, "[t]his rare faculty [was] acquired after years of application somewhere north of Nerbudda" (3), a former territory in British India. Neary tells Murphy that Murphy's conarium "has shrunk to nothing" (6). The conarium is the pineal gland, Descartes' seat of consciousness and also the third eye; *St. Mawr* brings it up in the conversation this chapter began with, and Bataille discusses its importance in an essay specifically dedicated to the pineal gland.<sup>17</sup>

To expand the point about meditation, at least two of Beckett's characters appear to specifically engage in meditation, for they sit "observing thoughts and perceptions arise in the present moment through their restrained bodies" (Gillette 284). *Murphy's* eponymous protagonist habitually straps himself to a chair and does this to experience bliss: "First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind...and life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word" (2). Murphy's disciplined sitting activity brings to him transcendental bliss and a sense of liberation.<sup>18</sup> The narrator of *The Unnamable* clearly appears to be another of these characters, for the narrator describes his absent body as holding the basic pose we can identify as being some sort of general meditative activity: the narrator states, "I do not move" (292) and that "I have always

---

<sup>17</sup> For Bataille, the pineal gland or third eye is associated with a reality that transcends "the chains of logic" ("The Pineal Gland" 80), and like the "eternal present" that Nick Adams and Lou Witt find and seek, respectively, Bataille claims that the pineal gland is an "immediate existence" (82).

<sup>18</sup> Murphy, like the narrator of *The Unnamable* and Lou Witt in *St. Mawr*, despite their self-improvement practices, cannot transcend duality. Murphy separates the eternal world and his inner world, his body from his mind. His teacher Neary "could not blend the opposites in Murphy's heart" (4). In that way, his meditation carries with it a sense of escapism—he escapes his body to sit in his mind, the opposite of Lou Witt's flight.

been sitting here, at his selfsame spot, hands on knees, gazing before me” (293).<sup>19</sup> While this pose, a continuously maintained activity and “the stillness of sitting” should lead the thinker to realize the “emptiness of mind” (Gillette 285), this flash of insight and the accompanying peace fail to occur, when instead the narrator’s rational mind produces an unending stream of consciousness: “What prevents this miracle [of quietness] is the spirit of method to which I have perhaps been a little too addicted” (303). The linear progression of logical thought and the suffering that coincides with it begin and proceed by the narrator’s “grasping thoughts or sensations and clinging to the delusion of a persistent self” (Gillette 284), whereas hypothetically, the “successful” meditative practitioner comes to see the ephemeral nature and emptiness of thought and so then identifies with the body that hosts this interior language, rather than identifying with the interior language itself. But the narrator notes that every time “a thought presents itself,” he must “record it before it vanishes” (341). This impulse is rooted in the belief that any given thought may help the narrator finally piece together the logic that will free him of thought, hoping that he will eventually “[hit] on the happy speculation...When all goes silent, and comes to an end, it will be because the words have been said” (369). The narrator hopes to realize himself and to achieve peace in doing so, but a problem resides in that the self that he seeks to perfect and free does not exist as such: no inner self-as-object exists to have and to hold. In fact, the narrator is not an entity, but a pattern of information. Instead of ego as object, we find the ego to be an amalgamation of habitual and individual thoughts, but paranoid of this fact, the narrator

---

<sup>19</sup> The narrator actually admits to practicing meditation called by that term, though the term has multiple meanings, and in the Western tradition of philosophy, meditation may mean something closer to contemplation rather than the largely Eastern tradition of watching thoughts arrive passively in the mind. To rephrase this distinction, one is an active cognition and one is an active observation of thought arising passively. Nonetheless, the narrator wonders if his “head lost all feeling?” or if he had suffered a “stroke...while [he] was meditating” (345).

persists its rationalizing, because “the coherent self is a fiction invented out of panic and fear” (Hayles 201).

And there is no question that the narrator of *The Unnamable* exists in a state of supreme suffering, and the novel itself documents this struggle. On one level, this struggle results from the division of self from world, which is to say, in this novel and in Beckett’s writing as a whole, his characters exist in a conflict that amounts to dualism at its core, *I versus the rest of the universe*. This struggle is not so much that the “I” wants to conquer the universe that stands opposed to it but that the thinking subject wants to finally bridge the gulf which divides the two, reconciling the mystery of both sides; or, forsaking the hope of transcending dualism, these characters, Murphy and *The Unnamable*’s narrator taken as example, turn inward. But perhaps this description does not go far enough, because the physical organism of the character (when Beckett’s texts actually include one) is itself part of the external world that resides on the latter side of this massive divide. *The body is itself other*. As Paul Davies explains, “Beckett’s characters embody the spiritual emergency of the Cartesian consciousness, split off not only from the environment but also from its own organism, so all that it is left with is ‘thinking’” (45). This is the situation in *The Unnamable*. So the inner conflict of the protagonist becomes the thought of “I” versus the idea of other, conflict at its most basic and most totalizing form: by definition, “[s]truggle is ego” (Trungpa 86). In the example of the narrator of *The Unnamable*, the reader does not even see an outside world, a trace of another entity—we read of only an “I” that entertains the thought of others presumed to exist. The mere idea of an outside world that exists in the narrator’s corrupted memory subsumes and replaces the perception of externality completely. He is completely shut off from the outside, including even from his body.



At first thought, the aforementioned divide between “I” and “world” might not seem to be an empty space, a gulf, but instead seem to be a wall. Davies reminds the reader that Beckett’s work repeatedly draws the image of “humans shut up in a small circular space—be it dustbin, urn, jar, log-hut, bone of the skull, pile of sand” (47). In *The Unnamable*, the narrator presumably speaks, or thinks rather, from inside a head that receives no sensation from outside itself. Because of this, this idea of interiority takes on the dimension of confinement; the skull is a prison house.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the idea that in Buddhist literature, the rational mind of the human being is often described as a wild monkey, but it is not a monkey living in the wild. Just as the ego as consciousness gets compared to a mind in a vat, the contemporary non-sectarian Buddhist thought of Chogyam Trungpa states that instead of being wild, the thinking mind-as-monkey is “locked in an empty house...He is a captive monkey in an empty house” (129). It does not remember being imprisoned, but rather it “awakens from his blackout...to find itself trapped inside a solid, claustrophobia-inducing house. That he has been captured is not particularly important; but the idea of capture is magnified a thousand times because of his fascination with it...He is *captured by his fascination*” (emphasis mine; Trungpa 129). The monkey is captivated by his interest, and “captivated” reflects a polyvalent signification, meaning both to be fascinated by an idea or object and to be bound by something: here this bondage is the result of that said fascination. His fascination with his imprisonment perpetuates or actually causes the narrator’s imprisonment.

The narrator of *The Unnamable* dwells on himself, enthralled with himself as the object of his fascination, the locus of his self-reflexive contemplation. More specially, the

narrator remains fixed in his neurotic position because of his compulsive self-interest, which results primarily from the impossibility of ascertaining the root of his identity, of making himself self-scrutable. The narrator remains stuck, obsessed with his mysterious situation, and this puzzle and his attachment to solving it secures his inability to think about anything but it. The narrator suffers from a monomaniacal interest in his predicament where doubt becomes the only truth known, but doubt serves a positive function in maintaining his struggle because “[t]his idea of the impossibility of asserting anything is something which ego feeds on, takes pride in, identifies with and therefore uses to maintain its continuity” (Trungpa 144). The narrator shares the same sentiment as this modern explication of this Buddhist “mind as monkey” metaphor. Almost mirroring the above quotation, the narrator explains, “[t]he search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue” (*The Unnamable* 299). The shared message underwriting both quotes above highlights the act of doubting as one that positively correlates with further thinking. The cognitive act of processing facts or ideas, then producing a hypothesis concerning the given information, only to arrive at doubt rather than certainty concerning the speculated result, guarantees continued mental processing. Both quoted thinkers recognize this, but the difference appears in the tone of the explanations. The Buddhist text casts the ego in an adversarial light, whereas Beckett’s narrator, though suffering as a result of his doubt, also understands the vital importance of doubt for his continued existence: the narrator *is* the search for truth, and doubt is his sustenance. The Buddhist text views the ego as an adversary because in a kind of part-to-whole fallacy, the ego tends to be mistaken as the whole self, where Cartesian philosophy posits that the ego in fact originates the self. But this latter theory of subjectivity causes the pain of imprisonment discussed above; Cartesian

thought splits the world into two, making it a philosophy that isolates the self and pits it in struggle against the universe at large. The narrator of *The Unnamable* exemplifies this scenario, and the text clearly bemoans it.

#### OUTSIDE HUMANITY, INHUMAN BEING

Because the narrator cannot achieve verifiable truths or prove any of its many paranoid hypotheses, the process of reasoning, though the source of the narrator's continuation, is also his greatest burden. *The Unnamable* like *St. Mawr* puts into question the worth of the faculty of reason, and both texts attack formal education as whole. D.H. Lawrence's stance against the mind makes it easy to describe his work as anti-academic. One critic claims that his "novels offer a provocative, anti-academic, code of self-education" (Bonds 203). This comment evokes Rousseauian values and fittingly so because Lawrence's fiction has a definite Romantic quality about it, and another critic cites this Romantic strain as being the recurrent cultural attitude that allows Lawrence's work to withstand the attack his oeuvre has sustained. Baldick claims that Lawrence's reputation and place in literature suffer no serious threat because despite the "wounding blows" his work takes, "resurgence[s] of youthful 'Romanticism'" will keep him relevant such as was seen in the 60s, where "'postmodern' hostility to scientific reason" and "'New Age' phenomena" will give rise to "an unrecognizably revised Lawrence Canon." *St. Mawr* might figure this revision and lead the new canon, according to Baldick (268). So this comment identifies *St. Mawr* as the exemplar text showcasing Lawrence's emphasis on self-education, and indeed, Lou empties out her mind so that she can foster an alternative method of world knowledge.

We see a similar distrust of formal education (and an interest in self-education) presented in *The Unnamable*, where the narrator recalls his education, saying:

They gave me courses on love, on intelligence, most precious, most precious. They also taught me to count, and even to reason. Some of this rubbish has come in handy on occasions, I don't deny it, on occasions that would never have arisen if they had left me in peace...Low types they must have been, their pockets full of poison and antidote. (298)

There are a few things to note in this passage, the first being the emphasis that had been placed on intelligence. The fact that he took a course on intelligence, whatever that may mean, reveals that the narrator's educators did not merely attempt to raise his intelligence or foster what intelligence he may have had, but that rather his educators stressed to him the absolute importance of intelligence, placing the highest value on it, placing it at the top of a hierarchy of values, even above the value of love. The narrator also notes that his educators taught him to reason, marking it not a natural ability but one that can be learned and which can be practiced. But the most telling idea in this passage is the idea that the lessons the narrator has learned appear to be tautologically self-fulfilling: he has had use for his lessons, but only because what he learned opened up opportunities for him to exercise his skills. Rather than be left to reside in ignorant bliss, he feels that his teachers gave him the tools to overcome trials that exist only *because* of his education in the first place. In this manner, because he mastered his lessons, he can overcome intellectual challenges, but on the other hand, his education offered him the opportunity to solve needless problems. This is the definition of "busy work": intellectual work is completed because one has the ability to complete it. Yet in the end, we see that the narrator has internalized the values these "low types" taught him, because reasoning has become his sole occupation. When he was empty of systemized knowledge, he knew peace, but once taught to think, he can do nothing but do

so. He is the diligent student made into a grotesque hyperbole. He exists as a distorted voice of reason, and “[t]his meaningless voice...prevents [him] from being nothing” (*The Unnamable* 370) and from finding quietness.

The narrator as a result of his education expresses “rationalism...[that when] taken to an extreme inevitably extrudes its own grotesque irrationalities” (Jones 16). He occupies the opposite pole on which the other side we find Bataille’s advocacy for unreason. Where Bataille wants to derail the trajectory of human history away from its inherent meaning-making impulse, this hyper-rational voice in search of reason and final understanding becomes unreasonable as a result of its own rational excesses. He might be described as displaying an “insistent purposefulness and...extraordinary preoccupation with abstractions,” both qualities being “overdone,” to describe this trait with Alan Watts’s language.<sup>20</sup> If the ability to produce reason signifies the essence of humanity, the narrator is the metastasized essence of the “species [become] too cunning and too practical for its own good” (*Nature, Man and Woman* 123).

If the ability to reason is the defining quality of human being, then the narrator’s own rational excesses exclude him from the rest of the species. The emphasis he places on intelligence and reason, values he learned in his youth, cause him to produce “grotesque irrationalities” when he attempts to rationally solve the problems that he faces. The narrator has become more human than is comprehensible to human thought. Eric Levy in *Trapped in Thought* argues that the narrator of *The Unnamable* renounces (or is forced to renounce?) his membership to the human species, which in turn makes him incomprehensible as a being.

---

<sup>20</sup> Watts was a thinker whose work challenges the wisdom of Western philosophy’s dependence on rationality and whose work introduces Zen themes as a way to explore alternative possibilities in the face of this dependence.

Levy explains, “To be an individual is to individualize a form or essence, and it is species that provides this necessary designation” (118). That is, the individual identity of any given human is grounded initially in the fact that it exists as a unique manifestation of a general but definable and recurring pattern of being—here, an individual human being among the general idea of human being taken broadly, and to be human is to be “a reasoning animal composed of body and soul” (118).<sup>21</sup> The narrator lacks these things, and as a result of this lack, as well as his unintelligible reasoning, his being is incomprehensible. This unintelligible existence becomes itself a kind of formless identity and the narrator prizes a behavior based on this identity. Even as a nonhuman, he still exists as an individual of some sort though, because “[o]ne way to repudiate species and reclaim individuality is to identify, not with form [read: a human body and its behaviors], but with its opposite—unintelligibility” (118). This is to say, this disembodied voice is unique in the most definitive use of the word because he is *sui generis*, the only of its kind. Even more so, where a human being would reproduce itself through sexual generation, the narrator perpetuates its existence through a commitment to forever express its hyper-rational nature through an endless stream-of-consciousness. Logical thought, the endeavor he tries to perfect, becomes so distorted that it folds back on itself, becoming tautological, so that even his (pro)creative capabilities only birth his own being. He does not generate but masturbate; solipsistic, he has no discourse with others but can only talk with himself.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> We need to remember that Agamben names the human as a coupling of body and logos or mind, and humanity arises from the tension between these two spheres.

<sup>22</sup> Lawrence would probably rail against the masturbatory nature of self-conscious thought that *The Unnamable* showcases. Also, I want to point out the theme of thinking as masturbation in Beckett’s work, e.g. Murphy’s pleasure strapped in his chair and *The Unnamable*’s narrator’s egocentric thought as solipsism-cum-masturbation. Masturbation, literal or otherwise, enforces the territorialization of a virtual reality: “Masturbatory pleasure [is]

So selfishness more than reason, which has failed the narrator (just as it has for Bataille), becomes the narrator's defining characteristic, as he exists for himself and through himself, thinks almost only of himself and at times of others, but does so only to provide himself grist for the mill so as to have the opportunity to contemplate his own memories, to theorize his own identity: the presence of others works only to explore and reinforce his ambiguous history of selfhood. Levy proposes that the novel's narrator thwarts "entelechy," which Levy defines as the human "self-realization" of its species, an outcome now impossible for the narrator because he has divorced himself from humanity. A perfection of reason would allow the narrator to self-actualize, because the achievement of supreme reasoning would mark the arrival of the supreme human, a kind of overman; precisely because the human being is defined as the "reasoning animal," "the species-form to be progressively realized is, of course, *reason*" itself (emphasis original; Levy 121); but the course of *The Unnamable* does not reveal a refining of thought, a success of the rational mind to ascertain higher truth, but instead the narrator "[uses] thought to endure its own frustration" (Levy 121). If there is a truth the narrator ever comes to know, it is that uncertainty is all that can be known. The narrator should realize the futility of his thought and so cease it, but such an acknowledgment would have also brought the story, or monologue rather, to an end. Thinking begets thinking and thinking begets perpetuity, so when Levy states that in *The Unnamable*, "[r]eason thinks only of its own impotence" (122), impotence here refers to the obvious incapability of reason to deduce truth, because on the other hand, we may see

---

dangerous because it was a sham version of real pleasure...It par[takes] of the wickedness of subterfuge, fraud, fakery" (Lacquer 220).

reason as actually quite a potent force. The will to reason displayed by the narrator is a kind of will to self, for the will to reason secures self-preservation.

As extinction threatens us all, the reader may come to admit or refuse his or her empathy for the narrator's plight. We may read *The Unnamable* as a condemnation of the dangers of and the horrors of hyper-rationality, or we may see the novel "[as] the story of a hero fighting for some remnant of self" (Adelman 14). For Adelman, the novel is a testament to the worth of the mind battling inconsistency and contradiction to make logical sense of the world to achieve truth, as well as to the staking out and holding a place for the narrator as an individual. Adelman's reading makes *The Unnamable* an inspiration story: the narrator's lack of body and the dubious nature of the various explanations of its past (its presumed pre-head-in-a-jar life) all but strip the character of all visible and tangible identity, rendering him mere consciousness in a search for truth. Adelman frames this prolonged struggle for identity and relentless search for ultimate truth the heroic story of the intellectual everyman. The adversity that the narrator experiences in the form of self-doubt justifies his paranoia, which Adelman names "a survival skill to the mind alert to the sacredness of self" (14).

This distrust of others appears in such an extreme fashion that the narrator feels he must divorce himself of his most fundamental affiliation with other people: a shared language. Some have remarked that the capability of language sets human species apart from other animals and defines the human species in and of itself, but the narrator's paranoia results in hermitage, a disavowal of humanity and its language, because "in using [words], he risks becoming a social creature, one of millions" (Adelman 15). Membership in humanity threatens the narrator's individuality and jeopardizes the sanctity of his individual self, and



using the language of others only threatens the narrator's search for truth. Distrustful of language and distant from humanity, the narrator finds refuge in the unintelligibility of its own hyper-rationality. But of course, this reading only reinforces the implications of the dichotomy *I versus the World*.

Like Lou Witt before, the narrator seems to opt out of membership with the rest of humanity, choosing hermitage and hoping to transcend language. Although the latter character has no presence beyond language, he believes that the inadequacy of language to ever express truth, as well as the poisoning that he suffered at the hand of his educators, stands in the way of his quest for total understanding. We read the narrator boast, "My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with" (*The Unnamable* 325). Linking us back to chapter 1, this passage seems to promise that through active forgetfulness, the narrator will erase all trace of unoriginal data, leaving behind only a pure self that underlies language—a Zen beginner's mind. The narrator states that he wants to be free of language, to no longer understand it and forget the messages and ostensible truths others have conveyed to him through language, but this illuminates the contradictory goal of the narrator. He cannot succeed in his quest for silence and emptiness without vanquishing himself if the process succeeds. In *The Unnamable*, the talking-ego is the sole character of the monologue, distanced completely from the physical organism that may think up its existence. We find nobody/no body of which to speak. As such, the narrator's motivation to continue to think and then doubt, and constantly repeat this cycle, becomes obvious. The ego desires its infinite continuity. For this reason, we may ourselves doubt his sincerity when the narrator claims to possess "[a] head

sufficiently obedient...to provide me at least with a vague idea of the elements from the setting in order for all to be empty and silent" (*The Unnamable* 334). This desire for silence pursued defines the death drive, also called the nirvana principle,<sup>23</sup> which is where the self seeks its own cessation. But in the narrative, this tendency toward self-annihilation does not trump the ego's desire for continuity. Ultimately, the narrator does not want emptiness and peace; he wants to futilely and paradoxically continue to pursue emptiness and peace through the production of words. Language is both the poison that causes the narrator's suffering and the antidote that prevents his demise.

There exists the option to see the narrator's unintelligible hyper/ir-rationality not as a failure of an earnest attempt to reason, but to instead see the narrator's language as producing nonsense as a defensive strategy against the authority of rationality his educators established inside him. The perceived effectiveness of the narrator's educators' ability to instill into him this authority has led to the grief he suffers at present, but hypothetically he could, if not overcome, then resist the rationality's sovereignty through the production of nonsense. Perhaps the way out of his predicament is not to engineer a line of thought that will reach truth but to instead deny the possibility of it through the production of meaninglessness. As Lou Witt felt, self-seriousness posturing leads to a hollow meaninglessness. But if meaning-making is the problem, then meaninglessness acts as remedy: "[L]unatics [do not] accept the world's practical scale of values" (*Nature, Man and Woman* 128), a scale where intelligence in this instance reigns supreme, as the narrator himself already lamented. If one can take the skill of reason, something perhaps not entirely

---

<sup>23</sup> William B. Parsons fleshes out a history of the dialogue between psychoanalysis and the Buddhist idea of nirvana in "Psychoanalysis Meets Buddhism: The Development of a Dialogue."

inherent in a person but rather an ability that formal education finesses, and treat it like play rather than take it seriously, the practice will remain the same but the quality of the practice transforms because the “nonsense of the madman is a babble of words for its own fascination” (*Nature, Man and Woman* 129). Or according to Paul Foster, who writes about Beckett through a Zen perspective, “Thought is impossible as a solution.” This is why the narrator’s reliance on incomprehension and forgetfulness to save him may end up having some merit after all. When the effort of thinking to reach a logical conclusion repeatedly fails, the realization of thought’s futility could allow the thinker to transcend it, or at least to dismiss it as a plausible means to arrive at truth (Foster 217). Perhaps the narrator exists in complete meaninglessness already, appearing to suffer but doing so only to be amused by the infinite (the book ends arbitrarily) production of nonsense.

But even if the narrator does not intend to produce nonsense strategically, in the end both his “human” nature and the nature of his thought process are in fact doomed to be nonsense. But the meaning of nonsense varies. So far we have witnessed two competing types of nonsense that I will crudely call Western-meditative nonsense and Eastern-meditative nonsense. Western-meditative nonsense is the failure or breakdown of logic that results from logic being pushed to its own extremes, such as in found on Lewis Carroll’s work; Eastern-meditative nonsense appears as the failure of logical dualism: we saw this in chapter 1 with Yone Noguchi’s non-dual *either/or/and* logic, and we will see it in the next chapter when I discuss Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*. The differences in these kinds of nonsense are rooted in the very differences in the meaning of meditation. In the West, meditation might mean something like thinking. To meditate is to contemplate, to think through a problem. The thought process is the tool and to refine it is the purpose of this conception of

meditation. On the other hand, meditation understood from a Zen (here representing the “Eastern” practice) perspective means to engage in an activity that watches thought but does not produce discursive thought. In Zen meditation, the thought process is the object of meditation, but one’s non-linguistic, somatically-based embodied awareness is the tool. The first meditative activity is self-reflective in that the meditating person becomes aware of his or her thought in order to produce new thought: the activity is progressive and linear. Clearly, this is the practice of the narrator of *The Unnamable*. It is an abstraction-based activity and does not rely on the physical body except that the body houses the intellect, as it were. One might see Western meditation as the definition of introversion, because the inside world predominates in heavy meditation of this kind. But Zen meditation is a physical, embodied activity. Rather than use the mind to problem solve, Zen meditation seeks to observe the thinking mind and witness its thought production, but in reaction to this observation, the meditator places no value on the thoughts observed. Instead, he or she witnesses how the mind produces thought, but the meditator does not judge nor identify with the thought produced, which leads the watcher to dis-identify with his or her thoughts, which become clearly identified as a *function* of the organism but not a primary source of the self’s core identity. In Zen meditation, an embodied activity, a person can see awareness give birth to language rather than believe that language gives birth to awareness: The ego will be seen as the artifact of humanity rather than the artificer of it:

This practice, however, is far from a Cartesian division between mental activity and corporeal presence. Focusing on his or her own breath, the one who meditates becomes more than usually conscious of the body; through that hyperawareness she connects to the present moment and the real that verbal and imagistic thoughts typically mask. (Foster 285)

Zen meditation attempts to extricate the participant from total immersion within the ego. When a being identifies with the elaborate virtual/linguistic reality inside the skull, this dualistic identification can cut the self off from the larger “torrent” of life (Levy 117). But when the outer body watches the inner reality, phenomenon and epiphenomenon become clearly differentiated; user and tool, subject and object, regain their logical relationship.

As I mentioned earlier, Beckett’s narratives do not depict protagonists who do finally transcend logocentrism, and *The Unnamable*’s narrator cannot adopt an Eastern meditative practice because of his disembodiment: he has no source of embodied awareness prior to or outside of thought. Lacking a larger organism that can witness the act of self-reflection, the narrator remains bound to *I*, which is always a cognitive tool, not an entity of its own, despite the error Descartes secured into Western philosophy through dualism and its privilege of the cogito. But the ego, a self-reflexive cognitive tool that recognizes its functioning yet mistakenly invests belief in its sovereignty over the embodied self, does not want to see its performed action as a human function; the ego believes itself to be the user of tools, tools such as rational thought. The narrator of *The Unnamable* experiences this resistance to identifying itself as a tool used by the human being, and Adelman explains that “[w]hen [the narrator] comes to see himself as [mere linguistic/symbolic] maneuvers...his end nearly comes” (15). His logical game play and ostensible search for silence constitute a kind of rational procrastination.

The narrator of *The Unnamable* engages in rational game play in order to prevent the realization of selflessness. He must do this because he desires to perpetuate his own existence, or what he believes to be his existence rather than the illusion thereof. In “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick Adams is able to move from a linguistically based form of

consciousness, that of rational thought and linguistic syntax, to an open awareness of himself in the larger context of his travels and his sylvan surroundings, all because he expands his consciousness from a purely reasonable and head-based consciousness, that so feared by D.H. Lawrence, to a holistic body consciousness. The narrator of *The Unnamable* cannot make this perceptual shift precisely, though, because he lacks a body. The narrator remembers, or tries to remember his body, but no sense data reaches the narrator and the reader has no evidence or motivation to presuppose that the narrator exists as anything more than a disembodied voice. The body the narrator finds to be absent seems to exist only as a memory or as a fantasy, and we can't be sure of which. And so bodiless, the narrator cannot identify, in short, with his somatic consciousness because he cannot be subsumed into a larger self or physical being. If Nick Adams shows consciousness as a telescoping hierarchy where bodily awareness envelopes rational thought, the narrator of *The Unnamable* has no higher or larger dimension to which he can unfold or expand. Language is the extent of his reality and awareness of reality and so, to recognize his inherent emptiness would threaten to invalidate and annihilate the voice-as-protagonist.

Since the narrator lacks a physical body, language must suffice to manifest his body, so to speak. Even if he is just a voice, the narrator needs to exist in some form. Many commentators on Beckett's work and *The Unnamable* arrive at the same conclusion: the idea of self or the concept of subjectivity arises solely from language. The self is merely a "laboring wheel of words" (*The Unnamable* 402; Katz 111); or, the narrator uses "language [to try] to confirm a false independent personality which does not really exist" (Davies 47-48). In the absence of a soul or inherent or permanent essence of individual identity, we see that subjectivity results from language, something lacking agency, rather than preceding it

(Katz 16)—there is no prior interior or core to the human being, despite the conviction of the ego to represent this core. The narrator wants to reach the equation of words that will grant it peace and comprehension, but the I-as-speaker we read lacks an “I-as-object” (Foster 212). If the *I* is an effect of language rather than the motivator of it, there is no cogito, no *I* who thinks, but rather, there is only the cogitatum, the *I* that is thought—as cogitatum, the *I* is not the thinking subject but an epiphenomenon of thought (Levy 105). As such, this novel totally excludes an actor, a subject who thinks, replacing it with a non-object, *I*. Beckett inverts the history of Western thought by replacing the *I who thinks up something* with *something that thinks up “I.”*<sup>24</sup> But this originary something is absent in the text and ultimately unnamed, and due to this nothing exists in the novel that can claim to own the thought process witnessed.

A previous section demonstrated that the narrator is not a human being but rather only one possible dimension of humanity, the ability (though failed) to reason. On the other hand, we see that the narrator is the defining characteristic (per Agamben) of humanity: self-reflection. Agamben showed that self-recognition in the link between body and logos, and that this productive tension comes from an empty space of exception. From this space comes the self-reflective voice of the text; because it has no bodily anchor, this voice seems to surface from some unfathomable place. The narrator is the voice that comes out of a void. Another way to understand this novel is that it makes empty space speak, otherwise

---

<sup>24</sup> This brings me to remember Foster’s important point that some critics have the bad habit of conflating the narrator of *The Unnamable* with the Unnamable something of the title, the undefined and unrepresented namesake of the novel (Foster 214). Rather, the Unnamable is that force, itself missing from the text, which acts as the subject that thinks. It is not the narrator, but it may be the author himself.

called prosopopoeia, the act of allowing a voice to rise from inanimation or absence, the “bestowing [of] the capacity to hear or speak upon the dead, inanimate, or absent” (Katz 14).

But the question remains: what original agency motivates this voice to speak? Many religious traditions consider the faculty of speech to be derived from some divine force—speech is parallel if not synonymous with God. In the New Testament, for example, in the beginning is the Word, and the Word is God. Here in this tradition, Logos is not a product of divinity but Logos is divinity itself, and so, human beings’ use of speech amounts to the borrowing or channeling of the holy presence through its material form. But Katz takes a radically different stance when he claims that not divinity but *desire* is the “motor of utterance” (26).<sup>25</sup> The force of desire as author motivates the narrator’s inquiry and hypothesizing, and in this case, this desire may even be erotic desire. Previously I explained the narrator’s masturbatory existence, and if the narrator speaks as to guarantee his own perpetuity, we can see his speech act as a kind of “hungering” love (*Nature, Man and Woman* 128) of the self. Yet the narrator is not a self or an extant being. Bodiless and mindless, this novel as stream-of-consciousness is the effect of something’s being; the stream-of-consciousness is not the *source* of being. But the voice and the reader alike never locate exactly whatever produces the voice heard as the narrator’s. It remains unnamed.

