

Enchanted Modernisms: Global Literary Afterlives of the Spirit, 1922–1949

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Abstract

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This dissertation focuses on the persistence of spirituality as an active, constitutive force in the literary productions of modernism and modernity on a global scale. Its key objectives are twofold: first, to demonstrate that the secularization thesis historically prevalent in critical narratives on literary modernism is a partial account, belying the continuation of matters of the spirit as enduring and dynamic presences in the modern world. Even in the wake of proverbial pronouncements of the death of God, this modern world is not one that is wholly and irrevocably disenchanted. Rather, due to the extreme unevenness of processes of secularization and disenchantment across the globe, the question of the death of God is not a consensus, but an animated site of contestation and considerably varied viewpoints. While I maintain this contention is true even within the canonical archive of modernism, the need to reassess and

nuance the secularization thesis is particularly imperative following the impact of New Modernism Studies and the increasing popularity of global modernism as a structuring framework. As the field continues its endeavors to expand its archive and modes of reading—especially into literary cultures in which secularization has been contentious, uneven, or inapplicable—the myth of a disenchanted modern world increasingly loses its claim to authority. As such, this dissertation casts a wide net in the endeavor to illustrate the untenability of disenchantment as a universal narrative, drawing from various—and not mutually exclusive—arenas of literary production, e.g. Anglo-American modernism, Japanese modernism, Black modernism, queer modernism, and modern Latin American literature. The various analyses comprising this project altogether form a broader tableau that shows the breadth and depth of spirituality’s role in literary responses to modernity.

That being said, the second key objective of this project, arising from its affirmation of a post-secular modernist literary studies, is to further diversify and reassess narratives on the possible functions of the spiritual—what its politics may be, which endeavors it served, how writers related to and thought of it. Across the chapters of this dissertation, then, spirituality emerges as not exclusively a conservative or reactionary instrument, but also an instrument for modern and progressive pursuits; not inherently normative or disciplinary, but also antinomian and insurgent—in certain cases, even, illustrating the porosity and instability of such divides. Authors moreover oriented themselves not just negatively toward spirituality, but positively and generatively as well—as, in all, a force not disengaged from the material world, but deeply implicated in its concerns—a means to variously explore, critique, affirm, imagine, and actualize paradigm shifts constitutive of modernity on matters such as, but not limited to, empiricism, empire, colonialism, race, culture, gender, and sexuality.

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Introduction

There is a popular legend well-circulated in Christian communities—indeed, a recurring tale in sermons and homilies up to our present moment—that centers on the Bolshevik revolutionary Nikolai Bukharin. In this tale, the Soviet politician and economic theorist is said to have been in the city of Kiev—some versions claim in the 1920s, others the 1930s—where he delivered an impassioned speech in condemnation of religion, excoriating the backwardness of the church and championing the triumph of an atheist state. As the story goes, after the speech concludes, a lone man—in some versions an Orthodox priest, often elderly—is said to have stood and proclaimed the following words: “*Khristos voskrese!*” Meaning “Christ is risen” in Church Slavonic, the phrase comes from the Eastern Orthodox Paschal greeting, an Easter custom in which the addressee responds with the phrase “*voistinu voskrese,*” in English, “truly, He has risen.” Legend has it that the crowd amassed before Bukharin, on hearing this Paschal greeting, automatically intoned in unison: “*Voistinu voskrese!*”

Though the tale is fascinating, it is also historically unverified—indeed, likely an outright fabrication. While Bukharin was both a skilled orator and prolific writer, he is not regarded as a noteworthy mouthpiece for the cause of state atheism in his time. There is an interesting surviving artifact involving Bukharin and the church, however, in the form of a 1923 political cartoon in the *Rabochaya Gazeta*, a Soviet newspaper and Bolshevik organ, which juxtaposes his figure with the institution of Eastern Orthodoxy. Taking the form of a diptych, on the left-hand side is an elderly Orthodox priest, whose face bears a sinister expression, clutching the Sacred Scripture in his hands. Before him is a group of devotees bent over in worship, assumedly of the peasant class, based on the spotted headcloths of the women and patched trousers of one of the men. On the right-hand side of the diptych is the proud and smiling Bukharin, standing

behind an enormous anvil. In one hand he brandishes a hammer; in the other he wields *The ABC of Communism*, the 1919 Bolshevist treatise which he co-authored as a manual for the Russian proletariat. As the priest's Bible has on its cover the Orthodox Cross, while on Bukharin's text is the emblem of the hammer and sickle, the image starkly portrays a war of dueling ideologies old and new taking place in the socio-political landscape. Considering the illustration's publication venue, one may read its commentary as the proclamation of a new, invigorated faith to supersede that of an old, degenerate regime—and, in doing so, to liberate the masses from their subjugated state under the rule of an archaic, oppressive institution.

While the former artifact is an unverified folktale, the latter an artistic representation with overt political leanings, each bears a sense of truthfulness as representations of a key ideological conflict animating their moment: the place of the church as the historical site of institutional divine sovereignty amidst the inauguration of a modern, revolutionary state. The extent to which they represent the furthestmost opposing viewpoints on the matter is clear: as the folktale professes that the people's faith in the power of a Christian god endures even under the reign of an anti-religious modern state, the latter proclaims the power of that modern state to free the people from the fetters of an antiquated belief system in the pursuit of progress—to dethrone and replace the authority that religious order once had with a secular order that aligns with the values of a modern age. The early Soviet Union is indeed known for its anti-clerical initiatives as a constitutive part of its revolutionary programme to liberate the masses. Hence Lenin, playing on the Marxian adage of religion as the proverbial opium of the people, proclaims the church a key mechanism for capitalist exploitation of the working class: a “spiritual booze,” a form of “oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people,” in which those “who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient

while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward.”¹ Rather than persisting in the deluded condition which the smoke-and-mirrors world of the spiritual conjures with its imaginary gods and monsters, the figure of the unfettered modern proletarian is firmly grounded in the material affairs of the here-and-now—one who “contemptuously casts aside religious prejudices, leaves heaven to the priests and bourgeois bigots, and tries to win a better life for himself here on earth.”² This proletarian is moreover a rational subject guided by the modern values of empiricism and reason over superstition, in alignment with the ethic of the socialism that Lenin envisions, “which enlists science in the battle against the fog of religion, and frees the workers from their belief in life after death by welding them together to fight in the present for a better life on earth.”³ On this basis, Lenin calls for the establishment of a secular state in which the spiritual must retreat from the sphere of public affairs:

“Religion must be of no concern to the state, and religious societies must have no connection with governmental authority. Everyone must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases, or no religion whatever, i.e., to be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule. Discrimination among citizens on account of their religious convictions is wholly intolerable. Even the bare mention of a citizen’s religion in official documents should unquestionably be eliminated.”⁴

The above mentality that Lenin propounds is indeed a familiar one for the typical modern subject: a separation of church and state—indeed, an ethic of religious freedom—rooted in an Enlightenment rhetoric of free-thinking rationality and personal sovereignty. In his estimation, such a move thereby necessitates the total erasure of religious thought and identity from public life, even the “bare mention” of it. The material and spiritual thus manifest as sharply demarcated ideological realms; religious subjecthood must have no bearing on political

¹ Lenin, 83.

² Ibid., 84.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

subjecthood, and vice versa. His treatise in fact encapsulates multiple popular definitions of the principle of secularity: denotatively, that which is concerned exclusively with earthly, imminent affairs—i.e., material affairs—and, connotatively, a distinctively modern viewpoint which affirms the retreat of the spiritual from public life. Interestingly, however, even as the advent of this secular state is heralded, complications are already manifest in its very utterance: while each member of the polity “must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases,” members of a certain party within that polity must be atheist “as a rule.”

The point of my discussing these various textual artifacts is, of course, not to poke holes in the principles of religious freedom or the separation between church and state. It is rather to ultimately underscore that the process of secularization inaugurated by modernity is not a one-and-done affair. To return to the folktale I open with, while its currency is due largely to its sentimental appeal as a testament to the endurance of faith—indeed, often as ammunition for the purpose of evangelism—it is for my project a compelling illustration of the persistence of the spiritual as a habituated component of a given socio-cultural fabric at one point ordered according to a religious framework. If there was ever a crowd of Kievans who uttered the phrase “*voistinu voskrese*” before a prominent member of the Politburo and an editor of *Pravda*, perhaps some would mean it as a willful proclamation of faith, yet others would say it simply because they, and perhaps their forebears, had always done so. In other words, in the modern vision that Lenin here propounds, though religious institutions “should become absolutely free associations of like-minded citizens,” whose members personally elect to participate in them as free-thinking individuals, the religious impulse is not always something willed.⁵ Rather, manifestations of the divine and the spiritual as shaping sociological forces—as well as belief in

⁵ Ibid.

these forces—ineluctably persist into the modern age in spite of their pronounced disavowal. It is this accretion of the spirit in the archaeology of modernity—especially as it manifests and discursively operates in literatures of the early to mid-twentieth century across the globe—that constitutes the overall focus of my study: the global modernist literary afterlives of the spiritual which, I ultimately argue, attest to spirituality as a constitutive force in the modern era rather than a vestigial one. Indeed, even in spite of its overt anti-clerical leanings, the *Rabochaya Gazeta* illustration speaks meaningfully to this persistence. Considering its representation of communism as the immanent creed to take the place of the discredited church in the hearts of the people, it is a testimony to the transfiguration of the spiritual impulse into new doctrines outfitted according to the style of the moment. While these doctrines bear modern sensibilities and speak to modern values, they are nonetheless ideologically operant as ordering principles to which a collective unified by shared beliefs ascribes—in other words, a church, in the Durkheimian sense of the term. That being said, this project maintains as a foundational premise that the secular is not a universal condition to which modern civilization has arrived, but rather operates as its own discourse—as Talal Asad writes, its own “political doctrine,” and one that is centrally implicated in the pursuit of modernity as a “political-economic project” which endeavors to realize the broad-scale adoption of classical liberal values.⁶

As such, I aver that the spiritual engagements in key modernist literary productions demonstrate that the dynamic between the spiritual and the secular is not a foregone conflict in which the latter triumphs over the former. Instead, my analyses of these works invite a reassessment of this dynamic, as well as of the possible functions of the secular and the spiritual in modernity. Collectively, these studies forward the literatures they engage with as sites not only

⁶ Asad, 56, 14.

in which the spiritual and the secular are thoroughly competing discourses, but also in which the spiritual is a constitutive part of the various literary projects developing across the globe in response to its uneven, varied, yet widespread modernization. With an eye to the field of modernist literary studies, I center the following questions: how does critical attention to these spiritual afterlives contribute to the reevaluation of what constitutes a work of literary modernism, as well as how a work of literary modernism operates—especially considering the ongoing endeavors to diversify both the archive of the field, as well as the ways of reading texts long regarded as part of that archive? With another eye to the study of literature and religion, moreover, I pose the following: in what ways does the consideration of modernist literature as a generative site of inquiry contribute to the conversations on modernity and secularization? Indeed, prevailing views on literary modernism both within the field and outside of it tend to maintain its exemplification of the secularization thesis—a term that describes, as Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart write, “the slow and steady death of religion” that foregrounds secularism as a constitutive process of modernity, one of the “key historical revolutions transforming medieval agrarian societies into modern industrial nations.”⁷ Critical surveys on literary modernism accordingly foreground an acute sense of metaphysical disillusionment as a distinguishing characteristic of the age—as Michael Levenson describes it, for instance, a “milieu of crisis” largely populated with “figures of nihilism, of degeneration and despair” due to the various existential quandaries posed by the “loss of faith; the groundlessness of value, the violence of war, and a nameless, faceless anxiety” writ large.⁸ Regarding this loss of faith, one does not need to journey far into the archive to find evidence for it: all three titans of canonical modern thought, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, each proclaimed a twilight of the gods according

⁷ Norris and Inglehart, 3.

⁸ Levenson, 5.

to their respective preoccupations and sensibilities. As the Marxian adage of religion as the opiate of the masses has already been mentioned, the Nietzschean proclamation of the death of God in *The Gay Science* is just as much invoked as axiomatic of the modern zeitgeist. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud likewise participates in the disenchantment of the divine through the alternate historiography of the Mosaic legend that he forwards. As he postulates that “religious phenomena are to be understood only on the model of the neurotic symptoms of the individual [...] as a return of long forgotten important happenings in the primaeval history of the human family,” so too does he affirm the power of scientific discourse to demystify the spiritual, whose machinations the methodology of psychoanalysis may readily pathologize and therefore master.⁹

And yet, even within such paradigmatic statements are vital nuances that preclude straightforward answers to the questions of secularization and disenchantment. In its full context, for instance, while Marx’s famous proclamation of religion as the “opium of the people” in the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* is very much critically-oriented, there is a multi-dimensionality to his manner of speaking on the subject that the phrase’s ubiquitous reproduction often belies. In spite of the connotations of stigma that the symbolization of opium evokes as an addictive and readily abused substance, it is largely opium’s function as a form of palliative care rather than curative treatment that makes it a particularly apt metaphor for his line of inquiry. If material exploitation is the pain-inducing condition that afflicts the social body, then religion as “opium” gestures to the practice of addressing the symptoms as opposed to the root cause, a point which forms the substance of his critique:

“*Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. [...] It is the *opium* of the people. [...] To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that*

⁹ Freud, 94.

requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.”¹⁰

From this excerpt, what emerges is a more measured awareness and assessment of the religious tendency as a response to “real suffering.” As such, while Marx calls on the people “to give up their illusions” in the form of organized religion, the foremost object of his excoriation is the “condition that requires illusions” to begin with, the “vale of tears” that gives rise to religion, “the halo.” There is likewise a tonal complexity underlying the hallmark Nietzschean lyric of *The Gay Science*: “God is dead: but as the human race is constituted, there will perhaps be caves for millenniums yet, in which people will show his shadow. And we—we have still to overcome his shadow!” While the phrase is so often construed as a nihilistic lament, the mood of Nietzsche’s pronouncements is at once thoroughly laced with a Dionysian spirit of affirmation, a titular gay science evocative of the troubadour poetic tradition to which it gestures.

My point in these reflections is not to make the argument that Nietzsche is actually saying that God is not *not* dead, or that religion to Marx is not an illusion—although he does recognize a certain realness to religion, in a manner of speaking—but to illustrate that master narratives on modernity such as that of a spiritually-alienated, disenchanted modern world are difficult to firmly sustain in practice. Moreover, it is vital to note that while the perspectives of hallmark thinkers in the canonical Western history of ideas are indeed representative of a prevalent sensibility on a given matter, they are not comprehensive or definitive testimonials. Rather, they are one sector of a burgeoning and poly-vocal arena which the varied intellectual and creative productions of the modern era altogether constitute. As Levenson writes, the field over the past several decades has “been moving to a dramatically enlarged perception of the range and reach of cultural activity,” increasingly “revealed as a complex of inventive gestures, daring

¹⁰ Emphases in original.

performances, enacted also by many who were left out of account in the early histories, [...] sometimes congruent with one another, and just as often opposed or even contradictory.”¹¹ As such, in the past decade or so, a considerable body of criticism has emerged to reevaluate the prevailing critical consensus on the role of the spiritual and religion in the history of modern thought and modernist literature. Foremost among these critics is Pericles Lewis, who in his monograph *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010) inaugurates a paradigm shift on the extent to which religious affairs were a matter of interest to modernist writers. Indeed, Lewis affirms that an enduring preoccupation with the “image of the church as broken container of a sacred essence, which the author seeks to transmit in the frail vessel of the novel or poem,” led authors to generate “a modern form of sacred text, charged with the meaning and power that seemed to them to have evacuated the church buildings.”¹² These creative productions, moreover, were a means for their authors “to understand religious experience anew, in the light of their own experience of modernity and of the theories of their contemporaries. [...] to explain, and provide a substitute for, the sorts of shared normative values that institutional religion no longer adequately supplied.”¹³ In other words, and vital for my own purposes, religion was not an irrelevant matter in the process of reckoning with the modern condition through the literary—it was, in fact, conducive to that reckoning.

While Lewis’ work is the most well-known on the subject of religion in modernism, in the time both contiguous with and closely prior to his monograph’s publication, other critics were engaged with a particular arena of spiritual life in the modern era: the then under-considered prevalence of occult movements in Anglo-European culture. The work of historian

¹¹ Levenson, 3.

¹² Lewis, 4, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

Alex Owen in *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (2004) is definitive here, in which she focuses on the “emergence towards the end of the nineteenth century of a widespread engagement with occultism, mysticism, and, quite literally, magic,” ultimately arguing that “fin-de-siècle occultism not only addressed some of the central dilemmas of modernity but was itself constitutive or symptomatic of key elements of modern culture.”¹⁴ Indeed, her historiography illustrates that these turn-of-the-century occultists were thoroughly driven by the modern values of reason, mastery, and self-will, individuals who “co-opted the language of science and staked a strong claim to rationality while at the same time undermining scientific naturalism as a worldview and rejecting the rationalist assumptions upon which it depended.”¹⁵ So too did they consider themselves “an enlightened vanguard for whom conventional religion no longer answered,” developing a “spiritual alternative to religious orthodoxy, but one that ostensibly operated without the requirement of faith,” therein “refashioning spirituality in ways that were distinctly modern.”¹⁶ As such, their movement strove to reconcile that which they found recuperable in both spiritual tradition and rational modernity while redressing the limitations of each: “to mobilize a reworked notion of science in the name of the religion of the ancients [...] in which the universe and the place of humankind within it were rationalized but brought back into sharply spiritual focus.”¹⁷ Directly put, this history of British occultism ultimately illustrates not just that the modern can be spiritual, but also that the spiritual can be modern—all-in-all, questioning “the inevitability of religious decline” alongside a “straightforwardly triumphal march of scientific rationalism,” and demonstrating that “the search for spiritual meaning can renew itself and adapt to the changing climate of a secularizing

¹⁴ Owen, 6, 8.

¹⁵ Owen, 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12, 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

culture.”¹⁸ Work such as Owen’s thus prompts the *Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010) to include a contribution that engages with spirituality: Roger Luckhurst’s survey on occultism, spiritualism, and psychical research in British modernism, wherein he complicates what he terms the “compensation thesis” in the study of occult movements in the modern era, or a “generic crisis of faith account [which] will lump these practices together as indifferent eccentricities,” trivializing how “forms of modernism appeared in cultures that remained saturated with religious ideas, running across the spectrum.”¹⁹

Carrying on the work of these earlier publications, recent years have seen a continued emergence of critical studies on the dynamic between modernism/modernity and spirituality, clear testimony to its present status as an active and vibrant arena of inquiry. Indeed, some have now even spoken of a religious turn currently underway in the discipline, as Craig Woelfel and Jayme Stayer describe in their introduction to a special issue of *Renascence* (2021) on the very subject of religion and modernism. Here, it is in fact their main “thesis that, fragmented and partial though it may be, there is indeed a turn toward the religious to be rediscovered in modernist literature” and the “entire hidden history of interconnections between religion, modernism, and theory that is ripe for excavation.”²⁰ While still “fragmented and partial” in their estimation, the latest titles in this area of research demonstrate its rapid and ongoing development. Adding to the body of work on the preponderance of the occult in the Western history of ideas and of science, Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm’s *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (2017) is a noteworthy contribution to the conversation that critics such as Owen and Luckhurst have incited. In this wide-ranging study

¹⁸ Ibid., 13, 11.

¹⁹ Luckhurst, 431, 433.

²⁰ Woelfel and Stayer, 8, 6.

that challenges “the assumption of disenchantment,” Josephson-Storm provides “a novel history of the human sciences” that shows how the formation of key disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and even the natural sciences “occurred against a background of magic and religious revivals” which ultimately “undercut[s] the modernization thesis by revealing its paradoxical origins in the shared terrain between spiritualists, sorcerers, and scholars.”²¹

Even beyond the now-thriving realm of occult studies in modernism—a realm that has perhaps been the most active site of inquiry in the study of modernism/modernity and spirituality—critics have turned as well to the afterlives of other spiritual practices, even those which would be considered traditional institutions of religion rather than fringe. Here Steve Pinkerton’s *Blasphemous Modernism: The 20th-Century Word Made Flesh* (2017) is representative, forwarding blasphemy as a “defining mode of modernist literary production” in its focus on “modernism’s imaginative investments in, and often subversive reworkings of, theology and scripture.”²² Indeed, Pinkerton forwards such transgressive retoolings as a means for authors to challenge institutional authorities of many sorts, all-in-all representative of an antinomian sensibility long considered characteristic of modernism: “as modernist writers critique and reinscribe religious orthodoxy, they also expose the ideological complicities of ecclesiastical and more worldly institutions of power.”²³ Though he acknowledges that his study takes a “via negativa,” in which religion is a force to be subverted, he maintains that it nonetheless “complicates the popular narrative of religion’s inexorable decline in the modern world.”²⁴ As his analyses affirm that “God endures as a potent object of imaginative appropriation and profanation” in modernist literature, they are in “a perverse way the surest

²¹ Josephson-Storm, 18.

²² Pinkerton, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

proof of religion's abiding importance among the moderns. [...] Even as [modernist literature] profanes religious traditions and institutions, it also tacitly affirms their status as objects worthy of such profanation."²⁵ Indeed, in this present year, the publication of the *Edinburgh Companion to Modernism, Myth and Religion* (2023) unequivocally demonstrates the continued presence of spirituality as a considerable force in the modern era—a presence still producing and still in great need of further scholarly inquiry. As editors Suzanne Hobson and Andrew Radford remark, while “the modernist preoccupation with spirituality [...] has been erroneously construed as a retrograde cultural and aesthetic politics,” its multitudinous and diverse contributions underscore that modern engagements with the spiritual “aligned with a wide spectrum of political projects and opinions, frequently featuring as a source of cultural renewal or a means of imagining a better future,” indicating not just spirituality's persistence, but also its function as a *generative* modern force, not solely a force to be subverted or critiqued.²⁶

Informed by this considerable body of criticism, I forward my own project as a continuation of this ongoing and active conversation, as well as a contribution to the areas acknowledged to be in need of further investigation. As Hobson and Radford write in their introduction to the *Edinburgh Companion*: “Much more can be said on cultural modernism's links to a confluence of multidirectional and unbalanced worldwide power trends and relations,” in order “to stay attentive to the many ways that religion/s play into the field of unequal and uneven relations within and between nation-states, peoples and communities.”²⁷ Indeed, critics are aware that a bulk of the aforementioned criticism engages largely with canonical white Anglo-European authors, while the field as a whole has long been engaged with the process of

²⁵ Ibid., 2, 3.

²⁶ Hobson and Radford, 5.

²⁷ Ibid.

further diversifying, expanding, and politicizing its archive in what is now paradigmatically known as the new modernist studies. Most recently, Douglas Mao charts the historiography of this watershed process taken in “the lead of scholars who since the 1960s had been working to counter the marginalization of women writers, writers of color, lesbian and gay writers, and writers working outside Europe and North America.”²⁸ Such endeavors were at once additive as well as revisionist in their approaches: “to stimulate exploration of authors and artists whose works seemed modernist in form, or in dialogue with canonical modernist texts, but who had not received the level of attention accorded more prominent figures” and also to “study both new and old objects differently [...] to change the interpretive and evaluative lenses through which texts are read.”²⁹ In this spirit, each of the chapters in this project variously centers writers and works beyond the orbit of traditional Anglo-European modernism, drawing from a variety of national, cultural, and linguistic literary traditions of the modern era—Japanese modernism, Black modernism, Hispanophone modern literature, as well as queer modernism. In the sections where more “traditional” modernist works are brought into the conversation, moreover, I do so for the purpose of generating comparative analyses that situate these texts in broader, transnational networks rather than cultural hierarchies—or, to quote Mark Wollaeger in the introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, “understanding them as part of more inclusive systems of exchange, circulation, and multidirectional flows.”³⁰ My work here is thus an effort to contribute to the ongoing project of bringing the generative interventions of this new modernist sensibility into the study of modernism and spirituality.

²⁸ Mao, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

³⁰ Wollaeger, 14-5.

Indeed, such efforts to do so are already well underway; Pinkerton's *Blasphemous Modernism*, for one, features a study on key works of the New Negro Renaissance, which also appears in the aforementioned *Edinburgh Companion*. In the *Companion*, moreover, while Hobson and Radford describe the anthology as making "some small inroads into this area," included is not just Pinkerton's work, but also Matthew Mutter's study on Jean Toomer, Mafruha Mohua's research on T.S. Eliot and Rabindranath Tagore, as well as a dedicated section on queer modernist writers, among other compelling contributions.³¹ Moreover, in the *New Modernist Studies* collection, Susan Stanford Friedman presents a noteworthy chapter on religion and modernism, conducting two comparative analyses—one on Tagore and Forster, the other on Huda Shaarawi and H.D.—through a postcolonial studies lens, encouraging "direct engagement with questions of how religion figures into the workings of empire and the anti-colonial movements it spawned."³² Vitally, then, religion in modernism is as well an avenue to investigate literary productions' representations of "the inequities of imperial power, the history of European 'civilizing' missions, and the anti-colonial movements for liberation."³³ In my own study, I endeavor to generate similarly constructive conversations on how, contrary to the notion that the spiritual and the material are antithetical, the spiritual is in fact a key vehicle for each of the writers discussed to substantially engage with the socio-cultural balances and imbalances of power that their works respectively center on. In other words, the spiritual is a primary means for these writers to address, critique, and reckon with the various hegemonies in operation in their particular contexts, as well as to articulate various literary and political projects that speak to their given concerns as modern subjects—and here I find the axiomatic Warwick Research

³¹ Hobson and Radford, 5.

³² Friedman, 93.

³³ Ibid.

Collective refrain of a “modern capitalist world-system” to be useful in its “materialist basis for a revived literary comparativism.”³⁴

That being said, my approach in this project is very much informed by that of world literary approaches and the so-called global turn in modernist studies that now so greatly predominate the critical conversation. Indeed, it is a major contention of mine that, considering the unevenness of secularization as well as the varied persistence of enchanted worldviews across continents—proverbially “combined and uneven,” to gesture to the language of the Warwick Collective—not only does the world/global turn in fact call for a turn to the spiritual, but so too does a spiritual turn call for a turn to the global, world, transnational, and/or comparative. As Warwick writes that their theory of combined and uneven development was developed in order to address how, “even within capitalist or capitalising social formations,” and indeed within modernizing social formations, “vast rural populations continued to ground the persistence not only of earlier economic conditions, but also of social relations, cultural practices and psychic dispositions,” I highlight the “psychic disposition” of spirituality, in particular belief in an enchanted world, as a prime manifestation of this phenomenon.³⁵ Through my focus on the afterlives and transformations of the spiritual across numerous social formations as they manifest in the realm of literary production, these spiritual engagements emerge as arenas of contestation and invention in response to modernization and its material underpinnings in such regimes of power as empire, colonialism, racial capitalism, and sexual reproduction. In their introduction to the recent *Global Modernists on Modernism* anthology, moreover, Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross in their compelling “ten theses” on global modernism underscore as one of their tenets that

³⁴ WReC, 7.

³⁵ WReC, 10.

“revitalization of tradition is as important for modernism as the break with the past or the demand for absolute novelty.”³⁶ On this point, Moody and Ross elaborate that in the historically-termed “peripheral and semiperipheral zones” with which global modernism engages, “as modernism becomes bound up with anti-colonial nationalisms that demand a strong national tradition to wield against the threat of foreign influence or occupation” the “push to make tradition new becomes one of the guiding pressures of many if not most modernist positions around the world. Tradition therefore becomes a site of ideological struggle.”³⁷ As Moody and Ross foreground that the modernist “commitment to novelty [...] sits alongside an equally strong commitment to tradition, as writers seek to recast, invent, or sustain their own cultural heritage in the face of modernity’s demand for transformation,” so too in each chapter are instances in which spiritual traditions are mobilized and reimagined in the ideological struggles in which they are variously enmeshed.

On that note, each chapter stands as a case study in support of this overarching project which affirms the significance of spirituality as a constitutive force in a global modernist critical practice—especially of belief in the spiritual, as I address presently. They proceed as follows: my first chapter undertakes a transnational study on the figure of the psychic across Anglo-American and Japanese modernisms. Through a comparative analysis of Madame Sosostriis in T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, the palm reader Pilar Ternera in Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and the spirit medium, or *miko*, in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s “Yabu no Naka” (tr. “In a Grove”), I forward a reading of the psychic as embodiment of each author’s critique against processes of accelerated modernization as they manifested in their respective cultural and historical contexts. For each writer, I argue that the figure of the psychic was not a laughable one, but one who

³⁶ Moody and Ross, 12.

³⁷ Ibid.

possessed considerable power in her divinatory abilities; as such, each text constitutes an affirmation of alternate epistemologies to counter what each deemed to be the darker sides of modernity and their accompanying crises. My second chapter shifts focus to the Americas, engaging with representations of spirituality in the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Alejo Carpentier. For Hurston, charting the presence of U.S. Hoodoo and Haitian *Vodou* across key titles in both her fiction and anthropological writing, I forward the importance of spirituality as an agentive force in her articulation of a Black modernist literary project. My analysis on Carpentier centers on his engagement with a syncretic *Vodou* in his iconic novella *El reino de este mundo* (tr. *The Kingdom of This World*), namely as a site to contemplate the formation of both a Latin American modern literary tradition and cultural imaginary. Lastly, my third chapter takes up the unlikely yet recurrent pairing of Catholicism and queer modernist literature. Here, I first consider Djuna Barnes' religious engagements in *Ladies Almanack* and *Nightwood*, forwarding her retooling of Catholic iconography and ritual as a means to critique heteropatriarchal regimes of power. I then move to Radclyffe Hall's Catholicism as it manifests in *The Well of Loneliness*, in which Catholic imagery, devotional practice, and theology serve as central vehicles for her articulation of a politics of queer acceptance. Together, these analyses demonstrate what I ultimately argue is the constitutive presence of Catholicism in the construction of a queer modernist literary tradition.

I want to highlight that in each of these chapters, central are not only representations of spiritual culture generally speaking, but also and more specifically investments in the power of the spirit that belief in an enchanted world affords. Indeed, this emphasis on belief is another key distinguishing element of my project. In the extant criticism on spirituality in modernism, much of it centers on texts that demonstrate a preoccupation with the spiritual, yet do not ascribe to the

view of spiritual forces as active presences in the material world—in other words, they are unbelieving rather than believing. Lewis’ monograph is one such instance, in which he forwards the modernist novel as representative of what he terms a “secular sacred, a form of transcendent or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world, without reference to the supernatural.”³⁸ As Lewis describes the modern world of these novelists as one in which both “belief and disbelief in a supernatural God have gone,” they must shift “the forces of enchantment from the public forum of churches to the private world of individual experience, which is the precinct of the modern novel.”³⁹ My project is thus also a contribution to the critical dialogue in how it affirms that, considering disenchantment as an uneven process—a process further underscored by a global modernist approach—there are indeed still instances where belief in the supernatural does persist as a constitutive force in modernism alongside the creative productions that engage with spirituality but do not ascribe to belief.

It is for this reason that I lead with the element of enchantment in the title of this project, *Enchanted Modernisms*. To invoke the terminology of enchantment and disenchantment is of course to invoke the famous Weberian pronouncement that “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed.”⁴⁰ Conversely, as Charles Taylor writes, an enchanted world is “the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in.”⁴¹ In other words, it is a world imbued with “extra-human agencies” and objects as “loci of spiritual power” which “can impose

³⁸ Lewis, 21.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Weber, 139.

⁴¹ Taylor, 26.

meanings, and bring about physical outcomes proportionate to their meanings.”⁴² Fundamentally, it is thus a world in which the boundaries between spiritual and material, as well as between self, community, and environs, interior and exterior, are porous rather than strictly demarcated. Here Taylor enumerates a “transformed understanding of self and world” that occurs with the advent of modernity—the shift from an enchanted, “porous self” for whom the “boundary between agents and forces is fuzzy [...] and the boundary between mind and world is porous,” to a disenchanted, atomized “buffered self” for whom the notion of individual mind is central and “things only have meaning if they awaken a certain response in us,” shifting the presence of power and meaning away from the communal body and the world.⁴³ As it is a central task of my project to illustrate the ways in which porous understandings of the self and enchanted conceptualizations of the world are not left behind in the modern era, but indeed persist as viable and generative modes of reckoning with modernity, so too does it ultimately endeavor to attend to the power and meaning suffused throughout the landscape that, though it may be invisible to the mind of a buffered self, is still very much present.

⁴² Ibid., 32, 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 39, 31.

Chapter 1: “Divination as Modernist Method: The Figure of the Psychic in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, T.S. Eliot, and Ernest Hemingway”

“The modern occultist movements, including astrology, are more or less artificial rehashes of old and by-gone superstitions, susceptibility for which is kept awake by certain social and psychological conditions while the resuscitated creeds remain basically discordant with today’s universal state of enlightenment...in former periods, superstition was an attempt, however awkward, to cope with problems for which no better or more rational means were available at least so far as the masses are concerned...Today, however, the incompatibility of the progress of natural sciences, such as astro-physics, with a belief in astrology is blatant...We thus may assume that only very strong instinctual demands make it possible for people still—or anew—to accept astrology.”