Via Katz’s thesis, desire acts as the prosopopoeic force or “motor of utterance” that visits the power of voice upon absence: desire is the Unnamed thing named in the title.

---

<sup>25</sup> Katz’s thesis here is Buddhist-inspired because rather than seeing speech as a gift or the presence of a deity, he names the force that most popular religions fear or denounce—desire—as giving rise to utterance. Buddhist doctrine explains that desire perpetuates *samsara*, the endless cycle of life and suffering. One of the more interesting differences in Christian and Buddhist world views rests in the basic judgment of reality: In Christianity, the divine gift of creation bespeaks reality, where in Buddhist thought, desire gives rise to reality, or rather, the illusion that appears to be reality.



Arising from a seeming nowhere, we might think of the narrator's voice as a voice grafted onto nothingness. That means that the narrator's voice is prosthetic, especially because the narrator feels it is not his own (Tajiri 10). This voice hears itself and believes in itself, but the ideas—information about the self—that he utters, most of which become repetitive and habitual, are “a pattern, not a presence” (Hayles 18). The ego as tool is fooled into believing its own existence.

By the end of this discussion, we can redefine the narrator, moving away from a paradigm that grants agency to the voice read, now understanding the text's vocal monologue to be “that which is narrated.” The Unnamable thing of the title, whether that be the divine authorial force of Beckett's own voice (via Katz) or the creative potential of the empty disjunctive space that generates humanity (via Agamben), acts as the original but absent narratological force and the voice that we read and which hears itself is a self-reflective effect of cognition that can see itself but which misidentifies itself as a subject with agency itself. Regardless of the voice's source, we now know that the voice, the narrator-as-narrated language, is epiphenomenal—it is the effect of some Unnamed force or absent being.

The narrator, though bodiless, believes he has or has had a physical body at some time. The ego, as Freud explains, results from the body's felt sensations: the ego internalizes eternal stimulation as well as the perceived boundary of the body. As such, if the narrator is now a disembodied ego, it is still a bodily ego.<sup>26</sup> The narrator claims to have an absent but sensate body somewhere and the narrator himself now exists only as a representative body,

---

<sup>26</sup> “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego,” writes Freud in “The Ego and the Id” because it is itself “the projection of a surface” (636-637).

language as virtual body. The ego as representative body is a powerful tool and can be understood even as an organically-produced cybernetic technology for it expands the boundary of “human subjectivity...because the parameters of the cognitive system [that the ego] inhabits expand” through it (Hayles 291). Put another way, the ego creates a body at the level of mental abstraction, manifesting the idea of the sensate body at another plane of existence: the conceptual. But this cybernetic relationship has an upshot: the logocentric virtual body tends to usurp the agency of the sensate body. This shifts the relationship of power, and Western philosophy’s focus on the cogito as center of human identity has all but vouchsafed this inversion because self-reflective consciousness moves from “minor sideshow” to the main stage, from “epiphenomenon” to epicenter (Hayles 3). But where the *I* should be an effect of language, the thinking organism tends to identify and grant authority to the “I,” confusedly giving the “I” the privilege of being the producer of language. The *I* of the narrator sees an outpouring of thoughts and he assumes that he creates them, but this *I* simply exists as another one of those thoughts.

The continually outpouring force of language is the narrator’s safeguard against nirvana, the annihilation of self that results from the realization of the self’s inexistence. Foucault posits “an essential affinity between death, endless striving, and the self-representation of language” (55). The immeasurable fear and the ever-present awareness of one’s impending death—the inevitability of preventing one’s own annihilation—prompts the exhausting but never exhausted will-to-be, and language creates the space in which to exercise this will-to-be; language “postpones death indefinitely by ceaselessly opening a space where it is always the analogue of itself” (Foucault 67). Language stands in for itself, and can do so infinitely, but because language’s self-representation is tautological, language constantly

reveals itself as empty. The empty space created by language is the empty space *of* language, and the production of language is the production of empty space insofar as the two are the same. In this way, the narrator is simultaneously only language and only empty space, two sides of the same thing.

Further, the space produced through language is not physical space but rather “a virtual space” (Foucault 55), and because the narrator is only language, he is a virtual entity. One critic understands this virtuality as a kind of “hypersubjectivity” that in Beckett’s work “is a direct function of empty space” itself (Essif 69). Just as Einstein’s physics linked time and space into one unified dimension, here subject and space mean the same thing. Just as time and space must be understood as timespace, language must be understood as producing subjectspace. Yet language is empty, and so linguistic reality is a hyperreality, and so the linguistic subjectspace is actually a hypersubjectspace. Language creates both the virtual “inner” space of the mind and the ego that occupies this space. Because language produces space and subject as mirrored virtual realities, the human ego marks both the creation a hyperreality and facilitates the ego’s colonization of said hyperreality. The moment of this colonization, the instance of the human animal’s inward turn, is itself the inaugural posthuman moment. Linguistic hyperspace expands the body’s boundary, and so when *homo sapiens* creates a space provided by language in which to consider itself, becoming human as a result of its own self-reflection as Agamben maintains, the arrival of the human also marks the arrival of the posthuman. The text’s disavowed voice is a tool without a user. Or, to link this back to a Zen understanding that states emptiness is form and form in emptiness, the narrator represents the impossible existence of emptiness divorced from form as its complement.

## UNBLENDED BINARIES

This chapter has qualified the generalized claim that Modernism championed the inward turn. This broad and generally accepted pronouncement, largely implying Virginia Woolf's and James Joyce's fictive inner spaces, if not characterizes the truth of Modernism, then outlines the accepted narrative about it. But Lawrence's work, from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to *St. Mawr* and even *The Man Who Died*, resists the head's gravitational pull inward almost completely. Lawrence was an uneasy fit among the other giants of Modernism, and Lawrence's intellectual faculties took blows from the literary intelligentsia,<sup>27</sup> but some of this assault on his intellectual status must have been blowback for his dogmatically insistent claim that the mind's sovereignty assassinates bodily intuition. Further, Beckett's work holds a liminal position between Modernism and Postmodernism, but at least one critic has called him "the last modernist" (Cronin). As a modernist writer, we see his work as also breaking party lines. Because Joyce's work figures so heavily into the Modernist canon, and because Beckett worked so closely with Joyce, we should be curious about Beckett's treatment of this Cartesian exploration of the person within, especially because stream-of-consciousness narratives like we follow in the case of *Ulysses's* Leopold Bloom heavily reinforce the notion that there exists a persistent self, that a hidden and complex psychological entity resides tucked away from public view who is unknowable by all but the inner being him or herself. As others have noted, Beckett's work does continue this Cartesian split, but the various "skullscapes" (Van Hulle 227) or prisons of the mind criticize the dignity and/or desirability of this I/world split, as well as challenge the inherent worth or privileging of the life lived in

---

<sup>27</sup> For example, Dolores LaChapelle discusses Lawrence's uneasy relationship with the Bloomsbury Group as well as with philosopher Bertrand Russell in the chapter "Mind and Nature" in her book *Future Primitive*.

and of the mind. Returning to *Murphy* for example, we see that Beckett relinquishes the value of maintaining a mind/body dichotomy when the cremated remnants of Murphy's body are comingled with the refuse of the world (Van Hulle 227). If we agree that Beckett's politics generally align with Bataille's and Lawrence's attack on the sacredness of the mind, but if we also note that Beckett did not prize the physical world either, we can see the scattering of Murphy's ashes at the end of the novel as the final transcending of dualities that he could not achieve in life. Like is scattered among like, trash among trash.

Beckett's fiction mourns the ever-inevitable human failure to break through the skull and bridge the gap between inner and outer worlds. One critic shows that Beckett's work depicts a Cartesian dichotomy that places the *I* on one side of the divide and the material world essentially seen as excrement on the other. I will add that Beckett's ontology of scatology, where human being arises from the "mess" and "muck" of the world, only further invites comparison to the excremental philosophy of Bataille, with whom Beckett had some correspondence.<sup>28</sup> In Beckett's dirty ontology, "each human is an addition not only to the sum of the physical world, but also to the pile of shit represented by it and by life" (Davies 50). This reading of Beckett condemns the world that produces and reproduces life, life which only gives rise to more suffering: the waste of the world happens to be the "fertilizer" that will grow yet another "manifestation" of life (Davies 51). And while it may be true that the Beckettian thinker turns inward to "shut out" or escape this world (Davies 52), this voluntary self-imprisonment brings no relief. Such a judgment that the mind should want to stand separately from the world of manure is shortsighted, because Beckett's fiction clearly

---

<sup>28</sup> See volume 2 of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* to read their correspondences. We learn from their letters that they had met and discussed ideas (257).

lampoons the life of the mind, often framing it as a painfully funny horror story. The material world may be a gross display of vulgar materiality, but the decaying, putrid and stale inner world fares no better. The mouth is a poor waste management system, and the ears and eyes take in language more quickly than the mouth can expel. And so *The Unnamable* appears to be one of the more tragic of Beckett's novels because the narrator, who has divorced himself from his body and thwarted all new sense data input, must recycle the same expired thoughts ad infinitum.

## CHAPTER 3—LINGUISTIC NONSENSE, SUBVERTED SOCIAL ROLES AND SOCIAL ESCAPISM IN COLD WAR LITERATURE

### INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter read two texts featuring protagonists who turn away from society in search of the fulfillment of some fantasy of self-actualization. It is fair to say neither *St. Mavr's* Lou Witt nor *The Unnamable's* unnamed narrator find the query of their respective quests, and in leaving society they lose an aspect of themselves, that is, some amount of their basic humanity. Divorced from human connection, these characters become more susceptible to the totalizing neuroses that motivate their extreme ventures toward self-perfection.

This chapter returns to American literature and surveys selected poetry and prose from the Cold War era. Specifically, I will close read and discuss the research concerned with Elizabeth Bishop's "The Man-Moth," a pre-Cold War era text that continues previously stated themes and prefigures their evolution, as well as Gregory Corso's "Marriage," "Last Night I Drove a Car," and "Transformation & Escape" before reaching the major focal point of this chapter, Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*. Starting with Bishop's poem, one that exemplifies in miniature the character type examined throughout the entirety of this project, I will lay the groundwork that will allow me to make the point that for Cold War literature, which reflects the challenges, restraints, and criticisms of what Alan Nadel calls America's Cold War "Containment Culture," *disruptive linguistic nonsense* allows the individual writer and the speakers/narrators of these texts to resist the reach of the implied mandate effecting social conformity; in effect, this word play affords these characters the opportunity to create new spaces in which to create novel identities beyond the limited scope of the socio-

politically accepted social roles modeled and adopted by mainstream American culture. That is, the subversive power of nonsense helps in founding a counterculture. After discussing how nonsense acted as a moment of potentiality for Bishop, who crafted a poetic narrative depicting a social outsider attempting to flee the confines of an urban American cityscape, then responding to the research that sees in Corso's "Marriage" nonsense used to challenge the status quo so to preserve the self, a tendency reflected in his other poetry, I will turn to *Dharma Bums* to explore how the Beats co-opted Buddhist beliefs—largely but not exclusively Zen Buddhist—to craft an iconoclastic literary and social performance. The Beats, especially Kerouac, engaged in a behavior described in *Pull My Daisy* (1959) called "goofing"—Corso's character explains to the visiting bishop character in the film that "goofing means I'm playing around with words." Although such word play was hardly novel, this term institutionalizes the practice, and I want to demonstrate how "goofing," linked to spontaneous writing, something Kerouac championed and which his literary stand-in, Ray Smith, frequently performs throughout the novel, can be linked to Buddhist philosophies on linguistic reality.

Consistent with the argument of this project, the texts read in this chapter reveal the parallel between linguistic reality and social material culture—an injunction against one means an injunction against the other. As a result, the readings in this chapter discuss various characters' subversive responses to their relationships to language, a social adhesive. Yet unlike Nick Adam's journey in chapter 1, for example, where we see a burned out Seney only briefly on the outbound journey, these texts give a more detailed description of the (sub)urban living spaces from which the featured protagonists flee. In many cases, these protagonists explicitly travel to more rural spaces because these natural settings are for one



reason or another thought to provide grounds for a more authentic existence. But just as these characters go outside of society, they also try to go above it: The Man-Moth tries to reach the moon, Corso goes to Heaven, and Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder get high on mountains, Buddhism, tea, and marijuana. In sum, these texts show getting high as a means of going outward. But what gets high must once again be grounded, and these protagonists all fall back to Earth in one way or another. This chapter emphasizes the subtheme running throughout this project that shows that in cases of social escape-cum-spiritual pilgrimage, the eccentric trip requires a circular or parabolic return and suggests that this falling down may not be equal to failing.

PART I: “BLACK SCROLLS ON THE LIGHT”: NONSENSE AS GROUNDS FOR TRANSCENDENCE-  
SEEKING

Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Man-Moth” is a poem that originated from the creative possibility inherent in “a found object” (Ramazani, Ellmann, and O’Clair 16). This poem specifically traces its roots back to a typographical error in a newspaper, as Bishop has frequently noted. Bishop explains that although she remembers that “mammoth” misprinted became “Man-Moth,” after the poem’s creation she no longer knew what was originally supposed to be markedly large. She also explains that she felt destined to find this productive mistake. When she saw it, it was as if “[a]n oracle spoke from the page of the *New York Times*, kindly explaining New York City to me, at least for a moment” (“On “The Man-Moth”” 101). In this instance, although the newspaper mistake was surely unintentional, Bishop found creative wisdom and worldly knowledge through accidental nonsense. And just as Bishop found possibility in a printed error, the poem’s subject—the Man-Moth—seeks the

possibility of transcendence-cum-escape based on his misunderstanding of the landscape of the night sky—specifically, he looks up and does not understand the celestial body he sees in the night sky.

I feel I should acknowledge a potential objection that arises when I seem to set as parallel Elizabeth Bishop's creative capitalizing on aleatory nonsense and Corso's and Kerouac's willful nonsense. The error that prompted "The Man-Moth" is not what I am calling disruptive linguistic nonsense. In fact, it seems to me that this historical trivia acts as little more than anecdotal curiosity. In this chapter, "The Man-Moth" functions as a thematic summary of the subject of this project—a discontent, perhaps we could even call it traumatized, individual seeks to flee the site of the social, usually represented by urban or suburban living, in search of some vaguely outlined idea of transcendence. Whereas social living is coded as inhibiting, limiting, and stifling, the escape to the periphery of whatever given social community offers, at least ostensibly, the opportunity to reach a state of fulfillment or authentic living. What we consistently see is that in this outward movement, the individual in flight, i.e. the transcendence-seeker, sacrifices language, an essentially social function. Whether seeing this through the more or less traditional Zen concepts of "big mind" or "no-mind"—both suggesting emptiness—or through the Batailleian violent disavowal of the head, the transcendence-seeker abandons the confines of logocentric thought and thus linguistically contingent meaning. Like Nick Adams and Lou Witt, the Man-Moth frustrates linguistic possibility in the pursuit of ecstatic bliss. Although this idea will be made clearer in the following reading of the poem, I want to highlight the desired outcome of the Man-Moth's attempt at transcendence. If successful, his being will be rendered "black scrolls on the light" (line 21) of the moon, a romantic vision of dualistic

unity with the power of the natural world. But the explicitly anti-linguistic gesture needs to be recognized here. His transformed body will in effect obfuscate the power of language. As when I discussed Norman Brown in chapter 1, meaning in language can be seen as trapped between the black bars of text and the white void of the page, but the image of black scrolls creates the image of an unassailable prison. A scroll blacked over completely communicates nothing; it negates and prevents any attempt to parlay linguistic intention: the claim articulated at the close of chapter 1 explains that the white emptiness of the page acts as a creative matrix, but here the screen of darkness fills to the brim the void where would come this linguistic potential. And like Corso and Kerouac to follow this reading, this countercultural refusal of language disrupts social codes so as to open up a space for the actualization of the liberatory desire of the transcendence-seeker.

The first stanza of the poem introduces the landscape and atmosphere of the Man-Moth's world. It is nighttime where the "cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight" (line 2). Looking from some unspecified subterranean position out into the mysterious night sky, "He does not see the moon" but rather only "observes her vast properties" (line 6). The Man-Moth does not recognize the moon as such, failing to understand its physical, astronomical function and ignorant to any cultural folklore surrounding the celestial body's presence. Instead, it hangs over him as a luminous enigma, shining down "queer light on his hands" (line 7).

Still enigmatic to him but utterly transformed, the moon appears "rather different to him" when on "rare" occasions he "visits...the surface" (10-11). Like a dark and dexterous cat burglar in a noir film, the Man-Moth, intrigued and confused, "scales[s] the faces of the buildings" (line 13), because mistakenly, "[h]e thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of

the sky” (line 14) that jeopardizes the assumed protective qualities provided by the sky above, a sky that acts as a vault or firmament (line 15). A poem situated in the war culture of WWII, offering two publication dates, 1939 and 1946, “The Man-Moth shows a fascination with permeated shelters that heralds what Steve Axelrod calls a “paradigm of perforated enclosure[s]” that “may serve as a signifier of the obsession with boundary lines vulnerable to infiltration and assault” particularly indicative of “discourse of containment” (“Elizabeth Bishop and Containment Policy” 854).

But we would be mistaken to believe that the Man-Moth necessarily embraces the protection that a shield-like night sky would offer. The fact that he scales the buildings to attempt to reach the hole in the sky showcases his willingness to explore what is mysterious, and as explained in the poem, if he were able to reach his distant goal and crawl through the hole, he would in fact seize the opportunity, possibly risking all that he is in the process to break through to the other side, crossing the threshold between the known and the unknown, despite the assumed, inherent costs to himself.

So, climbing “fearfully” up the sides of these buildings, the Man-Moth holds the naive belief that once and for all he will successfully reach the lighted hole toward which he advances and “push his small head through that round clean opening / and be forced through” (lines 19-20) onto the moonbeams themselves. A parenthetical note in the verse itself informs the reader directly of the Man-Moth’s foolishness, because in contrast “(Man, standing below him...has no such illusions)” (line 22). The illusion referred to is the idea that with enough effort, a being can wriggle through this caesura in the night sky and come out on the other. The Man-Moth’s struggles are noble and he labors despite the intense fear that accompanies his work, but “he fails, of course” only to “[fall] back scared but quite

unhurt” (line 24). This is the moment in the poem that most clearly “represents the absurd quest for the harmony and totality and the concomitant fall back down in a cartoon version of the modern city-scape” (Dennis 59).

The Man-Moth’s “absurd quest” and subsequent failure place him in the same category as the protagonists in the previous chapter. However, Nick Adams fares better on his modest journey aimed at helping him overcome, even if temporarily, the compartmentalizing effects of logocentric identity politics, while Lou Witt and Beckett’s narrator each fail on their extreme quests for linguistic transcendence. For sure, Nick Adams’s success stems in large part from the smallness of his ambition—to turn off his mind briefly and to be able to fish in peace. On the other hand, Lou Witt radically reframes her expectation of what it means to exist: she envisions another, truer level of reality itself, and so forsaking social convention and disavowing language wholesale, her escapist endeavor toward final liberation from egocentric selfhood leaves her alienated and still struggling at the novella’s end, albeit in the awesome expanses of the natural world and so closer to the source of raw life itself. In the same vein, Beckett’s narrator wants to transcend himself, becoming more than language while paradoxically having no way to exist beyond it, seeing as he is disembodied and literally trapped in the corpus of the text, his only body, so to speak. The Moth-Man joins this coterie of foolhardy seekers because irrationally, confusedly, he sets off on a journey to cover a vast amount of space, space that he seems to believe separates him from an ecstatic state of being.

Stanza four records his embarrassed reaction to his unsuccessful endeavor, and he retreats underground where he “cannot get aboard the silent trains / fast enough” (lines 27-28), and once aboard and seated the wrong direction, “he travels backwards” at a rate he

cannot imagine (line 32), marking his retreat as well as the regressiveness of his desire to escape in the first place. But what is it that he attempts to escape? Although the Man-Moth sets out to and fails in his attempt to flee through the moon-hole in the sky, at this point in the poem the reader does not have an explicitly stated reason that prompts this urgent escape attempt. It is in the fifth stanza that the narrator alludes to the extant threat: after each failed venture he must be “carried through *artificial* tunnels and dream *recurrent* dreams” (emphasis mine, line 34). It is in this moment of the poem that the horror that underlies the entire poem subtly sneaks to the surface, announcing the dread and danger of modern urban living. In fact, this is the threat that underlies the trip narratives throughout this project, seeing as the major narratives read herein communicate a romantic “living close the earth” or “return to nature” motif: Nick goes to the river, Lou Witt to New Mexico’s desolate deserts, Corso flees town in “Last Night I Drove a Car,” Ray and Japhy scale the Matterhorn and hang out in various pastoral settings, and Vassi goes “off the grid” more than once, too. These trips outward from city life imply the frustrations imposed by such (sub)urban living. Likewise for the Man-Moth, the admixture of the world’s artificiality—in this instance symbolized by the city’s infrastructure—and the pained repetition of life’s moments rhythmically pass through his consciousness just as the railroad ties running beneath him and “underlie / his rushing brain” (lines 35-36).

The most threatening component of modern living and the root of the Man-Moth’s terror lies in the “the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison” (line 37) that he cannot even dare to look out through the subway car’s window. The third rail powers the vehicle itself and so drives the disturbing ride through the city’s underbelly. The rail is his Achilles heel, “a disease / he has inherited the susceptibility to” (lines 38-39). Riding the subway, as

he apparently must, he nevertheless cannot bring himself to consider or visually regard the third rail that lies just within his eyesight.

The poem ends with a hypothetical situation in which someone captures the Man-Moth. The narrator instructs the reader to shine a flashlight into the scared creature's eye. Upon doing so, it will be forced to give up its own vitality in the form of a single tear, "his only possession, like a bee's sting" (line 45). And just as a bee suffers death after delivering its stinger attack, the Man-Moth will presumably perish unless he can "[s]lyly...palm it" (line 46) and then "swallow it" (line 47). If the captor does not pay enough attention, the Man-Moth can recuperate his to-be-confiscated possession and survive this hostile encounter, but if held in place by the critical gaze of whoever may corner him, the Man-Moth will have to surrender his tear, his sole possession—a tear that is "cool as from an underground springs and pure enough to drink" (line 48). The poem's ending highlights the Man-Moth's struggle with the deleterious effects of living in an urban landscape. Here the thwarted creature is interrogated and mugged by some would-be captor who would take from him and consume the one thing that he owes—a tear, clean and wholesome—that personally comes from within his being.

The fear of violence directed against the self underlies the poem. For one, the Man-Moth sees the moon as a hole in the sky that jeopardizes the integrity of the firmament-like sky to act as a reliable boundary between the surface of the earth and whatever lies on the other side of the night sky. As I mentioned before, this perceived chink seems to be a threat to the security of those who reside on earth, but this opening also seems to promise an avenue towards some unspecified state of liberation. Other threats appear unambiguously

inimical—the third rail that is like poison<sup>29</sup> and the hypothetical captor who might detain the Man-Moth and force him to surrender his sole possession, his single tear. The third rail poses an unmitigated threat to either the Man-Moth’s physical or psychological being—we can’t be sure which—but the hole in the sky and the would-be captor symbolize direct threats to the Man-Moth’s inner self or ego.

The Man-Moth expresses a desire to transcend the limitations of physical being where he would be transformed into “black scrolls on the light” (line 21). On the other hand, when faced with a circumstance in which he could give a gift from himself and in so doing this transcend the normally blockaded boundaries of interpersonal existence, the ego as boundary, the Man-Moth resists. This poem—one built around the tension between multiple binary positions—reveals the Man-Moth’s struggle with ideals of transcendence: he wants some sort of cosmic liberation for himself as represented by his attempted climb to the moon but protects his individual identity when confronted by the necessity to form an intimate bond with another.

Bishop’s poem showcases the gulfs between the surface world of Man and the subterranean domain of the Man-Moth, between lightness and darkness, between freedom and entrapment, and between self and other. The Man-Moth exists categorically on the latter side of these binaries as a being associated with darkness, confinement and alienation. As a result, “[t]he compactness of his world, the tension of his stance, in these lines is oppressive” (Doreski 129). Just as before in discussing the enormous difficulty of bridging the divide between self and other in Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, the Man-Moth and Man are separated

---

<sup>29</sup> Bishop in a personal journal makes a cryptic connection between the third rail and the horrors of alcoholism (Lombardi 115).



into “contrasting worlds of shadow and light, underground and surface” and these realms “seem mutually exclusive, beyond interpretation or knowledge” (Doreski 129). Difference in this poem appears inscrutable and insurmountable. Transcendence would be the capability to move from one pole to the other so as to comprehend another position/the position of the other.

Just as “The Man-Moth” depicts the eponymous protagonist trying to travel a great distance in order to achieve some greater scope of being, Bishop attempts to create in this poem a panoramic survey of the space between diametrically opposed perspectives. And just as the transcendence-seeker moves from thinking awareness to non-thinking awareness during the outward movement from the social to the solitary, this poem highlights the dualism separating the grounds for identity for both the dropped-out seeker and the social subject. One critic when commenting on Bishop’s artistic purpose makes the claim that ultimately “Bishop’s larger concern is to generate a language of sufficient latitude to permit observation of these intersections of like and unlike” (Doreski 129). The poem serves as an arena in which to observe the interplay between dualistic identities, and the Man-Moth, aware of the social and ontological limitations of his specific individual position, tries and fails to cross over to a plane where his darkness can ecstatically ride on light: “the man-moth seeks to penetrate the physical boundaries of this universe and be born into a new existence, one that escapes the laws of mortality and gravity that weigh down the natural man” (Lombardi 116). Although an alien being, the Man-Moth’s ambitions are painfully human. Mysticism in general tries to bridge the knowable world with the unknowable always-already beyond the realm of the knowable. The Man-Moth suffers the same metaphysical frustration as do Lou Witt in my second chapter and Marco Vassi in my fourth chapter to come. Just as

those characters fail at their lofty goal to transcend the limitations of human embodiment, the Man-Moth cannot reach his endpoint nor “[escape] those laws [and so] he is trapped in an existence ruled by bodily drives and marked by reiteration” (Lombardi 116).

Two energies exist for the Man-Moth: a kind of pure, unbridled energy represented by the moon beams on which he would travel if he could be metamorphosed, and then there is the kind of energy harnessed and bridled so to power urban living. And there is a clear ethos presented here: the former form of energy is associated with goodness and ontological freedom and the latter with poison, injury and containment. On one side lies energy coded as some unfocused, uncaptured libidinal force, and on the other lies the bodily drives and the focused driving power of the third rail, power enslaved to productive needs. This fantasy and privileging of energy-for-itself, unbounded and unemployed, resonates with Lawrentian politics and recalls Pan fallen. The privileging also falls in line with Bataille’s general disgust with rationality, a disgust that also implicates technology, as technological advances result directly from the advances in knowledge, the production of “knowledge” being the touchstone achievement of scientific, therefore rational, intellectualism itself. Or as Robert Dale Parker puts it:

The Man-Moth bravely seeks something sublimely exterior to himself and at the same time fears the ordinary all around him that he seems to fantasize into something sublimely oppressive. He tries, in the first half, to escape into aloneness, but in the second half, the populated world around him reasserts its routine. (47)

This quotation encapsulates what has and will be seen to be a description of the fundamental condition of the reality in which the transcendence-seeker exists—enlightenment is something locatable outside one’s self and one’s current circumstances, and so he or she seeking it must flee the society, as society appears as the primary obstacle before total cosmic

knowledge. And what this seeker does in response to this perception of oppressive reality is embark upon a self-serving pursuit of ecstasy. This is Lou Witt, Beckett's Murphy sitting in his chair (as briefly discussed before), Beckett's Narrator, Ray Smith of *Dharma Bums*, and Marco Vassi to come in the next chapter. Further, the highly individualistic nature of the pursuit also forecasts the seeker's failure. Abandoning humanity, chasing some mirage of ecstatic transcendence, these seekers leave behind human connection and social responsibility.

For the seeker who prefers to escape into solitude, a situation where he or she is asked to be selfless, that is, to give of the self, appears dangerous. Hence the bee metaphor Bishop directly employs in the poem: "By comparing the tear that may be drunk to the bee's sting, Bishop makes explicit the implicit threat of each opportunity for connection and transcendence" (Colwell 62). Whereas the Man-Moth bravely scales the landscape of New York in efforts to reach the "round clean hole" (line 20), he cannot risk offering himself to another person, albeit that this situation describes a stick-up, judging by the aggressive tone of the last stanza. Maybe he can make the initial venture to reach the moon because in seeking an individual ecstasy he actually risks no harm, as he is unable to reach the heights required to transcend and thus always falls back to Earth unharmed, "of course" (line 24); but in the case of his capture and forced forfeiture of his sole possession, he loses all and gains nothing.

The tear can then be seen to symbolize the Man-Moth's ego. Many religious traditions, for example, tell that the ego or the individual self must be sacrificed to merge with the transcendent "Self"; so the poem offers a situation that would allow an "abolishing [of] self in order to preserve it, or...escaping the self in order to realize it" (Colwell 63), but

the Man-Moth cannot understand the situation to pose such fruitful consequences. The captor does not hold the Man-Moth put by threat of violence but by force of observation, the violence of looking, and so the tear is thus “[e]arned by painful attention” and creates a “moment of connection [that] concerns giving over control and enlarging perspective, rather than making reality small, manageable and egocentric” (Colwell 63). And this sums up the basic behavioral pattern of the transcendence-seeker, here the Man-Moth in particular, who seeks cosmic freedom envisioned as ecstatic bliss while invariably holding on to the ego in “the desire to hide and protect the internal self, like a coin he’d rather not pay” (Colwell 62). Although freedom means having nothing left to lose, as once said, the Man-Moth feels such freedom should not cost dearly.

PART II. “ABSURD RICE”: DISRUPTIVE LINGUISTIC NONSENSE AND ESCAPE IN GREGORY CORSO’S POETRY

Gregory Corso, as Michael Skau explains in his study on the poet, can be seen as having served a particular role in the Beat community—“as a disruptive force” who was capable of “unsettling the comfortable patterns of convention” (1-2). He was also capable of disrupting authority. Skau retells an incident in which Corso was booted out of a lecture being given by Chogyam Trungpa at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado.<sup>30</sup> In 1975, Corso, while attending a talk, interrupted Trungpa and heckled him, as Skau describes it. Corso criticized the spiritual leader and claimed that he was playing games with Corso’s mind, referring especially to the concept and practice of ego death. Trungpa, suffering insults until Corso’s

---

<sup>30</sup> It is worth mentioning that Naropa, Trungpa’s own creation, has a program of study called the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

exit, kicked the disgruntled poet out of the meeting hall. This case recounts Corso's interpersonal conflict with a spiritual authority—albeit an authority in a religion that was not a dominant force in American culture, although ascending in popularity at that time.

In the above situation, Corso disrupted the authority of a spiritual leader through an outburst, but in the poem "Marriage," his narrator disrupts the authority of the juridico-religious institution of marriage via the production of disruptive linguistic nonsense. Fundamentally, Corso's writing challenged the authority of conventional American English, subverting its power through manipulation of syntax, grammar and diction. Corso's poetry expressed the capability to revitalize the power of language through the production of what appears to be a proto-psychedelic style. This serves the dual function of creating new language from old, as well as allowing the reader to experience the original language anew as a result of his innovative linguistic challenges. Corso's poetry echoes surrealism and prefigures the psychedelica of the 60s counterculture. Its juxtaposition of binary opposites, use of paradox, production of overlapping meanings and all other instances of other language play "[breaks] down traditional habits of perception, repudiates ontological clichés, and celebrates the unlimited possibilities of the eternal imagination" (Stephenson 76). In fact, he does not create an entirely new language but instead mashes up the English language into something that feels radically different, while still depending on the conventional meanings and uses of words to orient the reader and move him or her into his realm of understanding. In this way, the effect of Corso's poetry produces something like what Marco Vassi, discussed in the next chapter, calls the "Mysterious Familiar." Vassi writes that "we seek refuge in the known" and so "we lapse into habit, our perceptions dull, and we enter a period of stagnation" (109). He explains that people can overcome this "walking coma" in

which all the setting of life becomes stripped of meaning through rote memory, desensitized by familiarity, through living in a kind of middle path between “sleepwalking and insanity,” thus affording a person the ability to “[see] in innocence” (109). This is precisely what Corso’s language play does. He refuses conventional syntax, spelling and word use, yet he does not simply employ gibberish to speak for him. Navigating an approach that rests between the extremes of convention and total incomprehensibility, Corso’s poetry allows poetic language to break through the ossification of familiarity.

For example, Gregory Corso’s poem “Marriage” uses disruptive linguistic nonsense to challenge the continuation of “the more pervasive, cultural narratives [that] are echoed and reiterated” (Nadel 3) at the level of American Cold War culture, one especially marked by compulsory conformity as Nadel routinely argues. In doing this, the poem “Marriage” challenges the zenith of “courtship rituals” (Nadel 4) itself, and he questions his willingness to engage in the compulsory participation in marriage, something encoded as essentially “good” according to the poem. He resists as well the obligation to faithfully enact the honeymoon ritual, the logical continuation of the ceremony where taking the presumed virginity of his new bride would consummate the legally validated marriage enacted at the altar.

The first line of “Marriage” poses, in the language of logical fallacies, a complex question; the narrator asks, “Should I get married? Should I be Good?” They are phrased not as separate queries but the latter as a rephrasing or clarification of the first. “Good” spelled with a capital letter indicates a proper noun, as if he entertains the notion that he himself should become the embodiment of Goodness itself. To become so would be to alter his present state of being, and later in the poem’s second stanza where a hypothetical meet-

the-parents scenario plays out, the reader sees the narrator question, “How else to feel other than I am” (line 14), indicating the inscrutable nature of assuming a state of being other than one is.

Not only is being Good rather than being himself an unthinkable position at an ontological level, but “Corso sees being [G]ood as conformist, which is a trap,” but being “Good,” a vague term here indeed, is also “a temptation” because in being Good, that is getting married, Corso gains entry into American community (G. Olson 6). This community finds in the institution of marriage a social sexual ethics, and it is Corso’s “condensed images of nonsense throughout the poem that stand against the marital logic” (G. Olson 7), a logic that formulates the basis for the community’s dependence on marriage. Standing at the altar, undyingly rebellious and uncertain of his future, the poem’s narrator answers the priest’s ultimate question of if the narrator will take his bride’s hand in marriage with the seemingly nonsensical “Pie Glue!” Olson points out that although the expression appears on its face a simple rhyme for the expected words “I do,” a very childish rhyme I might mention, there is a strategy mobilized here. Olson tells his readers that at the time “hair pie” (7) was a crass slang term for a woman’s genitals, and so his response highlights the frightening sexual politics of expected monogamy, a force of limitation and perhaps even bondage. The narrator voices an “objection” to “being trapped with any one woman” (G. Olson 7).

To build on this point, the poem’s narrator’s expression of “Pie Glue!”, while voicing the fear that a man at the altar might feel when presumably committing to monogamy so to attain the privilege to enter into the social-legal contract of marriage, shows that he ambivalently accepts the vows being read. In responding with such a close rhyme, the narrator risks being misheard as voicing his commitment. “Pie glue” at the back of the

chapel might as well be “I do.” Corso’s narrator resists and scrutinizes the institution of marriage with all its limitations and sacrifices all the while giving the appearance of submission to the monogamous sexual ethics of marriage. According to Skau, this utterance represents one such moment in which Corso “deliberately courts disjunction and ambivalence” (17). However, this ambivalence leans in the direction of affirmation. His disruptive linguistic nonsense falls short of effective resistance and becomes a mere objection that fades, perhaps acknowledged by his church audience, perhaps not.

Corso’s ambivalent and paradoxical rejection/acceptance of his marriage vows stems from the anxiety of the limitations of the institution, but his resistance to love itself comes out of a troubled reaction to what he sees as its superfluous nature. The poem reads: “O but what about love? I forgot love / not that I am incapable of love / It’s just that I see love as odd as wearing shoes” (lines 107-109). Just as sex is possible without love, marriage is logically thinkable without it. Conflating love with marriage, Olson reads this line that compares wearing shoes to the protection of marriage, a social protection perhaps granted as a favor from the community that sanctions marriage (8). But in addition to making the mistake that we can assume that love here can be interpreted as a synonym for marriage, or at least carries a symmetrical meaning, this reading fails to address the oddity explicitly noted of wearing shoes—or what Corso himself judges as strange, that is.

Corso means that wearing shoes, like marriage, is an unneeded gesture, an unnecessary accessory. Although there are terrains over which a person cannot walk safely, let alone comfortably, without the benefit of footwear, in daily life public infrastructure such as sidewalks and walking trails provide flat walkways that are often kept up and periodically cleaned. Walking is more or less safe without shoes. As such, Corso might be implying that



wearing shoes, like marriage, becomes a dogmatically observed custom for its own sake. Just as many establishments threaten “no shoes, no shirt, no service,” a person sans shoes will lose certain social and public services for failing to adhere to expectation, as well as receive strange looks for breaching this taboo. A person in Cold War era America who did not marry may have faced such disrepute. Remaining a bachelor would cost a man some certain loss of social esteem. But just as the “Pie Glue!” wedding vows discussed above, Corso draws attention to the encumbrance of love. Love is not necessarily a problem; rather, it is just unnecessary to enclose it within the confines of marriage, and is thus odd.

The entirety of matrimony strikes Corso as odd actually, from the relationship between love and marriage to the actual ceremony that ends with “absurd rice and clanky cans and shoes” (line 34), and so he counters the firmly entrenched oddity and absurdity encoded within American courtship, marriage and honeymoon, and fatherhood with disruptive linguistic nonsense. At each of these stages, when picturing his hypothetical future, Corso responds with gibberish. When first starting to court a woman, rather than engage in polite small talk and romantic gestures, he decides to visit “cemeteries” rather than “movies” (line 3) and to “tell [her] all about werewolf bathtubs and forked clarinets” (line 4), matters conveying a threatening undertone, “forked” reminding of the tongue of a snake, an animal in Christian myth associated with evil. And as previously mentioned, when urged to affirm his marriage vow, he responds “Pie Glue!”

The honeymoon especially troubles Corso because of the creepy knowing smiles and patronization of “bride all those corny men slapping me on the back” (line 30) who uphold the objectification of women, telling him, “She’s all yours, boy! Ha-ha-ha!” (line 31). The bride, presumably a virgin by tradition, becomes the object of fantasy for the men in

attendance, and Corso can see “in their eyes...some obscene honeymoon going on” (line 32). Corso becomes paranoid as a result of the panoptic gaze of the world surrounding him, every male acting as if he knows his marriage is soon to be consummated and so voyeuristically taking pleasure in it:

The indifferent clerk he knowing what was going to happen  
The lobby zombies they knowing what  
The whistling elevator man he knowing  
The winking bellboy knowing  
Everybody knowing! I'd be almost inclined not to do anything! (lines 37-41)

Rather than fulfill his conjugal social obligation, he wants to “Stay up all night!” and counter the gaze of the on-lookers with a direct challenge, where he would “[s]tare that hotel clerk in the eye!” (42). At first, he would make his dissent heard in ordinary English, “[s]creaming: I deny honeymoon! I deny honeymoon!” (line 43) but then resorts to his consistent behavior of using nonsense to challenge the status quo; he would deny honeymoon by “running rampant into those almost climatic suites / yelling Radio belly! Cat shovel! (lines 44-45).

But in the hypothesized future fantasized about in the poem, he does not resist the honeymoon or becoming a father effectively and soon sits in his “big papa chair” (line 54) from which he would respond to his wife, “saying Christmas teeth! Radiant brains! Apple deaf!” (line 55). In fact, this behavior ultimately serves to encourage him to submit to marriage, and he declares, “God what a husband I'd make! Yes, I should get married!” (line 56). In the end, his disruptive linguistic nonsense seems to entertain the hesitant groom-to-be rather than effectively resist the authority of Christian mythology and the patriarchy of Cold War America and its social mores.

The poem ends with Corso waiting for a woman “possible as I am possible” (line 108), unmarried and hopeless to find a woman equal in anti-social potential to him, free

enough in her head to be bonded to him in marriage. The sexism of the last stanza highlights the discrepancy between Corso's want of freedom from social convention versus a want of social equality. He wants personal freedom but does not advocate interpersonal equality, as evidenced by dismissive sexism of the poem's last stanza. The poem does not urge social transformation so much as it declares one man's need to have freedom from the restraints of monogamy and the pressure to conform to American social expectations. "Marriage" is a poem about selfish escape. The same self-preserving message is more clearly and succinctly conveyed in Corso's poem "Last Night I Drove a Car," which I will quote in full:

Last night I drove a car  
not knowing how to drive  
not owning a car  
I drove and knocked down  
people I loved  
...went 120 through one town.

I stopped at Hedgeville  
and slept in the back seat.  
...excited about my new life.

This poem shows a narrator acquire a car, one that is not his, and then proceed to run down everyone in his way, even "people [he] loved" (line 5) to escape the confines of suburban life. Lacking any remorse and feeling liberated, a freedom that comes at great cost, he feels great hope about the life ahead of him. This poem shares the theme of anti-social selfishness in "Marriage," albeit stated more explicitly.

But that is not to say that Corso would not go so far as to sacrifice his own well being in an escape attempt. In "Transformation & Escape," the poem's narrator finds himself in heaven, a place that is "oppressively sweet" (line 2). There the angels of heaven labor to make him conform to the standards of heaven. Being made square by Saint

Michael's sword in having his hair cut, Corso apprehends the sword and "quarter[s] himself" in a great circular adhesive (line 14). Continuing to be tortured, he finally flees Saint Michael and Saint Peter but is caught and "sentenced...in the firmament of an ass. / The prison of an Eternity!" (lines 44-45) where he "schemed escape" (line 48). He delivers himself through self-mutilation:

I cracked my jaws.  
Broke my legs.  
Sagged belly-flat on plow  
on pitchfork  
on scythe.  
My spirit leaked from the wounds. (lines 61-66)

Dismantling his body to become free, the poem's narrator resists even the all-too-sweet confines of a Christian heaven, destroying himself so as to guarantee his liberation. This trammled Beat soul sacrifices bodily integrity as a last resort.

In Elizabeth Bishop's "The Man-Moth," the Man-Moth seeks escape from society in hopes of personal transformation, but Corso's poetry does not feature transformation as the goal of freedom from convention. Instead, a more fundamental clinging to self and to habitual patterns of being motivate the need to escape marriage, suburbia, even heaven. In the last poem "Transformation & Escape," the transformation spoken of only need occur as a condition of personal liberation, and the narrator even destroys aspects of the self, in this case the body, seen as non-essential, in order to protect the idea of a core self. Yet in this next last section on Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, the idea of escape from society is itself transformative.

PART III. GONE, GONE, GONE BEYOND—HAIL THE GOOFER: THE SUBVERSIVE ANTI-  
NARRATIVES OF BEAT BUDDHISM

*Dharma Bums* was published in 1958, in the second part of the Beat generation, as outlined by Gregory Stephenson in *The Daybreak Boys*. He identifies an “underground period” that ranged from 1944 to 1956, and then the “public” phase picking up at 1956 and going until 1962. The end date Stephenson places is approximate, and he supposes that it could have ended at the beginning “of the Vietnam War in 1965” (3). Regardless of the “official” end of the generation, Stephenson marks 1956 the beginning of the public era because it is in that year that Allen Ginsberg published *Howl and Other Poems*, and so with that momentous publication “the Beats began to attract public and media attention.” This second phase of the larger whole “is marked by the attainment of vision and by the communication of that vision to the human community” (3). And for sure, the feature of this latter phase defines the motive driving the plot of *Dharma Bums*, a novel dedicated to the evangelical spreading of the Dharma, the teachings of the truth as told by Buddha as spun by the Beats.

But just as Buddhism as a coherent label has been splintered into numerous sects and divergent traditions, the Buddhism represented in the novel appears in two separate, albeit superficial, guises. Keroauc’s character, because the novel is clearly a thinly veiled roman-a-clef, Ray Smith, says that he upholds Mahayana Buddhism. Actually, Ray does not know what he believes in. His labeling of his beliefs is incoherent and contradictory, as I will also highlight later, but the point of the matter is that he upholds a Buddhism of scriptures and sutras, whereas Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder) espouses Zen Buddhism, which tries to strip itself of formal textual doctrine. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Zen is not about filling the mind with ideas but about clearing it of conceptions. But even if Ray Smith is not

a Zennist, Kerouac himself has been identified as one of the Beats whose “celebration of Zen” helped popularize the practice in America (Jackson, “D.T. Suzuki” 46).

Because *Dharma Bums* showcases Kerouac’s Western understanding of Buddhism derived from popularizers such as D. T. Suzuki,<sup>31</sup> whose lecturing on the matter at Columbia University starting in 1951 may have “ignited the American Zen boom” seen in the 1950s and 60s (Jackson, “D.T. Suzuki” 46), rather than arising out of a family background or formal training, the matter of religious authenticity and accuracy arises. The characters in the novel claim to practice Buddhism, and yet the people in the story who hear their hipster sermons and improvised spiritual mottos are not in the position to evaluate the accuracy of the teachings as faithful representations of the religion. And what Alan Watts, a vociferous critic of Kerouac’s Buddhist “teachings,” says about Beat Zen applies to Beat Buddhism as a whole, a term I use because not all Buddhism adopted and disseminated by the Beats fell under the title “Zen” despite Watts’s framing of the matter. Zen Buddhism and Buddhism in general are not politically reactionary, and so in order to take it up, Watts argues that someone who would practice it “must have really come to terms” with the native religion and superstitions of his or her culture, so that “he can take it or leave it without fear or rebellion...Lacking this, his Zen will either be ‘beat’ or ‘square,’ either a revolt from the culture and the social order or a new form of stuffiness and respectability” (“Beat Zen” 90). Watts clearly lumps Kerouac’s ethos into the first category, “Beat” Buddhism, and I will present readings of scenes from the novel that support Watts’s assertion that Beat Zen as portrayed throughout the novel is comprised of “a younger generation” enacting its

---

<sup>31</sup> Kerouac met D.T. Suzuki in 1957, in fact (Pearlman 59).

“nonparticipation in ‘the American Way of Life,’ a revolt which does not seek to change the existing order but simply turns away from it to find the significance of life in subjective experience rather than objective achievement” (“Beat Zen” 91). Harsh criticism perhaps, and I do not want to give the impression that beyond this introduction I plan to evaluate or in any way focus my reading on judging the authenticity of the Buddhist experience in Kerouac’s novel. Instead, it is more helpful to simply note that in *Dharma Bums* we see what Watts describes, and so Beat Buddhism becomes a problematic but productive site of resistance to the conventional American lifestyle in the height of the Cold War’s containment culture.

But Kerouac as author did certainly handpick the aspects of Zen Buddhism that his novel features and he did so to highlight his own personal artistic agenda. His is a romantic presentation that emphasizes personal naturalness so much so that “[t]he need for rigorous discipline, regular instruction by a spiritual master and long hours of meditation, characteristic of authentic Zen Buddhism, are notable by their absence” (Jackson, “Counterculture Looks East” 57). Formalized practice is avoided because it would hamper the impressive and productive power found through Zen that the Buddhism-practicing characters use as a guiding principle for spontaneous composition. Related to this spontaneity is a playful creation of new language from old, as discussed in the previous section about Bishop’s and Corso’s work. Beat Buddhism’s selective interpretation fostered an appreciation of nonsense that allows new personal wisdom and alternative social roles to be created from the substrate of existing language and social narratives.

In *Dharma Bums*, the characters produce this nonsensical language, and Kerouac’s mouthpiece Ray Smith wants it produced as spontaneously as possible. This emphasis on

spontaneous creation arises as the flipside of the threat of spontaneous destruction, the fear looming in the collective American consciousness in the Cold War. It certainly appears in Ray's consciousness, who in chapter 14 decides to buy supplies to outfit himself for the Apocalypse: "if an atom bomb should have hit San Francisco that night all I'd have to do is hike on out of there" (85). Wandering as a Dharma Bum throughout the story, rucksack on his back and sutras on his lips, Ray seizes the opportunity to travel in solitude modeled after the mystical and legendary Zen Lunatics his close friend Japhy Ryder has told him about. In the case of nuclear catastrophe, he could begin a new life because loaded up with all his recently purchased gear, Ray reports feeling "like a new man" (86). And just as the threat of spontaneous destruction makes the opportunity to prepare oneself to live as a new person, the strictures of convention paradoxically make way for novel identities.

And so this last section will read *Dharma Bums* as a novel exemplifying what Carl Jackson describes as the Beat's "literary rebellion [that] championed 'spontaneous prose,' a neo-Romantic spirit and a rejection of academic literature" ("Counterculture Looks East" 52); specifically, I examine how the novel's overarching belief in the validity of Buddhist philosophy encourages Japhy's Zen anti-intellectualism, how it allows the use of Zen and mythic Eastern cultural tradition in general to serve as a source of physical and emotional pleasure, and how it establishes some amount of hope in the subversive power of nonsense to counter the oppressive forces of American authoritarianism and compulsory consumer-capitalism. To do this, the story unfolds following the circular narrative depicted in the Zen ox-taming pictures from twelfth century China, discussed in the last part of this chapter section. This Zen teaching tool shows the manner in which a person reaches Zen enlightenment, after which found, the seeker eventually returns to normative society to lead



a mundane life devoid of the privilege one might assume comes with having experienced transcendental wisdom.

*Dharma Bums*'s plot is simple in that like *On the Road*, it is episodic rather than strictly progressive. Initially, Ray Smith introduces the reader to Japhy Ryder and the Buddhist principles the two will entertain throughout the novel. Throughout the story, Ray travels by foot or by hitchhiking acting as a wandering "Dharma bum." He also learns to enjoy mountain climbing as a result of Japhy's influence, who before leaving for Japan to study Zen in a monastery, lines Ray up with a job working as a fire watch on Desolation Peak in the Cascades, where in isolation Ray comes to terms with his newfangled Buddhist beliefs before coming back down the mountain to rejoin society, no longer counter to it, an idea that will be explored in the conclusion of this chapter.

*Dharma Bums* opens with Ray Smith choosing between conventional Christianity or aligning himself with Eastern religious ideas. He is traveling as a stowaway on a freight train where he runs into another person riding the rails, and he "[takes] pity on him" and so offers to give him food. Satisfied by his act of donation, Ray "was pleased" and that brings to his mind the Diamond Sutra that instructs its reader to practice charity without consciously thinking about the act as charity, seeing as charity happens to be only a mental conception in the first place. Next, Ray reflects on the place he is in his life and where he has been, saying,

I was devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I've become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral. But then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world...in order to turn the wheel of...Dharma. (6)

The bum on the freight train gives Ray “a tiny slip of paper” with a prayer from Saint Teresa on it (7). Here in the beginning of the novel, both Eastern and Western religious beliefs are represented immediately, although very little appears to separate the two worldviews based on Ray’s description of Buddhism. As previously noted, Ray describes his Buddhist faith as founded on values such as charity and humility, as well as experiences of ecstasy, just as Christianity has extolled such values and historical church documents report experiences of ecstasy. Further, Ray explains that he had hoped his Buddhist practice would help him to become a “future Hero in Paradise” (6)—he conflates Christianity’s goal of Heaven with Buddhism’s quest for nirvana, making the two appear similar. Despite the freight train bum’s different religious background, Ray labels him a “Dharma bum” anyway and says of him that he “was the first genuine Dharma Bum” he had encountered (10).

Ray’s particular understanding of Buddhism, with the conception of a permanent self that can aspire to Heavenly bliss for example, seems to align with typically Christian theological beliefs, but even if the religious traditions represented in this freight train car were to conflict, Ray as Kerouac’s literary double would be able to accommodate both worldviews. Allen Ginsberg speaks of Kerouac as having possessed a Keatsian “negative capability” that allowed him to entertain obviously paradoxical ideas without his rational mind creating tension, frustration, or anger as a result, or as Ginsberg also describes it, a Whitmanian ability to claim multiple but usually mutually exclusive identities at once (373). In this first scene of the novel, the reader sees both Christianity and Buddhism offered as attractive avenues of life practice, but an interest in Buddhism wins the day. Ginsberg explains that Kerouac identified with both his Catholic background and his deep interest in Buddhism; this novel depicts Ray Smith, modeled on Kerouac’s own experiences, as he

pursues an alternative religious framework counter to the Christian monotheism that dominates American society at a time when the Beat generation pushed a countercultural response to the American political and economic mainstream. But what is overlooked in discussion of this novel is that Ray ultimately returns to society in the end, and we must ask whether this constitutes a failing of his countercultural ideology or a success of his transcendence quest itself—this is a question I will address in conclusion, where I will frame this narrative as a circular journey, a form that actually typifies the Enlightenment quest in specific Zen texts.

#### “I DON’T CARE”: JAPHY’S ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AS ZEN NATURALNESS

After the man on the train, the second Dharma bum Ray Smith meets is Japhy Ryder, a character based on Gary Synder, who Ray credits for having “coined the phrase” itself (10). Japhy plays an important role in Ray’s ideological formation because Japhy acts as a vehicle of transmission of Buddhism. Ray Smith gives a brief biography of Japhy’s growing up and explains that Japhy’s college studies led him to find the “greatest Dharma Bums of them all, the Zen Lunatics of China and Japan” (10). Initially though, Ray does not go into detail about what exactly a Zen Lunatic is; he merely introduces this vaguely defined group of Buddhist historical figures, making the Zen Lunatics seem as if they were some organized fraternity of religious fanatics rather than a scattered collection of important figures throughout the history of Zen Buddhism. The artificially constructed group and its ideology will figure into the discussion of Buddhism within the novel as it develops, but as now, Ray merely acknowledges that the Zen Lunatics praised in the book come out of Japhy’s background.

Characterized as a product of a backwoods bringing up, Japhy and his no-frills simplicity make him an apt mouthpiece for his particular take on Zen Buddhism, a role he fulfills in the novel. Japhy and Ray in fact approach their Buddhist discussions from different poles—while Japhy extols a Zen approach, Ray on the other hand claims he is a “serious Buddhist” (13).<sup>32</sup> This conflict between their two practices and understandings of Buddhism produces a philosophical tension within the story.

After describing Japhy’s upbringing, Ray comments on the similarities between these two Western Buddhists, namely that they “had the same favorite Buddhist saint” (12) but then the reader is told how their interests diverge. Ray explains that Japhy “knew all the details of Tibetan, Chinese, Mahayana, Hinayana, Japanese and even Burmese Buddhism” but Ray also explains that he “warned [Japhy] at once that I didn’t give a damn about the mythology” and all the regional and national nuances between the denominations; Ray claims that he only cares about the first noble truth, that life is suffering, and the third noble truth, that suffering can be ameliorated by Buddhist practice. Ray reports a barebones interest in the religion, although it is Japhy who practices Zen, the branch most characterized as a stripped down version of Buddhism, allowing a practice not dependent on formal scripture and Buddhist history.<sup>33</sup>

Japhy Ryder’s and Ray Smith’s conflicting perspectives highlight different values.

Japhy’s Zen-oriented religious belief favors a Buddhist experience that arises from the

---

<sup>32</sup> Despite acting as if Zen and Mahayana are vastly different, Todd Giles’s research on Kerouac’s Buddhism reminds us that “Zen is a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism” in fact (203). This exemplifies the inaccuracies and misunderstandings of Kerouac’s Beat Buddhism.

<sup>33</sup> For example, in chapter 1, I discuss D. T. Suzuki’s and Shunryu Suzuki’s descriptions of Zen Buddhism, and although both popularizers present very different models of Zen, both de-emphasize the importance of scripture and mythology to Zen practice.

mundane. For example, Ray recalls a time when he and Japhy walked into a bar together, and someone asked Japhy where he met his friend. In response, Japhy explained proudly, “Oh I always meet my Bodhisattvas in the street!” (11). But the flavor of Japhy’s Zen Buddhism becomes even more clear when he introduces the poet Warren Coughlin, who was a good friend to Japhy back in Oregon, to Ray. After exalting Coughlin’s powers of rhetoric, Japhy explains that Coughlin’s power may come from his being “a great mysterious Bodhisattva [he] think[s] maybe a reincarnation of Asagna the great Mahayana scholar of the old centuries” (12). Feeling left out of this romanticizing, Ray asks, “And who I am?” (13). Japhy responds cryptically, “I dunno, maybe you’re Goat,” perplexing Ray. Japhy tries again: “Maybe you’re Mudface” and of course Ray asks, bewildered, “Who’s Mudface?” Japhy brings all this together by saying “Mudface is the mud in your goatface” and rattles on, “What would you say if someone was asked the question ‘Does a dog have a Buddha nature?’ and said ‘Woof!’” Japhy sets the tone for how Zen Buddhism will be characterized in the novel and Ray Smith’s reaction demonstrates the typical response to it. Ray, less than amused by Japhy’s nonsense, finds it to be “a lot of silly Zen Buddhism” and this in when Ray proclaims that he is “a serious Buddhist,” specifically “an old-fashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism” (13). Ray’s labels are just as silly as Japhy’s mudface joke because Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism are actually opposing denominations. “Hinayana” is a “derogatory” title and description meaning “Lesser Vehicle” given by the Mahayana Buddhists referring to a kind of self-centered Buddhist practice, a practice aimed at liberating the individual follower but not striving to liberate others. The Mahayana Buddhists believed their version of Buddhism, the “Greater Vehicle,” was superior, and they aim at fostering a bodhisattva lifestyle, bodhisattvas being people dedicated to a common

Enlightenment of all (“Hinayana Buddhism”) The point here is that Ray Smith’s description of his beliefs is contradictory and confusing. His jumbled jargon reveals him to be a posturer at worst or a dilettante at best. He is not an informed practitioner.<sup>34</sup>

That said, despite the meaninglessness of his self-description as a “Hinayana coward of late Mayahanism,” Ray does introduce an interesting perceived difference between his approach to Buddhism and what he fathoms Japhy’s to be. Although he has confused the details, Ray recognizes that his Buddhist understanding emphasizes practiced compassion while Zen, as he apprehends it, concerns itself with overcoming conceptual thinking instead. Resisting Japhy’s style, Ray explains that his “contention” arises from the fact that “Zen Buddhism [doesn’t] concentrate on kindness so much as on confusing the intellect to make it perceive the illusion of all sources of things” (13). Rather than advocate the dutiful help of sentient beings, Ray believes that Zen directly confounds the mind of the practitioner to help liberate him or her from the source of delusion and thus suffering. Ironically, Ray understands Zen to be an intellectual approach to enlightenment despite the fact that “it reject[s] intellectual inquiry as the path to enlightenment” (Jackson, “Counterculture Looks East” 59).