—Theodor W. Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth*

This chapter takes as its focus a pairing that many would hold absurd: the connection between the study of modernity and the practice of divination. Contrary to that view, I maintain that there is a presence in this house: the under-acknowledged divinatory motif at work in the modern social landscape, particularly as it manifests in the modernist literary imagination. Even then, my position is somewhat off-kilter from the prevailing assumptions on the role of divination in the modern age, which holds psychic practice as at best a vestigial anachronism, “artificial rehashes of old and by-gone superstitions” fundamentally “discordant with today’s universal state of enlightenment” and incompatible with “the progress of natural sciences,” to quote from the epigraph from Adorno; or, at worst, as socially dangerous—the cheap and nonsensical trade of fraudsters, quacks, and flimflam artists only out to get ahead by exploiting the ignorance and emotional vulnerabilities of society’s gullible and unenlightened. Adorno takes up such a view in *The Stars Down to Earth*, in which he analyzes the astrology column of the *Los Angeles Times* in the early 1950s. Here, his upshot is to name the practice of astrology as an evil henchman of the culture industry working to “reproduce the *status quo* within the mind of the people” according to the dogma of totalitarianism and/or modern capitalism—a singular

mind, mind you.⁴⁴ Through insidious rhetoric of soothing assurance and certainty, the *Los Angeles Times*' astrologer to the stars is a dealer in opium of the people in the form of your daily horoscope: "Since the course of events is referred to as to something pre-established, people will not have the feeling...[that] they may have to be heroic themselves. Their problems will be solved either automatically or with the help of others...provided one only proves confident in the stars. Impersonal power thus replaces the personalized one of the heroes and is transferred to his more powerful superiors," particularly the figure of the boss man.⁴⁵ The power of divination is not to predict the future, but to render readers of the *Times* blind to or complacent with the overarching mechanisms of their own disempowerment: "What drives people into the arms of the various kinds of 'prophets of deceit' is not only their sense of dependence and their wish to attribute this dependence to some 'higher' and ultimately more justifiable sources, but it is also their wish to reinforce their own dependence, not to have to take matters into their own hands."⁴⁶ Adorno even goes so far as to liken believers in astrology to supporters of totalitarianism: "Just as those who can read the phony signs of the stars believe that they are in the know, the followers of totalitarian parties believe that they are in the know."⁴⁷ In his estimate, the "paradoxical idea of a one-party state" is "the consummation of a trend feebly presaged by the opinionated, inaccessible attitude of the astrological adept who defends his creed by hook or crook without ever entering into a real argument, who has auxiliary hypotheses in order to defend himself even where his statements are blatantly erroneous and who ultimately

⁴⁴ Adorno, 121.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

cannot be spoken to, can probably not be reached at all and lives on a kind of narcissistic island.”⁴⁸

I want to clarify that my goal is not exactly to question Adorno’s assessment of these particular “prophets of deceit” or astrologers to the stars, nor to speak in their defense. Rather, it is to provide what I find to be some much-needed nuance on the matter of how we might interpret the cultural function of psychic figures within modern social structures. Adorno engages with the specific example of the *Times* astrology column and makes a well-argued case for how it generates power to “fulfill the function of a conservative ideology, generally justifying the *status quo*.”⁴⁹ From that analysis, however, he gives the impression that such a function applies to *all* instances of so-called “superstition” and their practitioners. Of course, Adorno is in *The Stars* very much interested in what one would call a classically postmodernist critique of modern discourse’s master narratives of rationality. Indeed, much of his analysis is devoted to parsing out “the configuration of the rational and the irrational in astrology,” or how the column co-opts a rationalist ethic to perpetuate an irrationalist ethic of totalitarian hegemony—e.g., its soothing and reasonable tone, or its purported objective of guiding the reader to positive results in quotidian matters. However, I want to call for a reassessment of the numerous value judgments in subtle operation here and elsewhere in the social milieu. Firstly, I wish to make distant the inherent biases surrounding so-called “rationality” and “irrationality,” the implicit notion that that which is “irrational”—in other words, that which is not reconcilable to an authentically “rational” ethos—is necessarily worthless or even a pernicious social evil. These are terms that—for Adorno’s postmodernist context, perhaps somewhat ironically—in themselves operate according to a textbook modern rationalist purview, which I also seek to

⁴⁸ Ibid., 121-2.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 57.

complicate: the extent to which what the average modern subject would call “old and by-gone superstitions” have indeed been rendered obsolescent and abandoned. Lastly, I want to bring awareness to an additional power play at work: how the brand of “superstition” is in itself a weapon that ruling forces may use in efforts to disempower modes of knowing—modes that are often frequently gendered and racialized, moreover—inimical to those forces’ pursuit and maintenance of their own dominance.

The central claim of this chapter concerns what I will be calling divination as modernist method. I use the term “method” not so much to indicate a type of writing process, but more so a mode of inquiry into sociohistorical concerns—although, there are a number of modern writers who did in fact make use of psychic rituals *du jour* such as the séance as a mode of literary experimentation, a history that Helen Sword explores in her study of popular spiritualism and early twentieth-century Anglophone literature, *Ghostwriting Modernism*. Here, she notes the long-running parallel between the figures of author and medium: “Writers of imaginative fiction and poetry have always functioned as spirit mediums of a sort: giving voice and substance to literary characters we cannot see but nonetheless believe to be real; ventriloquizing for the dead; penning elegies and requiems that celebrate the human soul’s survival beyond death.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Sword’s study focuses on Anglophone modernists who delved into that connection, either by taking on the role of the medium in a creative-conceptual sense through utilizing aesthetics and/or literary techniques engaged with motifs of spectrality and/or esoterica—e.g., James Joyce’s polyphonic, ghostly invocation of voices in *Ulysses*—or by literally creating/producing work through the aid of spiritualist practices—e.g., W.B. and Georgie Yeats’ experiments in automatic writing. All in all, Sword assesses spiritualism’s appeal to modernist writers as a

⁵⁰ Sword, 7-8.

multi-faceted one: its “ontological shiftiness; its location of authorial power in physical abjection; its subversive celebrations of alternate, often explicitly feminine, modes of writing; its transgressions of the traditional divide between high and low culture; and its self-serving tendency to privilege form over content, medium over message.”⁵¹

My gratitude for Sword’s work comes as no surprise here—not only in her study’s compelling analyses on the subject at hand, but also in how I am not alone in a conviction that the practice of divination is by no means so much hogwash to condescendingly disparage on the grounds of its devaluation according to the standards of a modern master narrative that upholds rationality as supreme arbiter of that which is “real” and “true.” I seek to continue on with the work on this subject in a number of ways as yet unelaborated: first, by putting this psychic phenomenon, as we might call it, in critical conversation with the topic of literary modernism as critical response to modernization; second, by focusing specifically on psychic figures as characters in modern literature, analyzing their vital roles with respect to my chosen texts’ commentary on modernization; and, third, by considering this subject as a transnational phenomenon, examining a Japanese modernist text, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s⁵² “In a Grove,” alongside two Anglo-American texts of the same period, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. For each of these works, their authors utilize the resonance and potential of divination as critical praxis in a global modernist literary project actively engaged with the various conflicts, concerns, and foundational assumptions at work in the modern condition. Of course, psychic power works to critique the well-known malefactions of processes of modernization: mechanization, social alienation, militant nationalism,

⁵¹ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵² In Japanese, surnames come before given names when presenting a name in full. Western scholarship in Japanese studies tends to follow that convention, so I here do the same: surname (Akutagawa) then given name (Ryūnosuke).

epistemological hegemony, and so on—civilization in all its proverbial discontents. I also want to add that psychic power in its literary and sociocultural capacity is as much generative—and even regenerative—as it is de(con)structive. It holds the ability to make the invisible visible—telepathic, it can summon back that which is held to be irrevocably banished to the ether of marginality: cultural memory, folkloric tradition, alternate epistemologies, among other things. Rather than delimited and proscribed, psychic space is vast space.

Prior to my analyses, it would be worthwhile to foreground exactly what the term “divination” will entail in this context. One may as well begin with the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “the foretelling of future events or discovery of what is hidden or obscure by supernatural or magical means; soothsaying, augury, prophecy.” Some elaboration is of course required here. First, the “foretelling of future events” is the phrase least in need of explication, basically referring to “fortune telling,” in colloquial terms. The first two texts I examine engage with divination practices in this prophetic capacity: palmistry in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and cartomancy—divination by card reading—in *The Waste Land*. However, it is important to note that divination is not limited to methods of prophecy alone—at least, as I will use the term, and as the definition above suggests in the words “discovery of what is hidden or obscure.” It is here that we begin to phase into the realm of the occult—which in its simplest denotative meaning, after all, refers to that which is “hidden” and “obscure.” Prophecy certainly falls under this umbrella of engagement with occulted knowledge and/or forces, as does communion with otherworldly entities, whether of the dead or the divine. On that basis, I read practices of clairvoyance as a mode of divination as well. The third text of this study, “In a Grove,” in which a psychic medium channels the voice of a departed spirit, involves divination in this sense.

In any case, the unifying and decisive factor is the method: “by supernatural or magical means.” For our purposes, we may read these two descriptors as roughly synonymous, as they both entail that which is not directly observable in the physical, natural realm, or verifiable according to a rational, empirical order. In the popular imagination, images of crystal balls and astrological charts come to mind—yet, as I hope to impart in the following pages, methods of divination are extensively variegated and deeply particularized, and very often rich practices of cultural and historical significance. As I can attest to from conducting this study, there is much to uncover from what many will readily dismiss.

Hemingway’s Palmistry

I want to begin with an example that may come as a surprise, in that the psychic element in this text has been critically underrated: *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ernest Hemingway’s iconic 1940 representation of the Spanish Civil War. Though the character around which my analysis revolves has captivated readers of Hemingway for decades, it at first seems strange to categorize her as a psychic—perhaps due to her dissimilarity from how psychics are typically conceptualized in the popular imagination. Rather than a flamboyant, turban-clad, crystal ball-wielding mystic, she is a vigorous and rugged woman “almost as wide as she was tall, in black peasant skirt and waist, with heavy wool socks on heavy legs, black rope-soled shoes and a brown face like a model for a granite monument.”⁵³ She is a psychic in the truest sense, however—and from what we see of her craft, she is a skilled one. I’m speaking of Pilar Ternera, the *de facto* leader of the Republican *guerrillero* band around which the narrative focuses. In his construction of Pilar, Hemingway builds into this character many dimensions—fighter,

⁵³ Hemingway, *Bell*, 30.

Republican, *aficionada*; among them is also her status as a reader of palms. I want to suggest that this particular facet of Pilar is as vital to her importance in the novel as any of the others. I have been speaking of the art of divination as modernist method—a practice that for modernist writers becomes a methodology to plumb the ontological quagmires of modernity. With that in mind, Pilar’s divination becomes no mere oddity, a trifling detail in the high drama of a grandiose tableau of passion, martyrdom, and war. Rather, we may open up a reading of her palmistry as an arcane mystery of the utmost gravity and import—operating, in more ways than one, as the veritable *pulse of the narrative*, a through-line carrying a vital check to the preeminence of positivism and hyper-rationality in a landscape giving way in character from natural to mechanical.

With the above interpretation in mind, it becomes imperative to foreground both the thematic and aesthetic importance of Spain in Hemingway’s literary philosophy. As subject matter, the Iberian Peninsula is not only the location where some of his most acclaimed works are set; even more so, the place provided for him a richly captivating landscape of content to cultivate that now characteristic ethic of immersion in the natural world. Allen Josephs, a long-standing authority on the subject of Hemingway in Spain, writes: “All his life Hemingway...distrusted modernity or progress, believing instead in nature...there arises [in Hemingway’s work] a kind of opposition between those who live in harmony with nature and those who do not. The Spanish people, especially prior to the Spanish civil war, belonged to the first group, *homo naturalis* as opposed to *homo progressus*.”⁵⁴ In Josephs’ estimation, therefore, Hemingway’s engagement with “Spanish values” in both his life and writing at once nourished and came to represent “a rejection of modern Western values” in the same.⁵⁵ Iberia is even more

⁵⁴ Josephs, 222.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

so a key source of inspiration in the development of Hemingway's iconic method of rigorous verbal precision—a style which has become so towering a hallmark in the pantheon of modern prose writing. This stylistic influence manifests most prominently, of course, in the author's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, in which the technical finesse of the *matador* comes to allegorize the art of writing. On the author's initial trips to Spain, Josephs writes:

Hemingway was clearly beginning to associate toreo and writing and to see that both arts shared important elements...Hemingway's first years visiting Spain and discovering corridas—just as his style was emerging and he was making the revolutionary breakthroughs in language in his early stories and first novel that would change the English language—were experiences not readily separable from the style itself. The twin discoveries—of Spain and toreo on one hand and of his own style on the other—are part and parcel of the same powerful aesthetic vision.⁵⁶

Examination of *The Sun Also Rises*' representations of *toreo* speaks powerfully in illustrating that claim—for instance, the famous descriptions of Pedro Romero's time in the ring: “[He] never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line...[His] bullfighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time.”⁵⁷ In the passage's refrain of “purity of line,” the reader may readily draw associations to a line of type; and, indeed, its exaltation of an ethos of exact, unidirectional focus dovetails seamlessly with the now shopworn Hemingway adage of writing “one true sentence.”

For my purposes, I want to emphasize the fundamental inseparability of these thematic and aesthetic influences in the reading of Hemingway's literary representations of Spain: across the board is an espousal of distinctly *unmodern* values through distinctly *modern* methods. It is perhaps now taken as so much a given that the band of expatriates in *The Sun Also Rises* move through an enchanted landscape, that the fact almost loses its analytical saliency—yet I would

⁵⁶ Ibid., 224.

⁵⁷ Hemingway, *Sun*, 134.

like to bring that aspect to the forefront. Though at one point Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley sit in the chapel in Pamplona in a moment of no religious feeling—on the contrary, Brett becomes “damned nervous” as she attempts and fails to pray for Romero, claiming herself to be “bad for a religious atmosphere”⁵⁸—we may easily take the scene to be indicative of the paradigmatic “lostness” of the expatriates, who in their classic post-war disillusionment have fallen out of touch with a sense of greater spiritual affinity with the rhythms of the earth. Indeed, while the novel’s characters are for all intents and purposes unconscious of the festival as in essence a *religious* celebration—with the exclusion of Jake, who is at least peripherally conscious of that aspect—the fact is vital in conceptualizing the thematic cosmology of the novel. As Josephs writes, the text operates fundamentally as “Hemingway’s tragedy of *homo progressus*’s fall from primordial grace” via its contrast of “the sacred nature of the Spanish fiesta and the profane nature of the modern world”.⁵⁹ Thus, we may readily read the text as a valorization of the modern alienated subject seeking cultural renewal through a return to pre-modern values and an embrace of a conceptualization of time that is not linear and progress-oriented, but cyclical and sempiternal—one which “denies the importance of the individual or the individual generation and affirms the timeless essence of sacred time.”⁶⁰ One may even go so far as to say that *The Sun Also Rises* works to re-enchant the disenchanting.

I hope the space I here dedicate to discussion of this early novel comes off as no digression—in fact, I hold it to be essential to the framing of my analysis of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. While a span of nearly fifteen years separates the respective publications of the two novels, I find that these texts operate very much in the same sphere and on the same thematic

⁵⁸ Ibid., 166-7.

⁵⁹ Josephs, 231.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

continuum—not just in their identical Iberian settings, but fundamentally in their engagement with enchanted space and their ennoblement of enchanted modes of being and knowing. As Pedro Romero’s “purity of line” encapsulates Hemingway’s ethic of what one might call an anti-modern modernism, I want to show that Pilar Ternera’s own “purity of line” via the craft of palmistry—which after all manifests namely in the reading of *lines on the hand*—similarly represents that same ethic.

I am by no means the first to take keen interest in the character of Pilar, whom Edward F. Stanton refers to as “the most complex character in all of Hemingway’s fiction”.⁶¹ Indeed, critics have long been compelled by Pilar, a figure whom Hemingway crafts with great deliberateness to command in both personality and appearance—as well as to literally command in her occupation as *guerrillera*.⁶² This magnetism has been the occasion of many suppositions on the part of scholars as to who may have been the real-life inspiration behind the character—from the celebrated flamenco dancer Pastora Imperio,⁶³ to the Spanish Civil War era Republican and communist politician Dolores Ibárruri, a.k.a. *La Pasionaria*,⁶⁴ as well as the iconic Gertrude Stein.⁶⁵ Feminist and critical gender studies approaches to Hemingway have especially been drawn to the character’s fusion of masculine and feminine attributes as a manifestation of “gender trouble” that unsettles patriarchal hierarchizations of power, as well as sociocultural norms of gender binarism and heterosexuality. Rena Sanderson, for instance, reads Pilar as “an incarnation of the archetypal woman in her most fearsome guise...the mannish woman whose superiority threatens the man’s performance.” Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes similarly

⁶¹ Stanton, 169.

⁶² The name “Pilar” was a favorite of Hemingway’s. His boat, for instance, was named *the Pilar*—see Dearborn, 337.

⁶³ Stanton, 170-1.

⁶⁴ Vernon, 175.

⁶⁵ Comley and Scholes, 46-7.

describe her as “an interesting mixture of the older nurturing female and the erotic wise-woman, a creature whose sexuality transcends and threatens any comfortable division of the genders into discrete opposites interested only in one another.”⁶⁶ And, while the character Maria is so quintessentially understood as a personification of Spain, and of the natural world which in Hemingway is inextricably associated with Spain, many have discussed Pilar as the same. In the political allegory dimension, Alex Vernon reads Pilar as a manifestation of the Communist Party in Spain at the time of the Civil War—like Ibárruri, a “symbol of ‘revolutionary womanhood’”.⁶⁷ In a divergent vein, Stanton describes her as “a compassionate, nourishing earth mother,” a “kind of witch or shaman” to “something much more ancient and enduring than either the Church or the state—to a religion of the senses, the body, sex, the dark forces of the blood, the subconscious, the Spanish earth.”⁶⁸ Ecocritical approaches to the novel have likewise been drawn to these so-called “earth mother” qualities of her character—such as Lisa Tyler’s reading of Pilar and Maria through the lens of the Demeter and Persephone fertility myth, in connection with an interpretation of the text as critiquing the mechanized violence of a war that threatens to make waste of the Spanish nation, land, and their futurity.⁶⁹

I find that her role as chiromancer, or palm reader—which goes either under-acknowledged or ignored in the above analyses—has the potential to unify these varied interpretations—a skill which is, of course, inextricably linked to her partial “gypsy” or Romani heritage, which we learn from the Romani character Rafael: ““She has gypsy blood...she has a tongue that scalds and that bites like a bull whip. With this tongue she takes the hide from any

⁶⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁷ Vernon, 176.

⁶⁸ Stanton, 168, 167.

⁶⁹ Tyler, 125-33.

one. In strips. She is of an unbelievable barbarousness.”⁷⁰ This description notably comes prior to our even meeting Pilar—a move that foregrounds her heritage, alongside and linked with personal attributes of sharp-tongued quote-on-quote “barbarousness,” at the forefront of the reader’s mind with regard to her character. In his article on “gypsiness” in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, David Murad notes that this aspect has received little consideration in critical studies on the novel.⁷¹ While his study focuses mainly on the character Rafael, I find that Murad’s assessment rings true with regard to Pilar as well—her chiromancy, or palmistry, indicative of her “gypsiness” and all that it represents as an avatar of “Otherness.” While, as with all of the modes of divination discussed in this chapter, chiromancy has taken on a cartoonish quality in the Western popular imagination, it is veritably an ancient mode of prognostication, practiced for thousands of years across Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean before its arrival in Europe by the Middle Ages.⁷² While its exact origins are indeterminate, the Indian subcontinent is likely—hence the connection between chiromancy and the Romani, who migrated westward from India circa the 11th century.⁷³ Returning to Murad, he argues that “Rafael and Pilar are not ‘people’ but skillfully constructed ‘gypsy’ caricatures drawn from a mainly Western, non-Romani historical and literary tradition...[that] associates gypsiness with mysticism, exotic dancing, and pastoral music, with a romantic and libertine disposition in relation to society and the law”.⁷⁴ Murad does find that Hemingway’s caricaturization of Romani culture is not without any element of self-reflexivity, adding that the novel “also complicates and examines these traditions and associations. Through a conscious attempt to make Rafael and Pilar ‘be gypsy,’

⁷⁰ Hemingway, *Bell*, 28.

⁷¹ Murad, 88.

⁷² *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Palmistry.”

⁷³ Murad, 88.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

Hemingway can better project ‘the writer’s assimilated experience’ of living in Spain both for his American protagonist Robert Jordan and his Western, non-Romani readership.”⁷⁵ One may then potentially read this streak of exoticism that runs across the text not just as Hemingway playing to the perceptions of his audience, but also as a manifestation of Robert Jordan’s mediated Western gaze—the latter a vital factor for my own analysis, to be made clear presently.

With this element of Western exoticization, even orientalizing, in mind, I want to tread very carefully and mindfully here. I don’t believe that whether or not Hemingway’s representation is indeed exoticized and/or racialized is a matter up for debate. Just to illustrate with a more overt example, Robert Jordan at one point likens being a Romani to having an infirmity, remarking on Rafael: “The gypsy...He is truly worthless. He has no political development, nor any discipline, and you could not rely on him for anything...It’s odd to see a gypsy in a war. They should be exempted like conscientious objectors. Or as the physically and mentally unfit. They are worthless.”⁷⁶ What I would like to pose instead is an inquiry into the following: what are the motivating factors that contribute to a culture becoming racialized, exoticized, and/or orientalized? For discursive purposes, I find it would help to distinguish between what I see as two distinct manifestations at work here as to *how* this culture is racialized—by no means clearly mutually exclusive in all cases, and certainly not comprehensive. The first, and more clear-cut, are the total fabrications and/or generalizations engendered by outsiders, with no basis whatsoever in the lived reality of the culture—e.g., the stereotype of proclivity to laziness and incompetence, as in the quote from the novel above. As Murad writes, “The association of gypsies with idleness or social irresponsibility has been a common but strange stereotype given that many Romanies, over the course of centuries, have

⁷⁵ Ibid., 87-8.

⁷⁶ Hemingway, *Bell*, 281.

been enslaved and subjugated to work for the controlling governments or peoples around them.”⁷⁷ The second category, and perhaps more complicated, is the outsiders’ racialization of cultural traditions and practices that can actually be said to exist in the culture, e.g. the Romani and palmistry. In either case, one must of course take balances and imbalances of power into consideration—namely the aptitude for weaponization. From Mary Louise Pratt to Edward Said, et al., cultural critics have for decades been attuned to processes in which Western institutions and individuals, in pursuit of mastery and dominance over the “Other” with a capital “O,” have taken up racialization—and exoticization, which I hold to be a subset of racialization—as a tactic. Hence, we have the first tactic of mass libel, as well as the second tactic, which takes up the exoticizing gaze as a means to delegitimize forms of power and knowledge in the “Other’s” domain that threaten the pursuit to conquer—often as the ulterior motives behind exterior missions to “civilize,” “modernize,” “enlighten.” We must then consider the argument that the act of discrediting a belief or practice as “superstition” may in many cases operate as a means to subordinate, and is often as much about control as it is about reason—a statement that will in fact recur throughout this chapter and the following.

In the case of “superstition” as it manifests in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the form of Pilar’s chiromancy, I hold that we see such a process of delegitimization via exoticization being enacted—yet in the cosmology of the text, it is a process that ultimately does not entirely succeed. As previously alluded to, Robert Jordan is readily an avatar of a modernizing mission that trivializes and fetishizes its object of mastery-as-benevolence, even in spite of his position as the heroic protagonist of the narrative. Indeed, there are multiple signifiers about his character that engender such a reading: for instance, I here self-reflexively note his profession as an

⁷⁷ Murad, 92.

academic of Spanish language and culture—with knowledge itself functioning as a kind of “mastery over,” in addition to a “mastery of.” As the dynamiter, he brings with him the technology—and the technical know-how to manage it, moreover—through which the guerrillas may potentially persevere against the fascist forces. Symbolically resonant is his possession of a highly sophisticated wristwatch, which Thomas Strychacz close reads as denoting “a mastery of the visual field that philosophers and historians identify most clearly with yearnings toward a literate and rational comprehension of social, geographical, and scientific spaces during the Enlightenment.”⁷⁸ The figure of Robert Jordan thus, in his analysis, becomes “a prototypical master of the disciplinary gaze, whose watch evidences the kind of expert supervision men need in order to kill well.”⁷⁹

Counter to this technology of mechanized modernity that, in Strychacz’s words, figures “a profound shift in the experience and manipulation of space-time” from “sunset, dawn, and the passage of moon or stars...an amorphous interval between the ambiguous markers of light and dark” to “a logic of near-endless subdivision and coordination within a continuum of discrete moments”⁸⁰ is the ancient technique of divination via chiromancy. In this particular case, what is the function of this practice if not to assess and interpret in anticipation of future events? The life line of Robert Jordan’s hand that we may assume Pilar reads is, after all, very much a *timeline*, a visual trajectory of a sequence of moments. So then, what is the military intelligence of sorts that Pilar divines from his palm? True to the high drama of the text as a whole—and, in my view, the essence of the novel’s title and epigraph from Donne: “It tolls for *thee*”—a grim fate is of course in store:

⁷⁸ Strychacz, 105.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

“Let me see thy hand,” the woman [Pilar] said. Robert Jordan put his hand out and the woman opened it, held it in her own big hand, rubbed her thumb over it and looked at it, carefully, then dropped it...she looked at him without smiling.

“What did you see in it?” Robert Jordan asked her. “I don’t believe in it. You won’t scare me.”

“Nothing,” she told him. “I saw nothing in it.”

“Yes you did. I am only curious. I do not believe in such things.”

“In what do you believe?”

“In many things but not in that.”

“In what?”

“In my work.”

“Yes, I saw that.”

“Tell me what else you saw.”

“I saw nothing else,” she said bitterly.⁸¹

In addition to the element of ominous foreshadowing, the passage foregrounds Robert Jordan’s belief system that places pragmatism, discipline, and productivity at the forefront: the ethic that animates him is nothing other than his “work,” characterizing him as an agent of modernization through modern warfare—to return to Strychacz’s earlier wording, a “prototypical master of the disciplinary gaze...the kind of expert supervision men need in order to kill well.” As Murad observes, when it comes to the centrality of having a solid and dedicated “work” ethic with respect to the business of war and the good of the Republic, Robert Jordan and Pilar find common ground, fostering mutual respect between the two; on the matter of supernatural forces, however, the two must part ways and the mutual respect must falter.⁸² Robert Jordan, an embodiment of calculated reason and rationalism, is wholly dismissive, even scornful of this ill omen. Yet in spite of his professed skepticism, it is evident that Pilar’s foreboding prognosis haunts him, as he cannot wrest the reading from his consciousness. Indeed, he recalls the grim augury at regular intervals across the text, charting an internal transformation of curiosity into obsession.⁸³ Among these moments, one of the most noteworthy and symbolically resonant

⁸¹ Hemingway, *Bell*, 33.

⁸² Murad, 98-9.

⁸³ Hemingway, *Bell*, 54, 95, 180, 474.

occurs immediately prior to the arrival of snow on the landscape—a dire turn of events, foreboding ill with regard to the success of their exploits. Looking at Pilar, Robert Jordan muses: “She never brought in the gypsy stuff before. Except the hand he thought. Yes, of course the hand. And I don’t think she was faking about the hand. She wouldn’t tell me what she saw, of course. Whatever she saw she believed in herself. But that proves nothing.”⁸⁴ He is then immediately compelled to strike up with her the following dialogue:

“Listen, Pilar,” he said to the woman.
 Pilar looked at him and smiled.
 “What is it?” she asked.
 “Don’t be so mysterious,” Robert Jordan said. “These mysteries tire me very much.”
 “So?” Pilar said.
 “I do not believe in ogres, soothsayers, fortune tellers, or chicken-crut gypsy witchcraft.”⁸⁵

Here is a renewal of the furtive battle between reason and belief that is the undercurrent of their relationship. As embodiment of reason, in an attempt to shore himself against the weight of Pilar’s prophecy, Robert Jordan must disparage and belittle the validity of psychic forces in order to maintain the preeminence of his own ethos. Pilar, on the other hand, is invulnerable—instead coolly presenting another inauspicious prophecy that, once again in spite of Robert Jordan’s reasoning, must inevitably transpire:

While they had spoken the sun had clouded over and as he looked back up toward the mountains the sky was now heavy and gray.
 “Sure,” Pilar said to him, looking at the sky. “It will snow.”
 “Now? Almost in June?”
 “Why not? These mountains do not know the names of the months. We are in the moon of May.”
 “It can’t be snow,” he said. “It *can*’t snow.”
 “Just the same, *inglés*,” she said to him, “it will snow.”
 Robert Jordan looked up at the thick gray of the sky with the sun gone faintly yellow, and now as he watched gone completely and the gray becoming uniform so that it was soft and heavy; the gray now cutting off the tops of the mountains.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

“Yes,” he said. “I guess you are right.”⁸⁶

On an allegorical level, we may read Robert Jordan’s concession to Pilar’s forecast to signal a shift in awareness on his part—displaying some degree of receptivity to the validity of a mode of knowing that operates independently of rational calculation. Tying into Strychacz’s reading of our protagonist as “a prototypical master of the disciplinary gaze,” whose wristwatch figures an ethic of “near-endless subdivision and coordination within a continuum of discrete moments,”⁸⁷ Robert Jordan bases his supposition on the logic of the calendar year, a man-made system created to chart the passage of time in a systematized manner: in June, it does not snow; it will soon be June, therefore it will not snow. Pilar, however, operates on a different logic—one in keeping with a more flexible, even intuitive epistemology receptive to the language of the landscape, and speaking to the aforementioned analyses reading Pilar in connection with the “Spanish earth.” The “mountains do not know the names of the months.” In other words, the natural landscape—and in this particular context, an enchanted natural landscape—operates independently from the systems of man, not according to them. Indeed, it is when Robert Jordan takes up Pilar’s viewpoint and gazes at the sky that he ultimately yields to the veracity of her prediction.

However, though in this particular battle he willingly concedes, the war still very much rages on within him—as after all, to fully concede would be to bow to his own nearing demise as well. His denial comes to the forefront six chapters later, as the guerrillas sit in camp discussing the death of Kashkin, a Soviet operative for the Republican cause—and from that subject, the speak-of-the-devil question of whether one can sense someone’s death prior to the event—and from there, the scent profile of the infamous smell of death. He resumes the attack, in phrases

⁸⁶ Ibid., 180-1.

⁸⁷ Strychacz, 107, 105.

that at this point have become a refrain for the character: “‘Seeing bad signs, one, with fear, imagines an end for himself and one thinks that imagining comes by divination,’ Robert Jordan concluded. ‘I believe there is nothing more to it than that. I do not believe in ogres, nor soothsayers, nor in the supernatural things.’”⁸⁸ In contrast to the aforementioned dialogues, it is here that Pilar, speaking “as though she were talking to a precocious child,” undertakes to directly explain to him the validity of supernatural forces, as well as to highlight the limitations of his worldview: “‘Because thou art a miracle of deafness,’ Pilar said... ‘It is not that thou art stupid. Thou art simply deaf. One who is deaf cannot hear music. Neither can he hear the radio. So he might say, never having heard them, that such things do not exist.’”⁸⁹ There is an intricacy to her analogy here, one that cuts through Robert Jordan’s attitude of empiricist solipsism—according to it, what he acknowledges as real are only forces that he can directly observe with his own particular set of faculties; what’s more, he rejects the credibility of other faculties—and the forces those faculties recognize—principally on the basis that he himself cannot experience them. Yet there are many ways in which to “make sense” of something—what we may take as the commentary of this “smell of death” scene in which the physical senses and psychic senses intermingle: “‘Why do you say deaf when it is a thing of the nose?’” the guerrilla Fernando humorously asks.⁹⁰

Here, Robert Jordan ends up fighting a losing battle once more: another noteworthy difference from their prior conversations on the subject is that they are not alone, but at camp with the other guerrillas—and none take Robert Jordan’s side of the debate, instead deferring to Pilar. Rafael, the other Romani character, affirms her on the basis that among their culture the

⁸⁸ Hemingway, *Bell*, 254-5.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 254, 255.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

smell of death ““is a well-known thing””;⁹¹ one must say in a way that reinforces the element of “Otherness,” tying back to Murad’s reading previously discussed. For Pablo and the wizened Anselmo, their responses are complex yet generative. Anselmo says to Robert Jordan: ““I am against all such wizardry. But this Pilar has the fame of being very advanced in such things.””⁹² Similarly, Pablo states: ““I do not know...I am more of thy [R.J.’s] opinion. No supernatural thing has ever happened to me...But I believe that the Pilar can divine events from the hand. If she does not lie perhaps it is true that she has smelt such a thing.””⁹³ According to these statements, both Pablo and Anselmo ought to be on Robert Jordan’s side, based on what they personally believe and are able to experience. Unlike him, however, they possess the wherewithal to concede to the validity of abilities and forces outside of their particular circumference—or, at the very least, to make clear a measured reluctance to speak definitively on matters beyond their ken—as well as to honor the renown and authority of Pilar’s skill. The scene is overall one in which the protagonist’s position as the sole foreigner and American among the Spaniards becomes starkly apparent—tying back to Hemingway’s task of valorizing an ethos of enchanted animism that, to him, found its expression in Spain.

Critical responses are varied as to whether Robert Jordan does indeed come to see past his modernized world view, becoming convinced of or “converted” to the principally amodern or premodern knowledge that the Spanish characters—and, in the sphere of the text, by extension the Spanish people as a whole—have to impart to him. As aforementioned, Stanton proffers a reading of Pilar as “a kind of witch or shaman who possesses an ancient, secret knowledge of the world—a knowledge of the most secret things which Hemingway had intuited in Spain”—that

⁹¹ Ibid., 258.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 256-7.

knowledge being, principally, a “religion of the senses, the body, sex, the dark forces of the blood”.⁹⁴ According to his analysis, then, Robert Jordan becomes an acolyte of sorts: “Just as Pilar initiates Maria into the knowledge of a woman’s body, she will initiate Robert Jordan into other mysteries. When the novel begins, he is educated, scientific, and ‘very cold in the head.’ From Pilar he will acquire a knowledge of the head that is anything but cold; he will learn about the importance of the senses and the rest of his body...[and how] to integrate his head and his body, his daytime and nighttime worlds.”⁹⁵ Similarly, Josephs—writing on Robert Jordan’s death, the scene that brings the narrative to a close—notes how the protagonist becomes “integrated with nature, with the earth, with the pine needles, and with the bark of the pine tree he touches.”⁹⁶ Indeed, the final sentence of the novel describes “his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest,”⁹⁷ signaling a fusion of his life force with the natural landscape and all that is allegorically implied. Conversely, other critics hold a more static conceptualization of Robert Jordan’s character. Vernon, for instance, maintains “a rather nonprogressive conservative message” about his narrative, “one that ultimately reaffirms the traditional gender hierarchy,” such as in the hegemonic power dynamics of his relationship with Maria.⁹⁸ And, in Strychacz’s analysis, Robert Jordan holds to a “masculine will to power” throughout, persisting in his “attempts to master terrain and people in an ordered and disciplined way” until he is ultimately thwarted by “abstract and almost wholly unseen technologies of mechanized doom.”⁹⁹

In my own view, I am hesitant to optimistically affirm that a full conversion does in fact take place—at least, on the matter of his thinking past his preconceptions regarding

⁹⁴ Stanton, 167-8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168, 169.

⁹⁶ Josephs, 239.

⁹⁷ Hemingway, *Bell*, 478.

⁹⁸ Vernon, 182, 184.

⁹⁹ Strychacz, 120, 122.