On the other hand, “Serious Buddhism” according to Ray Smith is religiously socialist, as it were, while Zen is individualistic. And more frankly, “It’s *mean*,” Ray adds. Associating Zen with violence, Ray reduces Zen Buddhism to the sadistic whim of “Zen Masters throwing young kids in the mud because they can’t answer their silly word questions,” meaning Zen koan (13). But Japhy maintains his Zen advocacy, supporting those

---

<sup>34</sup> Despite Ray Smith’s messy mix of various Buddhist ideas from a multitude of different schools, Allen Ginsberg notes that Gary Snyder, the most formally trained of the Beats in Buddhism, said that Kerouac himself did in fact “have an intelligent grasp of Eastern thought...a learned grasp” (364).

mean old Zen masters because they want to teach their followers, “mud is better than words.” Zen, while dealing with the intellect, is in fact an anti-intellectual practice according to Japhy. Zen holds the direct thing-ness of the world above linguistic symbolic abstractions, and this anti-intellectual slant complements Japhy’s rustic and simple upbringing. Despite his initial reluctance to Japhy’s Zen Buddhism, Ray admits that Japhy “did eventually stick something in [his] crystal head that made [Ray] change [his] plans in life” (13).

Ray narrates another example of Zen as anti-intellectualism soon after this exchange discussed above, recalling a time when a group of poets left a late night poetry reading to go out and eat Chinese food in San Francisco. At dinner, Japhy “told anecdotes about the Zen Lunatics of the Orient” that had Ray “going so glad” (15). Uplifted from the stories and from a bottle of wine, Ray approaches the kitchen, and stereotyping the Asian cook he finds there as a Buddhist, asks, “Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?” Ray gives the reader a parenthetical note that Bodhidharma was an Indian who traveled eastward to introduce Buddhism to China and then he recounts the cook’s response: “I don’t care.” Ray conveys the cook’s dismissive answer back to Japhy who gleefully praises the response: “Perfect answer, absolutely perfect. Now you now what I mean by Zen” (15). Here, Japhy unequivocally associates Zen with a disregard to information and facts. Zen as explained by Japhy Ryder teaches enlightenment through willful ignorance.

Zaphy’s enlightenment-via-ignorance appears again in the form of mountaineering advice to Ray as they and their buddy Morely attempt to climb the Matterhorn in California. The group is jumping from boulder to boulder, making their way up the mountain, and although Ray easily negotiates the climb, he notices “how gracefully Japhy was doing it” (52). Japhy’s effortless physical performance inspires Ray who at first tries to imitate his nimble

friend in the lead, but soon enough Ray figures out that “it was better for [him] to just spontaneously pick [his] own boulders and make a ragged dance of [his] own.” It is by choosing his own path up the boulders that Ray actually gets closer to imitating the essence of Japhy’s style, precisely because his approach is based on being spontaneous. When Ray tries to follow Japhy’s path, he struggles, but when he makes his own way, he feels more comfortable. Japhy articulates this out loud by announcing:

The secret of this kind of climbing...is like Zen. Don’t think. Just dance along. It’s the easiest thing in the world, actually easier than walking...The cute little problems present themselves at each step and yet you never hesitate and you find yourself on some other boulder you picked for no special reason at all, just like Zen. (52)

Although Ray Smith’s own understanding of Buddhism suffers from some obvious confusions, Japhy Ryder’s descriptive advice aligns fairly well with the descriptions given by Shunryu Suzuki of Zen, as discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation. Shunryu Suzuki explains, for example, that “[e]ach one of us must make his own true way, and when we do, that will express the universal way” (101). This sentiment—something of a cliché today as a result of the mainstreaming of New Age “wisdom” gaining foothold in American culture as a result of what started in the Beat generation, as evidenced above, and then flourishing in the 1960s counterculture—is echoed in Japhy’s advice to Ray. Japhy, voicing a message consistent with the message communicated by formal Japanese teachers of Zen Buddhism, preaches a kind of presence in the moment that does not require a person to plan an action based on some arbitrary rationale, but to instead act instinctively.<sup>35</sup> Again, this is the principle

---

<sup>35</sup> Japhy’s Zen advice for athletic endeavors calls to mind Nike’s “Just Do It” slogan. There seems to be no relationship between Zen teachings and Nike’s ad campaign, though. One newspaper article suggests that Nike developed the motto based on the last words of Gary Gilmore, the murderer executed in Utah in 1977 and subject of Normal Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*, “Let’s do it” (Peters).



Lou Witt's mother in Lawrence's *St. Manr* tries to master, but going to such an extreme that instead of living spontaneously, she adheres dogmatically to a doctrine of mandatory, therefore forced, spontaneity. Japhy and Shunryu Suzuki both seem to suggest that a person trying to be spontaneous defeats his or her purpose. One can't script or plan for spontaneity.

Japhy's distaste for words only grows deeper as the novel progresses. Later on in the novel in chapter 24, Japhy and Ray reunite after some time apart; Ray has been traveling the United States by himself, but now Japhy is preparing Ray for his solitary stay on Desolation and Japhy is looking ahead to his trip to Japan to study in a Zen monastery. But Japhy's spirits are low and his temperament shows even less patience for talk where action would do better. One evening while staying with their friend Sean Monahan, right before bed, Ray narrates that he wanted to tell Japhy all about the insights he had gained "that winter meditating in the woods" but Japhy curtly shoots back, "Ah, it's just a lot of words," which shocks and saddens Ray. Japhy's frustrated retort continues, "I don't wanta hear all of your words descriptions of words words words you made up all winter, man I wanta be enlightened by your actions" (133). The reader finds out that in the past year, a year that has separated the two Dharma bums, Japhy has changed, and it seems not for the best. He has shaved off his characteristic goatee, making him appear "gaunt and rocky faced," as well as cutting his hair short so that he looks "Germanic and stern" (133). In short, much of Japhy's lightheartedness has gone out, leaving behind "some kind of disappointment" that appears visible on his visage and "certainly in his soul" (134).

This change of heart might be interpreted one of two ways. He admits to being less interested in Buddhist ideas and says that he is "getting tired" of all that, though he still plans to leave for Japan for formal Zen study (134). Despite his sullen disinterest in Buddhism at

this time, his unwillingness to hear Ray's verbal descriptions is nothing new—it just comes off more ornery than at previous times, such as on the Matterhorn as discussed above. That is, his unwillingness to hear Ray's insights is not a product of his own general disenchantment with Buddhism. It seems, rather, that in this time of tribulation, Japhy even more firmly holds on to his conviction that for Zen, actions speak louder than words, and so rather than hear the Dharma from Ray, he would rather go to bed in a foul mood. Zen naturalness, Japhy's guiding ethos, must mean that he has to allow his disappointment, not just positive emotional reactions, to happen without restraint when it must. In fact, he wakes up a new person, and Ray finds him chanting early in the morning and then the two friends share "one of the greatest mornings in [their] lives." Ray reflects on the turn of events and thinks, "Japhy had contemplated that night and decided [he] was right about hewing to the good old Dharma" (135). But Ray's influence did not occur via shared spoken language, as they exchanged no further words after Japhy's disapproving response to Ray's earnest excitement. Instead, Ray's acceptance of Japhy's silencing allows Japhy's own renewed exuberance the next day.

Japhy Ryder embodies a conception of Zen naturalness that shows that personal perfection does not mean to suggest appearing to be a "perfect person" according to social rules and expectations. He does not keep in high spirits at all times, and when upset, he allows himself to be without remorse or self-consciousness. Just as Corso's "Marriage" has the line, "How else to feel other than I am[?]" Japhy shows Ray that being a normal human being, even when rude or depressed, is its own state of perfection of lived with full commitment, devoid of trying to be "better" than he is at any given time.

## LONG GONE: SPIRITUAL HIGH AS SOCIAL ESCAPE

Michael Masatsugu explains that “[m]any white convert Buddhists, dissatisfied with Cold War U.S. society and culture, viewed Buddhism as an alternative American religious practice—an exotic Orientalist religious practice defined as outside and often opposed to U.S. national culture” (425). In the same vein, Erik Mortenson explains, “Anticonformist, antimaterialist, anti-institution—Zen Buddhism offered a personalized response to the constraints of postwar culture that found appeal among the Beats” (*Capturing the Beat Moment* 74-75). These claims appear true for the characters of *Dharma Bums* and the yet the benefit of conversion away from Christianity, the dominant belief system in Cold War America, amounts to more than just finding some measure of relief from the social neurosis that characterized Cold War culture; as the text shows, a conversion to an Orientalized religious practice offers the thrill of pursuing the hope and promise of a new belief system, and in this way, Japhy presents Zen Buddhism and the “Oriental” lifestyle in general as an alternative way to “get high,” which accords with the general tendency of the Beats to portray of Zen as its own kind of “fashionable intoxication,” quite another take on the “Zen lunacy” (Tworkov 7) Japhy tells Ray about early in the novel.<sup>36</sup>

Japhy’s portrayal of Zen exemplifies just how the Beats “forged a link between the pursuit of enlightenment and the use of drugs” (Seager 43). In addition to finding a corollary between drugs and life-altering wisdom, the Beat generation and the Counterculture after it used mind-altering drugs as a way to resist the mainstream, as if one way to counter

---

<sup>36</sup> Just as Zen Buddhism appeared to be an alternative method of getting high, Helen Tworkov in *Zen in America* explains that although the Beats may have thought “drug-induced enlightenment states” mimicked Zen satori, supposedly they did not offer a comparable experience. That said, these states “were often called Zen, and their effect changed America” (7).

America's capitalistic-consumerist mindset was to alter consciousness itself. If sobriety was the expected norm, motivated by the Protestant-inspired American goal-oriented work ethic, then the altered mind acted as a productive site of resistance.<sup>37</sup>

However, Japhy and Ray's Orientalist appreciation of Eastern traditions opens up this possibility of transgressive cognitive alterity without chemical means. For example, in chapter 3 Ray goes to visit Japhy's shack in Berkeley. Ray finds Japhy working on his own translation of the classical Chinese poet Han Shan's "Cold Mountain."<sup>38</sup> Japhy offers his visitor a cup of tea and asks him if he has ever "read the Book of Tea" (18). Ray says he hasn't and asks what it is. Japhy responds, "It's a scholarly treatise on how to make tea utilizing all the knowledge of two thousand years of tea-brewing. Some of the descriptions of the effect of the first sip of tea, and the second, and the third, are really wild and ecstatic." Later while on the Matterhorn, Japhy details these effects, explaining that "the first sip is joy, the second is gladness, the third is serenity, the fourth is madness, the fifth is ecstasy" (54). This hyper-specific journey through the emotions conveys a romantic belief that ordinary life, such as drinking tea, can feel extraordinary as a result of Zen practice. This is an example of the larger belief communicated through *Dharma Bums* that the Eastern mind can experience a greater depth of pleasure in life than can a person in the West. Zen, and Eastern life practices in general, such as mindful tea drinking, seem to grant or restore the fullness to life that these Beat characters are in active search for. Specifically, the image of

---

<sup>37</sup> For more on this specific idea, Tom Lutz discusses the Beats' use of Zen to challenge the American work ethic in his book *Doing Nothing: A history of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers and Bums in America*.

<sup>38</sup> Yuemin He writes that Snyder's interpretation of a choice twenty-four of more than 300 poem's by Han Shan depict this classical Chinese poet as "the quintessence of Chinese Zen Buddhism" (45). His article "Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain" analyzes how Snyder introduced his own philosophical slant into Han Shan's work.

the Eastern man is one who can experience the inflated physical joys offered by psychoactive chemicals without recourse to these drugs. Responding to Japhy's question asked in his Berkeley shack, Ray appreciatively asks, "Those guys got high on nothing, hey?" Japhy responds in language reminiscent of a stereotypical drug dealer: "Sip your tea as you'll see; this is good green tea" (18).

Just as Japhy's pitch for the joy of drinking his green tea carries drug use overtones, Japhy's characterization of the poet Han Shan establishes the motif of transcendent escapism present in the novel. He describes the poet as "a Chinese scholar who got sick of the big city and the world and took off to hide in the mountains" (18). This escape to mountain solitude parallels the end of the novel where Ray spends months alone working as a fire watch at Desolation Peak, a job Japhy sets up for him. I will discuss Ray's stay in the mountains later, but now I want to read the significance of such hermitage. When Japhy reads Ray his in-progress translation of Han Shan's poem, Japhy's politics become clear. He gives Ray some context, explaining that the speaker in of the poem is up at least 12,000 feet elevation, and then he reads a small excerpt: "Jagged scarps always snowed in, woods in the dark ravines spitting mist, grass still sprouting at the end of June, leaves begin to fall in early August, and here I am high as a junkey—" (20). This takes Ray back, as he repeats quizzically, "As a junkey!" Japhy reveals that what he reads is merely his "own translation" and that a more literal rendering would read "I am as high as a sensualist in the city below," but instead Japhy admits that he "[makes] it [a] modern and high translation" (20). According to Japhy, the original poem does in fact evoke a comparison that suggests the poem's speaker exists in a state of being described by the expression "being high" though. Japhy's rendering of Han Shan shows a pun on "high," making the hermit sitting at high altitude in the mountains as

“high as a sensualist in the city.” The updated language adds even another layer, where the sense-pleasure of the city-dweller is compared to that sought by a junkey, a comparison that also communicates Japhy’s thoughts on urban consumerism. His translation compares the pleasure of solitude in nature against what Japhy’s translation finds to be a kind of intoxication offered by the city life. The connotation conveyed by the term “junkey” clearly positions escape into nature as the preferable choice against city life, a belief in line with Japhy’s own rustic lifestyle and background.

However, not all the Beat figures are depicted as having embraced Buddhist conversion. In the novel, Alvah Goldbrook, Allen Ginsberg’s character, most consistently and most vocally resists the fantasy of otherworldly possibility told by Japhy and Ray. A hostile encounter between Ray and Alvah follows a session in which the three men and a young woman named Princess practice yabyum, which is by Japhy’s description a kind of sexual ceremony that “they do in the temples of Tibet. It’s a holy ceremony, it’s done just like this in front of chanting priests” (25). Japhy has Princess sit naked and cross-legged in his lap as he himself faces her while sitting cross-legged, all before the whole group slowly becomes more comfortable engaging in their Buddhist-inspired orgy. Afterward, Alvah and Ray go outside to sleep under the open sky and Alvah remarks that the clouds passing over them reminds him that they “live on an actual planet” (28). Ray senses this as a moment in which he can push his Buddhist agenda, and so he instructs Alvah to close his eyes so that he’ll “see more than that.” This inspires Alvah’s indignation, and he sharply reacts, “Oh I don’t know what you mean by all that,” clearly sick of his friend’s constant promises of higher realms of existence. Ray admits in narration that Alvah “was always bugged by [his] lectures on Samadhi ecstasy,” which he explains as being the state one can reach when the

mind has been cleared completely and behind closed eyes “you actually...see a kind of eternal multiswarm of electrical Power of some kind ululating in place of just pitiful images and forms and objects, which are, after all, imaginary” (28). Here the reader may comprehend the reason Alvah reacts as negatively as he does: he constantly hears from his Buddhist friend that the reality in which they both live is a phantasm, and what is more, according to Ray’s insistence, Alvah has clearly not caught on to this fact, all the while Ray acts as he has gained this valuable insight himself. Ray’s understanding of Buddhist cosmology forms an exclusive counter-reality that he lords over his less-informed friend.

Trying to square with Ray, Alvah asks if he wouldn’t rather live a life like Japhy—a life supposedly led in Zen practice—and have “girls and studies and good times and really be doing something, than all this silly sitting under trees?” (28), but of course, Ray emphatically answers negatively then claims that Japhy is merely “amusing himself in the void.” What Ray continues to explain is that sense-pleasure is meaningless because the entire world is a mere illusion delivered via the “six” senses (although he only gives examples of illusion perceived via the typical five senses). After much back and forth debate, Alvah succinctly sums up his objection to the “Buddhist bullshit” (25) they have been fighting over: feeling that Ray’s ideology, ascetic and life-negating as it is, disrupts the ability to lead a normal life, and so he demands, “Oh let’s cut this out and just live!” (29).

In an early review of *Dharma Bums*, a critic responding to the text suggests that “[w]e can’t live purely in the present and be human beings” (Champney 116), and this sentiment seems to echo Alvah’s contention with Ray’s pushing of Buddhism. Ray wants his friends to give up sensation-chasing and all the other manifestations of egotistical drama to live in the hidden reality of the present moment. But Ray’s suggestion rings hollow because it smacks

of hypocrisy, as he too seeks thrills and novelty, yet he feels he has surpassed this because of what he perceives to be the moral nature of his interest in Buddhism and achieving satori experiences. He takes his practice seriously, so much so that he cannot see exactly how self-serving it has become. It does not take much careful attention to decipher the desire for exoticness in Ray's description of mediation, for example. He just as much as Alvah is "amusing himself in the void." Another critic, who in an article argues that Kerouac's spiritual journeys and those depicted in his semi-autobiographical novels are a kind of spiritual tourism, points out that self-amusement via an outsider's participation in a foreign culture creates an experience of reality that seems and feels truer: "Rather than tourism being a journey of discovery, some argue that holiday makers want hyper-reality" (Bills 411). This is surely the case as this scene exemplifies the characteristic otherworldly flavor of religious zeal in this novel.

#### THE BANANA SERMON: THE TRANSCENDENT POWER OF NONSENSE AND GOOFING

In "Buddhism & the Beat Generation," Caroline Tonkinson, editor of *Tricycle: A Buddhist Review*, argues that "[t]o those coming of age in Cold War culture—a society that branded the different 'dangerous' and encouraged the compulsive consumption of material goods in a vain attempt to stave off nuclear nightmares—the only 'sane' response was to go slightly crazy" (n.p.) She explains that the debilitating self-consciousness prompted by the constant worry of nuclear annihilation, the incessant worry about accusations of communism, and the resultant urge to find comfort in America's marketplace constituted a new and highly dysfunctional standard of "normal." Forsaking this neurotic lifestyle, the Beats champion practiced linguistic and ontological nonsense to counter this insanity, reacting to Cold War



culture with a logically founded rejection of this status quo; *Dharma Bums* presents “members of the Beat generation [beginning] to find some sanity” through the practice of Buddhism. Or as Tonkinson states it in the introduction to *Big Sky Mind*, through their interpretation of Buddhist values, “the Beats found an antidote to the paranoia and conformity that were at the heart of fifties culture” (vii).

Chapter 13 is a chapter where Japhy’s iteration of countercultural beliefs, expressed as a vocalized resistance to the American status quo, specifically an anti-capitalist rejection of suburban domesticity, are paralleled and supported by an instance of goofing. In this scene, Japhy and Ray have recently finished descending the Matterhorn and have driven to San Francisco. Alvah arrives and then Coughlin comes to Japhy’s shack and starts a party with the wine he brought, and then the group carouses the streets of Berkeley. In normal fashion, the men begin talking about Buddhism and what becomes evident is that Japhy’s framing of it emphasizes the nonsensical anecdotes of the Buddhist masters, and just as nonsense for Gregory Corso becomes a kind of unreality that opposes reality, the linguistically playful ideas Japhy shares mean to act as a counter to the oppression of American political and economic reality. To start, Japhy shares a definition that one Great Plum Zen Master gave as the meaning of Buddhism, saying it is “rush flowers, willow catkins, bamboo needles, linen thread” (77). Meaning to convey that a person can find the “ecstasy” of Buddhism in everything in the world, this sweeping definition when taken to its logical conclusion also empties the definition of any meaning whatsoever. If Buddhist ecstasy can be found literally everywhere, there is also nowhere it can’t be found. By having no principle of exclusion, the term loses all meaning. There exists no difference between ecstasy and the mundane.

Japhy continues to extend this blurring of lines between what is blissful and what is boring to explain that reality and unreality are too one and the same in his perspective. He says that the American frontiersmen were “always [his] real heroes” because they were “constantly on the alert in the realness which might as well be real as unreal” (77). This is a cryptic claim that he does not elucidate, but he quickly ties it to the Diamond Sutra, which he quotes as instructing one to “[m]ake no formed conceptions about the realness of existence nor about the unrealness of existence.” This command stresses a non-dualistic view of the universe, which should neither be labeled real nor unreal. This has political implications for Japhy, who believes that adherence to this belief will make “[h]andcuffs...get soft and billy clubs...topple over, let’s go on being free anyhow” (77). Simply put, Japhy’s understanding of Zen non-dualism acts as a force to liberate oppressed citizens from the tyranny of brutish authority and liberate them from physical imprisonment, seeing as the possibility of the denial of physical materialism allows one to escape its confinement. Ray chimes in and offers the most idealistic result of this proposition: “The President of the United States suddenly grows crosseyed and floats away!” Buddhist ontology according to Japhy undermines even the highest figure of American political authority.

Following this point, Japhy makes a logical leap to connect Whitman’s line “*Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*” (emphasis original; 77) with the non-dualistic idea previously expounded, explaining that Whitman’s sentiment reflects the proper attitude of the “Zen lunacy bard of desert paths.” It is not clear who these bards are, but we can assume he is conflating the Zen lunatics of Asian antiquity and the current group of American wanderers to whom he belongs. These bards are all “Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general

demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming all that crap they didn't want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars" and so on (77-78). Everyone bound to this general demand is "imprisoned in a system [or rather, cycle] of work, produce, consume, work, produce" and so on, again. To counter this system, Japhy envisions "a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up mountains to pray." Clearly, Japhy sees himself as a model of this revolutionary rucksack wanderer.

Although Buddhism is not typically associated with political or social revolution, because "[t]he Beats selectively identified themselves with the Transcendentalists...much of their writing was the expression of a spiritual revolt with political overtones," writes Richard Hughes Seager in his study *Buddhism in America* (42). The Beats' hybrid of Buddhist cosmological thought and American social thought renders a product that finds direct application as a social tool against conformity, and this is true even for Kerouac, who Seager does not identify as a particularly "political thinker," but who does utilize Buddhism "as a vehicle to protest conformity" (42). Because Japhy Ryder leads the countercultural rap discussed above, it may be difficult to tease out Kerouac's own beliefs from his memory of Snyder's own agenda, but regardless, even separated from the facts of the various personal histories on which it is based, *Dharma Bums* as a literary text upholds Seager's overall claim about the Transcendental flavor of the Beats' framing and use of Buddhism.

Spontaneous language, a major tenet of Beat culture as a whole and championed throughout this novel, acts as a key feature of these aforementioned countercultural "Zen Lunatics" envisioned. While wandering the country in political resistance, these young Americans will "go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no good

reason” (*Dharma Bums* 78). In a moment, Japhy’s politicized Buddhist sermon will lead to this very thing. After proselytizing to Alvah about Buddhist practice and then reciting his latest work on his translation of Han Shan’s “Cold Mountain” poem, Ray and Japhy pick up guitars and make a song out of the advice given. Coughlin joins in and gives his own list of mandates for a good life: “Sharpen your pencils, straighten your ties, shine your shoes and button your flies, brush your teeth, comb your hair, sweep the floor, eat blueberry pies, open your eyes” (82). Mishearing or purposely reimagining Coughlin’s commands, Alvah compliments the line, “Eat blueberry spies is good.” This is an instance of goofing, of the word play practiced by Corso and the various characters in this Kerouac novel. In review, the scene that begins with an appraisal of Buddhist wordplay and Buddhist-inspired political resistance ends with Alvah’s practice of turning domestic instructions—“Comb you hair, sweep the floor, eat blueberry pies”—into aestheticized nonsense.

Later in chapter 21, during the spring after Ray’s winter traveling alone, the reader finds another example of Beat Buddhism tied to goofing and spontaneous composition. Ray has taken to meditating in an area he has dubbed “Buddha Creek,” and one day in this location his nephew little Lou approaches him, and Ray picks up an object and presents it to his nephew, who asks, “What’s that?” (111). Ray resists answering the question straightforwardly, instead saying, “That....It’s *that*” (emphasis in original). He does not want to have his nephew associate the object with an arbitrary signifier, an association that Ray believes jeopardizes the immediate thing-ness of it. Eventually giving in to naming it in English, Ray tells little Lou that “it [is] a pine cone” and only then did his nephew “make the imaginary judgment of the word ‘pine cone,’ for, indeed, as it says in the sutra: ‘Emptiness is discrimination.’” Predictably, Ray’s nephew reacts to this “gone” wisdom by goofing. Little

Lou experiences some sort of epiphany when seeing the dualistic discrepancy between the physical object in his uncle's hand and the arbitrarily given label "pine cone," saying in response, "My head jumped out, and my brain went crooked and then my eyes started lookin like cucumbers and my hair'd a cowlick on it and the cowlick licked my chin." After spontaneously goofing, little Lou now desires to make up a poem to "commemorate the moment," and his uncle supports this idea, granted that he "make it up right away, just as [he] go[es] along." Ray wants to teach his nephew to separate poetry composition from forced effort, advocating precisely the Zen naturalness advocated by Japhy on the Matterhorn. To keep poetic language empty, Ray teaches his nephew to divorce meaning from wordplay.

In fact, Ray maintains that his achievement of "emptiness" is his highest virtue. Later in chapter 21, Ray reaches his religious peak, realizing, "Everything is empty but awake! Things are empty in time and space and mind.' *I figured it all out*" (emphasis mine; 114). As discussed earlier, as Japhy explains, Buddha nature is in everything, and so when Ray feels he has become aware of his emptiness, he believes, "[I]here's no difference between me and anything else...I've become the same as everything else. It means I've become the Buddha" (115). As discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation, the concept of emptiness is associated with creativity because it acts as the void from which all form, literary and otherwise, arises, and so Ray revels in a blissful hysteria upon reaching a state wherein he could see that his "life was a vast glowing empty page and [he] could do anything" (117). Devoid of linguistic titles, everything Ray sees is IT. He purports a tautological viewpoint where "That...It's *that*": as in the reflexive property of algebra,  $x$  is always simply  $x$ , and everything, though different in appearance, is always at its root the same:  $x$ , where  $x = 0$ .

The enlightenment described above happens instantly for Ray. These experiences in the novel coincide with the expectation in traditional Zen experience, and so “*satori* signifies not just enlightenment; rather, the term has a temporal inflection that connotes a *sudden burst* of enlightenment” (Maltby 101).<sup>39</sup> And just as my larger premise maintains that the spontaneous creativity in the novel stems from the looming threat of spontaneous destruction, in Zen, moments of enlightenment result from instances of violence. After conveying one Buddhist master’s formulation that “The Buddha is a dried piece of turd” (136), a definition that shows the extreme nature of the power of the mundane, Japhy asks Ray if he knows “what sudden enlightenment is,” only to go on and answer the question himself. He tells that a master struck a student with a stick and “knocked him off the veranda ten feet into a mud puddle. [The student] later became a Master himself” (137). Sudden violence prompts sudden understanding. In response, Ray thinks, “All wallowing in mud to prove the crystal truth of compassion,” but he does not share this thought, having finally learned that Japhy would care not for his conceptualizing.

At this time, after withholding his thought, Ray shares an understanding of Zen enlightenment with Japhy, and they goof on the wordless and famous “flower sermon,” creating their own version. But it is this kind of liberal approach to spiritual experience that earns Kerouac Alan Watts’s censure in “Beat Zen, Square Zen, Zen.” In this article, Watts bemoans “Zen used as a pretext for license” (99) and so criticizes Kerouac’s understanding and practice of Zen largely on the basis that Kerouac’s, and his characters’ I might add, “Buddhism is a true beat Zen which confuses ‘anything goes’ at the existential level with

---

<sup>39</sup> This claim is only half-true, however. Rinzai Zen believes in sudden *satori*, whereas Soto Zen believes in a gradual process of enlightenment.

‘anything goes’ on the artistic and social levels” (“Beat Zen” 101). Watts was not a Buddhist so much as a writer about Buddhism, but Kwong Roshi, a Chinese-American Zen teacher under the tutelage of Shunryu Suzuki, expresses the same opinion, saying that “Beat Zen...was a complete misunderstanding. Like saying nothing matters...without practice, without form, you can’t get at the heart of” Zen (qtd in Tworkov 82).

Judging by the critical dismissal of Kerouac’s vision of Zen, Beat Zen can hardly be considered to be a true face of traditional and formal Zen, but instead it can be seen as an early expression of postmodern artistic expression. Take for example that Watts, in the same article discussed above, also criticizes John Cage for his production of nonsensical, musically speaking, pieces under the auspices of Zen practice (95). Interestingly enough, Cage had a relationship with Isamu Noguchi, son of Yone Noguchi discussed in chapter 1. The selective interest in the spontaneity emphasized by Zen or at least emphasized by those who championed its place in American culture helped foster a kind of play, absurd and based on freedom of artistic vision from convention and expectation, that characterizes postmodern art.

#### PARABOLA OF AWAKENING: GETTING HIGH AND COMING BACK DOWN

“Before a person studies Zen, mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after a first glimpse into the truth of Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and waters are not waters; after enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and waters once again waters.” ----  
—Traditional Zen saying (qtd in Schiller 2)

Buddhism and Kerouac’s oeuvre share the theme of journeying. Akin to Kerouac’s celebration of travel, “The Heart Sutra,” a key text in Buddhist literature, cheers on the

spiritual seeker as he or she makes progress past illusion toward the true understanding of reality. It reads: *Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*, which is commonly translated to mean, "gone, gone, gone beyond, gone even beyond the beyond, hail the goer." And although my research has not yielded a definitive conclusion, as I have not been able to find an etymology of the term, I speculate that the Beat slang adjective "gone" or "way gone," such as when Ray calls Rosie, a girl he meets in chapter 2, "a real gone chick" (15), comes from the popularized Heart Sutra itself. The expression, similar to "far out," refers to a person or situation that surpasses expectations and so seems otherworldly. Being either "real gone" and or "far out" closely resembles being "gone even beyond the beyond," and seeing as how much Buddhist literature and specifically Kerouac's work influenced Beat culture, this may likely be the case.

But my main point here is that while Kerouac's oeuvre, and *Dharma Bums* specifically, concerns travel—whether it be hitchhiking with a rucksack on back or climbing up the face of a steep mountain, the idea of travel obvious implies movement toward a destination, but what may be underemphasized is that in *Dharma Bums*, travel also necessitates return. Gregory Stephenson identifies this when he notes that "[t]he motif of the road and the journey is central to Kerouac's twelve-novel sequence, *The Duluoz Legend*" (17). *The Duluoz Legend* was Kerouac's title for his corpus of work thought of as a larger, unified text, and Stephenson's chapter specifically claims that the novels that make up the behemoth *The Duluoz Legend* exemplify a specifically circular journey that follow the structure of the "hero-quest," starting with "separation," leading to "initiation," and finally ending with "return"—the circular shape of the stories unfold a journey "whose end is its own beginning" (17). Stephenson supports this argument by citing one of Kerouac's poems as an epigram. The



“113<sup>th</sup> Chorus,” also called “Mexico City Blues,” a poem that pedantically extols the Buddhist idea of emptiness and perfection, tells the reader that “your goal / is your startingplace” (*Mexico City Blues* 113, lines 17-18). Further, Stephenson also draws a parallel between the recurrent mountain climbing in the novel, as well as Japhy’s interest in Han Shan’s *Cold Mountain* poems and suggests that the round trip in this particular novel might be visualized as a climb up a mountain and then back down (38-39).

Ray Smith echoes the sentiment expressed by Kerouac’s speaker in the “113<sup>th</sup> Chorus” when he explains near the end of the novel, “The whole trip had been as swift and enlightening as a dream, and I was back” (*Dharma Bums* 127). Both of these works by Kerouac reflect the tendency examined by Erik Mortenson of Beat writers and their characters to experience a “visionary state” that is quickly “extinguished,” after which “the seer returns to quotidian existence to make sense of their privileged experience” (“Keeping Vision Alive” 123). This aligns with Stephenson’s three-part circular journey, where the separation experienced is of the individual from ordinary reality; the protagonist in a visionary state stands outside the reality of his or her culture and finds a reality that appears radically recoded. This describes Ray Smith in *Dharma Bums*, and it will also describe Marco Vassi of *The Stoned Apocalypse* of the next chapter, another who embarks upon a round trip journey after departing from ordinary reality while in search of the transcendental.

This separation is itself brought on by initiation into the occult secrets of an alternative belief system—Ray Smith chooses to identify as a Buddhist rather than as a Christian, the expected belief system in Cold War America, and throughout the novel his alternative lifestyle and his conceptual frame of reference bear the influence of this adoption.

Yet in the end, he returns to “quotidian existence” and rejoins his society and reclaims a more socially legible social role.

Before he comes back to mainstream reality, he goes far out from it, taking up a new role in the process. Watts’s “Beat Zen, Square Zen, Zen” outlines a prescribed model of how a person should react to the visionary state. He explains that a person who has experienced some level of enlightenment recognizes that his or her ego serves a social function that helps the individual as well as other people identify and interact with the person in question, but “[h]aving seen this, he [or she] continues to play his [or her] social role without being taken in by it.” Instead of adopting or fashioning a new identity, especially one shaped around the experience of enlightenment, or even “play[ing] the role of having no role at all,” the individual should “[play] it cool” (“Beat Zen” 91). This is not how Ray Smith responds though, nor does Vassi in the following chapter following a similar experience. In fact, both Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder base their identity on resisting their pre-enlightened selves and so drop out of straight society, advocating that others follow suit.

To return to Stephenson’s point, it needs to be said that his helpful description of the circular quality of the journey told within *Dharma Bums* misses the crucial discussion of the text’s plot arc that approximates the form of the ten ox-taming pictures, a classic Zen teaching tool that uses a panel of illustrations to depict the shape of the journey and the way back. Ray and Japhy discuss these “famous Bulls” (137) immediately after the banana sermon analyzed in the previous section, and I will quote at length Ray’s narrated description:

It was an ancient Chinese cartoon showing first a young boy going out into the wilderness with a small staff and pack...and in later panels he discovers an ox, tries to tame, tries to ride it, finally does tame, and ride it but then

abandons the ox and just sits in the moonlight meditating, finally you see him coming down from the mountain of enlightenment and then suddenly the next panel shows absolutely nothing at all, followed by a panel showing blossoms in a tree, then the last picture you see the young boy is a big fat old laughing wizard with a huge bag on his back and he's going into the city to get drunk with the butchers, enlightened, and another new young boy is going up the mountain with a little pack and staff. (137)

This remarkably accurate summary of the contents, as compared against Ray Smith's previous descriptions of Buddhist teachings, highlights the journeyer's ascent to enlightenment symbolized by a trek up a mountain to find a bull or an ox to capture and tame and then the necessary trip back down to the world of commerce and socialization. It is a round trip that leads the traveler back to where he started, having gained nothing, as enlightenment in Zen is devalued as having no worth. The final arrival back into world is marked by its commonplace nature, not by otherworldly knowledge or living a life of privilege granted from esoteric secrets found. A reference source explains that the ox-taming illustrations, an ancient Taoist narrative adapted by a Chinese Buddhist sometime in the twelfth century, depict "the realization of the inner unity of all existence" and the reference elucidates further that:

The ox symbolizes the ultimate, undivided reality, the Buddha-nature, which is the ground of all existence. The oxherd symbolizes the self, who initially identifies with the individuated ego, separate from the ox, but who, with progressive enlightenment, comes to realize the fundamental identity with the ultimate reality which transcends all distinctions. When this happens, the oxherd realizes the ultimacy of all existence; there is nothing that is not the Buddha-nature. He now understands the preciousness and profundity of the most ordinary things of life, illuminating ordinary living with his enlightenment. (Koller 1)

This is the trajectory Ray Smith's journey takes him as evidenced by the similarities between this legend and the shape of the plot. When Ray and Japhy discuss the ox-taming pictures, Ray narrates that he already feels he has arrived at that place of return, having come back to

drink with Japhy, but I argue that the end of the novel itself closes the story on the same tone conveyed at the end of the ox-taming pictures discussed here.

After ending his fire watch on Desolation Peak, as he prepares to descend and rejoin American society, Ray gives up the wild hope he has previously tried to share with everyone he meets. He thanks Desolation, which acts as the mountain in the ox panels, for “guiding [him] to the place where [he] learned all” and knows he must share his company with “all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upsidedown in the Void” (191). In order to rejoin society, he must even give up his Buddhist identity and re-identify with Christian belief, opting into the system he denied when he respectfully shared his ideological differences with the first bum he met on the rails at the book’s opening, and we see this when he repeatedly intones the name of God, asks for God’s blessings, and even says, “God, I love you,” after which he looks into the sky because he “really meant it.” He no longer needs to cling to his counterculture belief system because having reached some sort of enlightenment, he realizes “[t]o the children and the innocent it’s all the same.” As he leaves, he offers a blessing to the shack that has housed and says, “Thank you, shack” but quickly adds “Blah,” implying that Japhy’s message that words do not matter has stuck with him in principle, and returns “back to this world” (192), closing the gap between the reality of American 1950s society and the reality of enlightenment, knowing finally that they are one and same. That is to say, in accordance to Zen texts, enlightenment is not separate from the practice of everyday life. Ray no longer needs to be isolated from the world, counter to it. Instead, like explained by the ox-taming pictures, the enlightened live a mundane life in the end.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the use of nonsense in the Cold War era texts discussed. Bishop's "The Man-Moth" is not a poem that uses nonsense in the poem proper but instead the poem itself originated from accidental nonsense. Although less self-conscious of the use of nonsense, the discussion of the poem established the theme of selfishly motivated escape from urban/suburban America. Corso's poetry, poetry that actively uses disruptive linguistic nonsense to challenge social institutions, continues the quest figured by the Man-Moth but explores its relation to specific social conventions, conventions dependent on gender roles. The kind of revolt depicted comes across as futile in the end though. Lastly, in the section reading Kerouac's work, I explained how disruptive linguistic nonsense resulted from an investment in Buddhist ideology and served a counterculture purpose, but unlike the texts of the previous sections, the altered state of existence promulgated by this ideology eventually gives way to an acceptance of mundane social reality as Ray Smith comes to peace with the traditions and structures of American Cold War culture. The end of *Dharma Bums* showcases a homecoming that is neither heroic nor an act of surrender but comes out of a renewed willingness to be part of a neurotic society after Ray Smith has personally freed himself from the strictures of his ego.

## CHAPTER 4—“A SPLENDOR AMONG SHADOWS”: RADIANT SELFHOOD, DUAL

### REALITIES, AND POSTMODERN SACRED PRODUCTION IN MARCO VASSI’S *THE STONED APOCALYPSE*

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will define the 1960s counterculture as having believed in two simultaneously livable realities, our observable, rational, materialist reality and another based on magical or mystical principles associated with what might be generally described as spirituality—in short, a physical realm and a spiritual realm. This definition shows that the 1960s were a markedly postmodern era because Emily McAvan, whose book *The Postmodern Sacred* I will engage with in laying the foundation of the chapter, writes that in postmodernity “the supernatural can exist alongside rationalism” (23). These seemingly untenable yet concurrent realities can exist in productive tension as a result of postmodernity’s opening up of a space for the irrational, a result of its critique of “Enlightenment universalism” and the “collapse of scientific meta-narratives” that had previously championed rationalistic atheism (McAvan 1). Seeing even the objective truths of scientific progress as a historically produced fiction, postmodernity allows for the resurgence of religious and spiritual beliefs. Paradoxically, I want to show that New Age spirituality, largely made up of beliefs that empirical science would call irrational, rose in part from a scientifically produced chemical, LSD.

McAvan’s book explores the proliferation of postmodern texts that generate something she calls the “postmodern sacred” that incorporates irrationalist forms of belief into “rationalism” (24) and offers the consumer a mediated experience of divinity through the consumption of spiritually-inflected texts; as the postmodern sacred acts as a highly individualistic, personalized DIY spiritual experience, she links this cultural phenomenon

with the advent of the New Age of the 1960s counterculture, but curiously, her book declines to comment on the role of psychedelic drug use as a primary genesis point of these beliefs. This chapter intervenes at this point, exploring how psychedelic drug use, namely LSD but also marijuana, contributed to a posited belief in a spiritually inflected reality that coincides with scientifically-grounded materialist reality, a reality that loses its primacy as a result of postmodern epistemological doubt. This chapter will show how psychedelic drugs—literal objects of consumption (counter)culturally associated with divinity/the supernatural—and decontextualized spiritual practices associated with psychedelic drug use contributed to the formation of the postmodern sacred as produced by the counterculture. To prove this argument, I will read Marco Vassi's *The Stoned Apocalypse*, an autobiographical “burn-out” travel narrative. Vassi's book when consumed by the reader is an example of the postmodern sacred, yet Vassi himself is not a consumer of the postmodern sacred but a producer of it.<sup>40</sup> The consumer plays a largely passive role, receiving Vassi's mediated “peak experiences” and feeling them cathartically. A more active agent than his readers perhaps, Vassi as a “prophet of peak experience” (McAvan 44)<sup>41</sup> records a written account describing the period in his life in which he acted as what social theorist Grant McCracken calls a “radiant self,” a kind of New Age identity. This chapter will explore Vassi's construction and

---

<sup>40</sup> McAvan's book curiously gives the postmodern sacred agency. She writes sentences that use the term as the grammatical subject, giving agency to something that is as a matter of fact the effect of the will of the various producers of postmodern sacred texts. My chapter describes Vassi as one such agent-producer and names his book a postmodern sacred text.

<sup>41</sup> McAvan uses Bauman's term from his *Postmodernity and its Discontents*. McAvan when referencing the term “prophet of peak experience” calls up Oprah Winfrey as her example, who “encourage[s] viewers to model their own consumption on Oprah's presumably more spiritually enlightened preferences” (44). Calling Vassi a “prophet of peak experience” carries a double meaning though, because users of drugs also “peak” and come down. But at the peak of a good “trip,” the user finds there visions of spiritual enlightenment.

discarding of this postmodern identity; following McAvan, I will turn to Zygmunt Bauman for the terms of such identity construction.

As *The Stoned Apocalypse* will for most of my readers be an unfamiliar text, in addition to a plot summary of the memoir, I want to provide cultural context with which to understand the problematic politics Vassi explores in his account. To begin, this last chapter will explore the belief in these aforementioned parallel realities—the material and the spiritual—starting with a reading of Timothy Leary’s essay “The Seven Tongues of God,” which aims to see science and religion as complementary to one another, using the narrative and experience of the LSD trip as proof of their compatibility. This will establish the theme that a rational reality and an irrational supernatural reality can parallel one another.

Proceeding from this point, the chapter will develop an extended close reading of Marco Vassi’s countercultural erotica memoir *The Stoned Apocalypse*, and this reading will further investigate twinned or doubled realities, including the relationship between spiritual and sensual peak experiences. In postmodernity we see an always-already reciprocal coexistence of the sacred and the profane simply because “the profane/sacred split is erased...in postmodernity” (McAvan 119). To locate one confused boundary between those two seemingly opposed livable realities, I will argue that Vassi’s book, as well as Ram Dass’s *Be Here Now*, belong to a pornographic subgenre situated under the larger descriptor of the postmodern sacred. Whereas McAvan’s study reads “unreal” (e.g. SF and fantasy) texts for the presence of the postmodern sacred, I will demonstrate that *The Stoned Apocalypse* and *Be Here Now* produce commodified versions of spirituality that position the reader against the pleasure of the spiritual life in a manner that mirrors a reader’s relationship to pornographic texts; these New Age texts provide the reader a voyeur’s position of spiritual seekers’



exploits that penetrate the limits of materialist reality, exposing a once-hidden spiritual reality beyond it, one that was once veiled and is now promised to the reader, seemingly offering the catharsis of transcendence that becomes virtually accessible to the reader through the consumption of these spiritually inflected texts.

The chapter concludes that the transformation Vassi goes through while acting as a radiant self in his narrative depicts not forward moving progress toward an endpoint but instead depicts a circular roundtrip just as seen in prior chapters; although he attempts to modify his identity, this spiritual burn-out narrative ends with Vassi's returning to original form having experienced one essential change: he develops a meditative awareness<sup>42</sup> that exposes both the role of pleasure-seeking as the underlying motivation for his identity change and the failure of Vassi's pursued spiritual path to deliver him from this pleasure-seeking lifestyle. The spiritual path, from which Vassi does generate insights that remain valid for him even after he comes off it, is itself revealed as a form of pleasure-seeking rather than as a cure for desire and ego-based decisions, as he thought when he began his self-transformation. This newfound awareness is a quality I claim marks modernity's shift to postmodernity at the wider sociological level, and *The Stoned Apocalypse* illustrates this same turn at the level of the individual subject-agent. In Vassi's case, this awareness carries with it a Zen overtone, and so I will compare postmodern awareness in Bauman's terms against descriptions of Zen awareness.

---

<sup>42</sup> Meditative awareness, popularly called mindfulness, explored throughout this project, might simply be defined as embodied awareness, an awareness of the mind's functioning in such a way that the act of observing thoughts creates a subtle distance from the act of thinking. In the introduction I cited Thoreau's definition of "spectating," the practice of impersonally seeing one's life unfold as distinct from an egocentric basis of experience. This practice reverses the Cartesian axiom, I think therefore I am, *I am therefore I think*.

## A TAB ON ONE OF THE TONGUES OF GOD: SPIRITUAL SCIENCE/SCIENCE FICTION

As I introduced earlier, the 60s were an era that operated on the principle that there existed doubled realities, a “world [that] worked on magical and mystical principles as well as rational ones” (Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head* 174). Spearheading the countercultural drug scene, Timothy Leary’s pro-LSD writings functioned as propaganda or manifestoes epitomizing this claim. Specifically, Leary’s pseudo-scientific essay, “The Seven Tongues of God” (1963), tries to forge a merger between the realms of empirical science and New Age spiritual idealism. This intersection wants to validate the quest to discover inherent ontological meaning for human existence, a hope which underlay the New Age principles that made up the countercultural belief system, and it does so by allying the magic of the universe as Leary sees it with the cold, respectable authority of scientific rationality.

The first paragraph of the section that begins the essay, called “The Turn-On,” announces this juxtaposition. Here Leary recalls his first time partaking in psilocybin mushrooms, which he calls “so-called sacred mushrooms,” but adds that these he received from “a scientist from the University of Mexico” (“Seven Tongues” 13). His first psychedelic trip is both a “biochemical” and a “sacramental ritual” (“Seven Tongues” 14). This juxtaposition of the holy with the rational aligns the two seemingly disparate ideals and makes them parallel, and after establishing such proximity, Leary labors to close the distance that separates empirical scientific objectivity and experientially based “spiritual” knowledge. “The Seven Tongues of God” goes on to describe how psychedelics can produce a religious experience for most people who take them. Leary, rather than explaining drug-based psychedelic experience as a mere effect of chemical mind alteration, claims that these chemicals actually reveal a divine nature. Although LSD, for example, might change one’s

brain chemistry, he sees the actual insight to be a valid spiritual experience that just happens to be achieved via a democratic means, i.e. drug-taking, rather than by prayer, fasting, meditation, or miracle. A psychedelic drug is a medium, a catalyst, as it were, revealing a reality that exists independently of said drug use.

Instead of seeing the appearance of the spiritual as a mere function of the brain's sensory and nervous systems, a simple light show bewildering the drug taker, Leary wants to establish the synonymy between science and spirit. To him, they are not conflicting or even contradicting world views but are rather two different ontological systems developed and aimed at reaching the same goal: science and spirituality want to explain the nature of existence, but science explains reality at the objective material level and spiritual knowledge does the same at the personal, subjective level. He writes that “[s]cience is the systematic attempt to record and measure the energy process and the sequence of energy transformations we call life” and that in the same vein, “[r]eligion is the systematic experience to provide answers *to the same questions*” (emphasis original, 20). What Leary proposes is that the two are not different aims, but different languages—they are the same conversation had for different audiences, encoded in different registers, using different metaphors.

Yet despite attempting to remove the barrier that has sharply divided religious and scientific thought, especially in the twentieth century, Leary's essay does not align all the world religions he discusses equally with empirical science, but instead his essay advances an agenda to allow specific religious traditions the privilege of representing the spiritual discovery he touts the psychedelic trip as being able to inspire. In his essay, he includes a chart that correlates various world religions to mind-altering drugs, each drug producing

effects that align with features of the religion to which it is paired. For example, he relates the Zen satori experience with marijuana use and Catholicism with alcohol (and he does this without an obvious tongue in cheek irony—his point is that both alcohol and Catholicism work at the emotional level of consciousness, where Zen works on the sensory and Protestantism on the social level) (50). Even though Leary discusses the psychological and physical dynamics found in many religious traditions, all of which he must encapsulate into sweeping generalizations, two religious traditions stand out as having received more import and more relevance from Leary. Just as Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954) links mescaline use with Hindu and Buddhist ontological and aesthetic motifs, Leary specifies that “[t]he psychedelic experience is the Hindu-Buddha reincarnation theory experimentally confirmed in your own nervous system” (27). This essay, an early artifact in the counterculture's mythopoesis, valorizes these Eastern traditions and validates them in that they appear to have most closely understood the truth of reality as revealed by LSD use, the truth of reality that Leary wholeheartedly believes to be revealed through LSD use as expressed in “The Seven Tongues of God.”

Leary's essay implies McAvan's postmodern sacred on multiple levels. First, because of the scientific research introduced in it, “The Seven Tongues of God” appears to have been aimed at an academic audience, but by communicating these ideas to a lay audience, he helped initiate a kind of “pop-culture spirituality,” thus signifying the postmodern sacred. Also, because LSD existed in the 1960s as a commodity, at one time available on the legitimate market but later relegated to the black market, “The Seven Tongues of God” advocates what McAvan might call a “consumptive approach to the sacred” (6). In addition, Leary's spiritual politics rely on “lived experiences” (McAvan 7) of spirituality, the backbone

of New Age practices, practices that in turn heavily influenced the evolution of the postmodern sacred for the above reasons. Further, the postmodern sacred, as I have explained, relies on blurred boundaries between the sacred and profane and the rational and the irrational, boundaries compromised by Leary's employment of a chemical of scientific inquiry turned pop culture sacrament. Lastly, McAvan notices that the postmodern sacred displays the postmodern penchant for pastiche. It "makes use of Eastern and Christian ideas and symbols equally, in a sometimes jarring synthesis of disparate traditions" (8). Leary's grafting of the tenets of various world religions onto the effects of a chemically induced experience shows the decontextualizing, ahistoricizing tendency of the postmodern sacred that here appears in the guise of LSD-based New Age beliefs.

RADIANT SELVES, EXPANDING MINDS, AND JOURNEYS TO GOD: THE PARADOX OF  
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH WILLFUL EGO DECONSTRUCTION

Supporting McAvan's claim that the postmodern sacred manifests opposing realities that exist side by side, and perhaps acting as the origin point of this phenomenon itself, the proponents of psychedelic drug use in the 1960s, for which Leary has become the historical poster boy, spoke of two separate realities that a person could possibly experience: one reality reflected the truth of the cosmos "as it is," the bare reality supported by scientific observation as well as by the experience of transcendental wisdom (whether induced through traditional religious methods or through neo-religious chemical sacrament); the other reality consisted of distortions and hallucinations of the egocentric reality, bare reality filtered so to conform to a subject's desires, thus accommodating the needs of his or her fears. The former reality is beyond perspective, impersonal, unbiased, while the latter is self-centered

and based on one's experiential worldview. Leary's "Seven Tongues of God" promises that LSD and other mind-altering drugs, when taken consciously, can lead the user from the latter to the former reality, but such a move would cost users the crumbling of their defense mechanisms and all the other protective functions of the ego, such as Freud describes.<sup>43</sup> Jay Stevens in *Storming Heaven* cites Leary as claiming at the Congress for Applied Psychology in Copenhagen in 1961 that (psychedelic) drugs provide "the most efficient way to cut through the game structure of Western life" (158). Likewise, "The Seven Tongues of God" places the human ego in the spotlight, shaming it for perpetuating what he judges to be a sham reality that obscures a hidden true reality; he says LSD can allow someone who takes it to see past this ego-based illusion by wiping the ego clean, shattering its power to filter the world. Although Leary also writes that "[s]piritual appeals to transcend the ego are vain" ("Seven Tongues" 36), the culture that accompanied and motivated LSD use in the 60s centered on the idea that through the use of this specific psychedelic chemicals, as well as other manmade and natural hallucinogens such as STP and psilocybin mushrooms respectively, one might transcend the personal ego, and further, that one *should* seek to do so despite the personal discomfort. Later in this chapter I will go further into discussing the problems inherent in the moralistic framework that surrounded and supported psychedelic drug use in the hippie counterculture, which Timothy Leary and his lieutenant of sorts, Richard Alpert—who would become Ram Dass—advocated. At this point I will merely identify that the psychedelic research that started out as a social scientific interest for Leary and his cohort of Harvard professors quickly morphed into a pseudo-scientific agenda that fostered a type of spiritualism that involved not just an effort to promote the discovery of "cosmic

---

<sup>43</sup> See "The Ego and the Id," for example.

consciousness”<sup>44</sup> but also encouraged radical ego dissolution.<sup>45</sup> This proved to be an undertaking that paradoxically vastly strengthened the LSD user’s ego, and I will demonstrate this point shortly through readings of Vassi’s memoir.

Regardless of the efficacy of the ego-destructive approach, Leary, Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, another professor tuned on to psychedelic mind-expansion, touted LSD as a means to escape the presumed confines of the human ego. Shortly after the publication of “The Seven Tongues of God,” which promised that any person who acquired psychedelic drugs could have a religious experience, Leary, Alpert and Metzner offered the countercultural readership a revisionist take on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a manual used by Tibetan monks to guide dying people to escape reincarnation and achieve nirvana, freeing them from another life as a temporary, suffering-based being. This new guide, *The Psychedelic Experience* aims to help establish a “setting”—the time and space in which psychedelic drugs are taken—conducive to achieving liberation from one’s ego: it guided readers through ego death rather than physical death. The authors write that the “purpose [of this and like manuals] is to enable a person to understand the new realities of expanded consciousness, to serve as road maps for new interior territories which modern science has made accessible” (Leary, Metzner, and Alpert 3). Specifically, *The Psychedelic Experience* contemporizes *The Tibetan Book of the Book* and as such shares the goal of acting as “a detailed account of how to lose the ego” (Leary, Metzner, and Alpert 12). Enough micrograms and the proper use of

---

<sup>44</sup> Richard Maurice Burke’s book *Cosmic Consciousness*, originally published in 1900, uses this term for the comprehensive understanding of the cosmos at large: “Timothy Leary was one of its most fervent readers” (Lachman 176).

<sup>45</sup> Once again I want to turn to Jay Stevens, whose exhaustive study is perhaps the most powerful of the countercultural historical narratives I’ve encountered while researching this project: He quotes psychiatrist Oscar Janiger, another LSD researcher, as saying that Leary and his cohort’s research and drug advocacy prompted a destructive sea change. Specifically, Janiger said, “it was Leary and the others who were ruining what we had worked so hard to build” (171).

this manual seem to guarantee liberation from the ego and its game playing, i.e.

(inter)personal “drama.”

The ultimate irony lies in that Leary, who not only pushed for compulsory ego destruction but who frequently took LSD under the auspices of his own spiritual methodology, appears to have failed at his goal of ego loss: “[A]nyone who has read Leary knows that dissolution of the ego is a trick not in his repertory” (Lenson 154). His rambling rhetoric and his arrest record show him to have been quite the character, acting as a central figure in the countercultural social drama and hardly detached from or transcendent over worldly politics. Instead, a certain self-seriousness accompanied Leary and his acid politics. Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* reports that when Ken Kesey and the Pranksters traveled to Millbrook to meet with Leary, they arrived to a solemn scene and that Leary could not be disturbed because he was in isolated meditation for a multiday acid trip. The Pranksters were turned off by the heady sense of importance Leary and his cohort gave to acid use, and as a result they named his brand of psychonautical exploration “The Crypt Trip” (106). Popular memory seems to resist Leary’s argument that LSD chemically aided a person’s attempt at ego diminution, if only based on Leary’s own lack of progress at such a goal. Alan Watts, also interested in Eastern philosophical systems and who acted as a countercultural figurehead, worried that Leary actually suffered from “inflation,” a Jungian term signifying “a sort of messianic neurosis that comes from misreading the mystical experience” (Stevens 346). The man who wanted to guide a generation of acid trippers toward ego loss appeared in the eyes of at least one of his peers to misunderstand or mismanage the powerful experience offered by the variety of psychedelics with which he experimented.



Others who dabbled in psychedelics reacted in a similar way, and this chapter will focus on Marco Vassi's protracted reaction to "turning on" through various mind-expanding techniques, of course including drugs. His story presented in *The Stoned Apocalypse* reads as the archetypal account of hippie self-discovery and self-reinvention but also reads as a "burn out" narrative. Vassi's book is an erotic travel narrative, too, but most of all, it acts as an under-read example of the postmodern sacred—a text that offers readers/consumers a virtual, mediated experience of the numinous. Grant McCracken in *Transformations* would label the literary character Vassi presents to his reader as a "radiant self," a term that describes the stereotype of the hippie or New Age practitioner who embraces Eastern religious practices and whose worldview takes on a revolutionary if aggressive optimism, and whose lifestyle reflects an eclectic, orientalist taste in part informed through the flaunted acquisition of esoteric knowledge. Radiant selves do not necessarily need to have tried LSD to earn this label, but the 1960s version of the term would probably have done so.<sup>46</sup>

The 1960s radiant self was also marked by a journeying impulse. Having taken acid means having embarked upon an "acid trip," a term for the LSD experience that signifies the importance of movement in countercultural self-reinvention. One theorist states, "It is crucial to understand how travel and LSD reinforce each other. A *trip* consists in reinventing oneself through the sensual encounters with beyonds [sic] which could be geographical, cultural or psychological" (Saldanha 49). And so the acid tripper—the *psychonaut*—explores inner space, maps the contours of the inner experience, but as *The Stoned Apocalypse* will show, LSD use and radiant selfhood to also relate to physical or external world pilgrimages.

---

<sup>46</sup> Radiant selves today might be devout yoga practitioners, Wiccans, and those who live by astrological prediction. Certainly, drug use is only one path toward radiant selfhood. Other irrational, ecstatic means exist.

This continues the journeying theme developed throughout this project—Nick Adams, Lou Witt and Ray Smith all travel geographical space while seeking to understand and master their inner spaces, and Beckett’s narrator feels immobilized, a symbol of his mental stagnation and inability to escape. Vassi’s memoir reads as a travel narrative, where each passing chapter narrates a scene change as he makes his way across American landscapes: inner and outer travel mirror each other because “[r]adiant selves are unapologetically mobile, slipping the moorage of the present self and the present coordinates of time and space for new definitional possibilities” (McCracken 142).