“superstition” and forces unseen. I do find that he is by no means a static character all-in-all—indeed, much of the material from the text referenced in this study indicates palpable uncertainty, curiosity, even recognition on his part. And, while I have emphasized the foil-like, antagonistic dimension of the dynamic between Robert Jordan and Pilar, I do agree that there is an instructive, initiatory dimension to their relationship as well, particularly with regard to the body and the natural world. For my own subject, however, I find his conversion is at best a partial one, based on his final thoughts regarding Pilar’s reading. At the novel’s end, as he awaits his death at the hands of the Nationalists, it lingers in his thoughts: “Do you remember? Pilar and the hand? Do you believe that crap? No, he said...No, I don’t believe it...She was afraid maybe I believed it. I don’t, though. But she does. They see something. Or they feel something. Like a bird dog. What about extra-sensory perception? What about obscenity?”¹⁰⁰ It is possible that, like Anselmo and Pablo, Robert Jordan has learned to respect belief in the supernatural while maintaining his own personal views—however, the difference is Anselmo and Pablo state their own beliefs first, yet finish their statements with recognition, whereas for Robert Jordan it is the reverse. Closing his thought on the matter with a curse, he denies the import of Pilar’s reading to the bitter end, disparagingly likening “extra-sensory perception” to the abilities of a “bird dog,” or hunting dog—no doubt a gesture back to the earlier conversation on the smell of death. If he must admit that psychic ability is indeed a force to be reckoned with, it is not a higher power, but a base one—subhuman rather than superhuman. As readers, however, we have the liberty to contemplate the gravity and import of the arcane mystery that operates as a veritable throughline for the entire narrative—taking into consideration how, through the psychic motif, the novel puts pressure on the modern ideological supremacy of positivism and rationality that Robert Jordan

¹⁰⁰ Hemingway, *Bell*, 474.

embodies. And, considering Pilar's enduring appeal to scholars approaching the novel through the lens of critical gender approaches, alongside that deconstruction is a palpable valorization of feminized and "othered" forms of power and knowledge that the masculinized discourse of modernity institutionally discredits. As Pilar at one point exclaims, in words emblematic of the novel's quixotic parlance: "I obscenity in the milk of science".¹⁰¹

I say "put pressure on" very deliberately, as opposed to more extreme alternatives such as "dismantle," "defeat," and so on. In his study on Hemingway in Spain, Alex Vernon cautions against wholeheartedly espousing "an easy dualism of fascism, technology, professional militancy, aggression, and the masculine standing against democracy, agrarianism, citizen-soldiers, good-heartedness, and the feminine," in both the novel and the Spanish Civil war as a whole—principally on the very well-grounded fact that the Republicans fought with all the accoutrements of modern warfare, just as the fascists did.¹⁰² Hemingway's representation is certainly true to this reality, arming the guerrillas not with pitchforks, but with dynamite and heavy artillery. I want to heed Vernon's admonition here—as tempting as it may be for me to view my analysis through a rose-colored lens, it would be out of touch to assert that overall, the supernatural "wins." For a work published in the aftermath of the war, there is no getting around the historical fact that fascism "won." However, I don't find that inevitable outcome to detract from what I want to say here on the matter of valorizing divination and psychic faculties in modernism. The novel is a work of tragedy, and tragedy is by no means a one-way path to denunciation, resignation, or cynicism. Part of its pathos is to inspire and affirm, even rally through that poignancy—indeed, it is safe to say the novel was written in part to operate in the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 451.

¹⁰² Vernon, 186.

global struggle against a dangerously spreading fascism.¹⁰³ For my own topic, we may similarly say that the validity of enchanted forces is not undermined by the absence of their absolute triumph over all. Rather, it would be more intentional and no less meaningful to extract from the novel the commentary that enchantment is still very much in operation in the modern age *covertly*—not expelled from the landscape through its mechanization, but persisting in the present and influencing the future. To recall Pilar’s explanation—though many grow deaf to it, its music still reverberates.

Eliot’s Tarot

“...there is not an all, given all at once: there is a finite number of elements whose combinations are multiplied to billions of billions, and only a few of these find a form and a meaning and make their presence felt amid a meaningless, shapeless dust cloud; like the seventy-eight cards of the tarot deck in whose juxtapositions sequences of stories appear and are then immediately undone.”

—Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*

My next example is a psychic of wide renown and great notoriety: Madame Sosostriis, that “famous clairvoyante” of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and her so-called “wicked pack of cards.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, I am confident that there is not a single line of this watershed poem that critics have not already analyzed to tatters in the century since its initial publication—and the Sosostriis passage in “The Burial of the Dead” is certainly no exception. At the moment of *The Waste Land*’s literal centennial, why attempt a contribution to the study of a text about which the critical dialogue may have possibly all but exhausted itself?

¹⁰³ Dearborn, 409, 437.

¹⁰⁴ All quotes from *The Waste Land* come from the Norton critical edition of the poem, ed. Michael North.

One might say that the occasion of a centennial calls for a retrospective, and I won't deny that. As a student of modernism, I look forward with great anticipation to the opportunities for discussion certainly to come from the domino cascade of centennials that awaits this field—or rather, a cascade which we are already in the midst of. Still, the advent of a centennial alone doesn't wholly satisfy as a valid pretense—there must be some contribution, some intervention beyond a mere word shuffling of innumerable close readings made over the years. I do find that I have such an intervention to make, which I hope has the capacity to enrich critical understanding of a poem already so vastly and assiduously commented on—or, at the very least, to pardon yet another take on *The Waste Land*. To recapitulate my task in this study, I have been speaking of divination as a modernist literary method—how psychic practices become for modernist writers a methodology through which to gaze into the crystal ball of the modern condition. That gaze, moreover, is not a passive one—as gazes rarely if ever are passive, but instead operate as subtle plays of power and/or modes of inquiry. Each in their way, then, representations of divination in the texts I take up cast light on the underworld of modernity and restore power to the enchanted—and in *The Waste Land*, the practice of cartomancy, or divination by card reading, does just the same. With the *Men of 1914* as his main point of reference, Peter Nicholls characterizes Anglo-American modernism as a literary movement that

developed in part as a *critique* of modernity. Here the 'new' was a highly equivocal category, since cultural renovation was frequently projected as a *return* to the values of a previous age...The modernism presided over by Pound and Eliot (one among several, but arguably still the hegemonic one) thus issued a call to order in the name of values which were explicitly anti-modern, though it did so by developing literary forms which were overtly modernist.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Nicholls, 163-4. Emphases in original.

In my analysis, I uphold the Sosostris passage as a key element of the poem's famous "*critique* of modernity" and quest for "cultural renovation" through an embrace of "explicitly anti-modern" values, as Nichols describes above as constitutive of Eliot's modernism. More specifically, I read the passage as an *affirmation* of modes of knowing and meaning-making that gain their epistemological power not via empirical and reason-based approaches, but via the generative faculties of *intuition*—and, as I hope to show, one could hardly find a more suitable emblem for such an ethic of knowledge production than Madame Sosostris' main method of divination, the tarot.¹⁰⁶

It is important that I lay emphasis above on the affirmative quality of cartomancy's representation in *The Waste Land*, in order to more properly distinguish what exactly makes my reading an intervention. To merely draw a connection between the Sosostris episode and the poem's critical take on modernity is certainly nothing new—and I want to clarify that I do not see that as the bottom-line of my task here. Rather, I seek to readdress—and, quite frankly, to *redress*—the nature of the role that Sosostris has to play in the *Waste Land* reader's journey through and out of the concentric rings of modern malaise. On that particular matter, scholars have tended towards demonstrably ungenerous viewpoints: at best, Sosostris is a purgatorial, lamentable figure; at worst, she is an absolute clown—either way, she is taken as a prime specimen of illustrating just how low society has fallen in the modern age. My goal here is to argue the inverse—that we may read Sosostris not as a forsaken soul, but as a *guide* who illuminates for the reader the way out of the eponymous wasteland through divinatory practice.

Indeed, it wouldn't be wholly facetious to say that the mere suggestion of a positive slant on Madame Sosostris and her craft constitutes a critical intervention in itself. I have found

¹⁰⁶ The word "tarot" may be capitalized or uncapitalized. While I leave the word uncapitalized, many critical works I cite do capitalize—neither way is necessarily in error.

myself taken aback at times by the triviality with which the volumes of Eliot scholarship have treated the Sosostris passage and its divination element over the decades—often manifesting as condescending, patronizing scorn. To illustrate, preeminent Eliot scholar Grover Smith writes that “one rejoices that Madame Sosostris is so stupid” with the tools of her trade—that “hardly anyone is likely to display greater ineptitude than she”.¹⁰⁷ On her practice of tarot card reading, Smith is equally dismissive—calling Eliot’s use of the tarot “as prankish as it was serious,” and reading the overall passage as Eliot’s “sidelong sneer at occultism and its own impostures”.¹⁰⁸ As to any critics who might take up the task of interpreting the tarot cards and their significance as they manifest in the poem, Smith deprecatingly calls the endeavor “a procedure not worth the trouble, like going into a fun-house of mirrors,” as “from the Tarot cards as sources, one learns very little; this is the lesson of any reading [of them]”.¹⁰⁹

Such an air of *hauteur* and dismissiveness I will admit is not entirely without justification beyond inherent biases spawned by elitism. Eliot himself has given reason for critics to take up the attitude, writing in *Four Quartets*’ “The Dry Salvages” that “To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits” or “riddle the inevitable / With playing cards” are “Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press”.¹¹⁰ And, Smith himself notes the allusion in the name “Madame Sosostris” not just to the ancient Egyptian emperor Sesostris, but also—and for my purposes, perhaps more significantly—to Aldous Huxley’s 1921 satirical novel *Crome Yellow*, a coy and scathing indictment of the post-war English social elite.¹¹¹ A veritable ethnography of the flimflam man, the novel is peopled with leisured and freewheeling aura sniffers and automatic

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Waste Land*, 97.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹¹⁰ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 27.

¹¹¹ See Smith, “The Fortuneteller.”

writers galore, who chart horoscopes to divine how to bet at the horse races. Our original Madame Sosostris is a textbook instance of the psychic as exploitative fraudster: not an actual fortune teller, but one of the characters, Mr. Scogan, dressed “in a black skirt and a red bodice, with a yellow-and-red bandana handkerchief tied round his black wig”¹¹² telling fortunes at a local fair on the estate of a wealthy acquaintance:

A placard pinned to the curtain of the doorway announced the presence within the tent of “Sesostris, the Sorceress of Ectabana.” Seated at a table, Mr. Scogan received his clients in mysterious silence, indicating with a movement of the finger that they were to sit down opposite him and to extend their hands for his inspection...He had a terrifying way of shaking his head, frowning and clicking with his tongue as he looked at the lines. “Terrible, terrible!” or “God preserve us!” sketching out the sign of the cross as he uttered the words. The clients who came in laughing grew suddenly grave...could it be, was it possible, that there was something in this sort of thing after all? ...After a long and silent inspection, Mr. Scogan would suddenly look up and ask, in a hoarse whisper, some horrifying question, such as, “Have you ever been hit on the head with a hammer by a young man with red hair?” When the answer was in the negative, which it could hardly fail to be, Mr. Scogan would nod several times, saying, “I was afraid so. Everything is still to come, still to come, though it can’t be very far off now.” ...Sesostris had a success of horror. People stood in a queue outside the witch’s booth waiting for the privilege of hearing sentence pronounced upon them.¹¹³

From the absurd reaching of Scogan’s cold reading to the farcical travesty of his performance—a so-called “witch” making the sign of the cross, exclaiming “God preserve us!”—the humour in the above passage is undeniable. However, I would like to point out the less overt yet demonstrably condescending attitude of cultural elitism and classism that permeates this particular episode as much as its admitted comedic appeal. While in his position as satirist, Huxley punches *up* in his earlier gibes at the wealthy and/or bourgeois figures who dabble in the occult to either make their fortune or carelessly waste it, here he punches *down* at the lower

¹¹² Huxley, 154.

¹¹³ Ibid., 154-5.

strata. So readily taken in by what Huxley presents to the reader as balderdash, Sesostris' clients quickly change from funning to believing—and we may take the queue that forms to consult the sorceress as populated by the latter as much as the former. For any readers who think of the occult as nonsense, they may here laugh *with* Scogan as much as *at* him, as he gets his rocks off making mockery of a rural laboring class portrayed as gullible and obtuse. Indeed, Scogan even uses this performance as a means to set up an illicit rendezvous between himself—out of costume—and a guileless young woman synecdochically dehumanized with the name “white muslin.”¹¹⁴ In an earlier time when authorial intent held much greater sway, critics may have taken their cue directly from the source.

One might also add that this supercilious attitude in dealing with the Sesostris passage may very well be symptomatic of a past age in scholarship of the academic as guardian of high culture, as Chinitz and Daniel describe in their study of popular culture in *The Waste Land*: “From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the assumption that Eliot consistently invokes the popular arts only to disparage them appears increasingly quaint,” a “relic” of “bygone eras in literary and cultural criticism.”¹¹⁵ One such bygone era they name as “the middle of the last century, when Eliot’s reputation and influence were at their peak, [and] it flattered critics’ own prejudices against popular culture to range the venerated writer on their side.”¹¹⁶ Chinitz and Daniel go on to provide an edifying reassessment of the disparate elements of mass culture in the poem, arguing that any overarching blanket statement is too flattening; one must rather take each instance in turn—while “On the whole, *The Waste Land* is critical of popular culture...it draws significant distinctions as well, revealing an ambivalent warmth for the popular

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 156.

¹¹⁵ Chinitz and Daniel, 71.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

arts and a greater skepticism toward lived culture, with Eliot's strongest condemnation reserved for objects and practices seen as obstructing or perverting authentic experience."¹¹⁷

Even for these considerably more sympathetic critics, however, the Sosostris passage falls far more on the side of "condemnation" rather than "ambivalent warmth." According to their reading, "Eliot turns to this ancient¹¹⁸ and yet newly commoditized and regulated practice to present both the persistence and the degradation of ritual form in its modern, popular incarnations".¹¹⁹ Signaling toward the "mechanization and commodification" of fortune telling in both the mass market and black market, the divinatory element harbors a critique of modernity in that its effect is to "cheapen both ritual practice and human practitioner".¹²⁰ That "ritual practice" is namely the tarot and astrology, and the "human practitioner" of course Madame Sosostris herself. In what ways is Sosostris cheapened? Chinitz and Daniel's analysis seems to be either split or forwarding two separate interpretations: "somewhere between priestess and charlatan".¹²¹ For the former, Sosostris is an oppressed figure, the guardian of a so-called "ancient practice" and "its ritual pedigree",¹²² harrowed and beset by a positivist police state persecuting alternate modes of knowledge; she thus ties into *The Waste Land's* overall anxiety at the "loss of authenticity [in cultural elements] as they undergo modernization" and are degraded by the "new cultural attitudes and regulations" of a society that no longer values its traditions.¹²³ However, Chinitz and Daniel still take into consideration that "Sosostris in some ways seems the charlatan, with her overblown mystical credentials standing in laughable contrast to her all-too-human

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 79.

¹¹⁸ Unless they are referring to a popular misconception about the tarot in Eliot's day (which is unclear), or are speaking colloquially, Chinitz and Daniel are unfortunately in error describing the tarot as "ancient." The tarot originates in 15th-century Italy. I will elaborate on this history later on.

¹¹⁹ Chinitz and Daniel, 74.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 74, 75.

¹²³ Ibid., 74.

cold...As such, she stands as an example of a popular practice gone awry and yet also as a reminder of its ritual pedigree”.¹²⁴ In other words, though Sosostriis is “the wisest woman in all of Europe,” she is a fallen and wretched figure.

There is much that I affirm in Chinitz and Daniel’s reading, yet there are certain elements that I take issue with or would like to further contextualize. I find that they are absolutely right to take into account Brian Diemert’s article on the English government’s criminalization, vilification, and marginalization of divinatory practice in Eliot’s time—in fact, that aspect is a running theme of my own study, and vital to its argument on divination’s threat to modernity as illustrating the limits of reason, the lacunae in the fabric of modern ideology. They are correct in this, and also in their accounting for the mass market commodification of divination—however, I do hold that there are limits to reading the divinatory element in *The Waste Land* through the lens of popular culture *alone*. I argue this namely because such an approach does not consider the significance of the occult not just in Eliot’s time, but within literary modernism as well. In their respective studies on modernism and the occult, for instance, Leon Surette and Timothy Materer chart a demonstrable preoccupation with occult matters in the lives and works of an extensive cast of modernist icons, many of which figure largely in Eliot’s immediate orbit—to name but a few, there is Yeats, naturally, but also Pound and Jessie Weston—and even including Eliot himself. Seeking to “recontextualize *The Waste Land* within the occult ambience” of early 20th-century Europe, Surette offers a compelling rereading of the poem’s “mythical paradigm as an initiation rite instead of a Grail quest...as exoteric and esoteric aspects of the same sacred mystery.”¹²⁵ Additionally, while Materer, who focuses mostly on Eliot’s later work, overall claims that “despite some decidedly occult elements in his poetry, [Eliot’s] importance to the

¹²⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹²⁵ Surette, 269.

history of literary occultism lies in his criticism of it as a dangerous heresy,” he nonetheless adds that in spite of “his formal disapproval of it, Eliot could appreciate occultism in modern poetry as a sincere attempt to revive a religious sensibility.”¹²⁶ Nevertheless, I must say that while, like Chinitz and Daniel, Materer nobly valorizes the historically undervalued in Eliot criticism, his take on Sosostris is likewise subtly disparaging. While he does describe cartomancy itself to be functioning as “a medium of spiritual wisdom” in the poem, Madame Sosostris is conversely “a tawdry figure despite the wise instruction she gives unconsciously through the Tarot.”¹²⁷ Such a view of Sosostris I seek to counter in my own analysis.

Of course, I must give credit where credit is due to the critics before me who have over the years taken journeys through that so-called “fun-house of mirrors” of the tarot in *The Waste Land*, leaving for my own trip to the carnival a number of edifying articles on the subject. Please understand that I find them to be very good articles on the whole, and I make thorough reference to them in my own study. However, I do hold that their existence does not obviate the need for further attention on the matter of divination in the Sosostris passage, on the claim that the subject has “already been done before.” My justification: while again, the articles are very fine, they are for the most part also very brief and more so conversational in tone, their task mostly to consider possibilities of what the cards mentioned in the poem might be in the tarot itself, or of how these cards speak to Eliot’s own biography as it manifests in the poem—rather than to forward unified analyses of the cards in support of an overarching argument on the poem’s take on modernity, as I hope to do. I also have my own interpretations on the meaning of the cards that are mentioned, and thoughts to add in response to the very helpful and often dazzling identifications these scholars have made on certain cards that Sosostris names which have no clear-cut, decisive

¹²⁶ Materer, 21.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 75.

analogue in the tarot. In addition to these articles, I have to enrich my analysis the aid of authoritative critical scholarship on the history of the tarot, published after the most recent article specifically on the tarot in *The Waste Land*.

Before I dive into intricacies, however, I find it would not be a digression—or if a digression, then at least a useful one—to take some space to describe exactly what the tarot is, what it has been “used for,” and to perhaps clarify some prevalent misunderstandings about the aforementioned. I only do this in order that any reader may follow my analysis, as I know tarot cards are not as generally known as, say, the standard fifty-two-card deck. The decks do share similarities and can be thought of as relatives, as playing cards of European provenance first came to the continent from the Islamic world in the early 14th century.¹²⁸ For the tarot deck specifically, its origins are traceable to northern Italy in the early 15th century, developed for the upper social strata to play the trick-taking game known as *Trionfi* (or “Triumph”).¹²⁹ While there are of course variations, one can generally and safely speak of a standard deck of seventy-eight cards in number. Fifty-two of these cards comprise four suits—Swords, Cups, Coins, and Batons—of thirteen cards each, numbered from Ace to King, similar to our contemporary everyday playing cards. Added onto these fifty-two are an additional twenty-six trump cards, each of which bears the image of a unique persona—e.g., “The Empress,” “The Hermit,” or the infamous “Death.”

¹²⁸ Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, 29.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

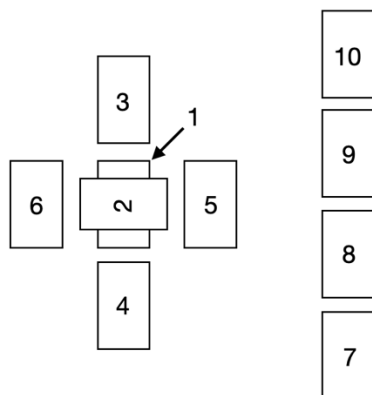


Figure 1. The “Celtic Cross,” a common tarot card spread. Numbers indicate the order in which the cards are placed as they are drawn from the deck. This specific spread is typically thought of as made of two parts: the “cross” (cards 1-6) and the “staff.”

How this at first purely recreational deck of cards came to be used as an esoterically-charged tool in divinatory practice is a long and intricate story. Suffice it to say that cartomancy as we know it today comes into being through the efforts of a number of 18th-century French occultists, the first of which is one Antoine Court de Gébelin, who at a *soiree*, as he watched a group playing cards with a tarot deck, fancied to see figured in the images on the cards ancient Egyptian symbols of hermetic knowledge.¹³⁰ Thus began what came to be a widespread

misperception about the tarot’s origins—one that I have seen reproduced in critical work a number of times, and which Jessie Weston ascribes to in her brief gloss on the tarot—of which she claims to “know nothing”—in *From Ritual to Romance*.¹³¹ As to how one divines with the tarot, it is enough to say that each card carries with it its own cluster of possible meanings, derived from the symbolism in its unique image. From the deck, the diviner arranges a group of cards in a particular pattern or schema, called a “spread,” of which there are many kinds that vary in shape and number of cards according to the diviner’s practice (for an example of a popular spread, see fig. 1). Based on the meanings of the specific cards and their positions in the spread—and, moreover, taking each card into consideration in relation to the cards surrounding and their own affinities—one may intuit a message in response to the question or issue that the querent—a term for the individual who is petitioning the cards for guidance—“brings to the table,” so to speak. I might here say that this activity lends itself remarkably to the practice of analysis, interpretation, and storytelling: one divines with the tarot literally by crafting a

¹³⁰ Ibid., 59-60.

¹³¹ Weston, 77-80, esp. 79n20.

narrative, hence its great appeal to the literary imagination. Indeed, this section's epigram comes from an experimental 1973 Italian novel by Italo Calvino, who crafts each story within from spreads of "the seventy-eight cards of the tarot deck in whose juxtapositions stories appear" out of the "finite number of elements whose combinations are multiplied to billions..."¹³²

While it might be assumed from the above paragraph that Weston's book is Eliot's source for the tarot, a majority of critics who have written on the subject do not hold that to be the case. Rather, most view that source to be the work of Arthur Edward Waite—famed occultist, whose membership in the London-based secret society the Order of the Golden Dawn overlapped with that of Yeats.¹³³ That work is namely the tarot deck that bears his name, the "Rider-Waite" deck, developed in collaboration with artist, occultist, and fellow Golden Dawn member Pamela Coleman-Smith—along with the accompanying guidebook on the meaning of the cards and how to divine with them, first published in 1910.¹³⁴ I myself am in agreement with this general assessment, chiefly due to the poem's all-but-explicit reference to one of Coleman-Smith's illustrations, the "man with three staves" (l. 51), in the lines depicting Madame Sosostris' reading. More on that card presently.

It is important to note that among the cards mentioned in the poem, some of them go under the proper names they bear in the actual tarot, and some of them have names of Eliot's own devising. As such, correspondences between the cards in the poem to the original tarot range from explicit to speculative, based on Eliot's description of each. In my analysis, I will be very clear in distinguishing which names are "real" and which are Eliot's. For instance, to take up the first card in Sosostris' reading, the "drowned Phoenecian Sailor" (l. 47), there is no card

¹³² Calvino, 97.

¹³³ For more on Yeats' involvement in the Order of the Golden Dawn, see Ellmann, 89-101.

¹³⁴ The Rider-Waite deck is to this day the most commonly-used and widely-recognized tarot deck.

under that specific name. However, based on Eliot's description, critics have examined the portraiture of the cards themselves and forwarded their own suggestions on what card this sailor may be. Among these, I find one by Betsey Creekmore to be the most convincing: the notorious "Death" card.¹³⁵ In Coleman-Smith's illustration (fig. 2), we see the commanding image of a skeletal knight in dark armor astride a white horse—an utterly apocalyptic personage. Beneath the mount's hooves lies the unconscious—and most likely dead, considering the context—figure of a king, an inference readily supportable due to the figure's luxurious garb and

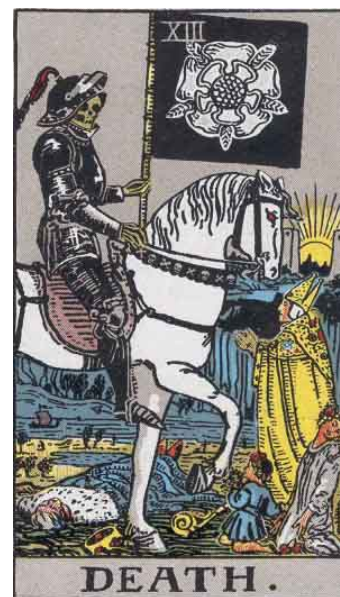


Figure 1. "Death" in the Rider-Waite deck.

the golden crown lying upturned on the ground near his head. In the background is a blue ocean, across which a ship sails by. If we are to take Creekmore's assay as viable—and I think it is very plausible—a correlation to the figure of the Fisher King becomes immediate. So then, are we to take this element as supporting a fatalistic reading of the poem? In consultation with Waite's manual to the deck, not so—in fact, contrary to the card's dark imagery, and to popular imagination as well, it signifies overall "rebirth, creation, destination, renewal."¹³⁶ Waite elaborates: "The veil or mask of life is perpetuated in change, transformation and passage from lower to higher...into the state of mystical death is a change in the form of consciousness".¹³⁷ In conversation with *The Waste Land*, then, the card intimates sociocultural renewal out of the sludge of modern anomie. The phrase "your card" in reference to the "drowned Phoenician Sailor" is moreover noteworthy, and suggests further knowledge of Waitian cartomancy on

¹³⁵ Creekmore, 911.

¹³⁶ Waite, 123.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 122-3.

Eliot's part. According to the first spread that Waite includes in his guide, the Celtic spread (see fig. 1, above), the first card drawn is meant to represent the querent—the “Significator” card, in Waite's terminology.¹³⁸

If we are to follow the pattern of Waite's Celtic spread—an idea that I owe to the ingenuity of both Creekmore and Nänny in their respective articles¹³⁹—then placed atop this first card horizontally would be the enigmatic “Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks” (ll. 49-50). Like the “Phoenician Sailor,” this card also has no clear analogue in



Figure 2. The “Queen of Pentacles.”

the tarot—though once again, critics have shared their ideas. And again, I find Creekmore's to be the most likely, if any: the Queen of Pentacles (fig. 3), “pentacles” being Waite's own occult substitute for the traditional suit of “coins.” Creekmore bases this match not only on the fact that in the card, the queen is seated on a throne of carved rock, but also based on similarities between this card and the starting lines of “A Game of Chess,” which mention a “burnished throne,” “fruited vines,” and “golden Cupidon[s]” (ll. 77-80). Looking closely at the Queen of Pentacles' throne, one does see carved into it both fruit-laden vines and cupids—one at the top of the throne, and one below the throne's visible arm.¹⁴⁰ The suit of coins, or pentacles in the Rider-Waite, in general signifies wealth, prosperity, abundance, and so on. To refer to Waite's manual, as the queen is one of the rulers of this particular domain, she is the heightened personification of “opulence, generosity, magnificence, security, liberty.”¹⁴¹ Imagery of opulence indeed figures greatly in the lush imagery of the card, in which flowering branches enframe the noble figure,

¹³⁸ Ibid., 299-305.

¹³⁹ See Creekmore, esp. 910, and Nänny, esp. 337-8.

¹⁴⁰ Creekmore, 912.

¹⁴¹ Waite, 256.

and a verdant and river-strewn landscape flourishes in the background. According to the Celtic spread, this second card which covers the Significator—in this particular reading, “Death” as cyclical rebirth, as mentioned above—indicates “the nature of the obstacles in the matter” that the querent poses.¹⁴² We see that the two cards of “Death” and the “Queen of Pentacles” share a considerable degree of overlap not only in the actual spread itself, as the later lies atop the former, but also in their meaning. The cross the two cards form—itsself a powerful motif tying back to rebirth—becomes a mystic union of death-in-life and life-in-death, the desire for regeneration at the heart of the poem.



Figure 3. The “Three of Wands.”

We are already aware of the above as a central dilemma of the text—so then, where is the querent to go from here? Next in Sosostri’s reading appears “the man with three staves” (l. 51), all-but-certainly the “Three of Wands” in the Rider-Waite tarot (fig. 4), “wands” as again a more occult renaming of the “batons” suit. I speak with great confidence principally due to Eliot’s note to the passage, which describes this card as “an authentic member of the Tarot pack”; he also here writes that he associates the card “quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself.”¹⁴³ While Eliot describes his association as arbitrary, there are elements in the card itself to support the connection—in Coleman-Smith’s illustration, a finely-robed figure with a golden circlet about his head stands at a height, surveying a group of ships sailing across the waters below him. Staked into the ground around this figure are three tall staves, hence “staves,” one of which the figure grasps. Creekmore perspicaciously notes that these staves are moreover “living boughs,”

¹⁴² Ibid., 301.

¹⁴³ Eliot, *Waste Land*, 22.

as leaves sprout from their tops.¹⁴⁴ In consultation with Waite’s manual, we find that this “Fisher King” is in fact a merchant prince, symbolizing “established strength, trade, commerce, discovery” and “able co-operation in business”; “those are his ships, bearing his merchandise, which are sailing over the sea.”¹⁴⁵ With its horizontal and vertical movement all advancement and progression, going forth and exploring new horizons and opportunities—especially in the material realm, no less—the card is an apt representation of an especially modern preoccupation with boundless enterprise, innovation, acquisition. However, the card’s inclusion in the poem is not necessarily an embrace of the pursuit of material gain. If we are to consider where it would appear in the Celtic spread—which is directly above the cross of the first two cards—the meaning becomes quite open-ended, representing “the Querent’s aim or ideal” or “the best that can be achieved under the circumstances, but that which has not yet been made actual.”¹⁴⁶ So, we might say that material acquisition becomes the best aim one can have in the pursuit of regeneration—yet I find that to be unsatisfying, not just in itself, but taking into consideration the dead kingly figure which appears in the aforementioned “Death” card. Do we see here, in the merchant prince of the “Three of Wands,” the dead or dying king come to life again? Or, is it the inverse—the merchant prince seeking an answer beyond the “best that can be achieved under the circumstances,” which still leads to decline and a hope for renewal?



Figure 5. The “Wheel of Fortune.”

¹⁴⁴ Creekmore, 913.

¹⁴⁵ Waite, 192.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 301.

I find the cards that still follow to be instructive on the matter—after all, when reading a spread, one must take into account not just each discrete card itself, but the whole of the picture. Following the “Three of Wands” is another card remarkably apt in speaking to the thematics of the poem—“the Wheel” (l. 51) which we may reasonably infer to be the “Wheel of Fortune” card in the tarot (fig. 5). Coleman-Smith’s illustration for this card is, in my view, one of the most complex and striking in the tarot in terms of both general appearance and implicit symbolism. Here, a colossal wheel hovers in the sky, engraved with hermetic symbols. Encircling it are two rings of creatures—in the first, flush against the wheel, are creatures Egyptian in origin: the Sphinx, dog-headed Anubis, and the serpent Typhon. For the second, in the clouds inhabiting the four corners of the card are the four living creatures of the Book of Ezekiel, and symbols of the four gospels: a winged lion, ox, angel, and eagle. Symbolizing “the perpetual motion of a fluidic universe” and “the flux of human life,” the card would be placed below the cross of the first two cards, indicating “the foundation or basis of the matter, that which has already passed into actuality”.¹⁴⁷ This “basis” or “actuality” of the reading then becomes the cyclical nature of time—moments, lives, and eras continually passing in a perpetual cycle of death and rebirth. Cosmic in scope, the Wheel looms turning beneath the querent’s material shufflings, ever a reminder of the karmic loop of deep time that dwarfs even the bustle of the modern age’s “unreal cities”—after all, it is the stanza following Sosostris’ reading that famously renders the image of the masses that “flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many” (ll. 62-3).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 108, 302.

The following two cards—the “one-eyed merchant” and a mysterious blank card (ll. 52-3)—I find to be decisive in emphasizing the above interpretation of Sosostris’ tarot imparting a critique of certain prevailing moods of the modern age. The “merchant” would be placed to the right of the center cross, the blank card to the left, representing “the influence that is just passed, or is now passing away,” and “the influence that is coming into action and will operate in the near future,” respectively—or, simply put, the past and future of the querent.¹⁴⁸ For the card that would represent the *Waste Land* querent’s past, the name “one-eyed merchant” is Eliot’s—as to possible analogues, I find the most persuasive one that critics have postulated to be the “Six of Pentacles” card (fig. 6).¹⁴⁹ As in the “Three of Wands,” we have the appearance of yet another merchant prince figure: a purple chaperon wound about his head, he holds a pair of golden scales in one hand and a fistful of golden coins in the other; two beggars kneel at his feet with upturned palms, and he lets the coins fall into the hands of one, but not the other. Looking down on the recipient of his wealth, his face is in profile, with only one of the eyes visible—hence the

Figure 6. The “Six of Pentacles.”



justification for his being the “one-eyed merchant.” As one would imagine, the card signifies “presents, gifts, gratification...prosperity, etc.”¹⁵⁰ Here, in my view, is a more decisive factor in interpreting Sosostris’ reading to be ultimately critical of the pursuit of material acquisition, marking those pursuits as not the pathway to regeneration. These efforts are *in the past* for the querent’s search—something the seeker must leave behind, rather than move towards in order to arrive at the desired destination of socio-cultural renewal.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 302.

¹⁴⁹ Creekmore, 914; Gibbons, 563.

¹⁵⁰ Waite, 270.

What, then, does the reading portend about the querent's future? Or, what must that querent move towards in order to find that sought-after path? We now arrive at what is perhaps the most puzzling card in the spread to divine—a blank card, representing “something he carries on his back, / Which I [Sosostris] am forbidden to see” (ll. 53-4). One is tempted to throw up one's hands at this point, finding this pathway barred by an actual blank space, closed off to even the wise eyes of the “famous clairvoyante.”



Figure 7. “The Fool.”

Critical commentary on this perplexing blank card is varied, and somewhat scant in comparison to that on the other cards. Robert Currie makes the observation that the Rider-Waite deck included two blank cards in addition to the seventy-eight;¹⁵¹ what exactly these blank cards would have been used for is unclear, as Waite makes no mention of them in his manual. Creekmore is the only critic to posit a specific identification: the trump card “The Fool” (fig. 7).¹⁵² At first I wasn't quite convinced of this selection, but after some thought have grown to find the card more and more likely a possibility. In the Rider-Waite tarot, the twenty-two trump cards are numbered from zero to twenty-one—historically, numbering the trumps was a very common practice in the design of tarot decks, the numbers corresponding to the cards' respective point values in gameplay. In playing card terminology, a “blank” card generally indicates a card with no value; the number of the “Fool” card is zero.

Additionally, I am inclined to take this blank card as more likely to be “The Fool” rather than an actual image-less card based on the descriptive phrase “something he carries on his back.” There *is* something being figured, here; that image is just inaccessible, not nonexistent.

¹⁵¹ Currie, 728.

¹⁵² Creekmore, 915.

We might consider that the “he” in this description refers to the “one-eyed merchant”—however, neither the “Six of Pentacles” nor any other of the merchant-like figures in the Rider-Waite deck carry anything on their backs. In the entirety of the deck, the only figure who might be said to be carrying something on their back is “The Fool,” who walks with a bindle poised on his shoulder. On first glance, the card appears morbidly humorous: a youth walks along, arms stretched outward, gazing up at a clear and sunny sky—seemingly unaware that in one step, the path he walks gives out onto a sharp cliff. However, Waite’s guide provides some additional context:

The edge which opens on the depth has no terror; it is as if angels were waiting to uphold him, if it came about that he leaped from the height. His countenance is full of intelligence and expectant dream...He is a prince of the other world on his travels through this one—all amidst the morning glory, the keen air. The sun, which shines behind him, knows whence he came, whither he is going, and how he will return by another path after many days. He is the spirit in search of experience.¹⁵³

The above description signals toward the veritable ambivalence of what this card may import in a given reading. While “conventional explanations” of “The Fool,” to use Waite’s own wording, point to more overt and explicit connotations of “folly, mania, extravagance, intoxication, delirium, frenzy, bewrayment” and so forth,¹⁵⁴ the occultist’s own slant on Coleman-Smith’s illustration imparts a desire to recast how one might respond to this card’s instructive clout—or if not wholly to recast, then at the very least to diversify the range of interpretive possibilities. According to a more Waitean approach to cartomancy, the card is not necessarily by default a cautionary admonition for the reader to abscond from the path of folly, and make all due haste towards the straight and narrow. Rather—and moreover informed by contextual factors such as the nature of the issue that the querent poses, the place of “The Fool” in the spread, the other cards’ meanings and placements, and so on—the card may just as well be an affirmative and

¹⁵³ Waite, 154-5.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 155, 286.

auspicious exhortation to give oneself over to the mania which may clarify one's vision, to exult in a frenzy that electrifies one's movement, to step into the void as the gateway to higher knowledge, as does the otherworldly prince of the above quotation. His "countenance full of intelligence and expectant dream" is perhaps in that regard not oxymoronic—he may go forth to experience and learn from his circuitous and many-phased journey across worlds, as heavenly bodies—the angels and the sun—guard his path and affirm its propitious course.