*The Stoned Apocalypse*, read as “the Bible by Seventies’ heads”<sup>47</sup> (Vassi and Stahl 110), and at least slightly fictionalized, documents Vassi’s “turning on” to states of “non-ordinary reality.”<sup>48</sup> Vassi does not move from ordinary to non-ordinary, from profane to sacred reality, but lives in both simultaneously. Readers witness this when throughout the course of Vassi’s story, he moves across the country to different scenes of the 1960’s counterculture, where he does all the drugs that are available to him, mostly psychedelics like LSD and peyote as well as marijuana, and on this journey he sleeps with basically everyone he encounters. At first, Vassi’s sexuality appears straight, but before the end of the tale, he has participated in anonymous orgies at gay bath houses as well as in a more intimate sexual encounter with a man he admires. His bisexuality is only another example of Vassi’s living in two worlds at once though. Throughout his journey of self-discovery and self-promotion,

---

<sup>47</sup> My research to find a history of the countercultural term “head” led to no definitive conclusion, though we can form a speculative etymology. Seeing that we see the term used in “Dead Heads” for fans of the acid rock jam band The Grateful Dead and as an adjective in the term “head shop” where drug paraphernalia is sold, there is a clear connection between the idea of being a “head” and using mind-altering substances. We can make the assumption that the term began seeing use after Grace Slick of Jefferson Airplane’s sang the lyrics “feed your head” on the band’s LSD anthem, “White Rabbit.”

<sup>48</sup> I borrow this term from Carlos Castaneda’s *The Teaching of Don Juan* (1968), another semi-autobiographical account of someone’s turning on via psychedelic chemicals and esoteric teachings.

for Vassi offers himself as a guru and prophet hoping to transform others as he is transforming himself by converting others to the religion or philosophy *de jure* that he practices, Vassi exists in a state of twinned or doubled reality, a condition which postmodernity affords as possible. The first doubled reality the reader encounters is that of Vassi's doubled role as "saint-sinner" (Watts, "Spirituality and Sensuality" 116), where he lives a full commitment toward both carnal knowledge and the desire for knowledge of the spiritually infinite. We will also see that as a marijuana user, and Vassi smokes pot consistently throughout his story, he lives in yet another doubled reality. Living in both ordinary reality and dream reality, the pot smoker accesses in waking life truths that have been relegated to the realms of sleep consciousness. Witnessing these once-hidden truths, he drags them back to ordinary reality and attempts to inject them into the society. Further, psychedelic drug use, namely that of LSD and peyote, reveal another twinned existence, beyond a simultaneous waking and dreaming life—the tripper on psychedelics sees him or herself as both human and god. This memoir depicts the ramifications of experiencing oneself as embodied divinity subject to the power grab characteristic of the human ego. But the journey that Vassi recalls in *The Stoned Apocalypse* is a round trip. After his initial "turn on," Vassi bridges the ordinary and the extraordinary, the material and the spiritual, but after he has "played [his] acid karma out" (Vassi and Stahl 111), he settles back into a world that seems more familiar, but forever changed by what he has seen and experienced.

Vassi as the quintessential example of radiant selfhood demonstrates the tendency to appropriate esoteric teachings and religious beliefs in an effort to fashion not a "*life project*" (emphasis original; 194) as Bauman puts it, but a functional self-assemblage through spiritual pastiche instead. The mystical practices that he adopts in this self assembly act as "[s]ymbolic

tokens [that] are actively sought and adopted if their relevance is vouched for by the trusted authority of the expert, or by their previous or concurrent approbation by a great number of other agents” (Bauman, “A Sociological Theory” 195), and Vassi admits that he “rarely [studied] a thing unless it has some fervid following in one circle or another” (5). He picks up these tokens by learning Gurdjieffian approaches to inner work, by briefly joining Scientology and the Communist party, by accepting Christ as his personal lord and savior for some time, all done while chewing up acid tabs and smoking a forest of marijuana. This self-assembly, an attempt toward a “construction of identity consist[ing] of successive trials and errors” (“Sociological Theory” 193), shows Vassi’s willingness to “give [himself] license in the use of [new transformational] resources” (McCracken 142). This self-assembly also represents Vassi’s attempt at “*body-cultivation*,” which includes the “acute attention devoted to everything ‘taken internally’” (“Sociological Theory” 194). His self-monitored self-assembly drives his prolific drug use as well as his attention to diet—he tries out various New Age versions of fad diets picked up from people he meets on his travels—and this self-assembly and body-cultivation all work toward Vassi’s construction of his guiding spiritual beliefs.

I will argue later that his development of postmodern spirituality can also be seen as something called “spiritual materialism,” but for now it suffices to explain that all Vassi’s efforts and appropriated knowledge/resources work to fashion a DIY personal religious framework. Bauman explains that DIY self-assembly projects in general indicate postmodernism (194), and McCracken specifies the flavor of this postmodern DIY spiritual or religious assembly, characterizing it as a process where radiant selves “choose their beliefs, jettisoning what does not appeal to them, mixing and matching ideological materials without regard for their origins or consistency” (McCracken 144). McCracken and McAvan both

explain how DIY mentality informs and underlies pop culture spirituality. DIY spirituality occurs when McCracken's radiant self seeks McAvan's experience of the postmodern sacred but wants firsthand and not virtual experience of it. In this way, Vassi's memoir complicates the idea of the postmodern sacred, because although he finds his spirituality through consumption and forms a spirituality based on pastiche, his spiritual belief is *not* divorced from real world practice (McAvan 15). His approach proves to be more active than what McAvan describes because he does not seek the postmodern sacred through the virtuality of postmodern texts but rather through a direct personal experience. His reader, however, can witness for him or herself the spectacle of the postmodern sacred mediated through *The Stoned Apocalypse*. I propose that radiant selfhood describes active participation in the kinds of practices that the passive consumer of the postmodern sacred on the other hand consumes, and so the historical figure Vassi plays in *The Stoned Apocalypse* depicts the active lifestyle of the radiant self, while reading this text can offer the passive experience McAvan outlines.<sup>49</sup>

Vassi's constantly evolving spiritual journeying in the guise of the radiant self stands in contradistinction from the simplicity of the pilgrimage taken by Nick Adams in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" as discussed in chapter 1. In that story, the "spiritual" journey Nick undertakes is understood only by implication of his actions. His trip out of civilization and his turn toward non-representational awareness suggest a countercultural exploration of a new method of living—one that breaks ties with society as well as with identification with symbolic thought in order to allow for personal regeneration;

---

<sup>49</sup> I want to note that it does seem problematic to describe reading as "passive." Other postmodern sacred texts media, namely film, offer a more passive experience, whereas reading happens to offer an experience, though a mediation, that requires the reader's engagement.

the trip is marked by subtly, silence, and self-reliance. It is an inward turn and a period of isolation. Vassi's spiritual journey, much like Ray Smith's in *Dharma Bums* discussed in chapter 3, opposes the conventions of mainstream society but relies on participation in an alternate culture made up of the hip, progressive, and spiritually "othered." The protagonists of the first two chapters—Nick Adams, Lou Witt, and Beckett's unnamed narrator—all move to escape society completely and seek to try to transcend representative thought in that place of solitude. However, Ray, Japhy, and Vassi move to the fringes of society but for the most part stay within a social group, albeit a countercultural cohort. In the company of other transcendence-seekers, these characters depend on the consumption of alternative (read: non-Christian) religious texts and the adoption of novel spiritual practices to power their attempts at enlightenment, and Vassi's lifestyle most obviously reflects a particularly postmodern practice in that it defies even the boundaries of a single alternative spiritual ideology. Whereas Ray Smith explored different approaches to Buddhism, Marco Vassi rapidly cycles through various systems of beliefs and social scenes in which to practice them. His explorations resist structuring and categorization, prizing consumer choice rather than allegiance to a school of thought or practice to dictate his choice of belief and lifestyle. Nick Adams's narrative depicts a classic story of wandering and return, while Vassi's demonstrates the manner in which postmodernity shapes even one's approach to spiritual development.

#### SEX GURU

*The Stoned Apocalypse*, though describing myriad mystical and religious practices, carries with it an overarching Buddhist inflection and it explores the paradox of pursuing and adopting various ideas of truth meant to lead one to some sort of Enlightenment experience, an

experience generally associated with the cessation of desire. The memoir opens with Vassi working as an editor of “sixteen-page piece of baroque reportage” (1). The first line of the memoir is a question posed by a yet unnamed asker, and the question “Are you...*searching?*” immediately introduces the underlying motivation of the memoir: Vassi’s desire to attain and consume “truth.” Just as Beckett’s *The Unnamable* features a protagonist inspired to search for the formula for self-perfection, the entire plot so to speak of Vassi’s memoir revolves around his chaotic pilgrimage toward spiritual truth, an end goal that seems to move like a mirage as he pursues it down the halls of various religious institutions and through the inner corridors of the mind opened up to inquiry through his use of different psychedelic chemicals. Ironically, desire, a motivator of human action that many religious traditions caution against, predicates his entire spiritual quest. But what Vassi will come to understand by the end of his countercultural pilgrimage is that one cannot search for “Truth” (which I spell here with a capital T to signify its monolithic, all-encompassing quality). Vassi’s final realization is that one cannot arrive at Truth through some effort to progressively better oneself. Paradoxically, he in fact reaches this understanding as the result of his searching. In this way, *The Stoned Apocalypse* is a countercultural retelling of Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, a tale of a young man who joins various religious orders and who practices a host of methods aimed at reaching universal truth, only to finally abandon his journeying and by doing so find what he seeks, though the truth found appears more modest than he expected. We can see Vassi’s indebtedness not only to Hesse’s tale but also to the Buddha’s tale itself. The second of the two opening epigrams Vassi offers aligns his autobiography with the outcome of *Siddhartha* and with Buddhism in general. He cites Gautama Buddha as having said, “I truly attained nothing from total and unexcelled enlightenment” (n.p.). While the idea of a

searching implies a thing recoverable, this idea of enlightenment shows that illumination actually brings the enlightened person “nothing”: the seeker finds no *thing*. The “truth” of Enlightenment from a Buddhist perspective, a perspective Vassi shares judging by the Buddhist flavor of his story and opening epigram, implies that the search for truth is actually non-progressive, that no linear progress can be made toward it. The idea of a search creates a dualistic paradigm where there is the seeker on the one hand and the thing sought on the other, where the former hopes to attain the latter, the object of desire. In this divide of seeker and sought-after, the seeker must remain divorced from the desired thing if he believes it to be a) an actual “thing” and b) outside of himself. Or as Beckett portrays it in *The Unnamable*, the pursuer of truth never finds it, but the pursuit highlights the inextinguishable desire to find it.

Ironically, it is desire for the flesh itself that leads Vassi to contemplate the spiritual life. Immediately, the book shows the ostensibly incongruent but ultimately complementary relationship between the fires of lust and the reverence for the divine. Starting on the first page of *The Stoned Apocalypse*, the reader witnesses Vassi’s interest in two seemingly distinct avenues, the world of flesh and the world of spirit, and his pursuit to know these stereotypically mutually exclusive realities. The asker of the question “Are you...*searching?*” turns out to be a woman named Joan, who Vassi describes as “the most interesting woman [he] had ever met in an office” (1). Although this story largely concerns the pursuit of what might be named the spiritual life, it begins with a description of his “uncomplicated animal passion for [Joan].” And just as Vassi will discover that most of the insights he will find over the course of his journey turn out to be if not illusory, at least largely fantastical, he admits to having maintained a sexual fantasy involving Joan who “for several months [he] had been



ravishing up and down the corridors of [his] imagination, flinging her across [his] desktop, ripping her skirt and blouse to shreds, forcing her with [his] throbbing manhood, until the fires of refusal in her eyes liquefied into yearning” (1). The reader should keep in mind Vassi’s background as an erotic writer, which won’t excuse the romanticized rape scenario but may very well start to explain its presence here.<sup>50</sup> Continuing from this point, we see that in many ways *The Stoned Apocalypse* remains in the genre of erotica. Throughout, Vassi draws explicit verbal pictures for his reader of the orgies that his self-reported charisma helps facilitate. But more than that, in this particular book these explicit sexual scenes are paralleled by the spiritual discoveries that Vassi seems to make.

At first thought, Vassi seems like a hypocrite with the juxtaposition of his spiritual pursuit, historically and stereotypically linked to a practice of abstinence, over his near constant pursuit of new sex partners. This dilemma arises from the presumed coupling of the idea of “purity” with the category of the “spiritual.” To decouple this problematic pairing and expose its fallacious nature, Alan Watts’s essay “Spirituality and Sensuality” discusses the tension that results from the idea that the human is a “combination of angel and animal” who finds itself “charged with the duty of transforming the gross elements of the lower world [read: the sensual world] into the image of God [read: a chaste being]” (113). This is the transformation Vassi as author depicts himself as character as undergoing, a kind of “feverish metamorphoses” (Latham 558), and this particular transformation appears within the quest of “perfecting the instrument [that was his] mindbody” (Vassi qtd in Heidenry 146). The idea that through this transformation we the readers might expect Vassi to

---

<sup>50</sup> Vassi’s sexual politics offer a jarring double consciousness in light of his supposed expanded consciousness. While Vassi will acknowledge his chauvinism (7), *TSA* clearly shows “the sexual revolution,” a major aspect of the counterculture’s politic aims and of which Vassi participates, clearly “arrived on men’s terms” (Rosen 145).

overcome his carnal desires stems from the presumption found in both Western and Eastern religions that predicts “the transformed human animal as something which has surpassed almost every aspect of the material body” including sexuality (“Spirituality and Sensuality” 113). The transformation that a turn toward a spiritual life initiates, such as Vassi writes of, becomes synonymous with self-perfection as explained above, and this idea of perfection itself implies chastity since major religious traditions worldwide link sexuality with sin or a “fallen” nature and thus imperfection. But Watts continues to break down this relationship, pointing out the faulty binary thought that underlies the spiritual/sensual divide when he states as a generalization that humans want “black or white” roles played, and so the holy saint and the sinning sensualist must appear separate to avoid what might seem like cognitive dissonance to the simple mind. Further, this mindset tends to “despise the kind of person who cannot make up his mind between what seem to be absolutely demanding alternatives, but who vacillates indecisively” between “the ideals of the spirit” on the one hand and the grosser “seductions of matter” on the other (“Spirituality and Sensuality” 115). Vassi plays this doubled role as the saint-sinner, although the ideals of major religious traditions demand the impossible separation between the two roles, between the performances of “intense holiness” and “outrageous licentiousness” (“Spirituality and Sensuality” 116). The point Watts wants to make and that Vassi demonstrates throughout his memoir, one that mixes earnest if perhaps misguided efforts to achieve transcendental truth while sandwiched between scenes of fleshy excess, is that “the love of nature and the love of spirit are paths upon a circle which meet at their extremes” (119). To see these two loves—of the body and the spirit— as degrees on a circle rather than as diametrically positioned poles on a linear continuum makes it possible to abandon the ideal of personal progress, the attempt of which

would move the seeker linearly from one pole to the other, better side. Vassi's memoir demonstrates Watts's hypothesis that the spiritual, though lofty in idea, offers no moral high ground, and in fact, that sensuality and spirituality as pursuits are ethically equivalent, or outside of ethical consideration altogether.

After reviewing Watts's argument that challenges the notion that a lifestyle inclined toward the spiritual is somehow higher than the sensual life, yet still remembering that the former promises to put the adept practitioner in touch with some higher or cosmic consciousness, we might wonder if through sexual experience the same transcendence promised by a spiritual life might be reached. Or to ask another way, seeing sexual and spiritual lifestyles as complementary rather than as oppositional, can sexual practice earn the reality-shifting reputation given to spiritual practice? Clearly it already has. Various religions have esoteric offshoots that address the elevating powers of properly applied, so to speak, or expertly channeled sexual "energy": the Indian *Kama Sutra*, Taoist practices aimed at conserving libidinal energy,<sup>51</sup> and Buddhist-inspired Tantric sex methods come to mind. This demonstrates proof of a belief that sexual practice does in fact provide a state of non-ordinary reality, a reality these aforementioned metaphysical backgrounds point to as some type of higher plane of consciousness. Murray S. Davis's *Smut: Erotic Reality, Obscene Ideology* frequently cites Vassi's erotica but not *The Stoned Apocalypse* itself, and Murray describes the gulf that ordinarily separates these two realms, explaining that "the crack between everyday reality and erotic reality, which opens imperceptibly, widens gradually until...orgasm suddenly snaps it shut again—hurling consciousness back into everyday reality" (74). Building on the effect of this bridged gap, Davis sees erotic reality as being capable of

---

<sup>51</sup> See *Libidinal Economy* 202-210 to read Lyotard's discussion of sexual practices used in Taoist mysticism.

facilitating personal change, saying, “[t]he transformation of self that occurs during copulation...can be either positive or negative...By turning off the defenses that normally preserve the integrity of the identity, sexual arousal temporarily opens the identity to essential change” (103). The defenses described, as I understand the claim, signify the barrier constructed by the ego structure, and if those walls tumble down in the sexual act, I surmise that a person can also become “turned on” in the sense Timothy Leary promised through psychedelic drug use; accordingly, Vassi’s interest in sexual peak experiences is congruent with his interest in spiritual peak experiences that aim at transcendence of the material world. Where Alan Watts makes an argument in service of freeing spirituality and sensuality from a false dilemma caused by binary thinking, Vassi as author, described in an interview as the “Guru of Sex and Drugs” (Vassi and Stahl 110), knows he does not need to and so does not choose between the two. His desire drives the pursuit toward both knowledge of the body and the spirit, a truth immediately made clear when Vassi affirmatively answers Joan’s opening question. His lust for Joan leads him to meet Joan’s spiritual teacher who shares the Russian mystic Gurdjieff’s philosophy, and that inaugural experience leads to Vassi’s subsequent attempts at finding some ultimate truth. Sexual interest acts as the catalyst toward a spiritual quest, and for some time, this conversion follows the narrative of the repentant sinner, the motif that usually accompanies the spiritual turn.<sup>52</sup>

In this self-assumed role as a guru of sex and spirit, Vassi reveals hidden truths. Fittingly, twice in the book he works as pornographer during his “strange journey through [himself]” (5). After quitting his job at the *Americana*, where he works when this memoir

---

<sup>52</sup> I mean to refer to a situation such as Saul’s transformation into Paul, as recounted various times in the Book of Acts.

begins, he goes to work for Avant Publications where he edits a pornographic magazine and over the five months of employment there claims to have “looked at over five thousand sets of photographs of women without clothing” (13). Again, at the close of *The Stoned Apocalypse* he briefly and slickly notes that after coming back to a more of less mainstream reality and after dropping the sanctimoniousness that resulted from his spiritual questing, he takes up work as a pornographer (223), the details of which he glosses over.

Working as a pornographer, Vassi makes explicit that which most societies hide behind clothing and taboo. This revealing activity is mirrored in the episodes in his memoir where he shares his astral revelations. If “mysticism is nothing but sublimated sexuality” as Watts argues (“Spirituality and Sensuality” 119), and if through his pot use he feels that he “is capable of introducing esoteric secrets into the domain of the social” (Boon 127) as I will discuss shortly, I argue that we can read *The Stoned Apocalypse* as what I call “spiritual pornography”; Ram Dass’s *Be Here Now* falls into this same category. These texts claim to allow access to a reality obscured in daily life and display it for the reader’s viewing pleasure. These texts give their readers a sneak peek into the inner folds of reality, a reality given a privileged status and one that will remain out of the reader’s/viewer’s reach unless he or she fastidiously follows the practices both books describe.<sup>53</sup> In the case of *Be Here Now*, these naked truths are even printed on pulp paper and must be read holding the book wide open and turned to read top to bottom as if viewing a centerfold (figure 1).

---

<sup>53</sup> I want to clarify that I mean no value judgment when calling Vassi’s and Ram Dass’s books spiritual pornography. Just as Alan Watts explains the non-duality between spirituality and sensuality, I do not mean to say that *The Stoned Apocalypse* and *Be Here Now* should be faulted for their immodest presentation of esoteric subject matter or the promises made.



Figure 1. Dass 47-48. Vassily and Ram Dass put the hidden hypostatic truth of reality on display, subject to the viewing pleasure of the reader and available for mass production and private consumption. Dass's *Be Here Now* in particular produces a graphic glimpse at this. This is the postmodern sacred as explicit/illicit consumption.

Vassily's brand of spiritual pornography puts on display something he calls the "Mysterious Familiar," a term that I argue is a psychedelic version of Freud's "Uncanny." In *The Uncanny*, Freud states that for some men, viewing the female reproductive organs, especially in a sexual context, can give rise to feelings of uncanniness. Having been born of a woman and then spending years learning from cultural taboo that the vagina should remain hidden and unspoken of, a person, man or woman for that matter, may experience fear or discomfort when seeing exposed "what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud, *The Uncanny* 124). The experience may parallel in a heightened sense the returning to one's parents' home after years of absence, seeing something that resembles one's origin and now no longer recognizing it as such, and so the mature child feels the appearance of what was once "home" to now be unhomey. Of course, the situation differs for the person experiencing uncanniness when seeing the female sex organs

because the organs now viewed are presumably not those of the mother, so the thought might be, “This is familiar, yet I do not know it.” The prohibition on sex can lead to a feeling of estrangement so that one sees the home-like as forbidden, so that one feels him or herself to be a trespasser on familiar grounds: the thought might be, “this sight reminds me of what I should not know.” So the “Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden has come into the open” (emphasis deleted, Schelling 649 qtd. by Freud in *The Uncanny* 132), and viewing pornographic material can provoke this reaction.

The experience of non-ordinary reality through psychedelics or spiritual practices mirrors this feeling, and Vassi writes that after some time traveling across America and through himself he came up with the phrase “the mysterious familiar” (108), the “one phrase that embraces it all” (Vassi and Stahl 112), to describe the essentially unexplainable reality of reality itself and one’s experience with it. “There is no one, there has never been anyone, nor can there ever be anyone, including the Overmind of all Being” he says in particularly Emersonian fashion, “who has the foggiest notion why anything exists at all” (Vassi 108). The entirety of reality becomes for Vassi a matrix that births all phenomena, but inexplicably so. Vassi, in line with Beckett’s dramatic portrayals of meaningless yet comforting routine, believes that most people live in a “walking coma,” and the development of habits, including the habitual perception of the world, makes a screen of mundane familiarity that hangs over a “backdrop of nothingness” (109). LSD use, as well as “[a]ll the yogas, mantras, yantras, and religious cookbooks” (108), the last of the list describing the category to which *The Stoned Apocalypse* and *Be Here Now* might be considered to belong,<sup>54</sup> work to help tear through that

---

<sup>54</sup> By the end of *The Stoned Apocalypse*, it’s clear that Vassi does not mean to suggest that his readers try all the techniques he himself tried, and his concluding belief that one does not need to try to find meaning or higher

screen. This transgression of witnessing what was hidden faces the tripper with reality revealed as the all-encompassing, inescapable and impersonal organ of generation. But in the instance where a person becomes aware of the hypostatic void that manifests what we call “reality,” he or she might feel mysterious familiarity, a sort of cosmic uncanniness, and Vassi realizes that “to live in this state of awareness all the time is a shortcut to madness” (109). Nonetheless, *The Stoned Apocalypse* teases and tempts the reader to seek this awareness, and promises that it exists and is obtainable; or on the other hand, acting as pornographer by trade and producing both explicit literary erotic and spiritual material, Vassi senses his audience’s desire to view such a reality and so writes a book, transgressive by nature, that appeals to the curiosity to voyeuristically experience the disrobing of the world of form to witness the void of formlessness that lies beneath. And like sexual pornography, the readers/viewers of spiritual pornography experience a cathartic fantasy on their part, but the performer in the media is the one who actually goes through the motions to produce this spectacle. That pornography needs an actor present in it accounts for Vassi’s radical self-disclosure that necessarily accompanies his exposure of the “mysterious familiar”: to denude the absolute totality of existence and put it on display requires not only reality to be exposed but it also necessitates the candid exposure of the actor who appears in the scene. Dressed and undressed as holy man and playboy, Vassi reveals himself twice in his memoir, an act of remarkable bravery or vanity depending on how one reads it.

Vassi’s pornography of the flesh and of the spirit wants to illuminate his reader. In this guru guise, he does not specifically take a Zen approach, though he does evoke the

---

truth may even seem to discourage this, so it may be unfair to call it a “cookbook” in the way that Ram Dass’s *Be Here Now* clearly wants to guide the reader through spiritual practices, but Vassi’s book does read at least as a catalogue of techniques.



Buddha in his opening paratext.<sup>55</sup> Based on the broad definition I have explored and developed throughout this project that claims Zen to mean direct, non-representational contact with reality, we can see his creation of pornographic literature as abridging the gap between representation and actuality, done in Zen fashion. Jennifer Doyle in a reading of Angela Carter exposes the Zen-like role of the literary/textual pornographer. Carter explains that the pornographer needs to “suppress...metaphor” in writing to instead “leave [the reader] with...empty words” (Carter 17). Where metaphor makes *X* mean *Y*, but always only as a gesture, as an act of authorial command and accepted only with the reader’s faith in the author, metaphor in effect places or folds one reality over another, creating a depth of meaning but also distance from it: the layer of the acquired and associated meaning created by metaphor conveys a representation that the text offers to the reader as a literal reality and so moves the reader one more level away from direct reality, as language as signifier already stands in metaphorically for observable reality as the signified. But when the pornographer strips metaphor away and leaves language as bare as possible—and Carter is referring to de Sade and his explicitly phrased and not euphemistically indulgent “literotica”—the semantic emptiness of the pornographic text attempts to evoke the naked reality of the body displayed for pleasure. Doyle explicates Carter’s theorization saying, “The point is not to render words

---

<sup>55</sup> Genette’s *Paratexts* discusses the way text placed by the author, editor, or publisher before, within, and following the “prose proper” of a text—writing that is called “paratext” in English translation—influences our overall reading and understanding of the text in question. The epigraph, for example, “is a mute gesture whose interpretation is left up to the reader” (156). I understand Vassi’s quotation of the Buddha to perform the second function of the epigraph as outlined by Genette, where the epigraph works by “commenting on the text, whose meaning [the epigraph] indirectly specifies or emphasizes” (157). Vassi bookends the Buddha’s quotation about gaining nothing through enlightenment with his own epigraph after the last page of *The Stoned Apocalypse* where Vassi explains that he now has given up the quest for truth. This further supports Genette’s point that the “significance” of the epigraph “will not be clear or confirmed until the whole book is read” (158). As I have stated, I argue that the quote from the Buddha gives the book a Zen overtone, mostly because of its emphasis on non-striving or non-gaining, an idea taught through zazen.

transparent but to render their thingness...and in doing so, the pornographer brings writing closer to *being*' (10).

The authors I have discussed throughout this and the previous chapters all have tried to move the reader closer to being: for example, Hemingway sets Nick Adams off on a trek through the woods to face bare reality, and Lawrence guides Lou Witt across the Atlantic Ocean and into the red sands of New Mexico to do the same, and now Vassi as pornographic artist guides the reader closer to "being" by recounting his own pilgrimage into the absurd and unflinching face of reality exposed. But to reach this plane, he had to all but lose touch with the reality of mainstream America. His countercultural trip placed him perpendicularly, askew to sober reality. He set himself on edge, "high" above mainstream America, its values, and its lifestyle.

#### SEEING DOUBLE: GRASS, ACID AND A PEEK AT ANOTHER WORLD

The previous section demonstrated that once one abandons a dualistic mindset separating sexuality and spirituality, such as Vassi does in his assumed countercultural guru role, only a matter of perspective separates the lusty sinner and the celibate saint, the life of the gross or the fine, the profane and the sacred, matter and spirit. Yet although he accepts mystical premises in his life, Vassi does not altogether abandon his belief in physical reality or deny materialism. In fact he explains, "I am given the creeps by people who think, somehow, that death isn't real. It indicates that they think life isn't real. And it is unfortunate that the spate of translations from the East has given them the jargon to justify their inability to wake up to the reality of the living" (106). This comment implicates among others Timothy Leary, whose literary work helped to Orientalize the drug use of the counterculture as well as

promote the belief that the occurrence of commonplace reality is a mere and escapable illusion. *The Psychedelic Experience*, previously discussed, helped disseminate this idea. Widely used by drug trippers at the time, today it receives harsh criticism for its exploitive and simplistic approach to appropriate sophisticated spiritual traditions into hippie counterculture. Daniel Pinchbeck, author of *Breaking Open the Head*, a gonzo/new journalistic exploration of psychedelic-induced shamanism that in many ways continues a countercultural project, wrote the introduction to a new edition of Leary et al.'s manual (2007). In it, Pinchbeck criticizes the "simplistic and moralizing psychological perspective on the more profound exegesis of an ancient spiritual science found in [*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*]" (xiii). Further, Pinchbeck has reason to believe that adherence to practices described in this text caused damage to its readers because of its advocacy of voluntary ego destruction, a state supposedly initiated by the use of strong psychedelics. For example, Pinchbeck cites John Lennon, arguably the Beatle most negatively affected by the moralistic interdiction mandated by the dogma that steered the drug culture of the counterculture;<sup>56</sup> namely, Lennon was moved to adopt Leary's "Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out" motto as is witnessed in the lyrics for "Tomorrow Never Knows"<sup>57</sup> and took Leary's prescription to kill one's ego seriously. Lennon explains:

I got the message on acid that you should destroy your ego, and I did, you know I was reading that stupid book of Leary's [i.e. *The Psychedelic Experience*] and all that shit. We were going through a whole game everyone went through, and I destroyed myself...I destroyed my ego and I didn't believe I could do anything. (*Psychedelic Experience* xiv)

---

<sup>56</sup> George Harrison, of course, was also very affected by the culture of the New Age, but he reflected his interest not through drug references in lyrics but in Hindu-tinged references.

<sup>57</sup> Lennon sings, "Turn off your mind, relax and float down stream."

It is interesting that Lennon calls the antics practiced in the aftermath of “turning on” a “game” because Leary’s whole point in proselytizing for psychedelic use was that by correctly navigating the experience, including having a smooth “re-entry” into ordinary/profane reality, one could supposedly escape living life as a striving toward material achievement and ego satisfaction. The psychedelic experience, according to Leary, could act as kind of instant Enlightenment, freeing trippers from the wheel of rebirth and suffering. Instead, many taken in by this sort of approach to psychedelic drug use came down hard, transformed for sure, but not suddenly free from attachment or achievement. Instead, they then proceeded to labor toward another goal, one of ego destruction under the guise of reaching liberation from suffering—the turn-on transformation promises freedom from goal-oriented personal narratives, but instead created the narrative of the “radiant self,” the spiritual seeker supposedly freed by New Age practices. The aftermath of Vassi’s turn-on experience seems to have been more positive or more affirming than Lennon’s, but clearly as a result of his psychedelic drug use, Vassi becomes less a monk who frees people through his own freedom than an evangelist hoping to move others to follow his path, and such a goal benefits his ego. After psychedelic use, game play continues, but the game’s rules become magical.

According to the turbulence experienced by Lennon and Vassi after dropping acid, we see that at the moment the psychonaut experiences non-ordinary reality, there exists the lure to validate this non-ordinary reality as existing in parallel to ordinary reality, or more dangerously, as existing *above* and beyond ordinary reality. Some early researchers called psychedelic drugs psychotomimetic substances in that they can mimic the symptoms of schizophrenia (Stevens 24). Fittingly, the use of psychedelics can lead to a “messianic frenzy”

(Boon 262), the appearance of which we often see in schizophrenics. Baudelaire described this condition as “theomania,” which is the belief in reality manifesting, or creating “reimagined or reconstructed” versions of reality through one’s own effort, which Marcus Boon argues leads to “instant self-aggrandizement,” a term apt to describe Timothy Leary’s and Marco Vassi’s “inflated” reaction to psychedelic use. Even in the instance that one might believe that drugs such as LSD can lead to a discovery of secret and eternal truths, “the ego is a most potent configurer of imaginal spaces and, if not confronted directly, will turn even the most potent psychedelic experience into a self-serving and deceiving charade” (Boon 264). Or as Chogyam Trungpa, author of *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*—spiritual materialism meaning the narcissistic use of spiritual discoveries—puts it, “Ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality” (13). I do not want to debate whether or not the psychonaut has “valid” experiences or accesses divine truths—anyone subject to the extreme limitations of human perspective cannot foreclose entirely on the possibilities and realities that evade our understanding, but neither can we affirm psychedelic revelations as evidence of the underlying nature of reality. What I want to argue is that regardless of the validity of the altered reality psychedelic use offers its user, whether the user glimpses a peek into the Real or suffers a hallucinatory glimpse into madness—and again, time and time again, these two things have been portrayed as two sides of the same blotter tab—these recovered “truths” end up serving a very human master: the perceived experience of the oceanic cosmic oneness or of the Mind-at-Large as Huxley calls it in *The Doors of Perception*, becomes fodder for the ego, the individual self, and Vassi’s guru trip shows this. The psychonaut may experience defeat, as Lennon did, or become heroic, as Vassi’s account attests. Both subjective experiences are nevertheless marked by the impulse to “reform,” to

become different—and better—than people they were before the psychedelic experience. After tripping, the psychonaut may feel a connection with God or believe him or herself to become God Itself, and so life post-turn-on develops a spiritual flavor, and like any good conversion, this includes renouncing one's former ways and starting to live a "moral" life. This is the life that doubles back on itself, a life that changes direction: as Trungpa explains it, "[w]e think our path is spiritual because it is literally against the flow of what we used to be." Such conversion appears "heroic," but such heroism again only grows the ego (78). This explains Vassi's ability to continue living his usual life of prolific casual sex and social power grabbing, but now under the guise of the guru. His psychedelic use did not conquer his ego, but granted it more power and authority. His sinner-saint lifestyle, a doubled existence, finds fuel in not only his expanded consciousness but also in his strengthened ego.

Marijuana, not strictly only stronger mind-altering psychedelics, contributed to Vassi's doubled existence and the recovery of the perceived truths he works to introduce into his social circles. Users of other drugs—the narcotic, the tranquilizing, the hallucinatory—are "content to rest in the transcendental state" they induce, but the cannabis user desires to, and as mentioned earlier "is capable of[,] introducing esoteric secrets into the domain of the social" (Boon 127). The pot smoker knows and hopes to disseminate "sacred truths" (Boon 145).<sup>58</sup>

One truth discovered seems to be the perception of humanity's twinned existence, and so we see that there exists a "doubling phenomenon that repeatedly manifests itself in the literature on cannabis" (Boon 151); *The Stoned Apocalypse* adds to this oeuvre. Boon's

---

<sup>58</sup> Boon bases this finding on the use of hashish, but clearly, the smoking of cannabis flowers rather than the pressed resin concoction has similar results, as Vassi's frequent and heavy marijuana habit demonstrates.

research presents a revealing account of a man's hashish high, an example of this twinning phenomenon that evokes Agamben's formulation of the human being as arising from within the empty space between two equal existences, as I discussed in chapter 2. In the passage in question from *The Road of Excess*, the recounted narrator discovers that under effects of hashish, "[he] was double, not 'swan and shadow,' but rather Sphinx-like, human and beast. A true Sphinx, [he] was a riddle and a mystery to [him]self" (151). This anecdote gives support to the phenomenon and literary trope that cannabis users see their existence as being the result of complementary states, formed not from a single identity made from the meeting of two halves per se, but from an identity that is a continually-produced synthesis of two discrete and whole identities. That identity which this narrator calls "human" would seem to be the powers of faculty—abstraction, language, self-reflective subjectivity. Looked at another way, what he calls "human" we also routinely call "the mind." On the other hand, the narrator refers to the presence of the animal body in the form of material existence as "beast." The mind signifies spirit—in other languages, the mind and the spirit are often synonyms, such the German *geist* and the French *esprit*—and the human body represents material existence. Boon's example suggests that these two existences complement each another, but as Watts explains, various religious traditions have sought to create a power dynamic where the body becomes subject to the mind's/spirit's will to perfect the self, creating a violent power dynamic. This attempted subjugation exists because the body's "gross" nature, especially its sexual impulse, appears as a shortcoming or an obstacle to one's perfection. But Vassi's championing of both the spirit and the flesh serves to overcome the false dilemma claiming that one must live as saint seeking spiritual knowledge *or* as sinner

seeking carnal knowledge and that one must see these as opposing realities rather than as different, equal, and mutually tenable manifestations of existence.

This should not suggest that while Vassi goes around America acting as a “Johnny Appleseed of the soul, making girls and boys along the way” (*The New York Times Book Review* qtd on back cover of *The Stoned Apocalypse*), he has transcended the ideal of morality as a whole. Initially for Vassi, psychedelic drug use becomes an alternative expression of and endeavor toward moral supremacy. So while the mixed pantheon of the New Age replaces the authority of the Christian God, the same Christian moral politics get played out by the counterculture in general and in *The Stoned Apocalypse* specifically. The “grafting” of Eastern religious philosophy onto psychedelic experiences, such as was done with Tibetan Buddhism in the writing of the guidebook *The Psychedelic Experience*, reveals the “absorptive ethos and narcissistic emphasis of [the] American mind-set,” which surveys and envelops into its own culture the history, myths, traditions and practice of foreign nations and peoples (Pinchbeck, “Introduction” xii), a behavior that in effect produces the conditions for the experience of the postmodern sacred. When Vassi adopts New Age beliefs, a recognizably Christian American attitude remains, one that suggests that contact with the divine entails moral and social superiority. Perhaps limiting this behavior by calling it “American” or “Christian” misses the point, though. As Watts points out, people who practice religion, especially converts, generally link spirituality with morality, seeing the first as the practice of the other. New Age religious/spiritual practices, such as witnessed in the counterculture, like Christianity, still want to rescue a fallen world, bring it back together, and empower “alternative authorities and the systems of meaning they sponsored” (McCracken 144). But as Pinchbeck suggests, acid gurus failed to completely convert to the Eastern religions;



instead, the psychedelic drug scene adopted these religions and used them to further the agenda of those using the mind-expanding chemicals for some program aimed at moral development.

Because of Vassi's obvious guiding moral imperative, until the end of *The Stoned Apocalypse*, he hopes to achieve self-improvement through his psychedelic drug use and through his religious and philosophical practices. Namely, he wants to achieve the highest level of cosmic consciousness that he can, and his earliest esoteric practice shapes this motivating desire. Mentioned earlier, his colleague, the woman Joan, leads him to a teacher who instructs him in the teachings of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff. Ouspensky's teachings show Vassi that he and everyone are "asleep," that the entirety of "so-called waking life is the blind stumbling of a sleepwalker" (Ouspensky qtd by Vassi 4), and this language carries with it a moralizing tone that admonishes the sleepwalker to wake up. Vassi heeds the call, seemingly awake enough to try and save himself and attempts to expand his consciousness. One method Mrs. R, Vassi's teacher, leads him through is "simple body awareness" where he experiences the illusory existence of the "I" with which he "usually identified" (11). Ecstatic from this revelation, Vassi "[resolves] to change completely" and becomes focused on his "progress," that is to say, his progressive awakening (12).

But Mrs. R. dismisses Vassi as a pupil when she finds out that he has taken LSD, telling him that now he must "do the whole drug thing now" (22), or "play out" his "acid karma" as Vassi puts it in an interview about this period in his life (Vassi and Stahl 111). So he goes on his way and explores other avenues leading toward this goal of awareness. Equating the knowledge of truth with the attainment of goodness, a classically Western philosophical relationship, Vassi initially favors and respects those who too seek personal

perfection via psychedelic drug use, but he eventually gives up this bias: he admits that at one time he “naïvely believed that anyone who had taken acid was automatically made a more decent and honest human being by it” (37), but goes on to recognize that LSD does not universally act as a sacrament in the way Leary describes in “The Seven Tongues of God.” Or if LSD can act as sacrament for some, he eventually sees that not all who put it on their tongues find salvation. Vassi also realizes that marijuana does not make one more peaceful, but that marijuana intensifies the already extant qualities of the person smoking it. He retells meeting a Navy pilot who “described how beautiful it was to get really high on hash and watch the colors of napalm bombs as they exploded on Vietnamese villages.” This jarring juxtaposition of aesthetic appreciation and disregard for the loss of life “disillusioned [Vassi] of the idea that to smoke grass makes one a better person” (106). Though these substances proved indispensable to Vassi’s own journey of self discovery, and in an interview he cited LSD as one of the most powerful teachers” he had (Vassi and Stahl 111), by the end of the journey documented in *The Stoned Apocalypse*, psychedelic chemicals, marijuana included, no longer appear to be a reliable and guaranteed avenue to self improvement.

That Vassi moves past psychedelic chemicals as means for enlightenment provides a specific case study that emblemizes a larger cultural phenomenon. By the end of the 1960s, many experienced psychonauts gave up their use of these drugs, or rather, those seeking self-improvement matured beyond the usefulness of these chemical means. For some, the hippie lifestyle marked by psychedelic drug use gave way to a more austere practice. Jay Stevens fixes this turn around 1967, when the Beatles publicly gave up acid for Transcendental Meditation instead. Before becoming Ram Dass, Richard Alpert, Leary’s second-in-charge in the “Turn on, Tune In, Drop Out” movement also relinquished mind-expanding drugs for a

religious path after finding his guru in India. What the generation witnessed was an adoption of subtler, less ecstatic means to reach cosmic consciousness; the motive for the switch was that even the most productive LSD highs may come accompanied by paranoia, anxiety and mental chaos, but sober methods avoid such confusion and panic. Quoting Esalen's co-founder, Stevens explains the evolution of the awareness movement, seeing it divided into generational waves, starting with the Beats and moving into the reign of the hippies, before finally coming to the proliferation of *sadhaks*<sup>59</sup> who were "more experienced meditators" than the previous two countercultural populations (Stevens 347). In a change of heart that might have looked like a trading in of Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience* for the actual *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, these *sadhaks* found "highs [that] were superior" to those found on drugs (Stevens 347).

So Vassi, like Richard Alpert, finds disappointment where he sought enlightenment through chemical means.<sup>60</sup> Contrary to expectation, the closest he comes to experiencing total enlightenment follows his use of speed, of all things. After taking his first hit intravenously, Vassi reports "breathtaking waves of love" washing over him. His description of his coming up on the drug mirrors language associated with religious transcendence: "My heart swelled and my body tingled. My mind became clear on the spot. There wasn't a trouble in the entire universe. All people were brothers and sisters. God was All." Not surprisingly, he calls speed a "miracle" and exclaims "Speed! I had found my drug. It gave

---

<sup>59</sup> Ram Dass would be such a *sadhak*. In *Be Here Now*, he frequently describes his life-post India as *sadhana*, which is a life dedicated to spiritual practice.

<sup>60</sup> Much like Vassi's discovery that LSD and marijuana fail to bring universal improvement to humankind, Richard Alpert abandoned his faith in psychedelic use after he "had gotten over the feeling that one experience was going to make [him] enlightened forever...it wasn't going to be that simple" (*Be Here Now*, "Coming Down" n.p.). This disillusionment led him to seek out holy men in India, and, after finding who he considered to be his guru, he changed his name to Ram Dass.

me all the things I had searched for in psychedelics and really found.” That his speed use did not induce a state of hallucinogenic non-ordinary reality made the drug’s high most meaningful to Vassi. Rather than finding “hallucinations and pseudo-cosmic insights,” “clear and immediate reality” greets him (124).

This experience on speed helps deliver Vassi from the belief that he can access a permanent state of awareness via psychedelics and afterward he stops searching for enduring yet hidden truths that await him, but the experience on speed also reveals what Vassi actually sought through his drug use. He recognizes that speed gratifies the ego, and this understanding forms his initial caution before taking it. He recalls that “[t]he house of speed freaks [he] had once visited in the Haight forever warned [him] away from the drug” and he explains his cautious fear stems from his observation of the “end result [of the drug’s use that] seemed to be a kind of walking death, and endless regression into the folds of the ego” (123). He evokes an image of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* when he describes the terminal speed user as “nothing...but a strident voice insisting on being heard” (123). Of course, Vassi being Vassi, he partakes nonetheless, but his prefatory remarks describe speed use as satisfying the ego, the thing that countercultural drug use tried to dissolve, and when he experiences bliss and satisfaction after being given his first hit, the reader sees that his whole journey has been less for wisdom than for the experience of ecstatic joy: not cosmic consciousness but cosmic sensation. Speed offers him this, and it appears in two forms and two phases. As noted above, after it surges through his body, he first experiences spiritual bliss, and that in turn fades into sexual bliss. Switching gears, Vassi turns to Tommy, the handsome black gay man who helped him to this first dose and propositions him for sex, and the two then proceed to have “rapturous” intercourse, the first time Vassi engages in

non-anonymous homosexual love making; before this time, his encounters had been in bath houses where the identities of those involved purposely remained faceless (125). Eventually he crashes back to a “dull, dirty, and infinitely boring” real [read: sober] world but somehow resists the temptation to shoot up again. But in his time high on speed, both identities—his spiritual and his sensual—find complete if necessarily ephemeral fulfillment.

Just as any drug high must eventually run out and let the soaring user plummet, narratives as read in Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, *The Stoned Apocalypse* and the chapter “The Transformation of Richard Alpert into Ram Dass” in *Be Here Now* show that the spiritual trip as a whole eventually fails. Just like the acid karma Vassi says he had to wear away, the spirit trip as a high fades. Here I want to clarify that despite the excesses of the spiritual tourism the reader sees Vassi participate in, *The Stoned Apocalypse* does record and announce a kind of self-awakening, and that awakening occurs precisely because of Vassi’s myriad endeavors and their failures, the trials and errors Bauman explains are part of self-assembly. Just as *Siddhartha* depicts a man who finds inner peace only after exhausting all possible means to find such equanimity, Vassi slowly realizes the truth of his inherent ontological meaninglessness, and this discovery of meaninglessness finally frees him from the need to seek some greater meaning. This is the truth the narrator in *The Unnamable* repeatedly finds and rejects, and this truth Vassi embraces. But this moment arrives after Vassi faces one last crisis. At the end of his story, working for a corporation and participating in the more or less “straight” world, a “restlessness... would not be assuaged” in him and “inchoate visions and unarticulated notions and undigested experiences” fill him. Disappointed by everything, he considers suicide (219) but rejects the option when he realizes this would merely nullify the “ego of its burden of self-consciousness” (220). He survives his own “Dark Night of the

Soul,” an occurrence Ram Dass explains happens to every spiritual seeker, bringing the seeker to despair after “the initial euphoria that comes through the first awakening into even a little consciousness” runs dry (Dass 96). Eventually with familiarity, the human mind renders all things extraordinary ordinary, and even the excitement of discovering other realities fizzles.

At this point the spiritual tripper/spiritual materialist must “give up trying to be something special” (Trungpa 59), and Vassi does this at the end of *The Stoned Apocalypse* when he goes back to pornography and devotes himself solely to a worldly life that he will watch with “detached interest” (223). This detachment allows him to quit seeking self-improvement in his life. He gives up interest in finding that eternally unifying moment, that which Lou Witt and Beckett’s unnamed narrator still seek at the end of their respective narratives. Vassi continues with his life nonetheless, doing what he can because he must. He feels “[a] new trip begins to write itself...but with a single difference from all others before it. This time [he] cannot deceive [himself] into thinking that the trip has some destination, that there is some final act that will draw everything together” (223). Instead of embarking on a new journey, he becomes content simply to move forward, going the only direction he may, the direction the arrow of time points, an arrow that is linear but not necessarily progressive. He sees that life eventually amounts to nothingness and moves that way unceasingly. Because of this, Vassi allows a certain measure of passivity to enter his lifestyle and mindset. Rather than say that at the conclusion of this journey he will “write a new trip,” Vassi instead explains that a “new trip writes itself in” (223), demonstrating that he sees himself as the product of some unnamed cosmic author inscribing his life. This marks his switch from seeking meaning to accepting meaninglessness as the meaning or truth about

life, the same inescapable paradox Beckett and Dass convey in their texts. Vassi states, “Never can I forget that everything that I know, or do, or feel, or create, or understand is but a brief poignant gesture into the supercilious face of the unknown” (224). Having arrived at this resting point from which he never need leave, having made a round trip that leads back to ordinary life, Vassi concludes his book with a short envoy that appears on an unnumbered page facing the final numbered page: “There is only what is, and that is mute. *I have stopped searching*” (emphasis original).

#### MODERNISM’S BUDDHA NATURE: A SHIFT IN AWARENESS

Vassi eventually gives up his attempt to fashion what Bauman describes as a *life-project*, which has a definitive goal, and instead at the end of *The Stoned Apocalypse* he describes an approach to his own life that signals self-assembly instead, an activity that “has no destination point” and “entails disassembling alongside the assembling” (“Sociological Theory” 194). He has followed this assembly/disassembly pattern throughout his memoir, but only by the book’s end after giving up a teleological goal for himself does he himself recognize it. This self-constitution, now acknowledged, allows him to cease searching for ultimate truth and finality precisely because this “incessant (and non-linear) [self-constituting] activity” “lacks a benchmark against which its progress could be measured, and so it cannot be meaningfully described as ‘progressing’” (“Sociological Theory” 193). Vassi has become aware of his personality that drives him to narrativize his life activity into something that only *appears* to be a progressive search for cohesive meaning, and this new self-awareness allows him to resist the compulsion to create a personal narrative; and though he develops this awareness

in great part due to his spiritual practices and psychedelic drug use, in the end this self-awareness stands independent of them.

Marked by Vassi's non-progressive self-constitution, the reader witnesses a shift from his modern to a postmodern understanding of life. At the beginning of the autobiography, a term used loosely, he appears modern in character or as an agent, to use Bauman's terminology, because modernity characteristically believed in "*movement* [of history] *with a direction*," a progression or teleology that presumed an endpoint or goal" ("Sociological Theory" 188). The life experience gained through the trials and errors of Vassi's journey increases his self-awareness, marked by his newfound interest in observing life from a detached vantage point rather than pursue the willful transformation of it; his new awareness pacifies his need for personal progressivism. *The Stoned Apocalypse* showcases Vassi's transformation from a modern to a postmodern agent at a personal level, a transformation that curiously mirrors Bauman's description of the transformation from modernity to postmodernity, which I will describe momentarily. I argue that Vassi's book portrays on the level of the individual what Bauman sees as having happened at the larger sociological level in the epochal shift towards postmodernity. And just as the influence of the counterculture and its practices guide Vassi's metamorphosis, we have to assume that the counterculture and its practices contributed to America's movement at the socio-historical along the same path toward postmodernity, and especially provided the experiences from which the production of the postmodern sacred would become thinkable. Consider the subtitle of Don Lattin's book *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, which is *how Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Ray, and Andrew Weil killed the fifties and ushered in a new age for America*. As my previous chapter explained, the containment culture of the fifties depended on strict adherence to narrative, a



characteristically Modernist trait, but the sixties helped bring America past this structuring impulse, ringing in an era of *post* Modernity. Just as Vassi ends up achieving an awareness of himself and as a result, resolves to live for himself and not for some ideal of progress, “[p]ostmodernity may be conceived of as modernity conscious of its own true nature—*modernity for itself*” (emphasis original; “Sociological Theory” 187). Vassi on the individual level and Modernity taken at large fail to maintain the belief in teleological progress, the pursuit of which cannot “be upheld...in light of the postmodern experience” (“Sociological Theory” 188). Vassi’s personal understanding of this fact and greater epochal shift to postmodernity appears to be an experience of illumination.

In light of the experience of postmodernity, Bauman argues that all ideas of global coherence must be discarded and the perceived appearance of emerging meaning happening anywhere seemingly must be seen as accidental and chimerical. In other words, “[a]ll order...is a...transitory phenomenon; its nature can be best grasped by a metaphor of a whirlpool appearing in the flow of the river, retaining its shape only for a relatively brief period and only at the expense of incessant metabolism and a constant renewal of content” (“Sociological Theory” 189). Compare this description of global matters, the incidents of history, to the description an “important [American Zen] teacher in the 1980s” (Seager 102) makes about the nature of human existence itself.<sup>61</sup> Charlotte Joko Beck explains, “What we call our life is nothing but a little detour, a whirlpool that springs up, then fades away” (6). What we see is that beyond the curious but perhaps coincidental overlap of language used,

---

<sup>61</sup> Seager explains that Beck “abandoned many of the Japanese elements of Zen,” making for a truly American Zen practice, void of most tradition and dogma that gives Zen a religious tone. This is important to note because Beck’s austere style of Zen helps prevent overtones of Orientalism from creeping into the discussion of this practice. This Zen is egalitarian, not Eastern in flavor.

what Bauman describes at the macro-level of society as a whole is also true at the micro-level of the individual human agent. This theory of postmodernity and this Zen definition of human existence differ only in scale. In that Zen predates postmodernity as a concept, we can see that in a matter of speaking, the world has entered a period in history defined by Zen ontology: postmodernity exposes a world empty of set and permanent meaning, is marked by an increased awareness of the essential ethereality of every individual being and action, and is populated by de-centered agents, which is to say, subjects empty of a stable, persistent, core identity.

Postmodernism in Zen fashion also exists only in the present. Bauman asserts that postmodernity “unbinds’ time,” which is to say that it diminishes the “constraining impact of past”; in addition to this, postmodernity limits the “colonization” of future moments (“Sociological Theory” 190). Bauman’s theorization of time in postmodernity is one that has hacked away the arrows of time, whereas modernity’s teleological concept of time asserted itself boldly into the direction of the future and one pointed backwards towards a past owned and shaped by the writers of such a history; in postmodernity, a single point—an eternal Now—remains where once stood the bidirectional arrow of time, the eternal present of meditative awareness depicted in “Big Two-Hearted River” and Vassi’s final understanding of reality.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to cover much ground in its discussion of Vassi’s *The Stoned Apocalypse*. Part of the motivation for this ambitious reading stems from the book’s placement on the fringe of countercultural literature: earlier, I quoted a writer who claims

that Vassi's far-out memoir would have been an assumed read for pot and acid heads immediately after its publication, but its popularity must have flagged with time, and it is not a book much discussed in academic literary research. (Vassi's erotica as a whole fares better, and as example, Davis's *Smut* frequently cites his other work.) As a result of its relative obscurity, in this chapter I hoped to explain the various implications of its subject matter so as to help prepare a space for it. I imagine *The Stoned Apocalypse* might fit into a subgenre that deals with spiritualism arising from or alongside drug use around the time of or directly following the 1960s counterculture, situated next to texts such as Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* and Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*—texts that also grapple with and are critical of the complex social problems inherent in spiritual journeys centered on metaphysically inclined drug use.

Also, this reading addresses a wide range of arguments because they all fit under the larger consideration of the postmodern sacred. As I have responded to McAvan's theory of the postmodern sacred, this chapter took up many of the specifics of her formulation of the term, including its pastiche-like nature, the power of consumption to provide the experience of it, and the doubled nature of postmodern phenomenology that allows for seemingly untenable or mutually exclusive worlds to coexist: Vassi's memoir provides a discussion of all these categories of definition. In specific, I wanted to remedy McAvan's elision of the complex nature of the New Age as a basis for the postmodern sacred, seeing as the New Age resulted largely from psychedelic interest in the 1960's counterculture, and her work fails to discuss drug use as grounds for spiritual experience at all.

McAvan's study focuses on what she calls "unreal texts," focusing on "science fiction, fantasy, and urban fantasy" (2) and grouping these together with perhaps a bit of

disregard for the generic differences between these categories. But she chooses the broader category of the unreal texts precisely because the subgenres that make up the larger genre of “unreal”—SF, “traditional” fantasy as well as “urban” fantasy—all “refract religious symbols and ideas through a postmodernist sensibility” (McAvan 3). In closing this chapter, I would like to close the distance between these genres and Vassi’s memoir.

I have struggled to place *The Stoned Apocalypse* into a category, just as I have struggled to name it a memoir or autobiography, as it obviously feels fictionalized. We cannot know the amount of truth Vassi as author put into the description of Vassi as character’s experiences, but regardless of its verisimilitude to Vassi’s real life, we easily read both Vassi’s shaping of the text into the erotica genre and the psychedelic turn-on narrative in line with Leary’s and Dass’s work. Despite the implications of these groupings or definitions, does it also accord with McAvan’s interest in “unreal” texts, specifically SF, more closely than has appeared?

McAvan’s study focuses on SF texts that produce the postmodern sacred and offer it for consumption to an audience hungry for the virtual experience of the divine or the numinous. Vassi’s book does the same, but it does not read like a SF novel. *The Stoned Apocalypse* is not science fiction, per se, but in its autobiographical liberties, it does depict a fiction of spiritual science. Daniel Pinchbeck describes *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a manual of spiritual science: although the spiritual beliefs this book discusses modern science would doubt on empirical grounds, it tells of an understanding of the universe that allows an active reader to help guide the (after)life of the person who has prompted the book’s use. The living reader (rather than the dying addressee) of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* practices a standardized method of spiritual science for the benefit of the dying (“Introduction”). Vassi

in *The Stoned Apocalypse* tests out similar spiritual sciences and renders his subjective results to his reader. His book, based on real but fictionalized events, is in fact a record of his learning and employing spiritual sciences: referring to Pinchbeck's terminology, I might define *The Stoned Apocalypse* as a spiritual-science fiction.

Might it not also fall under the category of science fiction itself? Carl Freedman in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* makes a case for canonical texts like *Paradise Lost* and *Finnegans Wake* as science fiction based on the definition provided by Darko Suvin of science fiction as “determined by the *dialectic* between estrangement and cognition” (emphasis original; 16). Whereas SF presents realities radically estranged from the reader's empirical reality, Vassi's consumption of LSD and other drugs produces a world separate from the world of sober reality. Through the technology of LSD specifically, Vassi finds a reality estranged from his normal or sober cognition: he accesses an alternative reality and records it in his memoir. This alternative reality that I have generally called “the spiritual” is an effect of a scientifically-produced mind-altering chemical: LSD produces, as *The Stoned Apocalypse* shows, a temporarily manifested SF reality apart from the empirical reality of the non-user, and his experience in this alternative reality “performs an estranging critical interrogation” (Freedman 17) of ordinary or non-drugged reality.

But even if the suggestion that *The Stoned Apocalypse* might be read as SF, given its reliance on chemical alteration to produce the appearance of the foundations of a spiritual science, Vassi's memoir belongs, at least partially, to McAvan's category of the postmodern sacred. Vassi offers his reader the remediated experience of his soul-searching and reality-tripping, a virtual transcendental journey. To read or “consume” this book allows the reader a peek at the divine, sacred or the otherwise “unworldly,” and this metaphysical exploration

itself stems from Vassi's own consumption of spiritual guidebooks and of psychoactive chemicals available on the countercultural black market. That is to say, these methods are themselves the media through which Vassi accesses these experiences of cosmic consciousness depicted within his memoir. The main question regarding the book's reception lies in the reader's approach to it. Consuming it as a postmodern sacred text, the reader might experience a voyeuristic mediated transcendence via Vassi's exploits, but just as easily, a reader might read *The Stoned Apocalypse* as a radiant self-guidebook, as a text outlining the steps needed for the reader to take to access another reality rather than experience the virtual catharsis of someone else's trip into the Mysterious Familiar.