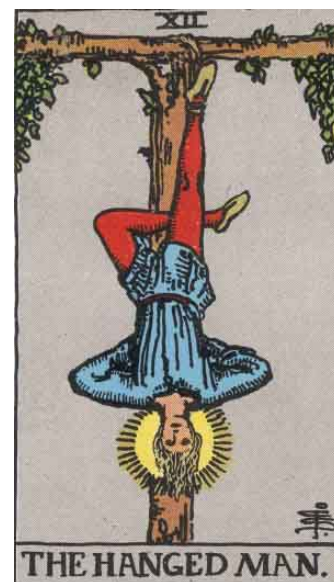


Figure 8. "The Hanged Man."

Having foregrounded the interpretive variability of the "Fool" card, we may consider the possibilities of its placement as indicating the querent's future—particularly in relation to the querent's past of material prosperity in the "one-eyed merchant," and present quest for renewal in the "drowned Phoenecian sailor" crossed with the "Belladonna." If we are to take the more "conventional" meaning, "The Fool" amplifies what I have been discussing as the tarot reading's implicit critique of a characteristically modern view of the sociocultural weight of material advancement. Cutting horizontally across the spread is a parable being enacted: the merchant prince goes down a path that leads to nowhere. Creekmore's interpretation runs in a vein quite similar, with the folly being the mammonist values of the "Waste Land" itself which are "unknowingly believed to be good," yet "are now understood by the protagonist [of the poem] to be obstacles to be overcome."¹⁵⁵ I would also like to proffer an additional possibility—or, an additional layer—in consideration of the card's more affirmational dimension, as suggested by Waite's description: a turning away from Mammon, certainly, *and* towards experience of an

¹⁵⁵ Creekmore, 920.

altogether different sort—experience perhaps misaligned or misconstrued as delirium, yet that may be resituated as cosmic rather than “moony.”

There remains one final card to take into consideration, and this analysis may conclude: “I do not find / The Hanged Man” (ll. 54-5) Sosostris says, ending the reading. As with the “Death” card previously discussed, the “Hanged Man,” an actual card in the tarot (fig. 8), at first glance strikes one as a morbid image—yet this dark façade betrays what is on closer examination a meaning deeply affirmational and auspicious. Looking deliberately at the card, we see that this hanged man is not an agonized figure, but an exultant one; and Waite in his description of the card is adamant that readers not be mistaken on the matter, making a deliberate, point-by-point visual analysis of the card’s elements that signal towards an impression of beatitude both consequent of and generative towards metaphysical richness: “(1) that the tree of sacrifice is living wood, with leaves thereon; (2) that the face expresses deep entrancement, not suffering; (3) that the figure, as a whole, suggests life in suspension, but life and not death.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, we see lush and radiant imagery not only in the living boughs making up the hanged man’s crucifix—which we have seen in the “Three of Wands” as well—but also in the halo of light that surrounds his head. Allusions to myths of regeneration also abound in the card, such as Biblical ones, of course—as the figure hangs upside-down, so St. Peter was crucified; and Eliot’s note speaks of an association between this card and the resurrected Christ appearing as “the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus,” which makes an appearance in “What the Thunder Said,” and as embodied along with sacrificial figures of other ancient pantheons in the “Hanged God of [Sir James George] Frazer”.¹⁵⁷ In terms of the divinatory meaning of “The Hanged Man,” then, it makes great sense for Waite to write that the card “expresses the

¹⁵⁶ Waite, 118.

¹⁵⁷ Eliot, *Waste Land*, 22.

relation...between the Divine and the Universe. He who can understand that the story of his higher nature is imbedded in this [card's] symbolism will receive intimations concerning a great awakening that is possible, and will know that after the sacred Mystery of Death there is a glorious Mystery of Resurrection."¹⁵⁸ Plainly put, the card, alongside "Death," is among the most apt in the tarot to allegorize the processes of renewal and regeneration that so centrally animate *The Waste Land*.

And yet, there's the rub—what are we to make not just of this image, but its absence? At the end of the reading, am I finally forced to throw up my hands and concede to an overall lack of an answer, the reading's ultimate failure to guide the querent on that quest out of the dry rot of the modern condition—and by extension the incompetence of Sosostris, or the exaggerated thematic significance of the tarot, as many scholars before me would have it? Far from it—and the defense is in the allusion. As mentioned, Eliot's note draws a connection between the "Hanged Man" and Christ in a specific episode of the Gospel of Luke, in which, post-resurrection, he appears to two of his disciples as they travel to Emmaus, a village near Jerusalem; the biblical passage states that "their [the disciples'] eyes were prevented from recognizing him."¹⁵⁹ While there is some ambiguity as to what exactly the statement means, such as why exactly they don't recognize who he is—proverbial "little faith" on the disciples' part? Deliberate disguise on Christ's part?—we can say that while these disciples see a person, as they speak with him and invite him to share their lodgings, they do not *see* him in that they cannot discern his identity. In other words, *they do not "find" him*, just as Sosostris does not "find / The Hanged Man." So then, does she still ultimately fail? Is she blinded, and in need of a "come to Jesus" moment? I don't necessarily find that to be so, in that she clearly recognizes that she

¹⁵⁸ Waite, 118-9.

¹⁵⁹ Lk. 24:16.

doesn't see the card—to go back to the biblical episode, the disciples aren't conscious of their blindness until *after* Christ reveals his identity to them. All-in-all, in Eliot's presentation of the "Hanged Man" card as absent, there is a defensible intimation for the querent, in order to find the sought-after socio-cultural regeneration, to give one's self over to the *unseen*. As it manifests in the arcane tapestry of the tarot spread, such is not only the *method* to find the cure to modern society's ailments, but also the *essence* of that cure itself—not a repetition of the same, but a careful attention to and awareness of the kinds of knowledge and power antecedent to the modern and persistent within the modern—even in spite of legal efforts in Eliot's time, as previously alluded to in Diemert's work, to brand such practice as superstitious fraud.

Akutagawa's Clairvoyance

Thus far, I have discussed the divination motif as it manifests in the work of canonical writers in Anglo-American modernism. I want to now shift focus to an example beyond the sphere of the Western Anglophone modernist canon, taking up an iconic text in Japanese literary modernism: Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's¹⁶⁰ short story "Yabu no Naka," or "In a Grove." I bring this text into play not just for the sake of providing an analysis of another compelling manifestation of my chosen topic. While that is certainly one motivation, I take up "In a Grove" to also demonstrate how divination as modernist method speaks to and enriches broader critical conversations on the study of modernism through a global approach. In discussions on writers and texts from outside the Western metropole that utilize modernist literary styles, there persists a now decades-old view holding to a center-periphery model of directions of influence: the West as aesthetic supernova and originator of stylistic innovation, dazzling the cultural outskirts and

¹⁶⁰ See note 9 on Japanese naming conventions.

inspiring their writers to reverent homage and discipleship in their own works—and, thereby, becoming complicit in promulgating views of Western supremacy, aiding the cause of cultural imperialism, and self-hatedly disavowing the worth of their native aesthetic modes. Counter to this paradigm is a conceptualization of orders of influence that are more multidirectional than unidirectional, and more phylogenetic than hierarchical—particularly in the Japanese context. According to William J. Tyler, scholars of modern literature in Japan have since the 1980s taken up the view of *dōjisei*, or “simultaneousness,” a “theory of synchronicity” that “argues for the point of view that modernism unfolded contemporaneously across the globe, or at least in nations or social sectors sharing analogous levels of economic, technological, and cultural development.”¹⁶¹ For one, there are incontestable points of evidence that “traditional” Japanese storytelling modes greatly influenced the development of Western high modernism—for instance, the influence of *Noh* drama on the development of Ezra Pound’s conceptualization of time consciousness,¹⁶² as well as Yeats’ theory of symbolism in his own theatrical work.¹⁶³

Additionally, we also find that many Japanese writers who take up Western literary styles do so not as sycophantically as it may appear on the surface. Rather, their use of such aesthetic techniques may also operate, in subtle and self-reflexive ways, as a means to interrogate the impact of modernity and Western influence—and in Japanese history, as I will discuss, the two go very much hand-in-hand. I maintain that we may read Akutagawa’s “In a Grove” as an instance of such discerning—and, in many respects, playful—self-reflexivity on the subject of the modern age. (On that matter, it is very deliberate that I place my analysis of this text alongside that on *The Waste Land*, as, remarkably, these two texts were published in the same

¹⁶¹ Tyler, 16.

¹⁶² Nicholls, 174.

¹⁶³ Ellmann, 216-8.

iconic year of 1922—a fact that in itself supports the cogency of *dōjisei*.) As I aim to show, this story—through a compelling fusion of modern Western technique with “traditional” content—signals the limitations of the dictates of cults of the modern in their Japanese iterations. And, I hold, the culmination of that inquiry manifests in nothing other than the story’s psychic element—namely, the figure of the spirit medium. In his study on the supernatural in turn-of-the-century Japan, Gerald Figal argues that a “discourse on the fantastic,” or *fushigiron*, operated “at the very heart of the historical configurations of Japanese modernity.”¹⁶⁴ In essence, he forwards the importance of *fushigi*, or “the supernatural, the mysterious, and the fantastic,” in the archipelago’s processes of modernization.¹⁶⁵ Rather than merely “the stubborn residue of modern rationalist knowledge,” *fushigi* in a broad sense—and in all its endless manifestations, from regional folklore to State Shinto—was a considerable force with vital and varied roles to play in the drama of the modern era—whether “to subvert modernity from the margins or to support it from the center,” or even simply as that which “allows the modern to be thought” via its negation.¹⁶⁶ I want to carry this conceptualization of *fushigiron* into my analysis of clairvoyance in Akutagawa’s tale; though its 1922 publication date is slightly past Figal’s historical orbit of the Meiji era (1868-1912), there is arguable continuity in the recurrent dynamic of a supernatural force that persists into the furtherance of modernization—and, moreover, a force that is active and interwoven in the social fabric, rather than obsolete and vestigial. While Figal’s work takes up an extensive catalogue of cases of the supernatural and their respective functions in relation to modernity’s constitution, my focus is on the single manifestation of the supernatural in the story at hand: the character of the *miko*, an ancient type of psychic medium associated with folk

¹⁶⁴ Figal, 8.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 15, 12.

spirituality, who through her clairvoyant faculties serves as conduit for the voices of the dead—a socially marginalized figure from a socially marginalized spiritual tradition, as I will discuss. In terms of her discursive function, then, as with Pilar and Sosostriis, her divinatory prowess that operates powerfully and decisively in the central conflict of the text places pressure on a master narrative of epistemological hegemony—one that places value solely on knowledge attained through reason-based faculties, denying all else.

All that being said, in order to better frame the particular elements of “In a Grove” that I analyze in their own cultural and historical context, it is important before taking up the story itself to historically contextualize Japanese modernism’s complex relationship between its own cultural tradition—whether those traditions be “real” or “imagined”—and the influence of imported Western cultural ideas and creative forms. It is a tortuous yet compelling history, set into motion at the latest in the mid-18th century¹⁶⁷ with the fall of the traditional Tokugawa feudal regime and the advent of the aforementioned Meiji era. As internal pressures fomented by external threats of Western colonial aggression gave rise to civil strife among the ruling classes, the subsequent end of isolationism brought about not only an industrial modernization and urbanization that transformed the landscape over a span of mere decades, but also the beginning of a so-called cult of European modernity: a sudden and widespread incorporation and emulation of all things Western—and, in consequence, a repudiation and devaluation of all things “traditionally Japanese.” Indeed, to give a sense for the dynamic of the era, while in the early Meiji there was built near the Imperial Palace a “British-designed mock-Renaissance Victorian” pleasure palace for the purposes of providing to both foreign dignitaries and Tokyo’s social elite entertainments of “the latest and most fashionable Western style...ballroom dances, costume

¹⁶⁷ As one would imagine, the question of an “origin-point” for modernism in Japan is as hotly debated and contested as it is in its Western iterations.

parties, Venetian fêtes, billiard games” and so forth; on the other side of the spectrum, there were multiple traditional “Buddhist temples and statues [that] were sold to be used as firewood.”¹⁶⁸

As a matter of course, literary forms were a fundamental instance of this wide-scale adoption of the European, particularly as those forms operated to help give shape to a cohesive and coherent nation-state—or, at least, the appearance of one. Such invaluable tools in the process of nation-state formation were no doubt appealing to the new elite of the Japanese archipelago—for centuries a myriad assortment of disparate, warring feudal domains now seeking to present itself as a unified country and people on the geopolitical stage. As Roy Starrs writes in his critical history of Japanese modernism:

...the most immediate and far-reaching effect of Western influence on late 19th-century Japanese literature was a sudden rise in the status of fiction, and of the novel in particular. When Japanese writers began to read and translate Western literature at this time, they encountered, in the modern Western novel, a very powerful vehicle of modernization and nation-building... These two phenomena [the novel and the nation-state] were not merely parallel but symbiotic: each had contributed to the other’s development. And this mutually enriching relationship reached its climax and apogee in the 19th century—at exactly the historical moment when Japan ‘reopened’ to the West.¹⁶⁹

At the turn of the century, however, the force and extent of the embrace of Western attitudes had brought about a counter-modern movement that would reinstate value to traditional Japanese arts and culture.¹⁷⁰ Feeling the whiplash of a bewilderingly fast-paced modernization, many Japanese artists and intelligentsia began the inevitable task of “social and psychological problems that such rapid modernization can cause,” often accompanied by a “mood of nostalgia

¹⁶⁸ Starrs, 58, 36.

¹⁶⁹¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 85-6.

¹⁷⁰ It should be noted, however, that the notion of a cohesive Japanese tradition was itself deeply mediated by international influence—as Starrs writes, “even those who advocated a ‘return to Japanese tradition’ were strongly influenced by modern Western ideas of exactly what was meant by ‘Japanese tradition.’ ... when we attempt to analyse Meiji constructions of Japanese tradition, we must also take into account the influence of Victorian views of that tradition, as well as of Victorian views of ‘national tradition’ in general, which also played a significant role in shaping Meiji nationalist ideologies.” (38-9)

for the ‘old Japan’” and a “revived interest in Zen and in Shintō, [and] in the Japanese literary classics” of the imperial court a millennia ago.¹⁷¹

By the end of the Meiji era and into the Taishō era (1912-1926), the latter being parallel to what is roughly held to correspond to “high modernism” in Japan, modern literary forms only continued to morph in divergent ways. On the one end of the spectrum developed proletarian radical art forms, such as the highly performative and explosive *Mavo* visual arts movement, directly and heavily inspired by contemporary European *avant-garde* aesthetics and Marxist politics; on the reverse end was the conservative and aesthete neo-sensory school, a “de-politicized”¹⁷² literary aesthetic with a deep reverence and nostalgia for the traditions, values, and cultural symbols of Old Japan. One predominant characteristic of this moment—between isolationism and fascism—is an atmosphere of cosmopolitanism, intellectual and cultural networks of international influence and exchange. Seiji P. Lippit describes this “Taishō cosmopolitanism” as “a certain conception of a universalized modern culture,” a “rejection of a localized conception of culture in favor of participation in a universalized realm of modernity, one in which Japanese and European civilization are perceived to coexist in the same shared space.”¹⁷³ Moreover—and, for my purposes of investigating the afterlife of the traditional in the modern, most notably—traditional and modern creative styles are no longer mutually exclusive modes. Rather, experiments in the hybridization of the traditional *with* the modern take to the air: “a revival of native artistic traditions in a ‘modernized’ form,” particularly “as an alternative to the kind of wholesale adoption of Western art practices initiated by the ‘Meiji modernizers.’”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Starrs, 84, 67.

¹⁷² After all, there is an irony in claims to the “apolitical,” which are in themselves a sort of politics.

¹⁷³ Lippit, 12.

¹⁷⁴ Starrs, 144, 145.

For Akutagawa, he is widely considered to be emblematic of this era's intellectualism; Lippit describes him as "one of the exemplary figures of Taishō cosmopolitanism, and in his early writings he drew on multiple literary traditions of both Asia and Europe. His conception of literature was, in effect, an embodiment of a modernity perceived as a universalized cultural space in which Japanese and European civilization existed in the same framework."¹⁷⁵ Indeed, one of the leading literary innovations of which Akutagawa was at the forefront was the use of Western prose fiction modes—particularly the short story—in a Japanese context, along with classically modernist experiments in narration—stream-of-consciousness, multi-perspectivalism, fragmentation, the unreliable narrator. As Denis C. Washburn writes, "Instead of seeking a perspective to transcend relativism's limitations, he [Akutagawa] was more interested in the formal possibilities offered by the creation of multiple perspectives that created irony and thus undercut the individual perspectives of his characters."¹⁷⁶ Such an undercutting of the integrity and preeminence of personal subjectivity through narrative style was of course subversive thematically as well as formally. Again from Washburn:

The characters' viewpoints are purposely decentered to reveal the fact that viewpoint is not absolute; the irony resulting from the gap between what the characters know and what the reader knows reduces the credibility of the account and renders the truth of the story relative, dependent on individual interpretation. The compensation for this ironic denial of absolute truth is that the narrative as a whole seeks credibility by asserting that the contingency of life and art is an inevitable condition of human experience.¹⁷⁷

We find the above stylistic innovations of decentered and unreliable points-of-view that forward an "ironic denial of absolute truth" at the forefront of "In a Grove," a short prose piece comprised of a series of fragmentary, multi-perspectival, and conflicting testimonies all told in

¹⁷⁵ Lippit, 33.

¹⁷⁶ Washburn, 226.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 227.

the first person. Alongside these techniques is another “modern” element of the text worth noting, particularly for the purposes of unpacking this text’s response to the dynamic of modernity versus tradition: in addition to its experiments in narration, the story is also viable as a work of detective fiction, a storytelling mode which arrives in Japan as a so-called “borrowed genre” during the *fin de siècle* via translations of Western works such as the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.¹⁷⁸ In his study on British and American detective fiction, Charles J. Rzepka defines the genre as “any story that contains a major character undertaking the investigation of a mysterious crime or similar transgression,” especially one “in which the puzzle element directly engages the reader’s attention and powers of inference”—the term “puzzle element” referring to “the presentation of the mystery as an ongoing problem for the reader to solve, and its power to engage the reader’s own reasoning abilities.”¹⁷⁹ According to Rzepka’s taxonomy of the genre, that element of reasoning is not only significant, but definitive. In fact, he delineates an empirically-grounded, reason-based order as a generic bylaw—that “the imaginary world of detection must conform to the universe described by modern science, the world familiar to most educated readers living in the industrially developed nations” of the United Kingdom, United States, and France; ergo, “the hunt [for the culprit] must conform to the requirements of causal logic, from which chance and the supernatural are excluded.”¹⁸⁰ With this emphasis on Western reason in mind, the synchronicity of detective fiction’s arrival during the aforementioned Meiji era of accelerated modernization and Westernization is no coincidence; Kari Sawana describes early Japanese detective fiction as “one of the primary vehicles for the typical Meiji Enlightenment ideals of empirical reasoning

¹⁷⁸ See Silver, 58; Saito, 4.

¹⁷⁹ Rzepka, 12, 10.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

and rational thinking”¹⁸¹; for the figure of the detective in particular, Satoru Saito reads the Japanese iteration of this archetype as “a hero who symbolized how Western knowledge can be utilized for the good of the nation...an emblem of success within the ideology of *risshin shusse* (rising in the world) that drove ambitious youths of Meiji Japan and beyond to seek success through education, in general, and Western learning, in particular.”¹⁸²

However, into the Taishō period—Akutagawa’s moment—critics chart a shift in detective fiction’s ideological commentary, once again running parallel to the Japanese experience of modernity and prevailing views towards it: from certainty to uncertainty, from affirmation to doubt. With the onset of the 1910s, Japanese detective fiction writers turn to the genre as a means to contemplate, in the words of Sawana, the “ambiguous figures of modernity...the fast, opaque, and fragmentary condition of modern existence” and “the precariousness of the post-Enlightenment world where rationality has failed and the potential for mayhem is an ever-present danger”.¹⁸³ This exploration of the so-named “dark side of modernity” was not so much an experience of exhilaration and allure, but more so one of disillusionment and alienation indicative of the modern, urban post-Meiji subject’s own experience: Saito’s analysis of the detective as symbol of that subject’s positionality turns to the figure of the criminal as representative of “the difficulties of the Japanese student and intellectual in finding productive ways to participate in society as emblems of modernization and Westernization that they were supposed to embody.”¹⁸⁴ This mood of anomie only persists in the detective fiction of the following decades, in which cosmopolitanism gives rise to fascism: Mark Silver’s study reads detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s as reflecting “more generalized

¹⁸¹ Sawana, 7.

¹⁸² Saito, 7.

¹⁸³ Sawana, 11, 15.

¹⁸⁴ Saito, 9.

Japanese anxieties...anxiety over Japan's place in the modern world, over the meaning of Japan's Westernization and the threats it posed to Japanese cultural identity, and over the mixed success of Japan's attempts at colonial expansion in a manner that both followed Western example and asserted Japanese interests."¹⁸⁵

We find "In a Grove," written in 1922, in the midst of this trajectory: though not explicitly and deliberately a work of detective fiction on Akutagawa's part,¹⁸⁶ we may in all fairness read the story through the genre's framework—thereby uncovering its critical commentary on the anxieties of modernization, in definite alignment with the analyses of the Japanese detective fiction scholars above. After all, the occasion of the story is in fact a murder mystery. The incident is as follows: in Heian period Japan (794-1185), the body of a young samurai named Kanazawa no Takehiro is found with a stab wound to the chest, lying in, of course, a grove—a "deserted place where a few scrub cedar trees are mixed in with the bamboo" a "few hundred yards off the Yamashina post road" connecting to Kyoto, the imperial capital.¹⁸⁷ Officials must thus take up the task of solving the crime, seeking to ferret out the culprit and elucidate what "really" transpired from a series of testimonials by various witnesses and/or suspects. At the outset, the story appears to be a classic, by-the-book instance of detective fiction according to Rzepka's definition—clearly the basic premise of "an investigation into a mysterious crime" is met. Additionally, there is a definite "puzzle element" to the text, "the presentation of the mystery as an ongoing problem for the reader to solve" via the engagement of "the reader's own reasoning abilities." We have seeded in the various testimonials certain clues to the case, inviting the reader to engage with the investigative process as the story progresses.

¹⁸⁵ Silver, 15.

¹⁸⁶ Akutagawa did author one story, "Kaika no satsujin" (tr. "Murder in the Age of Enlightenment"), explicitly for a magazine's special issue on detective fiction; for further detail, see Saito, 200-9.

¹⁸⁷ Akutagawa, *Rashōmon*, 10.

For instance, readers may infer from the testimony of the woodcutter, who first discovers the body, that its clothing of a “pale blue robe...and one of those fancy Kyoto-style black hats with the sharp creases” makes the victim likely a member of the social elite, before we discover in a later testimony from the victim’s mother-in-law that he is in fact a samurai.¹⁸⁸ Only the most incurious would feel no inclination to in some degree track the various key objects at play—such as a black lacquered quiver and dappled gray horse belonging to the victim, or a hair comb—presumably worn by the victim’s wife, a key witness in the case—that the woodcutter reports at the scene of the crime, which disappears in the testimony of the cunning bandit Tajōmaru, the primary suspect: “...the bamboo leaves on the ground showed no sign she’d ever been there,” he states.¹⁸⁹ Adding onto these various elements contributing to a clear “puzzle element” is a palpable effect of immediacy due to the first person testimonial arrangement that brings readers into the investigation, placing them in the shoes of the authority to whom the various characters address their statements.

While the above aspects certainly make for an engaging reading experience, there is an additional layer of craft to the story in how it *subverts* the rules of detective fiction as much as it embodies them. For one, we might consider a possible *lack* of detective figure as archetype of rationality. Rzepka’s definition specifies the presence of “a major character undertaking the investigation of a mysterious crime.” In the tale at hand, however, a clever sleuth the likes of a Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot is notably absent; the closest there is in terms of such a presence is the addressee of the testimonials: in Jay Rubin’s translation, a magistrate. It is worthwhile to note that in the original Japanese, Akutagawa uses a more historically specific term: *kebiishi*, a chief in a “body of police commissioners who constituted the only effective

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 10, 12.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 15.

military force during Japan's Heian period," operating as "the backbone of the [imperial] administration during this time," according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Both terms carry clear connotations of central governmental authority—connotations that only intensify with the imperial associations of the original. Might this *kebiishi* be our Holmes? It is difficult to agree for certain, namely due to how disembodied and intangible a figure he is in consequence of the story's narrative strategy of first person testimonials. Rather than an idiosyncratic gumshoe protagonist, the *kebiishi* is an invisible, wordless, distant, almost spectral presence, ascertainable only through the titles that precede a handful of the monologues—"Testimony of a Traveling Priest under Questioning by the Magistrate," for instance. While, as previously mentioned, the strategy enables readers to more easily identify themselves as investigators of the case, it is a double-edged sword—there is no demigod of reason to place on a pedestal.

With that absence in mind, the tale works effectively in conversation with Saito's statement on shifts in post-Meiji detective fiction's focus and interests, in alignment with shifting moods regarding modernity—away from investigator figures "as emblems of modernization and Westernization" and towards criminality as allegory of the alienated, disillusioned modern Japanese subject for whom those ideals have failed. Indeed, if one had to identify the central character of "In a Grove," the role would most deservedly go to the main suspect of the murder, the bandit Tajōmaru.¹⁹⁰ While the magistrate speaks not a single word in the entirety of the text, Tajōmaru's testimonial is the longest in the story by far—a testimonial that moreover paints a portrait of a treacherous yet undaunted anti-hero whose moral code as a whole is obviously flawed, yet displays an informed understanding of the hegemonic power structures of the social elite: "When *I* kill a man, I do it with my sword, but people like you don't use swords. You

¹⁹⁰ Those who have seen Kurosawa's *Rashomon* will in all likelihood recall the actor Toshiro Mifune's animated performance as the bandit Tajōmaru.

gentlemen kill with your power, your money, and sometimes just with your words: you tell people you're doing them a favor. True, no blood flows, the man is still alive, but you've killed him all the same. I don't know whose sin is greater—yours or mine. (A sarcastic smile.)”¹⁹¹

Beyond the absence of a fully differentiated detective figure, an even greater subversion is at work in the text's rejection of what Rzepka refers to as a “concept of fairness,” in which “the hunt must conform to the requirements of causal logic.”¹⁹² In other words, the writer must make the solution to the mystery ascertainable to readers via the application of skills in reasoning based on the information provided throughout the story, thereby conforming to a standard of “fair play.” If a vital clue is left out prior to the revelation, say, or if we do not meet the culprit until the moment of confession, such a violation is considered a gesture of disrespect to the spirit of the game. It does not take long for “In a Grove” to flout this convention; while the first four testimonials, all brief statements from indirect or character witnesses, seem to set up a “fair play” arena, there is a shift in the three remaining testimonials from direct witnesses and suspects, in which that standard becomes egregiously and increasingly disregarded. In the first, the bandit Tajōmaru confesses to the crime; according to his testimony, after luring the samurai and his wife off the road in order to rob the pair and assault the woman, he kills the samurai in a swordfight to the death. While there may be a minor violation of the rule of fair play in that the bandit confesses outright, the reader may also think that here is a story with an exceedingly simple solution: the testimony immediately prior, from a policeman who apprehends the notorious bandit, states the suspect was upon arrest in possession of a quiver of arrows the same color as the victim's. Yet the case is far from closed, as the wife's testimony that follows presents an entirely different narrative. According to her, the bandit flees the scene, leaving the

¹⁹¹ Akutagawa, *Rashōmon*, 13.

¹⁹² Rzepka, 15.

samurai immobilized but alive; overcome by shame and despair, she then attempts a murder-suicide, but is only able to kill her husband and not herself. Which is the true account? Based on the information at hand, the reader might reasonably infer it would more likely be the wife's. As gestured to earlier, we may glean a character analysis from Tajōmaru's confession that he is a figure with a very warped yet particular code of ethics that places high value on personal pride, boldness, and defiance. "I didn't want to kill him in a cowardly way. I untied him and challenged him to a sword fight," he claims.¹⁹³ The statement could be an attempt to save face, now that he has been caught after a life of crime and knows his goose is cooked; indeed, he closes his testimony with the declaration: "I always knew my head would end up hanging in the tree outside the prison some day, so let me have the ultimate punishment."¹⁹⁴ One might surmise that perhaps he would rather have his final act paint him as a lionhearted fighter rather than a sneak, and owns the crime in consequence.

Both of these testimonies are disproven, however, by the closing testimony of the narrative: a statement from the murder victim himself—one that is not given in the past and later recovered, but told in real time at the moment of the deposition. How might that be possible? I have been discussing these final testimonies with regard to a violation of the standard of fair play—and I want to clarify that the wife's and bandit's statements alone do not necessarily constitute an outright violation. Of course, conflicting testimonies do not in themselves qualify as a wrench in the cogwork of rationality, as long as the reader can still successfully adduce a plausible solution from the material provided, as I have attempted to do above. The outright violation of the rule of fair play—and, in my view, the most extensive subversion of the conventions of detective fiction—comes in Akutagawa's use of psychic forces as the key to

¹⁹³ Akutagawa, *Rashōmon*, 15.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-6.

solving the mystery at hand. When it comes to the “requirements of causal logic,” Rzepka writes, “chance and the supernatural are excluded”; such an exclusion is a matter of course, as the latter in particular simply does not “conform to the universe described by modern science” from which reason derives its epistemological authority.¹⁹⁵ Yet in the text at hand, the victim is able to provide his own account through the aid of a spirit medium, who uses her powers in clairvoyance to channel the voice of the dead man from the beyond. From that testimony, we ultimately discover that it was neither his wife nor the bandit who ended his life; rather, his death came from his very own hands. According to his statement, the bandit convinces the wife to run off with him on the basis that, quote-on-quote, her “flesh has been sullied”; she agrees, but exhorts Tajōmaru to kill her husband: “I can’t be with you as long as he is alive!” the victim recalls her stating to the bandit as justification. Ironically disgusted, Tajōmaru renounces her—and they each in turn flee the scene. Forsaken, in his despair, the samurai stabs himself in the chest.

In reference to the figure of the spirit medium above, I identify her as a woman with absolute certainty—a certainty not ascertainable from the English translation, but in reference to the original. Rubin’s translation refers to this character as simply “a Medium,” and the testimony makes no direct reference to the gender of the figure who channels the dead man’s spirit. In the Japanese, however, Akutagawa again makes use of a term that is highly specific, historically and culturally: the *miko*. It is worthwhile noting that the Japanese written language is in large part ideographic—in other words, it makes extensive use of sign-based characters with pictographic origins meant to visually represent that which they signify. The word *miko* is written with two such characters: 巫女, the first meaning “shaman” or “oracle” and the second meaning “woman.” While, etymologically speaking, the word literally translates to “shamaness,” the term

¹⁹⁵ Rzepka, 15.

refers to a very specific kind of medium with a complex and variegated history. As that history is vital to a more historically-oriented analysis of this figure, some degree of context will be useful. Indeed, the question of even a mere working definition of the term is troublesome, due to the fact that who a *miko* is/was and what her abilities are/were is highly variable based on such factors as historical moment and geographical region. While in present-day Japan a *miko* generally refers to a Shinto shrine maiden whose duties include assisting priests in rites, ministering to visitors, and the performance of ceremonial dances,¹⁹⁶ the title hearkens back to prehistoric times, predating even the arrival of Buddhism in Japan in the seventh century.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, the contemporary *miko* bears not only little resemblance to her ancient ancestress, but even more so a significantly reduced degree of spiritual acumen. Carmen Blacker in *The Catalpa Bow*, an anthropological study of Japanese shamanism, describes the ancient *miko* as a powerful sibylline figure who through her supernatural abilities could commune with both the spirits of the departed and with deities, or *kami*.¹⁹⁸ Prior to the seventh century, the *miko* was a woman of high social status, as attested to by a number of ancient Japanese legendary figures of shamaness queens and demigoddesses. With the Taika Reforms of the seventh century, however, the ruling class' impetus to model their society on China's led to a shift in the *miko*'s social status, from a predominantly ruling class figure to one thereafter associated with folk culture, a spirituality of the periphery. According to Blacker's history, for the next millennium the *miko* continued their mystical practice "on the humble level of the folk religion," often forming communities known as *miko-mura* from which "they would set out at stated seasons of the year on long peripatetic

¹⁹⁶ Bocking, 121-2.

¹⁹⁷ Blacker, 30.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 30, 75.

journeys, like strolling minstrels, delivering prophecies and messages from the dead in the villages through which they passed.”¹⁹⁹

It was in the mid- to late-nineteenth century—with the advent of the aforementioned Meiji era of accelerated modernization and Westernization—when the government illegalized these spiritual practices, thereby transforming the folk shamanesses—who for over a thousand years had worked in service of village communities across Japan—into social outlaws. From the critical histories, we find the motivations for this criminalization to be numerous, yet deeply interwoven. We may begin by considering the rhetoric of enlightenment that pervaded the centers of socio-political power: “in accordance with modern rational principles,” the central government justified its stance on the grounds that the *miko* “deluded the people by professing to deliver messages from the dead”.²⁰⁰ While on the surface these motions claimed to prioritize the welfare of the general public, closer examination reveals a self-interested impetus on the part of the government to consolidate and centralize not only the nation of Japan itself, but even more so the extent of their hold over that nation. In this matter, we may more than fairly say that in Japan, the ideological control of spiritual beliefs—the question of what is proper “religion” and what is “superstition”—came to be as powerful a tool of sociocultural modernization as the introduction of railway systems or finger-waved hair. The prime example in substantiation of these claims is of course the government’s creation of State Shinto, which upholds the Emperor as its supreme deity. Indeed, Jason Ānanda Josephson’s study of religion as a politics of national identity formation in Japan, a “transnational product of contested asymmetries of power,”²⁰¹ forwards that State Shinto emerged precisely as a response to the external pressures of gunboat

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 127.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Josephson, 5.

diplomacy—the earlier-mentioned anxieties from Western power plays taking place not a long way off in China. With a uniform, monotheistic system of belief, Japan could present itself as a “civilized” people from a Western, Christian point-of-view. Indeed, much of the newly reworked Shinto *matsuri* (festivals) were in fact “imported from European rites of state and national festivals”²⁰²— often set to be celebrated, moreover, according to the Gregorian calendar rather than the lunar calendar, and parallel to Western holidays.²⁰³

It would be a misrepresentation, however, to say that it was wholly out of fear and deference that the Japanese government went about these efforts. If to curry favor was the sole objective, then a promotion of Western religions would have been more ingratiating, after all. One must take into consideration the benefits of a central system of belief that the government could present as *uniquely indigenous to Japan*: in the heyday of nationalism, the ambition to sit at table with the powers of the world necessitated the creation of a strongly unified Japanese national culture. In that endeavor, the power of a unified Japanese spirituality could not be overstated. With state-sponsored Shinto, the elite could all the more effectively engender among the citizenry a collective identity in allegiance to the State—indeed, its god of worship was none other than the Emperor himself, the very figurehead of the Japanese government.²⁰⁴ That being said, to achieve uniformity, outliers must be culled. The success of State Shinto thus called for, in Josephson’s phrasing, a “selective disenchantment”²⁰⁵ of Japanese spirituality: the aforementioned legislative iconoclasm that worked to devalue and flatten the profusion of local spiritualities to be found across the many regions and cultures of the archipelago. Emblems of

²⁰² Ibid, 168.

²⁰³ For instance, it is around this time that Japan begins to celebrate the New Year no longer according to the lunar calendar (as most of East Asia still does) but on January 1st, as in the West.

²⁰⁴ And the logical conclusion of these efforts was, of course, Japanese fascism of the 1930s. See Starrs, 134-6.

²⁰⁵ Josephson, 168.

village folk belief systems such as the clairvoyant *miko* were thus perceived as threats to the development of a “modern” Japanese national polity—as such, while national Shinto celebrations inhabited the sphere of “proper religion,” the *miko*’s centuries-old practices became mere “superstition:” backward, irrational, uncivilized, deceptive, and decidedly unmodern.

With this history in mind, we may now take into fuller consideration what I hold to be the story’s implicit critique of modernization via its ascribing the closing testimony to the *miko*. What the context above opens up is a historically-contextualized justification for a reading of the *miko* as an inverse of the Holmesian detective figure and the ideological underpinnings of the primacy of rationality. The inverse of the detective could be said to be, after all, the criminal—and at the time of the story’s publication in 1922, her divination practice was as yet technically a criminal offense, had been so for decades, and continued to be so for decades to come.²⁰⁶ She is in effect a personification of pre-Meiji, pre-modern Japan: a cultural embodiment of a marginalized and criminalized non-modernity that lingers, haunting the pursuit of truth and reason that the story’s investigation can be read to allegorize and complicate. In reference to an earlier quotation from Washburn, he describes the story as forwarding “the notion that truth in human terms is relative and that reality is contingent,” as its “modernist preoccupation with perspective” expresses.²⁰⁷ On that premise, we find that the concluding testimony of the *miko* takes that unravelling, fragmenting process to its utmost extreme—the consummate manifestation of ultimate unknowability. It is important to note that while the final statement disproves the earlier testimonies and identifies the “killer,” it still ends on a note of extreme uncertainty. As the spirit of the samurai describes himself laying on the forest floor with a knife

²⁰⁶ These shamanic practices would not be decriminalized until, ironically, the year 1945—with Japan’s defeat in World War II and the beginning of Allied occupation—under MacArthur’s Religious Bodies Law. See Blacker, 128.

²⁰⁷ Washburn, 227.

in his chest, he closes not upon the revelation of his suicide, but with the following enigmatic sentences: “Then stealthy footsteps came up to me. I tried to see who it was, but the darkness had closed in all around me. Someone—that someone gently pulled the dagger from my chest with an invisible hand. Again a rush of blood filled my mouth, but then I sank once and for all into the darkness between lives.”²⁰⁸

From the above, we may fairly say that while the crime itself has basically been solved, we cannot with confidence call the case as a whole “closed.” Who is this elusive individual who makes off with the murder weapon—and, at least indirectly, precipitates the samurai’s demise? The woodcutter who discovers the body makes no mention of any dagger on the scene in his testimony—could he have taken the weapon and falsified his statement? But then, what would be his motivation? Did the wife return to the scene, finding her husband in his wounded state—perhaps accidentally bringing about his death in an attempt to minister to him, or deliberately doing so to eliminate the witness to her betrayal of exhorting the bandit to murder him? At this point we are in the realm of guesswork, with no way to wholly substantiate these conjectures based on the material provided. In reference to the aforementioned scholarship on post-Meiji Japanese detective fiction, Sawana and Silver analyze the genre as an expression of social anxieties regarding where the road to modernization had led those who traveled it, whether willingly or unwillingly—in Sawana’s words, the “precariousness of the post-Enlightenment world where rationality has failed and the potential for mayhem is an ever-present danger.”²⁰⁹ By the end of our story in which officials have attempted to adhere to the method of procedural reason, the shadows that still exist in this enlightened space are indicative of the shortcomings of modernity and the futility of its pretensions to total knowledge and power.

²⁰⁸ Akutagawa, *Rashōmon*, 19.

²⁰⁹ Sawana, 15.

Yet in the spirit of the text, there is an additional interpretation that I would like to propose—one that I find does not necessarily negate that which I have already foregrounded, however. It is reasonable to say that the story's representation of the *miko*, as I have read it, articulates a critical commentary that puts pressure not only on the omnipotence and omniscience of “modern” epistemologies, but even more so on the myth of the total devaluation and abandonment of “pre-modern” epistemologies in the modern era. It is the afterlife of the enchanted in the age of reason that has been a through-line for each of these texts—and in this particular case, the place of the “traditional” in the modern might be another way of construing that dynamic. I have made prior reference to the complexities in Japanese literary history of writers' various positionalities on the matter of “modern” or Western vs. “traditional” Japanese creative techniques and subject matter; and while Akutagawa is rightly considered to be a quintessential example of a modern Japanese writer who embraced Western literary styles, the fact does not by extension imply a total rejection of what was thought of as “traditionally Japanese,” historically or aesthetically. After all, among his most famous works are numerous examples of historical fiction, such as “In a Grove,” that synergize Western genres and techniques with pre-Meiji subjects, environments, cultural practices, myths and legends, and so on—and which, through that very synergy, often delve into the intricacies and tensions of navigating such a hybridized sociocultural arena.

Indeed, there is something deeply allegorical in how the mystery at hand is the *death of a samurai*, an element that arguably carries with it implicit connections to the decline and fall of the shogunate that inaugurates Japanese modernization. We may read the story's investigation, then, as a kind of reckoning with that event in the moment of its aftermath—and in that process, there is a place for pre-modern modes to operate and contribute. Towards the start of this

analysis, I made reference to Figal's notion of a discourse of the supernatural, or *fushigiron*, in which he reads the supernatural as constitutive of Japan's modernization process. While his major case in point is the development of State Shinto as described above, we might here make a similar claim regarding the role of even the more peripheral instances of the supernatural that the *miko* represents. In the world of the text, somehow or other the *miko*'s services were elicited for the investigation—and her psychic faculties play not only a demonstrable role, but a pivotal one. The one who might be said to “crack the case” most effectively is not the Holmesian detective as empirical demigod, but a derelict village oracle—and she does so not through faculties of reason and rationality, but through an entirely different mode of perception, indeed its polar opposite: a spiritual clairvoyance operating beyond the bounds of the physical, scientific modes of knowledge production. I bring up this possibility to not only argue for a literary modernism in which the supernatural persists, and in a state of empowerment rather than disempowerment, but also to suggest a role for the supernatural as facilitating modern concerns—what will be the main argument of the following chapter, which examines the role of religion and spirituality in the development and valorization via literature of distinctly modern social movements regarding race, gender, and sexuality.

Chapter 2: “Conjure Stories: The Modernism of Hoodoo and *Vodou* in Zora Neale Hurston and Alejo Carpentier”

This second chapter takes up a modern manifestation of the spiritual in a more specific, yet by no means homogeneous, cultural-historical arena: that of Black diasporic religions in the hemispheric American Gulf, in particular the Caribbean and the U.S. South. In the first chapter’s discussion on divination as critique of modern discourse, the scope of divinatory practice is not restricted to a particular spiritual culture; one need not ascribe to a given spirituality in order to practice it. In the texts here studied, however, the spiritual practitioners they represent may be understood as adherents to their respective traditions—and, while I bring in cultural and historical specificity as distinguishing factors between these chapters, I do emphasize an awareness of the plurality of the practices at hand. Indeed, to refer to the great number of diasporic spiritualities in the Americas as a single “arena” is already to belie the profusion of cultures and histories within Black diaspora. And here I clarify that, as diaspora is a key concept informing this chapter, I strive to maintain a sense of diaspora as a paradigm that contains, to draw from Stuart Hall, an extensive degree of “difference” that operates at once “in and alongside continuity.”²¹⁰ In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall traces the paradoxical condition inherent in the concept of diaspora—that while the peoples of the diaspora come “from different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages and gods” and so forth, “it was the uprooting of slavery [...] that ‘unified’ these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past.”²¹¹ As such, this chapter is informed by this critical intervention in a hegemonic and imperialist notion of diaspora as “scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred [African] homeland to which they must at

²¹⁰ Hall, 227.

²¹¹ Ibid.

all costs return,” stemming from a view of cultural identity as manifestation of authentic and originary essence. Rather, Hall defines diaspora “not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”²¹² Hence, in my approach to the subject of diasporic spiritualities, it is my endeavor not to reinscribe the notion of these practices as expressions of and/or yearnings for an original African essence. Indeed, for the writers under study in this chapter, their literary engagements with diasporic spiritualities are deeply enmeshed in this very issue of homogeneous origins versus heterogeneous transformations. And while many would read these works to be on the side of the former—and thereby complicit in the reinscription of colonial power differentials—I consider their capacity to speak to the side of the latter: “the place of many, continuous displacements” and “the space where the creolisations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated.”²¹³ As Hall suggests about cultural identity, these syncretisms and hybridities contain generative potential because they are not uniform or fixed, but “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.” Therefore, though this project will at times refer to “diasporic spirituality” in the singular, a sense of multiplicity and mutability is implied.

From this multiplicity, the following chapter takes up literary representations of two syncretic transformations: Haitian *Vodou* and U.S. Hoodoo as they manifest across selected works by Afro-American writer Zora Neale Hurston and Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. I hope to represent, through this comparative analysis, the significant involvement of Black diasporic

²¹² Ibid., 235. Emphasis in original.

²¹³ Ibid., 234.

religions in the making of modern—and, each in their unique context, *modernist*—hemispheric American literary practices. The specific pairing of Hurston and Carpentier illustrates the depth, scope, and variety of diasporic spiritualities' influences across literatures of the American hemisphere in the early to mid-twentieth centuries. Certainly, each writer in the orbit of the area studies field in which they are traditionally studied is by no means alone when it comes to an interest in spiritualities of Black diaspora. In Afro-American literature of the modern era, one might read Hurston's representation of Hoodoo alongside, say, Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*—or, in the orbit of the Harlem Renaissance, Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*, popularly regarded as the first known mystery novel by an African American. In Latin American and Caribbean studies both Hispanophone and Lusophone, likewise, writing in the early to mid-twentieth centuries is the Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera, as well as the Brazilian modernist writer Jorge Amado, who engages with *Candomblé* across many of his novels. And for all these fields, into the contemporary era, literary engagements with diasporic spiritualities proliferate. Rather than an area studies approach, however, this chapter opts for a hemispheric approach—taken up for the purpose of underlining diasporic spirituality's function as a transnational, even cosmopolitan force, and site of exploration into modern sociocultural developments across literatures of the Americas. In the selected works of Hurston and Carpentier, these developments include projects of aesthetic, political, and intellectual decolonization from Anglo-European hegemonies, inquiries into collective identity formations—pan-African and Latin American, respectively—as well as investigations in matters of postcolonial, post-independence, and/or post-emancipation subjecthoods. Though I understand that the notion of the subject—whether individual or collective—is now quite outmoded, it did have currency in the particular stages of the literary and intellectual histories under focus. I here clarify that these conversations in these

critical histories—on the postcolonial subject, collective identity, various approaches to decolonization, and so on—are in a sense the objects under study, and in certain cases, not necessarily paradigms, visions, or programs that my project affirms as politically viable and “correct.” At bottom, what I am avowing here is the persistent role that spirituality played in literary cultures in the modern era, and an intervention in the notion that “modern” necessarily implies secular and disenchanted—what is by-and-large a construct of elite Anglo-European intellectual society. Indeed, I find that what an investigation on Hoodoo and *Vodou* in these texts reveals is that an expansion of modernist literary studies beyond the Anglo-European metropole also necessitates an expansion of the worldviews and epistemologies that one might consider both modern and modernist.

Due to its hemispheric approach, this chapter is greatly informed by work in the field of American hemispheric studies. As Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine write, through an “emphasis on taking account of overlapping and sedimented histories,” efforts in this field “chart new literary and cultural geographies by decentering the U.S. nation and excavating the intricate and complex politics, histories, and discourses of spatial encounter that occur throughout the hemisphere but tend to be obscured in U.S. nation-based inquiries.”²¹⁴ Their motive is not to erase or negate the vital factors of nation or region, but to consider them “as products of overlapping, mutually inflecting fields—as complex webs of regional, national, and hemispheric forces that can be approached from multiple locations and perspectives and that can help us to reframe American cultural analysis.”²¹⁵ In my own project that likewise takes up Hurston and Carpentier’s literary engagements with the “overlapping and sedimented histories” of U.S. Hoodoo and Haitian *Vodou*, while striving to not erase their respective cultural and regional

²¹⁴ Levander and Levine, 5, 3.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

contexts, I forward the reach that African diasporic spiritualities possess throughout the Americas as a force in which writers across the transnational Gulf Coast saw great potential for their respective literary projects. Moreover, they developed such projects in response to both the material, political conditions and cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual problematics they faced within their communities—and here I underline the chapter’s primary assertion and intervention as it fits into my project as a whole: spirituality’s considerable presence in and discursive engagement with the *modern world* and its resultant literatures. In this regard, though a major difference between this chapter and the one previous here emerges, I find their varying slants together form a colloquy rather than a dissonance. While the modernist writers of the first chapter employ divination as a discursive practice through which to *critique* the conditions of modernity that they witnessed, the modernist writers of this second chapter turn to diasporic spiritualities as a generative site of possibility for their respective regional and cultural communities to meet the challenges and antagonisms they faced in the modern era. For Hurston, I take up her engagement with both U.S. Hoodoo and Haitian *Vodou* as modern Black nationalist practice across both her fictional and anthropological work. Therein, these interconnected religious traditions form a transoceanic armature linking disparate Black diasporic communities across the Gulf, forming a means for these communities and the individuals comprising them to enact collective and individual self-determination against deeply-embedded white supremacist power structures. Opening with a nuancing of her purported atheism, I trace the development of diasporic spiritualities’ constant and burgeoning importance across her writing—first with a discussion on her valorization of Black Christianity’s African influences in her first novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, then with an analysis of Hoodoo’s liberatory potential in her later novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and the early anthropological collection on Black folk cultures in

Mules and Men, and finally an examination of Haitian *Vodou*'s radical history and present in the later anthropological collection *Tell My Horse*, detailing her field work in the Caribbean. With *Tell My Horse* as a segue, I then take up the significance of Haitian *Vodou* in Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Kingdom of This World* (*El reino de este mundo*). On this work of historical fiction representing the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath, I examine Carpentier's engagement with *Vodou*'s syncretic and animistic attributes as a means to explore and articulate the notion of a transculturated Latin American-Caribbean cultural expression—especially in opposition to European dominance, and in relation to contemporaneous developments in modern Latin American prose writing on the question of forming a distinct literary sensibility. Notably, Carpentier's work in representing *Vodou* in *Kingdom* may be thought of as forming the basis for his concept of *lo real maravilloso*, a contentious yet vital theory in the history of both magical realist and Latin American literatures that holds belief in an enchanted world as foundational to its practice. For both Hurston and Carpentier, while I cannot claim that their projects were without flaws and shortcomings, they were noteworthy stages in their literary histories in which the spiritual carried great power and presence.

The Politics of Hoodoo and *Vodou* in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston

Those unfamiliar with the writing of Zora Neale Hurston may find a study on religious belief in her work a surprise on visiting her Wikipedia page, as the article contains a dedicated section titled "Atheism." Exceedingly brief, it cites as chief justification for an atheistic worldview the following quote from her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*: "Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness, and an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rules of the game as laid down. I do not choose to admit weakness. I accept the challenge of responsibility. Life, as it is, does not

frighten me, since I have made my peace with the universe as I find it, and bow to its laws.”²¹⁶

On reading *Dust Tracks*, however, one finds that the chapter from which the quote derives, titled “Religion,” mainly relates the author’s experiences regarding Southern Baptist Christianity, the form of institutionalized religion under which she was raised. From her childhood, Hurston deeply thought about and challenged what was given to her to take submissively and thoughtlessly as the daughter of a Baptist preacher: “You wouldn’t think that a person who was born with God in the house would ever have any questions to ask on the subject. But as early as I can remember, I was questing and seeking.”²¹⁷ Her reflections carry a clear tone of self-assurance, yet that tone by no means overpowers what is her nuanced approach to the subject at hand. The narration moves fluidly between unpacking the shortcomings that she finds in the religious community of her formative years, and acknowledging the practices in that same community that influenced her. Of course, a staunch and life-long individualist, Hurston turns a critical eye to tendencies she observes in organized religion in which a practitioner’s faith becomes an obstruction to self-determination, as the quote on prayer above illustrates. Indeed, what immediately precedes that quotation is the following declaration of personal autonomy that one might find reminiscent of Deism, at least in terms of its view on the distance between the individual and the divine; as she writes: “I accept the means at my disposal for working out my destiny. It seems to me that I have been given a mind and will-power for that very purpose. I do not expect God to single me out and grant me advantages over my fellow men.”²¹⁸

Yet while Hurston is not afraid to make known her scruples with organized religion—particularly as those criticisms foreground her personal philosophy—she does not throw the

²¹⁶ Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 326-7.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 311.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.

broom out with the dust. From these same pages of *Dust Tracks*, Hurston intimates how aspects of her family's religious community were generative in the development of her aesthetic philosophy, especially as they pertain to that philosophy's valorization of Black diasporic expression. For instance, in her memories of revival meetings, she recalls the congregational ceremony of initiating the unconverted in such a way that signals an alertness to the power of performance, ritual, and poetry:

“It was exciting to hear them tell their ‘visions.’ [...] I knew them by heart as did the rest of the congregation, but still it was exciting to see how the converts would handle them. Some of them made up new details. Some of them would forget a part and improvise clumsily or fill up the gap with shouting. [...] I know now that I liked that part because it was high drama. I liked the baptisms in the lake too, and the funerals for the same reason.”²¹⁹

Here, Hurston represents the act of testifying as a creative practice in its theatricality and engagement with the art of storytelling. In the “high drama” of the converts’ performances, each plays on a standard conversion narrative in such a way as to compel the interest of an audience for which it is rote. Indeed, Hurston goes on to recount these visions as laden with dramatic imagery, in which hellfire and brimstone as a matter of course abound: converts recount themselves hanging “over Hell by one strand of hair” as “flames of fire leaped up and all but destroyed their ever-dying souls” or “walking over Hell on a foot-log so narrow that they had to put one foot right in front of the other while the howling hell-hounds pursued them relentlessly.”²²⁰ As is customary in Hurston, the passage is not without an element of humor: for instance, she describes converts looking across the pit of hell and seeing a “little white man” on the other side, the figure of Christ come to teleport them to safety.²²¹ However, that aspect by no

²¹⁹ Ibid., 318, 320.

²²⁰ Ibid., 318-9.

²²¹ Ibid., 319.

means confounds her representation of there being much to learn for one who would go on to take up the crafts of prose writing, playwriting, and theater as professions.

Indeed, Hurston would go on in her work to frame Black Christianity's performative practice as a testament to the merit of Afro-American aesthetic expression, in particular folk expression and Black Southern culture. As biographer Robert E. Hemenway notes in reference to the Harlem Renaissance, or New Negro Renaissance, "the black intellectual had to challenge both the racist stereotype of folk experience in the American minstrel tradition and the historical neglect of the folk arts by black people themselves. The first generation of emancipated slaves often repudiated their folk heritage as a product of slavery, something that was to be forgotten as soon as possible."²²² In turn, the "response of the Renaissance intellectuals to such resistance to the folk heritage was to acknowledge the 'crude' genius of the spirituals and to claim for them an emotional parity with 'high' art."²²³ For Hurston, who proudly grew up in the all-Black, autonomously-governed town of Eatonville, Florida, her deep Southern roots—which few Renaissance figures could claim for themselves—gave her a unique vantage point in the task of valorizing the folk spiritual in such a way that did not submit to the overweening demands of cultural imperialism. In her theatrical work, such as the musical drama *The Great Day*, she strove to present the artistry of folk spirituals on its own terms—as opposed to altering them to better suit white tastes, or frame them according to the dictates of white aesthetic standards, as many stagings of spirituals did at the time.²²⁴

It is in Hurston's debut novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, that Black spirituality's aesthetic significance comes to the forefront. Briefly, the narrative details the rise and fall of its principal

²²² Hemenway, 52.

²²³ Ibid., 53.

²²⁴ Ibid., 177-8.

character, John Pearson—based on Hurston’s own father—a sharecropper turned Baptist preacher. In Hemenway’s estimation, the conceptualization of “preacher as poet” becomes a central undertaking of the critical commentary of the text. According to his analysis, “John’s poetic faculties are part of the esthetic matrix of black folk culture. [...] It is the language-making faculty that best defines him, that is what also defines his world. John is a man who seeks beauty, lives intensely each moment, and loves language as an end in itself.”²²⁵ To be sure, Hurston presents John’s sermons in verse form, composed of lines rife with rhetorical depth and lyrical finesse. It is vital to note that, here and elsewhere, Hurston attributes the poetic acumen of Black Christianity to the elements of African spiritualities melded within it. Such a view indicates her conceptualization of Afro-American religious practice as an expression of a fundamentally syncretic cultural history in all its complexities and tensions. As she writes in her essay “The Sanctified Church,” “the Negro has not been christianized as extensively as is generally believed. The great masses are still standing before their pagan altars and calling old gods by a new name. As evidence of this, note the drum-like rhythm of all Negro spirituals. All Negro-made church music is dance possible.”²²⁶ *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* aligns with this view—in moments of heightened performative expression, Hurston on multiple occasions brings the motif of the African drum into the narration. In the scene detailing a barbecue on the plantation where John spends his youth, for instance, the “drum-like rhythm” comes to the forefront in the dance that follows: “They called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins—the drum—and they played upon it...the voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them and they heard it. The great drum that is made by priests and sits in majesty in the juju

²²⁵ Ibid., 193, 195.

²²⁶ Hurston, *Sanctified*, 103.

house. [...] Ibo tune corrupted with Nango. Congo gods talking in Alabama.”²²⁷ Here, melded into the drum-beat are numerous cultural influences from regions throughout Africa, particularly from their spiritual practices; the music thus becomes representative of a syncretic Afro-American history comprised of various cultural elements. Such a message of the integrity of diasporic cultural expression is vital to the critical commentary of the text, indeed the very parting message of the novel. In its final pages illustrating John Pearson’s funeral, the drum-beat returns to bring the narrative to a close:

And the preacher preached a barbaric requiem poem. On the pale white horse of Death. On the cold icy hands of Death. On the golden streets of glory. Of Amen Avenue. Of Halleluyah Street. On the delight of God when such as John appeared among the singers about His throne...And the hearers wailed with a feeling of terrible loss. They beat upon the O-go-doe, the ancient drum. O-go-doe, O-go-doe, O-go-doe! ...Not Kata-Kumba, the drum of triumph, that speaks of great ancestors and glorious wars. Not the little drum of kid-skin, for that is to dance with joy and to call to mind birth and creation, but O-go-doe, the voice of Death—that promises nothing, that speaks with tears only, and of the past.²²⁸

In this context, the phrase “barbaric requiem poem” is not an oxymoron, but a statement against finding it as such. In this final paragraph, Hurston paints a subtle gradient that takes the reader through the many layers of Afro-American cultural history as performed through spiritual ceremony. Christian imagery and iconography—“golden streets of glory,” “Amen Avenue” and “Halleluyah Street,” the “pale white horse of Death”—interfuse with images and icons that are African in provenance: “O-go-doe, the ancient drum,” the “great ancestors and glorious wars” of generations past. By closing the narrative with a gesture that draws focus to African influences, Hurston underlines their significance to Black creative expression in the American South. Rather than devaluating these influences, she marks them as a vital element of a fusion of two airs: the

²²⁷ Hurston, *Jonah*, 59-60.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 311-2.

African drums the base to the Judeo-Christian oratory's treble, together a performance of the multiple strains that comprise Afro-American cultural expression.

For my purposes of considering the role of the spiritual in literary aesthetics that enact, explore, and forward modern social movements, it is vital to foreground Hurston's take on the poetic integrity of a syncretic Afro-American spirituality as a distinctly *modern* endeavor, echoed in an overarching Black modernist project in a moment when "black people in cities across the world responded to a common impetus to view themselves as modern subjects," to quote Cheryl A. Wall.²²⁹ As Houston A. Baker Jr. writes in his study of the Harlem Renaissance,

"For any behavior that is designated 'modernist' for Afro-America is also, and by dint of adequate historical accounts, always, coextensively labeled popular, economic, and liberating. What exists on the antecedent side of black modernity is not a line of stodgy, querulous, and resistant premoderns but a universe of enslavement. In the slave world, discourse was figured not as, say, repressed Victorian or Puritan formulas, but as hard won song and courageously expostulated black oratory (and written prose) designed to move the spirit of freedom. Modernist 'anxiety' in Afro-American culture does not stem from a fear of replicating outmoded forms or of giving way to bourgeois formalisms. Instead, the anxiety of modernist influence is produced, in the first instance, by the black spokesperson's necessary task of employing audible extant forms in ways that move clearly *up*, masterfully and re-soundingly away from slavery."²³⁰

From the above, there are two major points about Black modernism that I want to emphasize: the first involves, generally speaking, a radically different relationship to the past for writers, especially when it comes to the value of aesthetic forms and cultural traditions as influences in their creative practices. While there are certainly a number of exceptions to this point—some of whom appeared in the previous chapter—in broadscale theorizations of white modernisms both continental and Anglo-American, we can fairly speak of general climates of anxieties of influence, a consciousness of moving away from "repressed Victorian or Puritan formulas" and "bourgeois formalisms." Conversely, we see a great many Afro-American modernists not

²²⁹ Wall, *Harlem Renaissance*, 20.

²³⁰ Baker, 101.

devaluing the creative forms of their cultural and historical past, but finding inspiration in prior generations' storytelling techniques and other modes of expression. For instance, Wall describes Harlem Renaissance writers' incorporations of Black vernacular speech as opening up avenues for Afro-American modernists "to experiment with language and to make it new, as Ezra Pound was urging white modernists to do. Black modernists recognized the 'new' in the old oral traditions that had never been a part of literature."²³¹ We find *Jonah's Gourd Vine* to be a representative example here: as the figure of John Pearson attests to, Hurston presents a key oral and exegetical tradition of her forebears as prime evidence substantiating the integrity of Black culture, particularly a regional Southern Black culture.

The second point involves a prevailing social and racial consciousness across Black modernist writing, what Baker describes above as the "necessary task of employing audible extant forms in ways that move clearly *up*, masterfully and re-soundingly away from slavery." If one takes as a premise the quote from Wall above on "black people in cities across the world respond[ing] to a common impetus to view themselves as modern subjects," we might fairly read "common" in multiple senses of the word: if not completely shared and unified, then at the very least widespread and highly prevalent. Considering an "impetus to view themselves as modern subjects" as a reasonable foundation, then, Black writers who wrote with an aim to facilitate, in the words of Baker, "popular, economic, and liberating" efforts among their communities had something modern about them. Besides, assessments of a given writer's sociopolitical engagement are often contextual, depending on the matter at hand and shifting from age to age. Hurston is an illustrative example of the complexities at work here—while throughout her career there were those who considered her work to be too detached from community struggles, it is

²³¹ Wall, *Harlem Renaissance*, 106.

difficult today to look at the whole of her writings and try to convince oneself that Black self-determination is not a primary concern.

Hurston's take on spirituality in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, then, is "modern" in the sense of its being, if not overtly "economic," certainly both "popular" and "liberating" in its critical commentary valorizing Black Christian oratory—particularly as a creative node in the larger orbit of African diasporic culture, which is valorized in turn.²³² As the drum motif imparts, it is indeed because of its African diasporic qualities that it comes to carry such artistic worth. As Hurston conveys in "The Sanctified Church," the "high-brow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations" in imitation of white Protestant churches strips the services of their drama, dance, and music; conversely, the Black Christianity such as John Pearson's is "a revitalizing element in Negro music and religion...putting back into Negro religion those elements which were brought over from Africa and grafted onto Christianity as soon as the Negro came in contact with it, but which are being rooted out as the American Negro approaches white concepts."²³³ The centrality of this diasporic sensibility attests to Hurston's enduring interest in conjure as Black diasporic practice, manifesting repeatedly throughout her work—in particular as a modern Black literary aesthetic at once "popular, economic, and liberating." Houston A. Baker Jr. defines conjure as "the transatlantic religion of diasporic and Afro-American masses in the New World."²³⁴ Of course, branches within this religious practice are numerous, varying according to the contexts in which they developed—e.g., Cuban *santería*, Brazilian *candomblé*, and so on. Terminology as such becomes important to briefly foreground and clarify. Across Hurston's work, there are two

²³² As an aside, the novel is also critically engaged with processes of modernization, namely in its representation of the Great Migration and the central motif of the locomotive--a dimension of the text that is unfortunately beyond the bounds of this study's particular scope.

²³³ Hurston, *Sanctified*, 103, 104-5.

²³⁴ Baker, 43.

strains of conjure with which her writing is concerned: the Hoodoo of the American South and Haitian *Vodou*. In the analyses that follow, most of the works discussed engage with American Hoodoo; the exception is the anthropological title *Tell My Horse*, in which Haitian *Vodou* is the form of conjure under discussion. As such, the term “Hoodoo” will be used for each work excluding *Tell My Horse*, where it will be “*Vodou*.” Throughout, “conjure” will serve as an all-encompassing term in reference to the macrocosm of Black diasporic religions as a whole.

In Hurston’s works of prose fiction, conjure might fairly be said to serve as thematic bookends of a sort, in that it plays a subtle yet noteworthy role in both her first and penultimate novels—*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, respectively. Taken together, one may observe a growing attunement to conjure’s potential as a modern Black literary aesthetic that asserts diasporic cultural meaning and sociopolitical integrity. As I have been discussing the diasporic quality of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, conjure’s appearance in that text further imparts a conceptualization of U.S. Black culture, particularly in the South, in which its African influences are interwoven into the everyday social fabric.²³⁵ In the all-Black community of Eatonville, Florida in which the novel is principally set, Hoodoo is a concrete and powerful force that its practitioners and adherents may employ to bring about extraordinary outcomes. In fact, it is conjure that radically changes the entire course of John Pearson’s life—namely through the machinations of his mistress Hattie Tyson, a dedicated Hoodoo acolyte who employs the services of a conjure woman to bring about the premature death of his wife Lucy and have the newly widowed John marry her. One of the novel’s most vivid scenes details the ritual through which the conjure woman, An’ Dangie Dewoe, carries out her client’s request:

An’ Dangie crept to her altar in the back room and began to dress candles with war water. When the altar had been set, she dressed the coffin in red, lit the inverted candles on the

²³⁵ As well, and to emphasize the quality of “everyday,” the aforementioned musical revue *The Great Day* also includes a scene focusing on conjure.

altar, saying as she did so, ‘Now fight! Fight and fuss ‘til you part.’ When all was done at the altar she rubbed her hands and forehead with war powder, put the catbone in her mouth, and laid herself down in the red coffin facing the altar and went into the spirit.²³⁶

From the above description, the imagery of cat bones and red coffins in tandem with the ominous portent of discord and strife may give the impression that conjure in the novel operates as a primarily evil, sinister force. As well, the principal antagonist Hattie is the sole primary character who turns to Hoodoo as recourse. These factors notwithstanding, it is vital to clarify that Hoodoo is not a “wicked” practice altogether, but rather a neutral force in which its practitioners use their expertise to channel spiritual power towards as many ends as there are human motivations. As An’ Dangie tells Hattie immediately before conducting the above ritual: “‘Member now, you done started dis and it’s got tuh be kep’ up do hit’ll turn back on yuh.”²³⁷ While the conjure woman is adept at her craft, that knowledge comes with the awareness that Hoodoo is a power that operates according to its own rules; through careful, studied expertise one may achieve mastery *of or through* that power, but not a mastery *over* it. Indeed, after An’ Dangie’s death, presumably from old age, Hattie’s hold over her husband steadily wanes—and when John finally learns of Hattie’s use of conjure to hold him over the many years of their relationship, he expels her from his house. Interestingly, in the divorce trial that follows, John deliberately chooses to not provide testimony of his ex-wife’s conjure as evidence against her in court, when it might have worked in his favor. As he explains to a friend: “‘Ah didn’t want de white folks tuh hear ‘bout nothin’ lak dat. Dey knows too much ‘bout us as it is, but dey some things dey ain’t tuh know. Dey’s some strings on our harp fuh us tuh play on and sing all tuh ourselves. Dey thinks wese all ignorant as it is, and dey thinks wese all alike, and dat dey knows

²³⁶ Hurston, *Jonah*, 201.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

us inside and out, but you know better.”²³⁸ What these remarks convey is an informed awareness on John’s part that, though the two races may occupy the same courtroom, each in reality stands in a radically different position when it comes to the administration of justice. Subject to the judgments of a white judge and an all-white jury, John understands the power differential at work here—as such, one may read his statement to subtly imply a consciousness of Hoodoo’s role as a distinctly Afro-American form of recourse and retaliation operating independently from the machinations and control of a white supremacist state. Hence, there are here defensible intimations of conjure as Black nationalist practice in the orbit of Hurston’s literary philosophy.

With the text’s diasporic, syncretic representation of Afro-American culture in mind, it is worth remarking that Christianity and conjure are not represented as conflicting spiritual practices. In other words, belief in one system does not negate belief in the other as a matter of course. Whether principal or tertiary, the novel’s characters place stock in both as influential forces at work in the world; and members of the community such as Hattie may both attend church and call upon An’ Dangie without necessarily being called into question for it, at least with regard to the authenticity of her beliefs. In fact, going by the rhetoric of the text, the two systems are not even necessarily separate to begin with. As Harris, a deacon in John’s church, at one point says to Hattie when she asks if he puts faith in conjure:

“‘Yeah, Ah do, Mrs. Rev’und. Ah done seen things done. Why hit’s in de Bible, Sister! Look at Moses. He’s de greatest hoodoo man dat God ever made. He went ‘way from Pharaoh’s palace and stayed in de desert nigh on to forty years and learnt how tuh call God by all his secret names and dat’s how he got all dat power. He knowed he couldn’t bring off all dem people lessen he had power unekal tuh man! How you reckon he brought on all dem plagues if he didn’t had nothin’ but human power? And then agin his wife wuz Ethiopian. Ah bet she learnt ‘im whut he knowed. Ya, indeed, Sister Pearson. De Bible is de best conjure book in de world.’”²³⁹

²³⁸ Ibid., 261.