## **PROJECT CONCLUSION—COMING OFF IT: FAILURE AS SUCCESS**

I have framed the idea of achieving enlightenment or some measure of transcendent awareness as amounting to nothing; that is, although attaining such states are coveted and the subject of many spiritual self-help books, the frequently glanced over fact is that, at least in Zen texts, enlightenment is paradoxically taught as possible while being nearly completely devalued. Despite the rigorous practice involved in learning to focus on the breath and remaining still in a formal meditation posture, many Zen teachers say that Zen practice is non-progressive, that it has no goal and that practice is in itself enlightenment, an underwhelming and often ignored fact for Western practitioners taking up such a practice that has become cloaked with mysterious intrigue. In short, Zen as it is received in popular culture is the product of hype because in Zen practice, there is nowhere to go. So, one might ask, why are each of these stories centered on a travel narrative?

In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David McMahan, actually building upon another critic's idea, claims that leaving home for spiritual development is a Protestant theme (199), but the texts previously discussed in my project evince characters that search for transcendence via meditation or non-thinking awareness, an anti-logocentric approach running counter to Western logocentrism and associated with Eastern mystical practices. Is McMahan's assertion overstated, or does this admixture of a Protestant narrative line directing a story thematically developing Buddhist ideas exemplify the hybrid nature of Buddhist Modernism, what he calls "a modern hybrid tradition," itself no less authentic in this guise, one that comingles European historical tradition with historical Asian Buddhism?

I have to believe that although this project has surveyed case studies of what has to be called the recent history of Buddhist Modernism, a legitimate hybrid according to

McMahan, the recurring narrative structure that has been showcased has roots in both Western and Eastern literary traditions prior to Buddhist Modernism. Both Eastern and Western canons contain stories of those who sought to achieve lasting transcendence and failed. For example, we can read Percy Shelley's sonnet "Lift not the painted veil which those who live" as proof of this trope and as a succinct summary of the transcendence-seeking narrative, complete with the accessing of a hypostatic realm below ordinary reality and the warning that accessing such a place threatens the seeker itself. This sonnet recalls Vassi's *Mysterious Familiar* and outlines the plot arc of many of the texts I've read here. It reads:

Lift not the painted veil which those who live  
Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,  
And it but mimic all we would believe  
With colours idly spread,—behind, lurk Fear  
And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave  
Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.  
I knew one who had lifted it—he sought,  
For his lost heart was tender, things to love,  
But found them not, alas! nor was there aught  
The world contains, the which he could approve.  
Through the unheeding many he did move,  
A splendour among shadows, a bright blot  
Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove  
For truth, and like the Preacher found it not. (630)

The veil acts as a colorful illusion draped over some obscured but seemingly truer reality. Once a seeker lifts this vivid artifice, he or she finds hope, but fear is mirrored as the twin of this newfound hope. Just as these transcendence-seeking narratives produce dialectic tensions between various dyads of awareness and perspectives on reality, in this poem fear grows in direct proportion to hope, and so the discovery of once-hidden hypostatic reality sets off an unsustainable and eventually crushing fall into the void. The sonnet ends with



truth's inevitable intangibility, out of reach for both the spiritual leader and the tender and broken-hearted seeker. Though much darker in tone than Vassi's chosen Buddhist epigram about the non-achievement of the enlightened state, Shelley's poem outlines the archetypal journey that Vassi embarks upon, a journey that must end in failure.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, this same motif appears separately in Eastern literature, and Alan Watts retells one such story in English demonstrating this. Watts's recounting of "The Second Immortal," like Shelley's sonnet, emphasizes the folly of looking for a spiritually meaningful and significant life. It is set in what seems to be antique China and tells of a cakeseller who spends his days in "empty activities" such as eating rice, smoking tobacco, watching grass grow, watching clouds move across the sky, and chewing watermelon seeds. One day a priest tells him that he should heed the threat of his advancing age and make something of his life or risk "[going] to the grave as insignificantly as old refuse flung into the river" (90). The cakeseller initially accepts such a fate with detached acceptance, but when the priest tempts him with the promise of becoming an "Immortal," the cakeseller's ears perk up. The priest describes these godly figures as having magical powers and says that one will teach him the secrets necessary for a remarkable and eternal life. He seeks out these Immortals and soon finds sages who try to help him, instructing him in practices meant to empower and purify him, and so the cakeseller renounces his personal habits and comforts, much like Vassi does after meeting Mrs. R., trading in his old life for the path to perfection and godly wisdom. Like Siddhartha, Vassi, and even Ray Smith, all these practices seem to grant him some success but fall short of his aims, leading him further away from his ordinary and familiar life

---

<sup>62</sup> Notice too that Shelley's poem describes spatial traveling, an image that parallels the idea of the seeker's inner journey, just as the major texts discussed in this project do.

before. Eventually the cakeseller meets an unexceptional trader—an “ordinary man” (95)—who claims he is an Immortal and who spies another Immortal in their company. Although hidden from the cakeseller’s perception, he asks the trader to describe the other Immortal’s features:

His breathing is operated by the wind...the light of his right and left eye is given by the sun and the moon...his flesh is maintained by the earth...his bones and vital juices by rocks and rains...his thoughts and moods are directed by the coming and going of the seasons and the elements. He does not rely on his own resources; he allows himself to be maintained and directed by that which maintains and directs the wind, the sun, the moon, and the rivers, but you do not recognize it. (96)

The cakeseller becomes dumbfounded and begs to know how he can come to see this miraculous hidden being, and the trader gives him mystical directions, directions that seem inscrutable until the cakeseller realizes that all the man prescribes to him is to take up his previous habits, to become as he was before his sought Immortality. Hereupon the cakeseller becomes enlightened, realizing that despite the alluring and mystical language decorating the appearance of the Immortals he sought, what he labored to find was none other than an ordinary human being. The priest who had set him on his journey simply alienated the cakeseller from ordinary reality, promising a romantic fantasy instead. What he sought turned out to be what he already had, but he needed first to lose himself in order to find himself. Of course, he once felt content with mundane reality, but the priest lured him into a trap of specialness; as a result of his spiritual seeking and its failure, the man returns to his previous lifestyle, but gains the perspective that he has always-already lived a doubled and uncanny reality as an Immortal; the implied caveat is that the cakeseller must fully accept his fundamentally ordinary life alongside the ideal of immortality. All those magical qualities described in the above block quote remain applicable, but they do not save him from death

and being discarded as refuse. The cakeseller's appreciation of life now rests on the foundation of the essential mundaneness of his life: specialness, on the other hand, is a perspective that arises out of appreciation for such a simple but ultimately inexplicable worldly existence.

All of the narratives I name "successful" enlightenment attempts, those of Nick Adams, Ray Smith, and Marco Vassi, depend on the failure of finding a separate experience of reality that would alienate the seekers from society. These characters may have left society to search themselves but they return once they see the futility of the enlightenment search. In other words, enlightenment is in large part seeing that one will always search for some unattainable truth beyond language but to no avail—enlightenment is knowing and accepting this ignorance.

David Foster Wallace's short story "Good Old Neon" from the collection *Oblivion*, argues that TOTAL UNDERSTANDING only exists in death, a hopeful fantasy. Neal, the story's protagonist, speaks to the reader from beyond the grave. After living a life of presumed fraudulence, Neal decides to commit suicide. The story bears resemblance to Beckett's *The Unnamable* in that a "head case" narrates from a place seemingly outside of time and articulates in breathless sentences the logic driving his failed pursuit for self-actualization. Like the texts in my second chapter, Neal is concerned with what he considers his fraudulent being that causes the destructive tragedy of compulsive social posturing. Like Beckett's unnamed narrator, Neal laments how "exhausting and solipsistic" (155) his egocentric existence is/was—he's self-reportedly dead but speaking to the audience from a timeless place. He explains the various methods he used to try to fill the void in his life, including rampant promiscuity, cocaine use, and psychoanalysis. He also recounts the time he tried "to

meditate [himself] into a having a true self” (162), a goal at which he fails, but he is awarded a certificate for being the most enduring meditator in the class, an ironically ego-boasting gesture made by the class’s instructor; as a result he gains the nickname “the statue” (159) for his marathon sitting, but as Neal explains, his meditation, like the rest of his life, is a self-conscious posture. In this sense, Neal hearkens back to the *St. Maur*’s narrator’s description of Rico’s being a *tableau vivant*, a living statue.

The idea of finding a “true self” permeates meditation discourse, and while Zen does promote the belief that one can exceed the boundaries of the thinking mind, enlightenment will not locate a substantial core identity. Neal often complains of being “hollow” and herein lies the rub: the true self he seeks and his feeling of hollowness are not different. The realization in meditation, observing one’s thoughts from a position not identified with the thinking mind, is that the true self *is* empty. Yet this idea runs counter to both the Western narratives of Christian theology and logocentric philosophy, where the soul or the I, respectively, would occupy the seat of identity. From a Zen perspective, however, hollowness is authenticity—but this may constitute one of those “certain truths” that a person can never be told or come to realize as it “might well destroy” him or her (Wallace 170). But, as we will see, upon death Neal sees that this hollowness is what makes space for human existence itself.

But before this, Neal, like Lou Witt, is disgusted by his fraudulent being and decides to make a sacrifice, but whereas Lou figuratively cuts off her head by disavowing her mental processing in toto, Neal goes a step further in destroying both body and mind in a planned car crash. And like the characters in the texts discussed in chapter 2, Neal leaves society and is unable to rejoin it, lost forever in death. The twist is that Neal’s suicide reveals to him the

ultimate nature of reality after all: his failed life, if suicide resulting from resignation can be called as much, leads him to have a kind of satori moment. In the hours leading up to his death he experiences the world in a way that resembles the fresh clarity of beginner's mind revealing the "very sacredness of the world"; and in death he sees that all of time exists in an eternal moment, the timeless fifth dimension as it were of Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." After repeatedly trying to explain to the reader how time does not work as supposed, where linear time produces linear thoughts, Neal says that at death he sees inside himself the "enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe" (178), akin to formal Zen's "Big Mind," all of which is squeezed and fed through the "tiny keyhole" of what Zen calls "little" or "small" mind—the ego—one moment at a time. But beyond human experience lies the still point of the fifth dimension or Zen awareness, and having seen this, Neal understands that his whole life, self-conscious posturing and all, is the natural effect of trying to live out in steps an existence that exceeds logical order and linear understanding.

It is because Neal experiences the reality of Big Mind or empty identity that he can reverse his condemnation of the thinking, self-reflective mind, even as he sees a space in which he does not have to identify with it. Again, that spaciousness is "what makes room for all the universe inside of you, all the endless inbent fractals of connection and symphonies of voices, the infinities you can never show another soul" (Wallace 179). Neal comes to see at the never-passing moment of his death that the ego and its performance are not fraudulent but instead make up the social surface of human interaction. This flip of perspective overrides the presumption that one should hopefully be "happy and unreflective" (181), which ostensibly seems to be the most auspicious disposition, as well overturns the guilt felt

for having the “ability to manipulate images” of yourself for the eyes of others (162), which rather than being an act of fraudulence, Neal now calls acts of “free will” (179).

In “Good Old Neon,” the protagonist experiences perhaps the most dramatic epiphany of the characters thus far discussed, but he also commits to the most dramatic life choice. The story promises the most cherished afterlife myth, where upon death no divine punishment is visited upon the deceased, and the nature of time is itself revealed. This is the permanent state of satisfaction and transcendent knowledge pursued in life by the characters of the texts in this project. Yet, however Pollyannaish Wallace’s story ends, this enlightenment experience lies beyond the human experience—his narrator must be speaking to the reader as a soul rather than as a mind or body. The other characters discussed herein, excepting Beckett’s nameless narrator, walk among the living and are barred from such an experience. But in this and the other texts, we come to see just how truly human the quest for transcendence is; we also see how frustrating it can be if one expects to come to a point of resolution that brings the repose of finality during his or her life. And while no ultimate knowledge is achievable—the TRUTH sought by western philosophy remains deferred unchangeably—an individual can unlock a small change in perspective: rather than identify with the holographic reality of language, with an “I” that exists only as a symbol in thought, the practice of embodied non-representational awareness roots one in the transient and inscrutable existence of the human form.

## Works Cited

- Adelman, Gary. *Naming Beckett's Unnamable*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2004. Print.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. Print.
- Aldiss, Brian. *Barefoot in the Head*. London: Faber & Faber, 1969. Print.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. "Elizabeth Bishop and Containment Policy." *American Literature*. 75: 4 (December 2003): 843-867. *Project MUSE*. Web. 3 May 2014.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould, Camille Roman, and Thomas Travisano. *The New Anthology of American Poetry: Modernisms 1900-1950*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005. Print.
- Baldick, Chris. "Lawrence's critical and cultural legacy." *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*. Ed. Anne Fernihough. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 253-269. Print.
- Bataille, Georges. "The Pineal Gland." Allan Stoekl 79-90.
- . "The Sacred Conspiracy." Allan Stoekl 178-181.
- . *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Ed. Allan Stoekl. Trans. Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1985. 178-181. Print.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. "A Sociological Theory of Postmodernity." *Intimations of Postmodernity*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 187-204. Print.
- . *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*. New York: New York UP, 1997. Print.
- The Beatles. "Tomorrow Never Knows." By John Lennon and Paul McCartney. *Revolver*. Parlophone, 1966. Album.
- Beck, Charlotte Joko with Steve Ray. *Nothing Special: Living Zen*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 2; Volumes 1941-1956*. Eds. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print.
- . *Murphy*. New York: Grove Press, 1957. Print.
- . "The Unnamable." *Three Novels*. New York: Grove Press, 1958. Print. 289-414.

- . *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, 1954. Print.
- Bills, Roger. "Traveller or tourist? Jack Kerouac and the commodification of culture." *Dialectical anthropology*. 34.3 (2010): 395-417. Web. 19 June 2013.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. "The Man-Moth." *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1983. Print.
- . "On 'The Man-Moth.'" *Poet's Choice*. Eds. Paul Engle and Joseph Langland. New York: Dial, 1962. Print.
- Bonds, Diane S. *Language and the Self in D. H. Lawrence*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987. Print.
- Boon, Marcus. *The Road of Excess*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Bouchard, Donald F. *Hemingway: So Far From Simple*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2001. Print.
- Brown, Norman O. *Love's Body*. New York: Vintage, 1966. Print.
- Burack, Charles. *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*. New York: Palgrave, 2005. Print.
- Burke, Richard Maurice. *Cosmic Consciousness*. New York: Causeway Books, 1974. Print.
- Burns, Aidan. *Nature and Culture in D. H. Lawrence*. Totowa: Barnes & Nobles Books, 1981. Print.
- Burton, Stacy. *Travel Narrative and the Ends of Modernity*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2014. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage International, 1991. Print.
- Carter, Angela. *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
- Castaneda, Carlos. *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1998. Print.
- Champney, Freeman. "Beat-Up or Beatific." *The Antioch Review* 19.1 (Spring 1959): 114-121. JSTOR. Web. 19 June 2013.



- Colwell, Anne. *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997. Print.
- Corso, Gregory. *The Happy Birthday of Death*. New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1960. Print.
- . "Last Night I Drove a Car." *Gasoline*. Intro. Allen Ginsberg. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1958. Print.
- . "Marriage." *The Happy Birthday of Death*.
- . "Transformation & Escape." *The Happy Birthday of Death*.
- Cronin, Anthony. *The Last Modernist*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997. Print.
- Dass, Ram. *Be Here Now*. San Cristobal: Lama Foundation, 1971. Print.
- Davies, Paul. "Three novels and four *nouvelles*: giving up the ghost be born at last." *The Cambridge Companion to Becket*. Ed. John Pilling. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. 43-66. Print.
- Davis, Murray S. *Smut: Erotic Reality/ Obscene Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.
- Dennis, Helen M. "Bishop and the Negative Sublime." *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*. Ed. Kelly Lionel. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 53-64. Print.
- Department of Asian Art. "Zen Buddhism." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. Web. 1 April 2014.
- Doreski, C.K. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language*. New York; Oxford UP, 1993. Print.
- Doyle, Jennifer. *Sex Objects*. Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Print.
- Dumoulin, Heinrich. *Zen Enlightenment: Origins and Meaning*. New York: Weatherhill Inc., 1993. Print.
- Essif, Les. "Introducing the 'Hyper' Theatrical Subject: The Mise en Abyme of Empty Space." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. 9:1 (1994): 67-86. Web. 19 Oct 2013.

- Faraone, Mario. "Pity we haven't a piece of rope: Beckett, Zen and the Lack of the Piece of Rope." *The Tragic Comedy of Samuel Beckett: "Beckett in Rome" 17-19 April 2008*. Ed. Daniela Guardamanga and Rossana M. Sebellin. Rome: Università degli Studi di Roma, 2009. 156-173. Web. 8 March 2013.
- Flora, Joseph M. *Hemingway's Nick Adams*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982. Print.
- Foster, Paul. *Beckett and Zen*. London: Wisdom Publications, 1989. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "Language to Infinity." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977. Print.
- Freedman, Carl. *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 2000. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Ego and the Id." *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1995. Print.
- . *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Gaggin, John. *Hemingway and Nineteenth-Century Aestheticism*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988. Print.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- Giles, Todd. "Upsidedown like fools?: Jack Kerouac's "Desolation Blues" and the Struggle for Enlightenment." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 53:2 (Summer 2011): 179-206. *Project MUSE*. Web. 18 June 2013.
- Gillette, Kyle. "Zen and the Art of Self-Negation in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*." *Comparative Drama* 46.3 (2012): 283-302. *Project MUSE*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.
- Ginsberg, Allen. "Negative Capability: Kerouac's Buddhist Ethic." *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School*. Ed. Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. 364-375. Print.
- Grimes, Larry E. *The Religious Design of Hemingway's Early Fiction*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985. Print.
- Hakutani, Yoshinobu. "Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Imagism." *Modernity in East-West Literary Criticism*. Ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani 63-86.
- . "W. B. Yeats, Modernity, and the *Nob* Play." *Modernity in East-West Literary Criticism*. Ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani 23-40.

- . "Yone Noguchi's Poetry: From Whitman to Zen." *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22.1, East-West Issue (Spring, 1985). Penn State UP. 67-79. Web. 12 July 2012.
- , ed. *Modernity in East-West Literary Criticism*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2001. Print.
- Hayles, Katherine N. *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.
- He, Yuehin. "Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain." Ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff 45-62.
- Heidenry, John. *What Wild Ecstasy: The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon*. New York: Scribner's, 1932. Print.
- . *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner's, 1958. Print.
- . "On Writing." *Complete Short Stories*. New York: Scribner's, 1972. Print.
- Hesse, Herman. *Siddhartha*. Trans. Hilda Rosner. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1951. Print.
- "Hinayana Buddhism." *The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism*. Soka Gakkai International. Web. 30 Nov 2013.
- Huxley, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print.
- Jackson, Carl T. "The Counterculture Looks East: Beat Writers and Asian Religion." *American Studies* 29.1 (Spring 1988): 51-70. Web. 8 June 2013.
- . "D.T. Suzuki, 'Suzuki Zen,' and the American Reception of Zen Buddhism." Storhoff and Whalen-Bridge 39-56.
- Jones, Amelia. *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004. Print.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1916. Print.
- . *Ulysses*. New York: Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1922. Print.
- Katz, Daniel. *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999. Print.

- Kerouac, Jack. *Dharma Bums*. New York: Signet, 1958. Print.
- . *Mexico City Blues*. New York: Grove, 1959. Print.
- Koller, John M. "Ox-herding: Stages of Zen Practice." *ExEAS Teaching Materials*. Columbia University, n.d. Web. 11 November 2013.
- LaChapelle, Dolores. *D. H. Lawrence Future Primitive*. Vol. 5. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1996. Print.
- Lachman, Gary. *A Dark Muse: A History of the Occult*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Print.
- Lamb, Robert Paul. *Art Matters: Hemingway, Craft, and the Creation of the Modern Short Story*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2010. Print.
- Laqueur, Thomas W. *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. New York: Zone Books, 2003. Print.
- Latham, Rob. "Bisexuality in New Wave SF." *Science Fiction Studies*. 36.3 (Nov 2009): 555-562. JSTOR. Web. 1 May 2013.
- Lattin, Don. *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: how Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Ray, and Andrew Weil killed the fifties and ushered in a new age for America*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. Print.
- Lawrence, D. H. *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*. 2 vols. Ed. Harry T. Moore. New York: Viking Press, 1962. Print.
- . *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Florence: Tipografia Giuntina, 1928. Print.
- . *St. Mawr & The Man Who Died*. New York: Vintage, 1953. Print.
- Leary, Timothy. "The Seven Tongues of God." *The Politics of Ecstasy*. Berkeley: Ronin Publishing, 1998. 13-58. Print.
- Leary, Timothy, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert. *The Psychedelic Experience*. Intro. Daniel Pinchbeck. New York: Citadel Press, 1992. Print.
- Leggett, Trevor, ed. *A First Zen Reader*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1960. Print.
- Lenson, David. *On Drugs*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. Print.
- Levy, Eric P. *Trapped in Thought: A Study of Beckettian Mentality*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2007. Print.

- Lombardi, Marilyn May. "Abnormal Thirst: Addiction and the *Poète Maudit*." *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992. 104-133. Print.
- Loots, Christopher. "The *Ma* of Hemingway: Interval, absence, and Japanese Esthetics in *In Our Time*." *Hemingway Review* 29:2 (Spring 2010): 74-88. *Project MUSE*. Web. 30 July 2012.
- Loy, David R. Book Review of *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities* by Robert G. Morrison. *Asian Philosophy*. 8.2 (July 1998): 129-131. Web. 10 November 2013.
- Lyotard, Jean François. *Libidinal Economy*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. London: Athlone Press, 1993. Print.
- Lutz, Tom. *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers and Bums in America*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2006. Print.
- Maltby, Paul. *The Visionary Moment. A Postmodern Critique*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002. Print.
- "The man from the town of Roaring Tiger (TA)." *The Age* (26 May 2001). *Canada Tibet Committee*. Web. 12 June 2014.
- Marx, Edward. "A Slightly-Open Door: Yone Noguchi and the Invention of the English Haiku." *Genre* 39 (Fall 2006): 107-126. Web. 6 October 2012.
- . "What about My Songs?: Yone Noguchi in the West." Ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani 41-62.
- Masatsugu, Michael K. "Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence?: Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years." *Pacific Historical Review* 77.3 (August 2008): 423-451. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 June 2013.
- McAvan, Emily. *The Postmodern Sacred: Popular Culture Spirituality in the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Urban Fantasy Genres*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2012. Print.
- McCracken, Grant. *Transformations: Identity Construction in Contemporary Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008. Print.
- McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Miner, Earl. *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*. Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1976. Print.

- Mortenson, Erik. *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011. Print.
- . "Keeping Vision Alive: The Buddhist Stillpoint in the Work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg." Ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff 123-137.
- Nadel, Alan. *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. Print.
- Nakjavani, Erik. "The Aesthetics of Silence: Hemingway's 'The Art of The Short Story.'" *Hemingway Review* 3:2 (1984): 38-45. EBSCO. Web. 30 July 2012.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. Trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1969. Print.
- "Nirvana." OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. Web. 8 March 2013.
- Noguchi, Yone. "A Japanese on Some English Poets." *The Living Age*. 8<sup>th</sup> Series, Vol III. Boston: The Living Age Company, 1916. Print.
- . "From *Seen & Unseen*." *Selected English Writings of Yone Noguchi*. Intro. Gelett Burgess. Vol. 1. Ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani. Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1990. 55-74. Print.
- . "From *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*." *Selected English Writings of Yone Noguchi*. Vol. 2. Ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani. Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1990. 55-98. Print.
- Odin, Steve. *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. Print.
- Olson, Carl. *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy: Two Paths of Liberation from the Representational Mode of Thinking*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Print.
- Olson, Gregory. *Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. Print.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Print.
- Parsons, William B. "Psychoanalysis Meets Buddhism: The Development of a Dialogue." *Changing the Scientific Study of Religion: Beyond Freud?: Theoretical, Empirical and Clinical Studies from Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. Ed. Jacob A. Belzen. New York: Springer, 2009: 179-210. Print.

- Patterson, Anita. "Global America Revisited: Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Modernist Japonisme." *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 33 (2011): 53-69. *Nanzan University Center for American Studies*. Web. 6 October 2012.
- Pearlman, Ellen. "My Lunch with Mihoko." *Storhoff and Whalen-Bridge* 57-66.
- Peters, Jeremy W. "The Birth of 'Just Do It' and Other Magic Words." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company. 20 August 2009. Web. 1 Dec 2013.
- Pinchbeck, Daniel. *Breaking Open the Head*. New York: Broadway Books, 2002. Print.
- . "Introduction" (2007). *The Psychedelic Experience*. ix-xix
- Poplawski, Paul. "St. Manr and the Ironic Art of Realization." *Writing the Body in D. H. Lawrence: Essays on Language, Representation, and Sexuality*. Ed. Paul Poplawski. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001. 93-104. Print.
- Pound, Ezra. "How I Began." *T.P.'s Weekly*. 21.552. (6 June 1913): 707. Print.
- . "A Retrospect." Ed. James Scully. *Modern Poetics*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965. Print.
- . "Vorticism." *The Fortnightly Review*. 96 [n.s.] (1 September 1914): 461-471. Web. 29 September 2013.
- Pull My Daisy*. Dir. Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie. 1959. Film.
- Ramazani, Jahan, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. "Elizabeth Bishop." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol. 2*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. 15-17. Print.
- Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.
- Rosenow, Ce. "Fenollosa's Legacy: The Japanese Network of Ezra Pound." *Philological Quarterly* 85:3-4 (Summer-Fall 2006): 371-389. *EBSCO*. Web. 30 July 2012.
- Saldahna, Arun. "The LSD-Event: Badiou Not on Acid." *Theory & Event* 10:4 (2007). Johns Hopkins UP. *Project MUSE*. Web. 13 May 2013.
- Schiller, David. *The Little Zen Companion*. New York: Workman Publishing, 1994. Print.
- Seager, Richard Hughes. *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Shakespeare, Alex. "The Names of River and the Names of Birds: Ezra Pound, Louis Agassiz, and the 'Luminous Detail' in Hemingway's Early Fiction." *The Hemingway Review*. 30.2 (Spring 2011): 36-53. *Project Muse*. Web. 8 October 2013.

- Shakespeare, William. "Romeo and Juliet." *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. Ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan. Thompson Learning: London, 2002. 1007-1040. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Lift not the painted veil which those who live." *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904. 630. Print.
- Skau, Michael. "*A Clown in a Grave*": *Complexities and Tensions in the Works of Gregory Corso*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. Print.
- Smelser, Neil. *The Odyssey Experience: Physical, Social, Psychological, and Spiritual Journeys*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Print.
- Stephenson, Gregory. *The Daybreak Boys*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990. 74-89. Print.
- Stevens, Jay. *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*. New York: Harpers & Row, 1987. Print.
- Stone, Robert. *Dog Soldiers*. Boston: Houghton Miffler, 1974. Print.
- Storhoff, Gary and John Whalen-Bridge, eds. *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. Print.
- Strychacz, Thomas. "In Our Time, out of season." *The Cambridge Companion to Ernest Hemingway*. Ed. Scott Donaldson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. 55-86. Print.
- Suzuki, D.T. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Fore. Carl Jung. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1964. Print.
- Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Pref. Huston Smith. Boston: Shambala, 2011. Print.
- Tajiri, Yoshiki. *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism*. New York: Palgrave, 2007. Print.
- Takahashi, Yasunari. "On 'Mindlessness': Beckett, Japan, and the Twentieth Century." *Samuel Beckett Today / Ajournd'hui*, Vol. 11 (2001), 37-41. Web. 4 March 2013.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*. Ed. William Rossi. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008. Print.
- Tonkinson, Carole. "Buddhism & the Beat Generation." *Tricycle*. The Tricycle Foundation. Fall 1995. Web. 5 Dec 2013.



- , ed. *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995. Print.
- Trungpa, Chögyam. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Boston: Shambhala, 1973. Print.
- Tworkov, Helen. *Zen in America: Five Teachers and the Search for American Buddhism*. New York: Kodansha International, 1994. Print.
- Van Hulle, Dirk. "Modernism, Mind, and Manuscripts." *A Handbook of Modernist Studies*. Ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 225-238. Print.
- Vassi, Marco. *The Stoned Apocalypse*. New York: Pocket Book, 1973. Print.
- Vassi, Marco and Jerry Stahl. "Marco Vassi: Interviewed by Jerry Stahl." *The Transatlantic Review* 58/59 (February 1977): 110-113. JSTOR. Web. 1 May 2013.
- Wallace, David Foster. "Good Old Neon." *Oblivion*. New York: Bay Back Books, 2004. 141-181. Print.
- Watts, Alan. "Beat Zen, Square Zen, Zen." *This Is It* 77-110
- . *Nature, Man and Woman*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.
- . "The Second Immortal." *Become What You Are*. Boston: Shambhala, 2003. 90-96. Print.
- . "Spirituality and Sensuality." *This Is It* 111-123.
- . *This Is It*. New York: Vintage, 1973. Print.
- . *The Way of Zen*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Whalen-Bridge, John and Gary Storhoff, eds. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. Print.
- Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York: Picador, 1968. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1981. Print.