²³⁹ Ibid., 231.

In the above, Hurston makes a powerful move describing the Bible as the world's "best conjure book," an assessment principally due to the conceptualization of Moses as the "greatest hoodoo man...ever made." As a case in point that there are significant aspects of the Bible which one may read as African in quality and origin, conjure works to decenter prevailing narratives regarding hierarchies of influence in the Judeo-Christian sphere. Indicating that the notion of a Judeo-Christian culture which coalesces in Europe and then radiates to the so-called periphery is a misrepresentation, Hurston instead proffers a vision of that culture as resulting from a proto-global network of influence across great swaths of territory about Western Asia—and, most notably, in which Africa figures largely in terms of its degree of sociocultural sway. Attunement to spiritual practices such as conjure thus becomes an avenue for Hurston to center African culture, and by extension Black diasporic culture, in a Judeo-Christian supersystem so often misconstrued for the purpose of sustaining European dominance.

Indeed, the critical potential of these ideas would stay with Hurston over the years, eventually providing the overall premise for her penultimate novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, in which the function of conjure as a Black nationalist and modernist literary aesthetic is fully in practice in terms of its socially modern liberatory potential. In short a retelling of the Exodus myth, the text is generally understood to be an allegorization of Afro-American history, namely the quest therein for self-determination and liberation from the oppressive hold of a white supremacist power structure. This allegorical dimension is manifest not only in the significance of the Mosaic legend in Black Christianity, but also in the purposeful choice on Hurston's part to have the Israelites speak in Black American dialect. Just as purposeful in her retelling is the choice to frame the character Moses as a "two-headed man" with "the black cat bone and snake

wisdom”—in the words of his father-in-law Jethro, “the finest hoodoo man in the world.”²⁴⁰

While the bare fact that the spiritual practice of Hoodoo is what liberates the Israelites from slavery under Pharaoh is enough to substantiate my overall claim, this aspect gains further depth on examining the details of Hurston’s representation of her protagonist’s journey to ever-increasing power through knowledge of the intertwined realms of nature and spirit. By emphasizing throughout the text the influence of African spiritual cultures as the foundation of Moses’ divine strength, once again Hurston’s syncretic conceptualization of Afro-American spirituality reframes narratives of white Judeo-Christian cultural hegemony and valorizes Black cultural history and practice on their own unique and multi-faceted terms.

Turning to the text, Moses’ engagement with conjure begins decades before the onslaught of the Ten Plagues of Egypt—namely through the influence of Mentu, an elderly stablehand in Pharaoh’s palace who becomes an indispensable mentor to Moses. Though his role in the palace infrastructure is a humble one, Mentu possesses a wealth of knowledge exceeding that of the high priests and warlords whose authority is vested in status rather than ability. This knowledge the hostler passes on to the young Moses, thus leading the Egyptian prince to great success and renown as he comes of age, principally through his lessons in cavalry tactics. While Pharaoh’s army favors the use of war chariots for their imperious effect, Mentu sees the chariot’s vulnerability due to its extreme unwieldiness; teaching Moses the greater flexibility and mobility of fighting on horseback, Mentu gives the prince the tactical know-how for him to grow to remodel the Egyptian army, expand Pharaoh’s domain through conquest, and become a famed war hero. And beyond social clout through warfare, Mentu also gives to Moses an understanding of the value of storytelling as a vessel and conduit for cultural memory—a view in stark contrast

²⁴⁰ Hurston, *Moses*, 227, 114.

with that of Pharaoh, for whom cultural memory is best memorialized through the construction of monuments from slave labor. Due to the critical light Mentu's view casts on Pharaoh's on this matter, it would be fair to say that a seed there is planted for Moses to later become conscious of the injustice in his grandfather's enslavement of the Israelites.

For my particular focus on conjure, however, Mentu's greatest lesson comes in his teaching Moses "the language of the birds and the animals and the plants."²⁴¹ In childhood, Moses first befriends Mentu due to the hostler's openness to thoughtfully engage with his developing curiosity in the natural world: "[Moses] was always wanting to know about plants. Was a frog a plant? Well, if a frog was not a plant, why was it in the garden? Who put it there? [...] If the sun could come up by itself and could roost on the high perch of noon, why did it fall down in the evening? Where did it go at night?"²⁴² Through his capacity for storytelling, Mentu fosters from this innate curiosity a sense of wonder and respect for nature. Animals, for instance, take on distinct characters and voices: "From old Mentu Moses learned about the ways of animals. The old man interpreted their noises and told Moses what they said. [...] In fact, they were human by Mentu's interpretations. Tara the monkey, for example, was he not the smart-aleck person of no importance always trying to imitate his betters and making a mess of things? Why, certainly!"²⁴³ This act of familiarization through personification works to subtly yet powerfully impart to Moses that nonhuman creatures carry their own points of view and knowledge to share, thereby decentering the human. Mentu's interpreting to Moses the "voice" of a lizard, for instance, is what brings out the aforementioned critique of the hubris of Pharaoh's mania for monuments:

²⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

²⁴² Ibid., 37.

²⁴³ Ibid., 39.

“Moses led the old man to the spot where he was trying to build a playhouse of bits of stone. A lizard peeped out from behind a rock nearby and looked at them with a long, earnest stare.

[...]

‘He thinks you are acting crazy,’ Mentu told him.

‘Why? Why is it crazy for me to build a playhouse like the cities of Ramses and Pithom that the Hebrews are building for Pharaoh?’

‘The lizard does not understand it that way. He thinks all structures are made for nesting. [...] He asks why do men build such high nests for their mates? Are they afraid that their eggs will be stolen?’²⁴⁴

Beyond flora and fauna, Mentu fosters in Moses an interest in the workings of the elements; for instance, “he would talk at length on the seven rays of time; on fire, the father of the sacrifice who was the triple-formed messenger of men to the gods—as fire on earth, as lightning in the air and as the sun in heaven.”²⁴⁵ This engagement with the operations of elemental forces in turn engenders a curiosity on priestcraft and matters of the arcane: “It was the talk of Mentu which stirred the inquisitive Moses to stealing into the enclosure of the priests. [...] He learned to feed the sacred snakes and handle the altar fires without hurt to himself. He begged to be taught the mysteries of signs and omens and the power of sayings and seals...”²⁴⁶ What these lines impart is the young Moses’ first forays into the practice of conjure: intimate knowledge of the workings of nature, deities, invocations and rituals, most prominent that of snake handling. Indeed, the figure of the serpent is a deeply meaningful one in both Afro-American Hoodoo and Afro-Caribbean *Vodou*, as is reflected in Hurston’s anthropological work as well. The section on “the highest and most powerful of all the gods” Damballah Ouedo in *Tell My Horse*, for instance, makes note of his “serpent signature”: as Hurston here writes, in Haiti the snake “is treated with reverence because it is considered the servant of Damballah.”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 40-1.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 43.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 118.

For the above reason—and vital for this discussion of the novel—a common folk Catholic analogue for Damballah is the figure of Moses, which Hurston also notes:

“All over Haiti it is well established that Damballah is identified as Moses, whose symbol was the serpent. [...] The rod of Moses is said to have been a subtle serpent and hence came his great powers. All over the Southern United States, the British West Indies and Haiti there are reverent tales of Moses and his magic. It is hardly possible that all of them sprang up spontaneously in these widely separated areas on the blacks coming in contact with Christianity after coming to the Americas. It is more probable that there is a tradition of Moses as the great father of magic scattered over Africa and Asia.”²⁴⁸

In both her anthropological writing and her fiction, then, Hurston draws a connection between Africa and the figure of Moses—and, furthermore, between conjure and an understanding of Moses as a “great father of magic.” Through the Mosaic legend, she puts conjure into practice as a rejection of the notion that European and Anglo-American cultural mediation has played an authoritative role in the formation of Black diasporic identity. Directions of influence thereby take on a structure that is less hierarchical and more rhizomatic, giving fuller presence and integrity to African influences in what is in fact a complex and multidirectional network of cultural exchange, rather than a regime of Euro-American cultural imposition that squelches out pre-colonial customs and values further with each succeeding generation.

To return to the novel, one might then be curious about my emphasis thus far on the character Mentu, when Hurston’s representation makes no explicit reference to conjure in the above passages. Implicitly, however, the linkages between Mentu and a Black diasporic folk ethos—in which conjure certainly figures—are considerable. In her analysis of *Moses*, Susan Edwards Meisenhelder writes of “Mentu’s affinities with the values of black folk culture” such as a “faith [that] rests with an oral folk tradition of story and proverb” whose “tales foster Moses’ spiritual growth.”²⁴⁹ In addition is the stableman’s attunement with the natural world—in

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 116.

²⁴⁹ Meisenhelder, 119.

Meisenhelder's words, "a philosophy of human connection with Nature rather than control over it."²⁵⁰ Indeed, in the opening paragraph of the section on Haitian *Vodou* in *Tell My Horse*, Hurston writes: "Voodoo is a religion of creation and life. It is the worship of the sun, the water and other natural forces" embodied in the symbolism of its rituals.²⁵¹ Mentu is as well aligned with a pantheon of deities indigenous to Egypt, and by extension to North Africa as well, through the legend that he tells to Moses of the Book of Thoth. This book is in essence a fabled tome lost to man, containing knowledge of vast arcane powers untold—arguably a stand-in for conjure, as the book's divine wisdom greatly concerns understanding and command of "natural forces." As Mentu describes it: "When you read only two pages in this book you will enchant the heavens, the earth, the abyss, the mountain, and the sea. You will know what the birds of the air and the creeping things are saying. [...] You will see the sun shining in the sky, with all the gods, and the full moon."²⁵² Moreover, guarding the book is a "deathless snake," an implicit connection to conjure in the serpentine avatars of Damballah, the aforementioned supreme deity in Haitian *Vodou*.²⁵³ This Book of Thoth goes on to play no small role; rather, one may arguably call it the decisive factor in the liberation of the Israelites overall: after Moses' searching for the book far and wide, the supernatural power through attunement with nature—in other words, conjure—that he acquires from it grants him the ability to perform the mythical feats of the Ten Plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and so on. On the level of allegory, then, conjure manifests as a culturally-resonant aesthetic representation of processes of self-determination in a diasporic Afro-American context.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 120.

²⁵¹ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 113.

²⁵² Hurston, *Moses*, 53.

²⁵³ Ibid.

What exactly is the African connection to the Book of Thoth, however, especially as further justification for reading its powers as conjure in the sense that I have been discussing it? Regarding this mystical tome, Meisenhelder registers implicit ties to the cults of the ancient Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris.²⁵⁴ More specifically, she identifies a parallel in the “philosophical conflict between the Pharaoh and Mentu” and the “major conflict within the history of Egyptian religion [...] between the worship of the sun and that of Osiris and Isis” as well as “their different origins: Osiris and Isis were considered indigenous African figures while the sun-gods were usually thought to have been brought in from the East.”²⁵⁵ In this way, it is not only the Egyptian setting that brings in connections to African cultural influences, but further still a spiritual strand among those in ancient Egypt with ties to Africa. Meisenhelder also notes that “these two strains in Egyptian religion also exhibited class differences: the worship of a remote, untouchable sun was associated with royalty [...] whereas the cult of Isis and Osiris, intimately connected with a tangible Nature and desirable afterlife, enjoyed broad popularity among the common people.”²⁵⁶ Noteworthy for Hurston’s allegorical purposes, furthermore, is the linkage between the age-old North African spirituality enmeshed in the natural world that is the source of Moses’ power and its historical affiliations as a major pantheon to which the masses may appeal—all-in-all an amplification of Black diasporic spirituality’s liberatory capacity in the novel. As to the connection between this pantheon and the Book of Thoth, then, Meisenhelder discusses the role of the Egyptian deity Thoth within what she calls this “Osirian faith,” namely as the “god of wisdom” whose knowledge “was grounded in communication with

²⁵⁴ The name “Isis” was in fact a favorite of Hurston’s, one she gives to the central character in the early short story “Drenched in Light,” as well as to the character in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* who is an autobiographical representation of her childhood self.

²⁵⁵ Meisenhelder, 123.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Nature” and as an “‘arch-magician’ who gave magical words to Isis and who was author of *The Book of the Dead*.”²⁵⁷ To drive home the point, Meisenhelder goes on to chart the parallels between the narrative of Moses’ journey to Koptos to find the Book of Thoth and the ancient Egyptian tale “Setna and the Magic Book,” in which the eponymous protagonist goes to that same location to find the very same legendary text.²⁵⁸ As well, the novel explicitly describes Moses making “a burnt offering and a drink offering” at “the temple of Isis at Koptos” immediately prior to retrieving the Book of Thoth.²⁵⁹ Such is a brief yet noteworthy gesture signaling Moses’ enduring affiliation with the polytheistic ancient Egyptian pantheon—even after his conversion to monotheism through his marriage into the house of Jethro, which at this point in the narrative has already taken place. These factors all come together to illustrate the extent to which Hurston, in Meisenhelder’s words, “places Moses in an Egyptian and pagan rather than Hebraic and monotheistic tradition” and thereby “suggests the indebtedness of Judaism [and Christianity] to Egyptian [and African] religious beliefs and practices.”²⁶⁰

Such is not to say that Judeo-Christianity is completely excised from the text; rather, as in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and “The Sanctified Church” above, Judeo-Christianity is one facet of many, including African cultural and spiritual practices. Hurston constructs this melding through a radical retelling of the Exodus narrative. For instance, the Moses of the novel is not a Hebrew child taken into the Egyptian palace as in Biblical lore; instead, he is the biological child of Pharaoh’s widowed daughter from her marriage to an Assyrian prince. In the text, the idea that Moses’ origins are Hebrew stems from a rumor spread by the young Miriam, who falls asleep while keeping watch over her infant brother in the fabled basket afloat the river, and wakes to

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 125.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 125-8.

²⁵⁹ Hurston, *Moses*, 118-9.

²⁶⁰ Meisenhelder, 125, 128.

find the child vanished; as the narrative explicitly states, “Miriam came to believe every detail of [her story] as she added them and retold them time and time again. Others conceived and added details at their pleasure and the legends grew like grass.”²⁶¹ Furthermore, it is very strongly implied that the voice of God is in fact Moses’ father-in-law Jethro, a powerful magus in his own right through whom the protagonist is converted to monotheism. For example, immediately prior to the burning bush episode that finally moves Moses to liberate the Israelites, Jethro suspiciously remarks, after failing to convince Moses to go to Egypt: “‘Well, he might think I’m through with the thing, but first and last he’s going to find out different...maybe there is still something about snakes that he can learn. The backside of that mountain may get too hot to hold him yet.’”²⁶² True enough, in the following chapter Moses witnesses the “Voice” of the burning bush turn a living serpent to an inanimate rod; convinced of that voice’s power, he then resolves to do its bidding—which, incidentally, mirrors Jethro’s wishes exactly.

Over time, this Judeo-Christian cover increasingly shrinks around Moses, the Hebrews, and their collective quest for self-determination—ironically enough, eventually becoming a constricting shroud that engenders such oppressive conditions as those in Egypt from which they sought liberation. And on the level of allegory, a connection here to the consequences of deferring to the will of cultural hegemony is more than plausible. The most telling scene in that regard is Hurston’s representation of the Adoration of the Golden Calf, in which the Israelites engage in bull worship while Moses journeys to Sinai to retrieve the Ten Commandments. Meisenhelder reads this episode as a “battle between two very different but powerful worldviews” in which the emergent Judeo-Christian norm vies to exterminate the persistence of African spiritual practice in order to secure its dominance; and yet, the scene is at once indicative

²⁶¹ Hurston, *Moses*, 35.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 124.

of how the Judeo-Christian “cannot easily destroy the religious and cultural legacy of Egypt”—and what Egypt stands in for, allegorically speaking—within the diasporic community.²⁶³ For one, Meisenhelder notes parallels between Hurston’s representation of the Hebrews’ “life-affirming pagan worship” with “many other celebrations that she has joyfully described in her other works” and presented as “example[s] of Africa’s rich cultural expression.”²⁶⁴ In the text, Hurston certainly does describe their adoration as a splendid festivity with music, dance, food and drink in abundance—a “breakdown and stomp” for instance; a “wild and savage shout of voices and drums” with “cymbals and harps and voices singing loud and happy.”²⁶⁵ To recall the discussion of African influences in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* above, it would be more than fair to compare this moment in *Moses* to *Jonah’s* barbecue scene in which Hurston describes the music of drums as the voice of “Congo gods talking in Alabama.”²⁶⁶ This factor of Egyptian—and by extension, African—cultural elements becomes overt in the Hebrews’ repeatedly referring to the calf by the name of Apis, an ancient Egyptian deity whose form was a sacred bull. Even the name of the goddess Isis is invoked in a statement of Miriam’s, a clear tie-back to the aforementioned Osirian pantheon indigenous to Africa, aligned with the common people, and the original source of Moses’ great power: “Isis will sure help you if you pray to her and pray right. Did the Bull God Apis ever go back on us?”²⁶⁷ Considering Moses’ indebtedness to that Egyptian pantheon for his power, the mass slaughter of Hebrews that he spearheads is indicative of betrayal to the cause of liberation due to deference to Judeo-Christian hegemony.

²⁶³ Meisenhelder, 139.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Hurston, *Moses*, 231, 233, 232.

²⁶⁶ Hurston, *Jonah*, 60.

²⁶⁷ Hurston, *Moses*, 230.

At the close of the narrative, however, Hurston's choice to have Moses break his staff, so to speak, and return to a spiritual existence integrated with an enchanted natural landscape is an affirmation of the personal and collective integrity that the valuation of diasporic spirituality brings. In the novel's concluding scene, we see the elderly Moses engage in dialogue with a talking lizard—hearkening back to Moses' childhood experiences with Mentu's personification of animal figures that spark the future prophet's curiosity in the natural world and in conjure. More specifically, the dialogue is a tie-back to the aforementioned "lizard talk" episode, in which Mentu with a lizard as proxy conveys to Moses the arrogance of Pharaoh's mania for building monuments as testament to the glory of his reign.²⁶⁸ In the follow-up on this "lizard talk" decades later, Hurston places Moses atop Mount Nebo, gazing over the Israelites' encampment spread out before him, a "splendid and orderly sight" and "magnificent spectacle":

"A whole nation assembled together and under tents. Prominent in the front was the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony that sheltered the Ark of the Covenant and the sacred mysteries that had made Israel a nation and set it apart from other nations. Inside were the gold and silver vessels, the candlesticks and basins. The rich and jewelled vestments of the priests and attendants and the instruments of worship. [...] The Tabernacle sat brooding in the plain and hovering its mysteries *like the sphinx*."²⁶⁹

In the above, we may take the sense of order and spectacle to apply not just to the spatial layout of the encampment, but also to the hegemonizing process of nation-state formation that the camp as a whole represents. Indeed, if in the Golden Calf episode Moses emerges as a manifestation of the tyrannical force that he once fought against, Hurston's comparison of the Tabernacle to an Egyptian monument—filled with riches as any pharaoh's tomb would be—sets this interpretation in stone. Unlike Pharaoh, however, Moses at this moment experiences feelings of doubt and uncertainty, which give rise to difficult yet resonant conclusions on the struggle for

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 40-2.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 281-2. My emphasis.

liberation: “He had found out that no man may make another free. Freedom was something internal. The outside signs were just signs and symbols of the man inside. All you could do was to give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation.”²⁷⁰ Such a statement not only indicates the ethic of collective self-determination through personal dignity and accountability so characteristic of Hurston’s thought; for my purposes, it also speaks to the text’s assessment of the pursuit of autonomy through total assimilation to the hegemonic culture as at least an uncertainty, if not an utter failure. Here enters the lizard, whom Meisenhelder reads as a catalyst for Moses’ ultimate abandonment of monotheism and return to “his own personal and cultural roots” in “the African foundation buried under Judeo-Christian tradition.”²⁷¹ In the ensuing dialogue, the lizard tells Moses of a great “keeper of memories” and knowledge on “how the world was made, and the heavens” who lives atop Mount Sinai: a “bearded lizard who knows all the things that used to be.”²⁷² With his passion for the workings of Earth, Heaven, and Heaven in Earth that has animated his life’s journey—in other words, his passion for conjure—now rekindled, the prophet resolves to seek out the reptilian sage; the text thereby closes with the following description: “Then he turned with a firm tread and descended the other side of the mountain and headed back over the years.”²⁷³ On a figurative level, this gesture of heading back over the course of his life is in effect a heading back as well to the spiritual-cultural practices and value systems with which he has lost touch. With this closing gesture of rejection and reclamation in mind, the fact that the wise animal is to be found on Mount Sinai—where Moses receives the Ten Commandments—is deeply resonant as a valorization of a diasporic spiritual code of being over an imposed one; as Meisenhelder writes,

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 282.

²⁷¹ Meisenhelder, 142.

²⁷² Hurston, *Moses*, 287.

²⁷³ Ibid., 288.

Moses “returns not to the Decalogue for the answers he needs but to an older, African folklore.”²⁷⁴ Walking from Nebo to Sinai, then, is the figure of Moses as analogue of Damballah.

Hurston’s fiction is not the only area of her work in which conjure operates at the forefront; for that reason, it is worthwhile to visit her anthropological writing, namely the collections *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*, both of which contain dedicated sections on conjure. The justification for taking up these texts comes not only from the shared subject matter, but even more so due to its relevance to the argument at hand on conjure’s modernity as a Black diasporic practice in efforts that are—to recall Baker’s phrasing—at once “popular, economic, and liberating” for a Black modern and modernist project. Viewed comparatively, the novels *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* fairly demonstrate the range of conjure’s possible functions as a sociocultural force, at least as it manifests in Hurston’s work—in the former, a morally neutral force which yet carries an implicit slant as a “popular” mode of recourse in Black Southern communities; and in the latter, an overtly progressive and liberatory force in the pursuit of emancipation. For *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*, each is a multi-dimensional tableau collating the various ways that conjure might function across this range of possibility—from neutral to righteous to sinister, restorative to vengeful, self-interested to self-determined. Furthermore, when taken together, the texts are illustrative of conjure as a distinctly diasporic practice; with *Mules* taking up Afro-American Hoodoo in the Southern United States and *Horse* engaging with Afro-Caribbean *Vodou* in Haiti, conjure takes on additional resonance as a Black nationalist cultural praxis—a testament to shared histories spanning across multiple communities, unifying those communities while remaining cognizant of their regional variations.

²⁷⁴ Meisenhelder, 142.

Before engaging with these texts, I find that an explanatory statement would benefit regarding my use of anthropological works in a literary studies project. My approach here will be to view these works through a literary lens—in other words, to read them as works of literature as much as they are sociological studies. In fact, Hurston’s approach as an anthropologist was to blaze her own trail in the vocation of collecting folklore, pushing past the boundaries in which an anthropological study would have been situated in her time. Rejecting the disciplinary standards of clinical objectivity and distance in which she had been trained at Barnard College, she immersed herself fully in the realms of the topics she studied, such that she frequently took the role of the direct participant in the practices involved. In her field work for *Mules and Men*, she became a Hoodoo acolyte, going through various initiation ceremonies and often serving as apprentice to the two-headed doctors with whom she worked. For instance, during her time with Luke Turner, the purported nephew of Marie Laveau, the “Voodoo Queen of New Orleans,” Hurston famously spent three days without food or water lying face-down on a massive snake-skin—in her words, a “going to the wilderness in the spirit” during which she “had five psychic experiences and awoke at last with no feeling of hunger, only one of exaltation.”²⁷⁵ As she here and throughout shares her own personal experience as a participant—and even as a Hoodoo practitioner herself, to an extent, in her capacity as a novice—she thereby speaks in the first person, bringing these anthropological texts into the literary genre of personal narrative as much as that of academic study. As such, Hurston appears in the texts as a distinct character in a picaresque journey across the Gulf Coast and beyond—rather than a depersonalized scientific observer, she is a protagonist of sorts in the narrative of her own research. Indeed, in her study on narrative technique in *Mules*, Trudier Harris describes the text as “clearly novelistic in its

²⁷⁵ Hurston, *Mules*, 198, 199.

approach,” in which Hurston “creates characters [out of her interviewees] in the way that short fiction writers or novelists do” and “manipulates characters and situations in ways to get readers to identify thoroughly with the text and its presentations.”²⁷⁶

Making the collection of folklore an art as much as a science, if not more so, Hurston’s departures from disciplinary norms contribute not only to endeavors of fostering reader convenience and aesthetic appeal, but also to an implicit critical commentary on the valorization of Black folk culture, in particular that culture’s folk medicinal practice of conjure—especially when an overwhelming majority of contemporaneous normative anthropological work on those subjects conveyed a narrative standing in total opposition to their sociocultural worth. On the subject of conjure in particular, Hemenway writes that the “insider’s view” Hurston took in her work as an anthropologist “contrasted sharply with the paternalistic ‘science’ of white collectors [...] who tended to see the conjure man or root doctor as a cunning con man, open to exposure by any rational person;” as such, the “antiscientific approach” that her collections of folklore exemplify is significantly a “rejection of scholarly bias” and “the inadequacy of sterile reason to deal with the phenomena of living” especially considering issues of race.²⁷⁷ As the matter for Hurston was personal in more ways than one, she could in effect combat prejudice through partiality; indeed, what the personal narrative dimension does is open up space on the page for her to appeal to her readership, address prevailing misperceptions on conjure that a typical reader would likely project onto the text, and impart her own viewpoint through the rhetoric of an authoritative and immediate subject position on the matter. In *Mules*, the first chapter of its section on Hoodoo might be read as such: in another gesture portentous of the eventual *Moses*,

²⁷⁶ Harris, ix.

²⁷⁷ Hemenway, 92, 213.

Man of the Mountain, Hurston opens with a survey of Hoodoo in the Bible, in which the creation of the universe is an act of conjure and Moses and Solomon manifest as two-headed doctors:

“The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything. Six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made. [...] Moses talked with the snake that lives in a hole right under God’s foot-rest. Moses had fire in his head and a cloud in his mouth. The snake had told him God’s making words. [...] And Solomon built a room with a secret door and everyday he shut himself inside and listened to his ring. So he wrote down the ring-talk in books.”²⁷⁸

There is more to note in the passage above than another instance of Hurston’s defamiliarization of Judeo-Christian lore through emphasis on its African influences, as in the above discussion on *Moses*. One may assume the “we” that Hurston invokes refers to Black America, more specifically those within Black America who put stock in Hoodoo—an instance of rhetorical appeals to *ethos*, providing legitimacy to her statements through the authority of her belonging to the subculture under discussion. Interweaving these rhetorical gestures with literary techniques such as dialogue and characterization, Hurston’s novelistic approach all the better impresses on her audience her conviction in Hoodoo as a formidable force at work in the American sociocultural landscape—thereby affirming the power of diasporic spiritual culture whose devaluation white supremacist power structures are so invested in. Following this biblical survey is a seemingly casual yet implicitly purposeful conversation between Hurston—or more appropriately the strategically-constructed “Hurston character,” to use Harris’ phrasing²⁷⁹—and her friend Mrs. Rachel on where one might find a Hoodoo doctor:

“Do you believe in dat ole fageyism, chile? Ah don’t see how nobody could do none of dat work, do you?” She laughed unnecessarily.
[...]
“Don’t fool yourself,” I answered with assurance. “People can do things to you. I done seen things happen.”

²⁷⁸ Hurston, *Mules*, 183-5.

²⁷⁹ Harris, 26.

“Sho nuff? Well, well, well! [...] Oh it kin be done, honey, no effs and ands ‘bout de thing. There’s things that kin be done. Ah seen uh’ ‘oman wid uh gopher in her belly. You could see ‘m movin’ ‘round in her. [...] Ah knowed de man dat done dat trick.”²⁸⁰

While there would be little reason to include such an exchange in a by-the-book anthropological study, this bit of dialogue serves multiple significant purposes. At the level of storytelling, it sets up Hurston’s entry into the realm of Hoodoo—a realm by necessity kept covert by practitioners, adherents, even just believers. Beyond the practicalities of narrative construction, however, one also finds Hurston’s intervention in the prevailing narratives on Hoodoo permeating further into the reaches of the reader’s mind. There is subtlety to Hurston’s construction of the course of the conversation: while the “laughing” Mrs. Rachel is at first dismissive, Hurston’s confident declaration of belief brings about a total shift, and we find that Mrs. Rachel knows far more than she pretends to. Consider the effect on a distinctly white audience in particular: it is as if one were overhearing a secret conversation between two Southern Black women unlikely to take place in the open presence of a white person—a conversation that brings white readers to consider that there is more to this covert spiritual practice than they have been permitted to know. As Harris writes, “Hurston designs the discussion with Mrs. Rachel to break down barriers of resistance to belief. [...] If she could illustrate through two perfectly legitimate little ole ladies the widespread belief in hoodoo, and get testimony from them to that effect, then perhaps her task in convincing audiences about the more improbable events [...] would be slightly less difficult.”²⁸¹ The strategy engages the reader and primes them for the commentary on Hoodoo’s significance to come.

And indeed, *Mules* delivers on that note. If the various stories and accounts that follow speak to any statement in their entirety, it is that Hoodoo, as Hurston says, “is burning with a

²⁸⁰ Hurston, *Mules*, 186.

²⁸¹ Harris, 37-8.

flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion.”²⁸² While each vignette illustrating that point is compelling, my interest is in those that speak to Hoodoo’s function as a force of covert defiance against systemic oppression under white supremacy. I am deliberate in my use of the word “covert” here, as the manner of its operation is more subtle, a grassroots kind of approach. As a contributing factor, there is for one the implicit mandate of secrecy due to the social stigma Hoodoo faces as a “suppressed religion” under the reign of white Christianity. Even more so, the grassroots quality of Hoodoo’s work comes from its enmeshment in the daily social fabric of Southern Afro-American life—its attentions focused largely on attending to the day-to-day concerns of living, as well as on individual, person-to-person cases rather than large-scale systemic interventions. Take for instance a case Hurston encounters while working as a novice for the Hoodoo practitioner Father Watson, in which a woman comes seeking restitution against a man who shot her husband: “‘But, honey,’ she all but wept, ‘they say ain’t a thing going to be done with him. They say he got good white folks back of him and he’s going to be let loose soon as the case is tried. I want him punished. [...] We needs help. Somebody that can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick.’”²⁸³ A frequent axiom across Hurston’s works, the phrase “hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick” is in brief to achieve success in spite of disadvantaged circumstances—and for the case at hand, it is an apt one. While we may safely assume that the target of the woman’s petition is a Black man, the crux of the issue at hand is a circumvention of justice through the exploitation of a white-controlled and “crooked” justice system. To continue with the analogy, then, Hoodoo is the force that intervenes to set “straight”

²⁸² Hurston, *Mules*, 183.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 218.

the course of events: as Father Watson says, ““When we get through with him, white folks or no white folks, he’ll find a tough jury sitting on his case.””²⁸⁴

A centerpiece of the Hoodoo section in *Mules*, however, is a story that takes place on a Georgia plantation, in which Hoodoo avenges the unjust death of a Black family’s daughter, brutally murdered by their white employer. While the young woman’s family leaves the plantation with no recompense under a white supremacist power structure that would yield none—“They knew better than to expect any justice. They knew better than to make too much fuss about what had happened”—they are in time avenged due to the intervention of a conjure man, another employee on the plantation named Dave, “known to dabble in hoodoo.”²⁸⁵ While the details of his hex are kept vague, it is clear that his hand is involved, in that he is seen on the grounds each time it strikes the planter’s family over the course of the following years. Each in their turn, the planter’s wife, son, and daughter are taken over by an extreme and unremitting madness—the son and daughter in particular driven to inflict serious violence on their father when in his presence. As the planter once desolated the kinship bonds and futurity of others, the very same torments are meted out to him in turn. Here, there is no mistaking Hoodoo as an intervening force here for those the justice system has failed.

All-in-all, while Harris rightfully notes a shift in the narratorial voice and presence from the first part of *Mules* to the second, in which Hurston is “removing herself and taking on the more objective tone,”²⁸⁶ there is still a sense, if subdued, of deliberate involvement and authorial intervention in the construction of this portion of the text—especially for rhetorical purposes concerning conjure’s power and meaning. Even the appendix of *Mules*, which on the surface

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Harris, 42.

appears as no more than a detached assemblage of supplementary material such as sheet music and folk remedies, may be read as a continuation of the main text's critical commentary on the social importance of Hoodoo as mode of recourse and self-determination. Directives from two-headed doctors on applications of conjure to assist the practitioner in the various trials and ailments that make up daily living—e.g., a list of enchantments for dealing with “court scrapes,” call back to the earlier vignette as well as *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Considering the historical disenfranchisement of Black Americans, the recurrence of Hoodoo in relation to legal affairs across Hurston's work is noteworthy. Under the juridical system at hand, not only are a Black citizen's modes of recourse through law wildly delimited; even more so, the white supremacist power structure in which these systems are fundamentally rooted weaponizes that law to maintain continued states of disempowerment for the racialized. Especially with all-white juries, a method to sway jurors towards one's favor by writing “each apostle's name on a sage leaf” and wearing “six of the sage leaves in each shoe”²⁸⁷ takes on a sense of gravity—not mere superstition to be scoffed at, but a covert manifestation of dissent in the face of pervasive systemic opposition. Conjure here is for many an ally in microcosmic struggles against a cosmically oppressive state—indeed, the final enchantment for “court scrapes” is an invocation to “let John the conqueror win your case.”²⁸⁸ While this phrase refers to the “John the Conqueror Root,” a mainstay ingredient for Hoodoo practitioners which figures largely in the remedy at hand, there is arguably a figurative dimension to the statement as well. In later years, Hurston would go on to posit a connection between this root and the trickster folk hero John, described in the glossary of *Mules* as “the great human culture hero in Negro folklore” who “defeats Ole Massa, God and the Devil. Even when Massa seems to have him in a hopeless dilemma he wins

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 275.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

out by a trick.”²⁸⁹ The first part of *Mules* includes many such folk stories of John and his exploits against these figures and the forces of oppression they embody. With this potential association in mind, connotations may thereby emerge of an insurgent spirit at work in these spells: the spirit of the figure of John as a kind of patron, but also and by extension a spirit of surreptitious rebellion.

In short, these conjurations are strategies for survival in which the spiritual and material are by no means discrete. Rather, and more specifically, the spiritual in Hoodoo frequently operates in service of material betterment for the communities it serves—a material betterment immediately pragmatic and readily applicable to everyday home economic concerns. Juxtaposed on a single page are instructions on how to kill a man with conjure in fifteen days, and a spell on how to rent a house using rice, sycamore bark, fig leaves, and John the Conqueror root. As such, while Harris rightly notes the amorality, dubious morality, or just plain immorality of “negative conjuration” in *Mules*, such as “hoodoo doctors committing murder” or “interfering in domestic situations just as long as the price was right”²⁹⁰ it is important to consider the righteous as well as the unrighteous. Such is not to say that the good justifies the evil, or that one cancels out the other. It is more so that absolute assessments on conjure as moral or immoral are not reflective in either case of what is a complex practice with endless applications.

Indeed, worth emphasis is conjure as a healing force, a variety of folk medicine that ministers to the ailments of Black Southern communities with limited access to medical institutions due to pervasive systemic oppression. In the appendix of *Mules*, Hurston provides an extensive list of prescriptions for a variety of conditions—from everyday ills such as stomach upset and menstrual pain, to more serious and chronic complications like rheumatism, fistula, and dementia. In a sense comparable to the aforementioned applicability of Hoodoo in legal

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 247.

²⁹⁰ Harris, 46.

contexts with governmental disenfranchisement in mind, a similar dynamic is here in operation with regard to social disenfranchisement in the sphere of public health. As Hurston writes in her accompanying commentary to the list of prescriptions: “On the ‘jobs,’ that is, in the sawmill camps, the turpentine stills, mining camps and among the lowly generally, doctors are not generally allied to prescribe for illnesses, certainly, nor for the social diseases.”²⁹¹ A story old as time, here is an instance of exploitation in the limited access to medical care for workers and “the lowly generally,” with particular emphasis on race and class intertwined. As such, the two-headed doctor takes on the vital role of caring for the health of these communities through the knowledge of folk remedies—thereby operating as a curative force in the social body’s unremitting and pervasive struggle against the plague of systemic oppression.

These remedies, moreover, are not necessarily to be taken as mere band-aid solutions over which modern medicine is infinitely preferable and more effective in every case. Rather, Hurston’s commentary highlights the *limitations* of modern medicine’s capacity to heal in certain circumstances, due in no small part to inherent biases regarding what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Furthermore, conjure as its own knowledge system and healing practice may succeed where modern medicine fails, these instances contributing to Hurston’s de-hierarchization of epistemological modes often structured according to white supremacist valuations. Take for example the following remarks:

“It is firmly held in such cases [of poisoning] that doctor’s medicine can do the patient no good. What he needs is a ‘two-headed’ doctor, that is, the conjure man. In some cases the hoodoo man does effect a cure where the physician fails because he has faith working with him. Often the patient is organically sound. He is afraid that he has been ‘fixed,’ and there is nothing that a medical doctor can do to remove that fear. Besides, some poisons of a low order, like decomposed reptiles and the like, are not listed in the American pharmacopoeia. The doctor would never suspect their presence and would not be prepared to treat the patient if he did.”²⁹²

²⁹¹ Hurston, *Mules*, 281.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 284-5.

While the element of belief contributing to the patient's experience of illness—"that he has been 'fixed'"—does constitute what institutional medicine might call a psychosomatic response, that nonetheless does not mean the illness is not "real" or does not exist as the patient experiences it. Suffering is suffering, and to dismiss it in another outright because one cannot make sense of it oneself may be said to constitute a kind of epistemological solipsism and elitism. The fact that "the hoodoo man does effect a cure where the physician fails because he has faith working with him" then, is an indication not of his backwardness but of a broader sense of understanding and perspective. There are moreover cases in which psychosomatic responses are in no way involved—such as the "poisons of a low order, like decomposed reptiles and the like, [that] are not listed in the American pharmacopoeia"—in which the conjure man's knowledge has answers where there are gaps in the medical doctor's knowledge. Indeed, the phrase "two-headed doctor" that is more-or-less synonymous with "conjure man" comes from his possessing an amount of knowledge greater than that which a single person may have; and in the case of curative powers, the moniker resonates.

To close my discussion on Hurston, I want to put my analysis of *Mules* into conversation with her other anthropological collection, *Tell My Horse*—a text that takes up the culture, history, and contemporaneous socio-political events of Jamaica and Haiti, but focuses predominantly on the subject of Haitian *Vodou* and its cultural significance. As in *Mules*, it is important to highlight that these conjure-based practices have no definite alignment or moral affiliation. Rather, Hurston represents them in such a way that speaks to the variety and complexity of the many *loas*, or spirits, that comprise *Vodou*'s pantheon; the myriad ways that practitioners interact with or call upon the power of these *loas*; as well as the innumerable purposes these practitioners may have for doing so. As she writes in the introductory chapter of

the “voodoo” section in *Horse*, “I would not pretend to call the name of every mystere in Haiti. *No one* knows the name of every loa because every major section of Haiti has its own local variations. [...] The heads of ‘families’ of gods are known all over the country, but there are endless variations of the demigods even in the same localities.”²⁹³ As well, she is mindful to foreground the duality of the *Vodou* pantheon of mysteres in terms of “moral” alignment: “All over Haiti, [...] it is agreed that there are two *classes* of deities, the Rada or Arada and the Petro [or Petwo]. The Rada gods are the ‘good’ gods and are said to have originated in Dahomey. The Petro gods are the ones who do evil work and are said to have been brought over from the Congo,”²⁹⁴ a statement that demonstrates both the diasporic nature of this spiritual practice as well as its nuance. Even within this duality, moreover, Hurston notes that this “good” versus “evil” bifurcation is in turn an oversimplification in many respects, elaborating on the complexities within each class on their varying attributes and purposes in Hatian society:

“[The Rada such as] Damballa and his suite are high and pure. They do only good things for people, but they are slow and lacking in power. The Petro gods on the other hand are terrible and wicked, but they are more powerful and quick. They can be made to do good things, however, as well as evil. They give big doses of medicine and effect quick cures. So these Petro gods are resorted to by a vast number of people who wish to gain something but fear them at the same time.”²⁹⁵

As with Hoodoo in the American South, any assessment of *Vodou* as entirely “high and pure” or “terrible and wicked” is unfounded; even the “evil” Petro class possesses the power to heal as well as harm. At bottom, the difference between the classes appears to be not so much what they do, but rather how those outcomes are brought about and the degrees of risk and accountability to the spirits involved therein. According to Hurston’s account, while the Rada are more readily appeased when it comes to their terms and demands, the Petro are more voracious and

²⁹³ Hurston, *Horse*, 114. Emphasis in original.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 114, 116. Emphasis in original.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 164, 167.

exacting—the former satisfied with small livestock like “chickens and pigeons, and there are no consequences or hereafter” that practitioners are accountable to for these spirits’ services; the latter demanding large sacrifices such as cows or hogs, and even “dead bodies from the tombs.”²⁹⁶ As well, those who petition the Petro for assistance must make a “promise of service” to them, which if broken results in the spirits’ taking terrible revenge, often in the form of blight and death; as Hurston ominously writes: “If you make a promise to the Petros *it is going to be kept.*”²⁹⁷ For my analysis, then, while my focus is on Hurston’s representations of the constructive dimensions of *Vodou*, especially as they speak to her Black modernist literary project, my goal is not to deny the reality of the destructive dimensions of *Vodou*, but to acknowledge its multiplicity while asserting its significance as a modern force in Hurston’s work.

Indeed, here too Hurston is engaged with the power of conjure as a force of healing as much as harm. As Barbara Ladd writes in her study of *Tell My Horse* as a work of resistance literature, the text as a whole may be read as a “quest for healing,” as Hurston “had come to the West Indies to continue the studies of voodoo pharmaceuticals that she had begun in Florida and Louisiana, and she would divide much of her time between the physicians and health workers of the elite classes and the mambos and bocors of the peasantry as she studied poisons and antidotes, curative potions and rituals of all kinds.”²⁹⁸ Hence, Hurston journeys to such locales as the waterfall of Saut d’Eau, more specifically the healing waters of the shrine to the Virgin of Ville Bonheur there located. As to the lore behind this site’s healing properties, that is in itself a compelling tale of folk spirituality’s perseverance amidst persecution under colonial and

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 167.

²⁹⁷ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

²⁹⁸ Ladd, 110.

postcolonial regimes of oppression. Hurston writes of a legendary occurrence in the late 19th century, in which a “beautiful, luminous virgin lit in the fronds of a palm tree there and waved her gorgeous wings and blessed the people.”²⁹⁹ In the wake of this appearance, people come to worship at this site from all across Haiti—to the neglect of the Catholic Church, such that a local priest in outrage attempts to chop down the sacred tree, only to have the machete ricochet off the wood and deliver a fatal wound to his head. While the tree is ultimately cut down and a church built in its stead, over the following years churches in the area in turn burn to the ground or are struck by lightning. Regardless of whether one would ascribe to these events sheer coincidence or divine intervention as the cause, there is something unmistakably allegorical to the legend at hand: an enduring pagan spirituality that, in spite of ferocious antagonism from the ruling colonial faith, persists as a beneficent and restorative force for the masses. Certainly, there is much for a novelist-anthropologist interested in Black diasporic practices of resilience through cultural integrity to meditate on. Thus, my motivations for reading *Mules* and *Horse* in tandem go far beyond their shared status as anthropological works, or their shared equine titles. On the greater project across Hurston’s work of exploring transnational Black modernist possibilities, the latter is very much a continuation of the former; to quote Ladd, “For U.S. Americans of African descent in particular, the book deploys questions of African survivals in the New World” as well as “the definition and viability of négritude” among other social concerns.³⁰⁰ In this way, she is very apt in describing Hurston’s quest for healing as “a matter of cultural healing as [much as] it was a matter of bodily repair, and finally it was the healing of the diaspora in new cultural formations that she sought.”³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ Hurston, *Horse*, 230-1.

³⁰⁰ Ladd, 110.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

On that note, another similarity between the two works is Hurston's sense of conjure not just as a practice of healing, but also as a political practice. If in *Mules* the political dimensions of conjure are less overt, in the Haitian context that *Horse* represents, they are front and center. Indeed, one cannot possibly speak of political history in Haiti without *Vodou* appearing at every turn, from the Bois Caïman in revolutionary times to the Duvalier regime and the Tonton Macoute, implicated in movements both progressive and reactionary. Yet I maintain that *Horse* primarily seeks to valorize the progressive potential of *Vodou* for a Black modernist project. Indeed, its very title foregrounds these progressive applications. Hurston takes the titular phrase from the figure of Guedé, a deity with “neither European nor African background” and therefore “the one loa which is entirely Haitian.”³⁰² Born out of the diasporic Black culture that emerged from the colonization of Hispaniola, he is a modern god if ever there was one, as his style reflects: as Hurston writes, this “hilarious divinity [...] full of the stuff of burlesque” is one who “likes to dress himself in an old black overcoat, a torn old black hat with a high crown and worn-out black pants” and “loves to smoke a cigar.”³⁰³ And as his shabby clothing illustrates, his affiliation is not with the wealthy elite, but with its masses, as it is the “hand of the Haitian peasant” that constructs him; in essence, Guedé is “the deification of the common people of Haiti.”³⁰⁴ To call him a voice of the people would be a truth in multiple respects—not only in an allegorical capacity as a folk hero, such as with John of the aforementioned trickster tales in *Mules and Men*, but also as an actual conduit through which the masses give voice to their grievances, amidst stringent and pervasive social hierarchization according to the combined factors of wealth and color. Guedé “manifests himself by ‘mounting’ a subject as a rider mounts

³⁰² Hurston, *Horse*, 219.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 219, 220.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

a horse, then he speaks and acts through his mount.”³⁰⁵ Using the voice of the possessed, the deity always begins with the phrase “Tell my horse that...” (in Haitian creole, “*Parlay cheval ou...*”) and what invariably follows is harsh invective befitting his character as a “boisterous god [...] full of the stuff of burlesque.”³⁰⁶ According to Hurston’s account, moreover, Guedé’s vituperations tend to direct themselves towards a very specific target: the social elite, those in positions of power and privilege over the laboring class; through the intervention of Guedé, a “well-dressed couple in a car” is battered with excoriating comments, for instance, or a “prominent official is made ridiculous before a crowd of peasants.”³⁰⁷ As such, Hurston’s accompanying commentary is deeply conscious of Guedé’s socio-political function as an outlet for insurgent critique—expressions of dissent that would otherwise be far less permissible were a member of the common people to voice those same sentiments without the cover of the rambunctious spirit as protection. She writes: “With such behavior one is forced to believe that some of the valuable commentators are ‘mounted’ by the spirit and that others are feigning possession in order to express their resentment general and particular.”³⁰⁸ Whether conscious or unconscious, these vocalizations substantiate Hurston’s analysis that Guedé’s “manifestation comes as near a social criticism of the classes by the masses as anything in all of Haiti.”³⁰⁹

For the purpose of reading this anthropological publication as a Black modernist text, it is vital to consider the implications of this *loa* being the title for Hurston’s study. As her audience is principally American, it would not be amiss to consider how this choice may resonate with that audience and the social concerns in which it is invested—more specifically, how they may

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 220-1.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 219.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 221.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 219.

resonate with a Black American audience with respect to, quoting Ladd, “black nationalism and what it means in Haiti versus what it means in the United States” as well as “ideas like the ‘white man’s burden’ and black dependency, stereotypes of white innovation and black mimicry.”³¹⁰

Across Hurston’s work, a target of criticism is those in the Black community who aspire to social ascendancy through a rejection and excoriation of Blackness alongside an emphatic embrace of whiteness—recall for instance the ludicrous Mrs. Turner from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In Afro-Caribbean cultural and historical contexts, Hurston encounters this attitude in the stark social divide between the laboring class and the ruling mulatto class—to use her phrasing, the “colonial attitude” of the upper strata’s “frantic stampede white-ward to escape from Jamaica’s black mass.”³¹¹ While this commentary comes from her time in the former British colony, the dynamic is certainly present in the Haitian context as well. As such, by drawing a stark underline beneath the figure of Guedé through her title, Hurston’s intervention concerns itself not just with hierarchies and solidarities of race alone, but with the ever-intertwined hierarchies and solidarities of race and class under colonial and postcolonial regimes of power—as Ladd writes, through Guedé, “Hurston reaffirms her allegiance to *black* culture and aligns her narrator not only with the black peasantry in Haiti but also with the black masses in the United States.”³¹² The diasporic aspect of this Black culture is moreover worth underscoring, as Guedé himself is distinctly a diasporic creation. Overall, as Ladd aptly describes Hurston’s use of “ideological speech” in *Tell My Horse* as “designed to retextualize the genealogies and trajectories of blackness,”³¹³ so too does her vision of conjure’s modernity in a Black modernist context—a cultural practice that interweaves disparate elements for generative and regenerative purposes.

³¹⁰ Ladd, 110.

³¹¹ Hurston, *Horse*, 6.

³¹² Ladd, 120. Emphasis in original.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

If this commentary is too saccharine, there are vignettes to cut through it—ones which further impart an exhortation against deferring to postcolonial hegemonies that center Europe. While the “Black Joan of Arc” chapter does not fall under the heading of the “Voodoo in Haiti” section, *Vodou* is at the forefront of Hurston’s representation of this episode in Haitian political history. Here, she relates the rise and fall of General François Antoine Simon, President of Haiti from 1908 to 1911. However, her focus is not on this figure alone, but on both him and his daughter Celestina—a powerful *mambo* (a *Vodou* priestess) and the titular “Black Joan of Arc,” a moniker arising from the parallels between her story and that of the French martyr: writes Hurston, “Both of these young women sprung alike from the soil. Both led armies and came to unbelievable power by no other right than communion with mysterious voices and spirits. Both of these women stood behind weak ruling chairs, and both departed their glory for ignominy.”³¹⁴ As this excerpt imparts, Celestina and her father come not from the ruling mulatto class, but from the masses—General Simon a “soldier peasant” who “had come up the military ladder from the most humble beginnings,” arriving at his presidential position due to the machinations of scheming politicians conspiring to use him as a puppet ruler.³¹⁵ Alongside him at the palace are two key advisors from the family—the *mambo* Celestina as well as the goat Simalo, a creature taken for a pet who is in reality the priestess’ animal consort.

It is tempting to read this story for its affirmational and subversive qualities: heroes of the people storming the capital with an army of soldiers “carrying their coco macaque sticks to which had been tied a red handkerchief,” signaling their protection under the god of war Ogun Feraille, whom Celestina had through ceremony petitioned in order to “make the men of her

³¹⁴ Hurston, *Horse*, 93.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

army impervious to bullet and blade.”³¹⁶ And after they come into power, Hurston’s description of rumors in the national palace where “it was said that a Voodoo ceremony was going on in the basement chambers while the state function was glittering its farcical way in the salon”³¹⁷ is redolent with allegorical resonance figuring Haitian political history as a whole, a sounding of her literary sensibilities at work. At the edifice both literal and figurative that is the central site of the body politic, the rites of “state function” that are a performance of Eurocentric, colonial influence—the “farcical” and “glittering” motions taking place in a “salon” readily interpretable as gestures towards a persisting French cultural and political preeminence among the governing elite—are undercut by the rites of *Vodou* that perform a diasporic cultural formation, their “basement chambers” setting at once suggestive of its repudiated yet persistent presence, as well as its foundational role in the nation’s political history. Yet, the story of these figures is not a celebratory tale, but a cautionary one. According to Hurston’s telling, President Simon in time becomes a victim to hubris, his desire for prestige and power leading him to spurn the *Vodou* that first brought him to his position of prominence, resulting in his and Celestina’s ruination. The catalyst of their fall is their abandonment of the aforementioned goat Simalo, Celestina’s familiar—namely their breaking up the “‘marriage’ between Celestina and Simalo” in which a “houngan [a *Vodou* priest] had mysteriously tied them together [...] and the power of each depended upon the other.”³¹⁸ With their rise in status, the President and the *mambo* contrive to arrange an “advantageous marriage” between Celestina and “a man of position and wealth” to heighten their social and political preeminence; and as Celestina’s spiritual union with the goat Simalo proves an obstruction to her marrying, Simon arranges a ceremony to in effect divorce

³¹⁶ Ibid., 95.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 96.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

the priestess and her familiar.³¹⁹ The action proves to be a turning point—in the aftermath of the goat’s demise, Simon and Celestina are ultimately overcome by insurrection, expelled from the palace, and driven into exile.

The question then arises as to what causes Celestina and Simon’s loss of power: the fatal effects of greed and hubris? Retribution for their disloyalty to the gods? One gets little help from the Hurston narrator figure, who moves across varying perspectives through a single narrative voice. At moments, the commentary reads as if conflicting viewpoints of the masses versus the elite are spliced together—for instance: “He [Simon] sacrificed his best friend to ambition which turned upon him and mocked his happiness to death. In the fog of flattery, he lost sight of the fact that goats and peasants are seldom the helms of empire.”³²⁰ While there is ambiguity in the narratorial voice, Hurston’s closing the chapter with the outlook of the masses underscores the story’s exhortation to loyalty to the diasporic spiritual culture: “‘Oh, well,’ they conclude, ‘what can you expect? One cannot expect to prosper who breaks his vows to the loa.’”³²¹ On that note, I would be remiss to take up the “Black Joan of Arc” chapter without discussing a scene in it vital to the text’s critical commentary of the folly of colonial pretensions. The scene is the funeral of Simalo the goat, in which he is given a grand Catholic burial fit for an archbishop:

“The body of Simalo in a closed coffin was borne to the Cathedral in great pomp and glory. It was represented to the priest that a close relative of the president had passed away. There were great bouquets of flowers, smoking censura, the chanted mass for the dead and great weeping. A most impressive funeral, all in all. It was only when the services were completely over that the priest became suspicious and discovered that all this holy service had been performed over a goat.”³²²

³¹⁹ Ibid., 97.

³²⁰ Ibid., 98.

³²¹ Ibid., 101.

³²² Ibid., 98.

Absurd yet stirring, the image is arresting in its symbolism: an extravagant tableau of all the accoutrements of pomp and ceremony in Old World European style, “great bouquets of flowers, smoking censura, the chanted mass for the dead”—and, at the center of this high drama, hidden from view yet ineluctably its heart, is the embodiment of a spiritual tradition that has been forsaken, yet still carries power and demands commemoration. While this representation is inspired by history, we are nonetheless through Hurston’s literary anthropological practice invited to meditate on its resonance: the farcical tragedy of spurning the power of diasporic spiritual culture to mimic that of the European elite for social and material gain.

As a Black modernist writer, in her “conjure stories” Hurston critiques pretensions to white standards as degradation and valorize Black cultures on a transnational scale. And, as the burial of Simalo accentuates in great vividness, she does so with great strokes of humor—and there is power in laughter. Hurston’s writing works towards many purposes, as the flourishing scholarship and popular celebrations of her work since her revival attest to; all her readers may agree that foremost among them is an invitation to laughter, along with a pronouncement of dignity in self and cultural histories that is decidedly modern.

The “Terrifying Card of Faith”: Vodou and The Enchanted Worldview in Alejo Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo* (1949)

“To begin with, the experience of the marvelous presupposes a certain faith [una fe]. Those who do not believe in saints cannot cure themselves with saintly miracles, just as those who are not Don Quixotes cannot insert themselves body and soul into the world of Amadís de Gaula or Tirant lo Blanc. [...] From that point on, the marvelous invoked in disbelief—as was the habit of surrealists for so many years—was nothing more than a literary ruse [...] Undoubtedly, little can be offered in defense of the poets and artists who praise sadism without having practiced it, [...] invoke ghosts without believing that they respond to séances, [...] and are incapable of conceiving a valid mysticism or abandoning their miserly habits to wager their souls on the one terrifying card of faith.”

—Alejo Carpentier, Prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*

Moving out of the Anglosphere, I want to pivot to a discussion of conjure's modernity in a different—though not disconnected—cultural-linguistic arena of literary production: representations of the significance of Black diasporic spirituality in modern Hispanophone literature, more specifically in a Latin American modernist project inquiring into its own questions of socio-political opposition to European hegemony through aesthetic expression, as well as processes of collective cultural formation and self-determination through the same. As I sought to show in the above analysis of *Tell My Horse*, Hurston is there interested in representing Haitian *Vodou* as a cosmology that powerfully shapes and informs a broader philosophy on Black diasporic cultural-historical integrity. In her transnational exploration of the modern Black subject, diasporic spirituality is not a practice to be abandoned on the modern quest for the betterment of material conditions at levels both individual and collective. Instead, the spiritual is a practice which can work to advance improvements in a wide range of material concerns, from bodily health to political sovereignty. In other words, the spiritual and material are not diametrically opposing elements. Rather, the former may readily facilitate the development of the latter; in these circumstances, the two are ineluctably enmeshed.

It is this intertwining of the material and the spiritual that will animate my discussion of what I hold to be *Vodou's* modernity in Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier's 1949 novella on the Haitian Revolution and its tempestuous aftermath, *El reino de este mundo* (trans. *The Kingdom of This World*). Composing my investigation are two general subthemes, each distinct yet interwoven, and together building to an ultimate contribution in the academic discourse surrounding this iconic text on the importance of spiritual belief and an enchanted worldview as modern epistemological, political, and literary practice in the Latin American-Caribbean sphere. The first concerns *Kingdom's* representation of *Vodou* as an emancipatory sociopolitical force; as

with Hurston, Carpentier is alert to the function of Black diasporic spiritualities in the Americas as a means for enslaved populations and their descendants to take power against a white supremacist social structure. True to Haitian political history from the revolution onwards, Carpentier's representation of these events places *Vodou* at the forefront of the text, a constant that animates the narrative's progression to the potentiality of liberation at every turn. This impetus to emancipation from Europe, furthermore, is as epistemological as it is political, as Carpentier is just as alert to *Vodou's* capacity to challenge European intellectual and cultural hegemony in the Americas. *Kingdom's* historical setting of the dawn of the Age of Revolution is a prime clue here; in Carpentier's representation of colonial and revolutionary Haiti, the positivist discourse of the Enlightenment—the primacy of Reason with a capital “R”—and the discourse of enchantment meet and clash within the monumental conflict between master and slave. In the space of the narrative, the results of the conflict between these warring discourses speak to an ultimate commentary on the significance of the enchanted worldview's decolonial power: the prognoses of Reason unsettled and ultimately disproved by supernatural intervention.

In this chapter's comparison between Hurston and Carpentier, however, it is vital to note the different subject positions with which they approach this enduring historical dynamic: as a Black American and descendant of slaves, Hurston speaks from within the matter at hand as it applies to the Black modernist project which so greatly animates her writing and philosophy. For Carpentier, a Cuban of European descent, while his work shares with Hurston's a valorization and de-marginalization of Black culture in the Americas, the applications of Black diasporic spirituality in his writing contribute to another cultural project: the complexities and perplexities of articulating a distinctly Latin American-Caribbean consciousness, history, collective identity, and literary expression. This mythical quest for origins—or, at the very least, its potentiality—

comprises the second subtheme in the investigation at hand: in *Kingdom*, the dynamic between *Vodou* and Catholicism as a distinctive element in the novella's exploration of what I hold to be the importance it imparts of melding *enchanted worldviews* in conceptualizing the Latin American-Caribbean tableau as fundamentally hybridized, transculturated, and syncretic in constitution. After all, the very notion of syncretism that one may now broadly apply to a variety of socio-cultural fusions originates in the description of religious transcultural phenomena. Such a move, all-in-all, seeks to foreground not only the perennial and enduring significance of Afro-Hispanic culture in this conceptualization of Latin American consciousness, but also the significance of the ontological validity of belief in that self-same conceptualization.

Central to my investigation of *Kingdom*'s inquiry into the significance it imparts on belief in a distinctly Latin American literary expression is Carpentier's fraught yet vital concept of *lo real maravilloso*, or "the marvelous real," which he famously introduces in the prologue to the text. Popularly, Carpentier's marvelous real is often held as a precursor to the globally-celebrated Latin American strain of magical realism (*realismo mágico*), a reading that is not entirely false but perhaps more so a partial truth. Firstly, as Roberto González Echevarría notes in his influential monograph on Carpentier, the designation was largely a retrospective one, coming into being in the sixties with the advent of the Boom, along with the reissue of a collection of Carpentier's essays containing the prologue to *Kingdom*.³²³ Secondly, and for my purposes more importantly, while both the marvelous real and magical realism share common ground in a preoccupation with the fantastic in the quotidian, there is a key nuance that makes the marvelous real a style more distinct, namely when it comes to potential conceptualizations of reality and the

³²³ González Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at Home*, 108.

real—at least, according to Carpentier’s theorization. To begin this discussion, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris note:

“As opposed to European Surrealism, [...] Carpentier’s ‘marvelous American reality’ does not imply a conscious assault on conventionally depicted reality but, rather, an amplification of perceived reality required by and inherent in Latin American nature and culture. [...] In Latin America, Carpentier argues, the fantastic is not to be discovered by subverting or transcending reality with abstract forms and manufactured combinations of images. Rather, the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America’s varied history, geography, demography, and politics—not by manifesto.”³²⁴

Though not a direct comparison between the marvelous real and magical realism as such, useful for the distinction in what Zamora and Faris foreground is the fundamental difference Carpentier avers between his own approach to the fantastic—which he holds to be distinctly Latin American in sensibility—and European avant-garde approaches to the same—in which, as González Echevarría notes, magical realism may be thought to originate, due to German critic Franz Roh’s coinage of the term in 1925, as well as the Surrealists’ preoccupation with the notion of the marvelous as “an aesthetic category and even a way of life.”³²⁵ While the latter implicitly conveys and/or unconsciously reproduces the outlook of a single, absolute reality which an illusory fantastic impinges upon and distorts—the “conscious assault on conventionally depicted reality” above—the former operates on the fundamental viewpoint that the fantastic is in fact a constitutive part of reality—not “subverting or transcending reality with abstract forms and manufactured combinations” but something which “inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place,” particularly in alignment with a Latin American cultural history in which, especially in Carpentier’s view, what would be deemed from a generalized European

³²⁴ Zamora and Faris, *Magical Realism*, 75.

³²⁵ González Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at Home*, 109.

standpoint as practically unreal is in fact incontestably real. In conceptualizing this fundamental distinction, González Echevarría's paradigm of a "phenomenological" European avant-garde-inflected magical realism versus an "ontological" Carpentierian "marvelous American reality" is useful.³²⁶ For magical realism overall, then—or even within its Latin American manifestation—a given work might operate according to either the phenomenological model or the ontological model, or leave the matter indeterminate—an assessment which, moreover, would likely vary according to interpretation. Hence the danger of treating these two realisms of the fantastic as interchangeable, even more-or-less so—while a work may be considered both magical realist and marvelous realist, not all works of magical realism are necessarily works of marvelous realism.

The point is to foreground the essential factor that distinguishes Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* from other literatures on the fantastic: that the text operates according to the underlying premise that the marvelous events of the narrative are in fact taking place in reality, not just in the speculative alternate reality of the text. Such a viewpoint is quite literally, moreover, a view of the world as enchanted—that marvelous phenomena and entities are truly at work within the physical and mortal plane, not adjacent to or superimposed upon that plane. Indeed, in his very treatise on *lo real maravilloso*, Carpentier explicitly states that one must believe in the marvelous in order to represent it in any degree of substance:

“To begin with, the experience of the marvelous presupposes a certain faith. Those who do not believe in saints cannot cure themselves with saintly miracles, just as those who are not Don Quixotes cannot insert themselves body and soul into the world of *Amadís de Gaula* or *Tirant lo Blanc*. [...] From that point on, the marvelous invoked in disbelief—as was the habit of surrealists for so many years—was nothing more than a literary ruse [...] Undoubtedly, little can be offered in defense of the poets and artists who praise sadism without having practiced it, [...] invoke ghosts without believing that they respond to séances, [...] and are incapable of conceiving a valid mysticism or abandoning their miserly habits to wager their souls on the one terrifying card of faith.”

³²⁶ Ibid., 113.

While it is to “poets and artists” that Carpentier addresses this treatise, whose invocation of the marvelous “in disbelief” is “nothing more than a literary ruse”—as he states in the prologue, akin to “the tricks of the magician”—perhaps the critic as well may find these sentiments to be a useful starting point in approaching these subjects. I am of course not the first to take up *Vodou* or syncretism in the study of this iconic text—each has been extensively discussed in both the Anglophone and Hispanophone academies, forming a body of criticism whose insights greatly inform my own analysis. And yet, the above subthemes are not in themselves the bottom line of my take on *Kingdom* as such, but rather the talking points through which to explore what I hold to be the novel’s valorization of a modern Latin American postcolonial and decolonial practice that operates as a function of belief that “presupposes a certain faith.” To explain: in scholarship on Carpentier, the representation of African spiritualities and quests for cultural origins in *Kingdom* are not understudied. However, as I have understood that scholarship, the prevailing tendency is to proffer readings of *Vodou* in the novel that, whether consciously or unconsciously, are by-and-large secularized and materialist in their approach and/or their conclusions. For instance, the centrality of Black diasporic religion is understood, but predominantly as a manifestation of Afro-Hispanic cultural history and expression—in that respect, it is treated no differently in terms of its function and import from any other mode of cultural performance. Or, even, assertions of the ineffectuality and ultimate failure of faith will be proffered as the bottom line. Among these readings, some are figured in negative terms—e.g., the disillusion and dissolution that comes in the wake of Sisyphean entrapment in a cycle of endless rebirth and ruin—and some in positive terms—e.g., disenchantment as constitutive of the emancipatory process, the necessity of awakening to the immediate and concrete affairs of the terrestrial plane in order for one to truly overcome

conditions of subjugation. Motivating the latter in no small part is the Biblical allusion within the title of the text, readily taken to be implying that the postcolonial Latin American-Caribbean subject must turn their attention to the tangible, material “kingdom of this world” over an illusory and immaterial “kingdom of heaven.” These interpretations, each noteworthy and compelling in their own right, are moreover striking in that they operate, whether implicitly or explicitly, on a conceptualization of the marvelous more in alignment with the “phenomenological” approach rather than the Carpentierian “ontological” approach, as in the excerpt from González Echevarría above.

It is in response to this prevailing viewpoint that I would like to proffer an alternate reading of the novel’s take on the dynamic between material and spiritual worlds. I aim to show that it is not so much an exhortation to embrace the realm of the material and reject the immanent realm of the spirit that is the novel’s prerogative, but rather an affirmation of an enchanted worldview that holds the division between material and spiritual realms to be substantially porous—if a division is even presupposed to begin with. Such is not to say that the above readings are necessarily deficient or mistaken; as it so often is with matters of the spirit, the degree of resonance and power that one perceives in the marvelous is typically directly proportional to the value one places in it. As such, it is wholly understandable, expected, and welcomed that there be a range of interpretations on the matter of the spirit in *Kingdom* as diversified as the tableau of its readers. Still, it is to me striking that the critical conversation is in fact so prevalently skeptical, even disapproving, when it comes to the question of belief in *Kingdom*—and to clarify, I mean specifically the ontological saliency of belief in the fantastic, not the subject of religion considered through a cultural anthropological lens. What manifests across the scholarship is an overall impression that Carpentier’s prologue is nothing more than an

overly-saccharine, disingenuous, tantalizing piece of bait in an elaborate subterfuge to render labyrinthine the space between the reader and the real implications of the text—and the critic is all too clever a creature to actually be taken in by it. Indeed, González Echevarría remarks on Carpentier’s tendency to maintain control over the interpretation of his work through the inclusion of various “productive misprisions” such as prologues and addenda, often generating tension in the study of his *oeuvre* due to “disagreements between Carpentier’s statements and his fictions—the discordant, even polemical relationship between essayistic pronouncement and novelistic writing.”³²⁷ On that note, I want to make clear that my view is not that the voice of the author should supersede that of the critic, or that readings of Carpentier ought not contradict what he has stated about his work. My engagement with the prologue is not so much a strategy to lend credibility to my own analysis through hiding behind the threadbare skirts of authorial intent, but rather a means to enter into a discussion of belief in the novel—one that seeks to illustrate the saliency of *Kingdom* as an enchanted text, whether one accepts the prologue or dismisses it. While González Echevarría avers that “a reading complicitous with Carpentier’s statements about himself” is a “straight but desultory path,”³²⁸ my aim is to show that the question of faith in *Kingdom* can in fact be a generative line of inquiry, perhaps one too hastily and prematurely abandoned in the wake of the noble campaigns of deconstruction and postmodernism. It may be that I am an unclever critic—even so, the least clever among us are just as compelled to provide explanations to what they allege.

Beyond the contentious matters of the prologue and the ghost of the Author, there is another problematical factor to address, one that is moreover integral rather than vestigial to the analysis at hand: the delineation of spirituality’s function in *Kingdom* as specifically modern, as

³²⁷ Ibid., 24, 17.

³²⁸ Ibid., 17.

well as participating in a distinctly modern Latin American literary project—and, finally, the approach to this 1949 novel as a modern text, as opposed to a postmodern one. For an Anglo-European academe in particular, the novel appears at an interstitial moment with respect to the prevailing institutional norms on periodicity: the opaque temporal realm of the 1940s, in which modernism and modernity give way to postmodernism, postmodernity, and contemporaneity. Criticism on the text is representative of its—based on this particular scholarly convention—liminal date of publication: the text is freely and generatively read by scholars of both modernism and postmodernism according to the respective lens of each field. To be first taken into consideration, then, is the suitability of reading an Hispanophone text according to the largely Anglo-European paradigm of modern versus postmodern. And here there are valid objections to account for—as Donald L. Shaw notes, for instance, there is the sensible “resistance of Hispanic writers and critics to passively adopting Anglo-Saxon terms which may not, in their view, really fit their literature.”³²⁹ To note a prime example, the direct cognate of the term “modernism” in the Spanish language, *modernismo*, refers already to a specific turn-of-the-century transatlantic movement in Hispanophone poetics, its figurehead the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. While a nuanced survey on its *modernista* poetry must be passed over in consideration of the project at hand, suffice it to say that while *modernismo* was indeed involved in increasingly modern transnational currents of cultural, aesthetic, and socio-political change and exchange, so also did it possess an unquestionable singularity. According to González Echevarría, its modernity principally materialized in the use of classically exquisite images and forms in order to have “the self’s woes submit to the force of poetic language, in the same way that nature was being subjected and given shape by science and technology in the second half of

³²⁹ Shaw, 896-7.

the nineteenth century.”³³⁰ Influenced extensively by French Symbolism, it was at once imitative and subversive in its imitativeness—as Gerard Aching writes, its “assimilation of contemporary European letters, thought and fashions took place through a network of readership, commentary, translation and creativity whereby the *modernistas* came to recognize one another as interlocutors in a cosmopolitan exchange of ideas about modern social life in capitals on both sides of the Atlantic.”³³¹ As concerned with aesthetics as it was, so too did it carry a definite political edge, namely in its pronounced anxiety and resistance towards U.S. expansion—in Aching’s words, the *modernistas*’ dedication to “contribute to the forging of discourses of national and regional culture in a period of hegemonic neocolonial incursions” on the part of both the United States and Europe.³³²

While the above example illustrates the importance of cultural and regional situatedness in one’s scholarly approach, just as apparent is this body of literature’s enmeshment in realms outside of those contained spheres—connections that invite comparison and intimate potential. If the possibility emerges of an analysis that does reasonable justice to these various demands, then it is one worth investigating. Moreover, another point in support of the use of the term “modern” in relation to a Latin American work of literature is the widespread acceptance of the existence of a postmodern Hispanophone literature—interestingly enough, one that has occurred both within and outside the Hispanophone academy. As Shaw writes, “the terms ‘postmodern’ and ‘postmodernism’ have been adopted enthusiastically both in Spain and Spanish America, and critics have hastened to attach the label to many of their contemporary writers...”³³³ The question he then poses is a salient one: “how can we study Hispanic postmodernism or use the

³³⁰ González Echevarría, *Modern Latin American Literature*, 26.

³³¹ Aching, 115.

³³² *Ibid.*, 114.

³³³ Shaw, 896-7.

term persuasively when there is no consensus about Hispanic modernism and only few signs that one is in process of emerging?”³³⁴ Indeed, the very nature of the term “postmodern” implies some preexisting form of modern that has been overcome—so then, this consensus surrounding an Hispanophone postmodern invites critics to consider the contours and qualities of the modern literary tradition that it supersedes.

According to Shaw, then, conceptualizations of Spanish and Latin American modernisms face the complicated task of meeting two base criteria: first, they must “do justice to the individuality of that nation’s modern literary culture,” yet they must also be “compatible with the general European and North American consensus about the meaning and characteristics of the movement, and therefore acceptable to non-Spanish critics.”³³⁵ Based on existing scholarly efforts to formulate such a modernism, one finds that an extension of the years that encompass the modern period is a necessary step. For expansions into earlier years, such a move is not exceedingly problematic—even within the Anglo-European sphere, *fin de siècle* precursors to modernism have long been considered vital parts of the modernist literary canon.³³⁶ It is the prospect of expanding the modern period into later years—past the close of the second World War, as is customary—that seems to cause greater issue. However, at least for the Latin American context, many do consider it to be a viable and necessary step. The prime justification resides in the unique timeline of developments in Latin American prose fiction as they align with the “meaning and characteristics of the movement” within modernist prose. Innovations in the realm of Hispanophone poetics are more-or-less contiguous with the standard Anglo-European model of periodization; during the early-twentieth century, the period of canonical “high

³³⁴ Ibid., 897.

³³⁵ Ibid., 903.

³³⁶ On that note, it is interestingly with the aforementioned *modernismo* that any use of the term “modernism” first appears with respect to describing a distinct creative movement.

modernism,” poetry was incontestably the central site of literary innovation in the Spanish-speaking world. For prose, the ugly duckling of Hispanophone literature, it is not until the mid-century—on or about the traditional post-45 divisional axis—that the genre starts to radically diverge from its 19th-century predecessors, namely through the employment of what Anglo-European critics would recognize as modernist prose-writing techniques. To quote from Raymond Leslie Williams’ study on the modern Latin American novel, those who would become the Hispanophone world’s leading innovators in fiction writing—under the stylistic influence of Anglo-American and European modernist figureheads the likes of Faulkner, Kafka, and Proust—began to incorporate in their works incontestably modernist strategies such as “the use of interior monologues, stream of consciousness, fragmentation, varying narrative points of view, neologisms, innovative narrative structures, and frequent lack of causality.”³³⁷ This sea change, to quote González Echevarría, is one that began “tentatively in the thirties and forties, accelerated in the fifties, and came to full bloom in the sixties” with the advent of the so-called “Boom” in which Latin American letters at last emerge as a contender in the global arena of literary culture and production.³³⁸ If one takes an alignment with certain stylistic qualities as their defining criteria of what constitutes a “modernist” text, then interestingly enough, Carpentier becomes not just a late modern prose writer, but an early Latin American modern prose writer.

In addition to stylistic confluences, it is worthwhile to consider other key defining factors of modern literature—namely, one that critically engages with the various social, material, and political conditions of life in the modern age as they developed across manifold regional and cultural arenas the world over. Here, it may be useful to reinvoke the prior discussion of Japanese modernism for illustrative purposes—a literature that emerged in response to a

³³⁷ Williams, 4-5.

³³⁸ González Echevarría, *Modern Latin American Literature*, 83.

radically shifting sociocultural landscape at once generatively and fatally enmeshed with the force of Western incursion. For the Latin American context, here as well a compelling dynamic emerges: under increasingly modern networks of exchange in culture and power, so too did Latin American writers face the task of creating a literature to meet the questions and tensions arising from these conditions. As González Echevarría states, among them was a prevalent aspiration to formulate their own modern literary project which professed “a denial of Western tradition and a desire to found an autonomous Latin American tradition—modernity’s cry for new beginnings.”³³⁹ However, as with both Japanese and Afro-American modernisms in their respective ways, such a project necessitated a far more complex negotiation between the “traditional” and the “modern” than what the Anglo-European make-it-new model upheld—or, rather, what it purported to uphold and practice on the surface. In any event, what became apparent was the difficulty and even impossibility of an ineluctably hybridized culture seeking to fully break from European influence, especially through the use of modern techniques gleaned from exchanges and even involvement with the contemporaneous European avant-garde. As such, “as Carpentier and modern Latin American writers denounced Western tradition, their search for a Latin American consciousness and mode of expression became, paradoxically, more European.”³⁴⁰ With Europe being at once a site of desired rupture yet influential source of innovative technique, it is not just that its status in the traditional versus modern scheme is indeterminate—it is in a sense a negation of that very duality.

Yet another contributing factor in this dynamic of the emergent modern Latin American literature was the constructedness of a certain “bourgeois and post-Romantic” faux nostalgia for a remote and abstract essential origin or even “tradition,” often pre-Columbian and/or primitivist

³³⁹ González Echevarría, *Pilgrim at Home*, 19.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

in essence; hence González Echevarría's statement that "Latin American literature centers around a lack, an absence of organic connectedness, and its mainspring is a desire for communion, or, in a Hegelian sense, for totality through reintegration with a lost unity."³⁴¹ In the Cuban context, an early manifestation of this pursuit was the 1920s avant-garde movement of *Afrocubanismo* (Afro-Cubanism), a project that—in the aftermath of Cuban independence, no less—sought to reframe and reconstitute Cuban identity through the incorporation, affirmation, and centering of an historically marginalized Afro-Cuban culture in modern art. While key figures such as the poet Nicolás Guillén and visual artist Wilfredo Lam were of mixed-race Afro-Cuban ancestry, a majority of the creatives and intellectuals that spearheaded and participated in the movement were instead white Cubans. For instance, its founding father of sorts Fernando Ortiz Fernández—who coined the very term *transculturación* (transculturation)—begins his career "directly concerned with assimilation;" his early work infamously focused on "African culture for what it could reveal about crime in Cuba," namely in a study on "witchcraft among Cuban blacks," more specifically "the criminal side of witchcraft—the ritualistic killings, the necrophilia, the bizarre sexual practices—and its moral impact on society at large" which was "undertaken with the avowed intention of understanding the phenomenon better in order to eliminate it quicker."³⁴² While Ortiz Fernández did undergo a "radical conversion, probably brought about by the young Afro-Cubanists,"³⁴³ and went on to become an influential champion of Afro-Cuban culture, the foundational example highlights the preponderance of the white outsider's view in formulating this movement. Perhaps not coincidentally occurring in the wake of European primitivism, Afro-Cubanists in their "desire to discover a new consciousness,

³⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

³⁴² Ibid., 46-7.

³⁴³ Ibid., 48.

devoid of the rationalistic strictures of European thought,” turned to a “primitivistic utopianism” in which that which was “black became an alluring other, who was nevertheless there, close at hand and nominally a part of Cuban nationhood and could be claimed as the point of departure for a radical new beginning.”³⁴⁴ To these predominantly white artists, this “alluring other” was “a being that fulfilled all the requirements of the new spirit: the pure, primitive way of expressing a simplified reality; his angular art; his jerky, percussive music and dance; the unintelligibility of his religious expression, which permeated all aspects of his culture.”³⁴⁵

For Carpentier—as well as the developing modernness of his oeuvre—the early years of his career showed an extensive engagement in the *Afrocubanismo* movement—principally as a member of the Afro-Cubanist intellectual coterie the *Grupo Minorista* (lit. “Minority Group”), as well as in his earliest works, which were “wrought around one all-encompassing metaphor or conceit: the alluring otherness of Afro-Cuban culture, the cohesive religious force of which can become the source for a different writing, freed from the strictures of Western mentality.”³⁴⁶ As such, it is important to highlight that, in a manner not dissimilar to Ortiz Fernández, the genesis of Carpentier’s interest in Black diasporic spirituality is characterized by a less-than-savory conceptualization of Afro-Cuban culture which in time expands in nuance and self-reflexivity. Most famous among these early works is his first novel *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!*—meaning “Lord praised be thou” in the Afro-Cuban *ñáñigo* dialect—which, though not the focus of this particular analysis, merits brief consideration due to its usefulness in illustrating the shifts in Carpentier’s representations of Afro-Caribbean spirituality and its modernism/modernity, especially as they inform and contrast with those of *Kingdom*. This *bildungsroman*, in short,

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 44.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 49.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 61.

charts the development and tragic demise of its Afro-Cuban protagonist Menegildo in the midst of a modernizing early-twentieth-century Cuba, in which a mounting U.S. presence takes increasing control over the newly independent island nation's sugar industry. While Carpentier would go on to disavow the novel, it carries interest among scholars for its strident critique of U.S. intervention and commercialism, as well as its representation of Afro-Cuban culture as site of counter-modern resistance. González Echevarría describes the novel as driven by a contrapuntal tension between two fundamentally incompatible worlds: "a black world ruled by magic and fate, and a white world where history and politics prevail."³⁴⁷ In rendering this dichotomy, Carpentier imbues the former with greater merit due in large part to its quality of enchantment—though not without an underlying strain of primitivism—in which it "opposes the white world of politics and history that envelops it by adhering to religion and tradition rather than to change and progress. [...] Subject to history, the white world is caught in a process of decay, invaded as it is by the effluvia of American products and customs that pollute the countryside. The white world is one of time and gradual decay, the black world has the strength of permanence."³⁴⁸ While emblematic of *Afrocubanismo*'s desire to valorize the Black culture of the island, particularly as it aided in efforts to liberate Cuban art and culture from Anglo-European hegemony, critics are more-or-less unified in terms of its weaknesses. As Jason Frydman writes, for instance, though Carpentier's "attempts to articulate cohesive national, regional, and hemispheric cultural identities through attention to African diasporic culture" come from a place of clear opposition to Eurocentrism, "the kind of attention paid reproduces textually the very hierarchies and divisions he criticizes."³⁴⁹ Such a conundrum signals toward the irony

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 77.

³⁴⁹ Frydman, 67.

that González Echevarría notes in early forays into a modern Latin American literary project of “the New World” as “a doubly fictive space: the one furnished by the European tradition and the one re-elaborated by Latin American writers.”³⁵⁰

For *Kingdom*, then, in terms of whether—or the extent to which—this subsequent novel is a departure from or continuation of this tendency, scholars are divided in view. Frydman for one considers *Kingdom* to be an Afro-Cubanist reproduction of the white writer’s gaze that primitivizes its African subject matter in the pursuit of its own self-interest, in which “nonwhite cultural expressions acquire a diabolical alterity, however productive they may be for white literary appropriation.”³⁵¹ In his analysis, it is instead Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (tr. *The Lost Steps*)—the novel following *Kingdom*, which charts the frustrated attempt of a white Caribbean-born composer to return to a telluric Latin American originary essence—in which the author finally emerges into a “self-reflexive critique of whiteness” that “seeks to ground New World artistic innovation not in appropriations of racial difference but through explorations of how that difference is framed.”³⁵² While I am in agreement with Frydman’s reading of *Los pasos*, I am hesitant to dismiss *Kingdom* as ultimately caught in the same snare of white *Afro-Cubanismo* as *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!*, and am disinclined to conclude that Carpentier’s representations of nonwhite culture needs must fail unless their ineluctable failure is that which the text professes. In terms of interpretations that read *Kingdom* as a departure from Afro-Cubanism, then, González Echevarría foregrounds a shift between *Écue* and *Kingdom* concerning that very dynamic: in the former, cultures must remain as oil and water; in the latter, however, one observes an emergent conjoining of the spheres amidst their cataclysmic

³⁵⁰ González Echevarría, *Pilgrim*, 28.

³⁵¹ Frydman, 67.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 70.

collision—or, at least, an investigation of the possibility of “a harmonious and coherent Latin American history [that] would develop toward a better future—a future in which the two images in the double vision could merge into one.”³⁵³

Such a development is arguably representative of early mid-century developments in the Latin American modern literary project—one that, in the aftermath of unsuccessful efforts to cut itself free from the bonds of Europe with tools of continental make, begins to explore alternate pathways through which to challenge a European hegemony that is at once irremediably constitutive of Latin American cultural history. If the West cannot be excised, then perhaps it may be subsumed and reframed in ways that are still generative of a Latin American intervention that affirms its own singularity. Hence González Echevarría’s statement on the positionality of Latin American literature’s modernity:

“Latin American literature is revolutionary and modern because it *corrodes the core of Western tradition from its fringes*, constantly reflecting back a *distorted and denuded image of it*—like Toussaint Louverture in the ill-fitting garb of a Napoleonic general routing the colonial troops. Rather than a radical, ontogenetic distinction, *a perverse and exaggerated similarity often constitutes the difference* in Latin American literature. If the main theme of Latin American literature is its newness and independence, its significance can only be gauged by its exaggerated topicality within the context of Modernity: born of Modernity, Latin American literature appears to be *condemned to the delusions of newness in order to expose them*.”³⁵⁴ [my emphases]

In the above passage, I find that there are two noteworthy and interwoven discursive strains to highlight in conceptualizing a viable working definition of what makes *Kingdom* a work of modern literature in a Latin American-Caribbean context. The first involves a critique of European supremacy not through an attempted escape from it, but through unflinching confrontation and reckoning with it—more specifically, via “reflecting back a distorted and denuded image of it” with a “perverse and exaggerated similarity” that professes the social

³⁵³ González Echevarría, *Pilgrim*, 96.

³⁵⁴ González Echevarría, *Pilgrim*, 30.

daring of a Latin American-Caribbean subjecthood that is fundamentally hybridized. In conversation with *Kingdom*, González Echevarría's chosen image of "Toussaint Louverture in the ill-fitting garb of a Napoleonic general routing the colonial troops" is apropos—a quintessentially New World subject and agent of decolonial movement. While this hallmark figure of the Haitian Revolution is interestingly absent from *Kingdom*,³⁵⁵ Carpentier peoples his novella with a varied cast of such New World subjects that, taken together, represent the range of responses and strategies to articulating that subjecthood—and, it is specifically each character's relationship to a syncretized enchanted worldview that determines the degree of success of their efforts. I will be discussing these various characters in detail in the pages that follow, but I will say here for now that amidst the successive rise and fall of figures who attempt to either wholly reject or wholly mimic European influence, it is in the figure of the principal character Ti Noël—an ex-slave who brings together the myriad strands in operation in the Caribbean cultural landscape—in which the possibility of a New World subjecthood through religious syncretism at last emerges. It is this inquiry into the question of Latin American-Caribbean subject production that is in large part what qualifies *Kingdom* to be considered a modern Latin American text.

Additionally, there is the second thread, a critique of the discourse of modernity and the "delusions of newness" upon which that European hegemony in no small part rests—in that regard, it would not be wholly amiss to say that a critique of newness functions as a critique of Western influence as well. Based on González Echevarría's wording of a modern Latin American literature that is "condemned to the delusions of newness in order to expose them", it

³⁵⁵ Possible explanations for Louverture's absence from *Kingdom* are varied. In his works of historical fiction as a whole, Carpentier tended to be drawn to lesser-known figures to render into characters—e.g., Victor Hugues in *El siglo de las luces* (tr. *Explosion in a Cathedral*). Beyond this proclivity, Luis Madureira considers Louverture's "Eurocentrism" or "allegedly uncritical acceptance of France's cultural and epistemological primacy" as operating in conflict with the text's "syncretistic cultural argument" (182-3). With respect to my own analysis, I find the lack of a clear spiritual element in Louverture's historiography another plausible factor.

is almost as if the discourse of modernity as it plays out in the Latin American sphere is a sort of replication study of that same discourse—its untenability that emerges from interaction in that sphere resulting in a weakening of the overarching theorem. From this multi-stage process of trial and error, an alternate configuration of the old versus new paradigm emerges—one whose “newness” is not only a rejection of an absolute and untethered new, but an exploration of old-and-new as new and therefore *old as new*. In terms of how this incipient critique and alternate configuration of newness manifests in *Kingdom*, I find a syncretic enchanted spiritual worldview to be once again the hinge—one in which a force that may be fairly thought to epitomize a so-called “counter-modern” standpoint operates constructively towards the “modern” pursuits of liberation and subject formation. Reformulations of conceptualizing the passage of time are manifest, principally in the aforementioned critiques of linearity as emblematic of Enlightenment thought, as well as the incorporation of cyclical and recurrent models often characteristic of the enchanted worldview—yet ultimately it is a syncretic synthesis of these two models that the text puts forth, the figure of the spiral.

Lord from Over There: Mackandal, Vodou, and Afrocubanismo

No study of spirituality in *El reino* would be adequate without dwelling on the figure of Mackandal, the revolutionary leader and *houngan*—or *Vodou* priest—whose uprising propels the earlier chapters of the text—providing, moreover, a thematic base rooted in the power and integrity of Afro-Caribbean culture and its belief systems on which the rest of the novel is at once a dedication and a departure. Carpentier’s representation of this historical figure has been an object of study for many; while perspectives on the implications of his arc and construction are varied, scholars are more or less unified on the centrality in this character of African ancestral spirituality as a liberatory force. The words of Emma Susana Speratti-Piñero

encapsulate this consensus, in which he is “símbolo de la fe y de la conciencia de la raza que, si no alcanzó a liberar, puso en firme pie de lucha para alcanzar algún día y por sus propios medios la libertad tan ansiada” (tr. “symbol of faith and of the consciousness of the [African] race that, though he does not achieve freedom, makes ready the fight to someday achieve that long-awaited liberation through its own means.”)³⁵⁶ As an embodiment of this liberatory effort through African diasporic religion specifically, one might note Mackandal’s appropriateness for a Black diasporic modern literary project such as Hurston’s; in relation to the project I see manifest in *Kingdom*, however, the character takes on a different upshot. In the context of the course of Latin American inquiries into modern New World subject formation, he becomes more so a personification of an earlier, foundational, perhaps even “Afro-Cubanist” stage—the basis of an Afro-Caribbean cultural-spiritual practice that with the passage of time and generations becomes further syncretized.

Indeed, no small factor in consideration of Mackandal’s significance is his “first generation” status—having been taken from Africa to Saint Domingue through the slave trade, rather than being born in the Caribbean. As a marker of his West African provenance, the text often refers to him as “the Mandingo,” and he is revered in particular for his “gifts [*artes*] as a narrator” in telling stories of his home continent. As such, he becomes for his community a vital genealogical link and custodian of cultural-historical memory; as Landry-Wilfrid Miampika writes:

“Mackandal ejerce, como en las sociedades tradicionales africanas, el papel de educador que transmite todo su saber a las nuevas generaciones, para que éstas mantengan su tradición heroica y sus valores socioculturales que conforman su identidad. A partir de sus narraciones orales, [...] [los] esclavos nacidos en el Nuevo Mundo entran en contacto con el pasado de África, a través de sus leyendas, que constituyen singulares ejemplos de

³⁵⁶ Speratti-Piñero, 29.

valentía y trascendencia humana [...] estableciendo relaciones de identificación con las cuales podía estimular su orgullo y valentía.”³⁵⁷

(tr. “Mackandal exercises, as in traditional African societies, the role of educator who transmits all his knowledge to the new generations, so that they may maintain their heroic tradition and sociocultural values that comprise their identity. From his oral narratives, [...] [the] slaves born in the New World enter into contact with the African past, through his legends, which constitute singular examples of bravery and human transcendence [...] establishing connections of identification with that which may encourage their pride and bravery.”)

Above, Miampika’s description of “singular examples of bravery and human transcendence” that “encourage their pride” in their African origins is highly apt. In the text, Carpentier’s descriptions of Mackandal’s tales share an overt common thread of valorizing the preeminence and grandeur of Africa, particularly in comparison to a debilitated and contemptible colonial Europe—a clear counter-narrative to the prevailing European view of superiority over an African culture and society deemed backwards and barbaric. From the very beginning of the text, in its famous opening chapter of “Wax Heads,” the reader is indirectly introduced to Mackandal as champion of the nobility of African heritage through Ti Noël’s iconic contemplation of a series of prints from Paris—the juxtaposition of their subject matter setting into motion the contrapuntal dynamic between Europe and Africa that will persist through much of the narrative. Alongside etchings mostly representing French society and culture—foremost among them “the face of the king of France, framed by suns, swords, and laurel branches”—is a scene emblematic of colonial encounter: “an admiral or French ambassador being received by a black man surrounded by feather fans and seated on a throne adorned by the figures of monkeys and lizards.”³⁵⁸ As the latter is revealed to be an African king, the image recalls to Ti Noël’s mind Mackandal’s tales which characterize “the *Great Over There*” as site of glorious legend: “events

³⁵⁷ Miampika, 145.

³⁵⁸ Carpentier, 6.

that had occurred during the reigns [*grandes reinos*] of Popo, Arada, the Nagos and the Fulas” in which “the king was a warrior, hunter, judge, and priest” alongside “princes hard as anvils and princes who were leopards and princes who knew the language of the trees and princes who ruled over the four cardinal points, owners of cloud, seed, bronze, and fire.”³⁵⁹ Standing in stark contrast with these mighty figures are representations of a European monarchy as weak, degenerate, and effete: “Kings they were, true kings, and not those sovereigns covered with someone else’s hair, who played lawn games and only knew how to be gods in the theatrics of the court, showing their girlish legs [*luciendo amaricada la pierna*] to the rhythm of a rigadon.”³⁶⁰ Such valorization is not limited to great figures, moreover, but to African civilization in its entirety. For instance, the Cap Français, a major site of commerce in the northern part of Saint Domingue, “with its bell towers, its stone buildings, and its Norman houses” is “nothing [*bien poca cosa*] compared with the cities of Guinea, where there were clay cupolas that rose over large [*grandes*] fortresses surrounded by battlements and markets that were known beyond the edges of the desert and beyond the landless towns.”³⁶¹ Inhabiting these structures of architectural magnificence is evidence of an advanced civilization characterized by excellence in craftsmanship and systems of trade both plentiful and extensive: “artisans of those cities” who “were experts [*diestros*] at softening metals, forging swords that cut like razor blades and were light as wings in the hands of warriors” as well as “large buildings that housed wheat, sesame seed, and millet” and “commerce between kingdoms [*de reino en reino*] that included the olive oil and wines of Andalusia.”³⁶² The connection to the Iberian peninsula via exchange in commodities is especially noteworthy here—an attestation of African societies as participants

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 6, 7. Emphasis in original.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 7.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 10.

³⁶² Ibid., 11.

and agents in emerging global networks of trade, rather than merely a source of labor through the export and exploitation of human chattel as colonial European forces would have it.

As well, Frydman discusses the figure of Mackandal himself as indicative of Afro-Caribbean culture as modern and cosmopolitan, along with the “worldliness of New World culture,” principally through an analysis of “Mackandal the scribe” whose association with both oral *and* written modes of knowledge preservation and circulation works “to dismantle the assumptions that structure Caribbean nationalist discourses about race, writing, and orality.”³⁶³ Based on an examination of the under-acknowledged “*libro de contabilidad*” in which Mackandal records information germane to the uprising in his own invented script, an additional dimension of his character emerges that unsettles “the exclusive affiliation of blackness with orality,” and affirms a “scribal tradition in Afro-Caribbean culture bearing traces of a cosmopolitan Old World past” and involved in “world narrative systems linking the Caribbean to transhistorical linguistic networks in the Mediterranean and West Africa.”³⁶⁴

On that note of African and Afro-Caribbean civilizations’ modernity and cosmopolitanism, it is important to clarify that such a move is not aspirational or imitative of European civilization in its rhetorical strategy—one that would merely reinscribe Western supremacy as the ultimate standard for the rest of the world to measure up to. Rather, Carpentier places alongside these descriptions of scenes not without certain touches reminiscent of an earlier *Afrocubanismo*: “Gigantic drums slept under palm frond blankets, mother drums, with legs painted red and human figures depicted on them” or “feasts of circumcision, when adolescents danced with their thighs smeared in blood, wood slabs were struck producing a

³⁶³ Frydman, 71, 73.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 73, 71.

sound like that of large domesticated waterfalls.”³⁶⁵ Amidst these renderings, Africa emerges as an incontestably enchanted space, in which kings were “made invulnerable through the science of their priests [...] wounded only if they had somehow offended the Gods of Thunder or the Gods of the Forge” and “rains obeyed the incantations of the wise men,” or “the sacred city of Widah [where] the cobra was worshipped as the mystical representation of the eternal ring, as were gods who ruled over the vegetable kingdom and appeared colorful and resplendent amid bulrushes that grew placidly along the shores of salt lakes.”³⁶⁶ In its totality, Mackandal’s vision is especially noteworthy for its rendering of a civilization in which the cosmopolitan world and the world of the spirit exist not in conflict, but in coexistence.

In fact, it is not only that belief in and attunement with spiritual forces—as well as a perception of those forces as intimately and immediately at work on the material and physical plane—is not inimical to that civilization’s might and progress. Rather, such a view is in actuality *constitutive* of it. Hence, as in Hurston’s oeuvre, African diasporic spirituality in *Kingdom* operates as a vital emancipatory practice to better material conditions and assert both personal and cultural sovereignty—a cause for which the figure of Mackandal is famously at once figurehead and catalyst. Drawing from the annals of history, the text identifies him as a “Vodou priest [houngán] in the Rada rite [...] invested with extraordinary powers through various spells under the grace of the greater gods,” possessing “supreme authority by the chiefs from the other shore” in order to “proclaim the crusade of extermination against whites and create a great empire of free blacks in Saint-Domingue.”³⁶⁷ While the detail of Mackandal’s alignment with the Rada rite may seem minor, its negligibility belies what is in fact a point of great significance. To

³⁶⁵ Carpentier, 11.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6, 10-1.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-3.

recall Hurston's delineation of the Rada and Petro rites above in *Tell My Horse*, the former is particularly associated with rightness and nobility—its practitioners working with the “high and pure” *loas* of Damballah's pantheon. Hence, while his notoriety as the “Lord of Poison”³⁶⁸ may on the surface render him as an evil and sinister force, these factors in actuality operate within an extremely complex web of affinities and motivations far more nuanced than the racialized and stereotypical conceptualizations of African diasporic spiritualities would have it appear. Indeed, Mackandal's ability to weaponize poison to such an extent comes from the intimate and extensive knowledge of the natural world characteristic of *Vodou* practitioners:

“Lying under the shade of a carob tree, he leaned on the elbow of his healthy arm and searched the familiar grasses with his hand, looking for those weeds he might have previously ignored. He was surprised to learn the secret life of unique plant species, given to disguise, confusion, and the greenest of greens, [...] The hand picked unknown canary grasses, sulfurous capers, miniscule peppers, vines that wove nets in between stones; [...] There was a vine that stung the skin and another that made the head of whoever rested in its shade swell. [...] Mushrooms that smelled of wood rot, flasks, basements, and illness, and pricked the ears and tongues of cattle; others with wrinkled flesh that covered themselves in excretions or opened their striped umbrellas in cold hollows where toads stared or slept without blinking. The Mandingo broke apart the meat of a mushroom with his fingers, bringing it to his nose and smelling poison.”³⁶⁹

Sifting through the lexical richness of this passage, apparent even in translation, a palpable immediacy characterizes Mackandal's relationship to the natural world—one that Carpentier starkly underlines with the very title of this excerpt's chapter, “Lo que hallaba la mano” (tr. “What the Hand Discovered”). Flush with the ground, Mackandal comes in contact with a “secret life” hidden within the covert spaces of “cold hollows” or “between stones;” gathering knowledge from direct, experiential, tactile sensation—physical responses of sting and swelling, odors and textures that wordlessly communicate an underlying power to be wielded according to the given designs of the practitioner. Here too is a manifestation of the contrapuntal motif

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 22.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 13, 14.

between African and European that propels the narrative, in which the epistemological methods of the former challenge and outbalance those of the latter. As Luis Madureira notes, “[in] contrast with the enlightenment ideal of a mastered nature,” Mackandal’s mode of approach is “not only to mirror but to fuse himself with the natural world.”³⁷⁰ Hence his “power to transform himself into cloven-hoofed animals, birds, fish, or insects,”³⁷¹ as well as his operating both literally and figuratively on a level with the earth—alongside, within, and *through* nature, rather than *over* it. Significantly, the text imparts that the method which propels Mackandal’s insurgence does in fact beat out that of his European counterparts: as the poison wreaks havoc among the French colonials “like an uncontrollable snaking vine” connecting the uprising back to communion with the forces of nature, the “most accomplished herbalists of the Cap searched in vain for the leaf, the resin, or the sap that might have brought such devastation [*portadoras del azote*].”³⁷² Though lost in translation, Carpentier’s figurative description of the poison’s devastation as “*portadoras del azote*”—literally “bearers of the whip”—is deeply expressive, communicating conjure’s power to bring about a subversion of the master-slave power dynamic.

As such, true to the history of the Haitian Revolution, *Vodou* operates as an enfranchising force, stirring the enslaved to contest their status and the white supremacist colonial hierarchy that sustains it. In this dynamic, it is precisely their *belief* in the African diasporic cosmology and its power—of which Mackandal, as messianic figure, is both prophet and living testament to—that animates the uprising. Hence Carpentier’s imbuing the prose with the language of faith and prophecy:

“Mackandal often visited the plantations of the Plaine to watch over the faithful [*sus fieles*] and learn if they still believed [*confiaban*] in his return. [...] One day he would give the sign for the great uprising, and the Lords from Over There, led by Damballah, by

³⁷⁰ Madureira, 176-7.

³⁷¹ Carpentier, 26.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 21, 20.

the Master of the Roads, and by Ogun of the Metals, would bring the lightning and thunder and unleash the hurricane [*ciclón*] that would complete the labor men had begun. ‘In that great hour,’ Ti Noël said, ‘the blood of the whites will run in the streams, where the *loas*, inebriated with joy, will lie facedown and drink it until they are full [*hasta llenarse los pulmones*].’³⁷³

Above, in this vision of Mackandal giving the “sign”—perhaps a gesture to the earlier motif of the hand, knowledge-seeking and powerful, associated with his character—that summons the pantheon of African deities to bring about the “great uprising,” there is an unmistakable melding of natural and spiritual forces in operation. Rather than distant and removed from earthly affairs, these “Lords from Over There” are actors in the course of the elements themselves: bringing “lightning and thunder” and a “hurricane” whose movement runs seamlessly into the course of the material affairs of the enslaved, carrying out “the labor men had begun.” These *loas* are moreover rendered as spirits of flesh, nourished by blood—their corporality only further enhanced by reference to the original, in which the reader encounters an image of this blood “filling their lungs” (“*llenarse los pulmones*”), sustaining the vital organs.

Across these scenes of revolutionary foment that Mackandal spearheads, the demonstrable Afro-Cubanist attributes permeating the prose are no small factor—an element contributing to the aforementioned readings of *Kingdom* as a manifestation of white *Afrocubanismo* that cannot evade the same entrapments which ensnare the early works. These primitivist overtones by no means decrease across the first part of the novel, as the reader follows the rise and fall of Mackandal’s insurrection. Consider for instance Carpentier’s staging of a celebration among the slaves in which “the drum hides thundered by the light of the torches and the [dancing] women repeated their rhythmic clothes-washing gestures,”³⁷⁴ replete with imagery reminiscent of a work such as *Écue*. At the center of this tableau stands a deified

³⁷³ Ibid., 26-7.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 29.

Mackandal, his presence reminiscent of a religious icon around which his adherents perform a rite giving voice to their collective lamentation under enslavement:

“Behind the Mother Drum, the human visage of Mackandal rose. [...] Restored [*El Restituido*]. In the flesh [*El Acontecido*]. [...] Women passed continually in front of him, shaking their hips to the rhythms of the dance. [...] all the voices joined in a solemn chant that drowned out the percussion. After a four-year wait, the song became the vehicle for an infinite number of complaints [*miserias*]: [...] Will I have to wash the pots forever? Will I have to eat bamboo forever? As if coming from the gut, the questions came tightly together, gathering in choir form, a wail torn from the peoples [*los pueblos*] driven into exile to build mausoleums, towers, and endless walls. Oh Father, my father, how long is the road! Oh Father, my father, how long the sorrow [*el penar*]!”³⁷⁵

An ever-present dynamic in the text, here as well the contrapuntal relationship between European and African is at the forefront; the celebration above notably takes place during the Christmas season, a juxtaposition of the respective ritual celebrations of the two spheres. While Miampika notes intimations of religious and cultural syncretism in this passage, that “Mackandal es considerado como un padre, nombre que se da a Dios en la religión cristiana” (tr. “Mackandal is considered to be a father, the name given to God in the Christian religion”),³⁷⁶ on the whole, the two sides need must remain separate while Mackandal operates at the forefront of the text. Even the chapter titles as they work in conversation with their content are representative of this initial separation. Across these, many contain Biblical allusions in connection with the scenes and figures represented. In the three other sections of the novel, these Biblical allusions intensify in their syncretism via their referentiality to the struggles of the enslaved and the key Black characters—eventually culminating in the figure of Ti Noël as “Agnus Dei,” to be discussed in-depth below. In this first part, however, the chapter title that is an overt reference to Christianity notably applies to the French colonials, and not to the enslaved—even though an opportunity for Carpentier to incorporate a syncretic connection was openly available. This title, “De

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁷⁶ Miampika, 149.

Profundis”—in Latin, “out of the depths”—references the 130th Psalm of the same name, whose movement is an expression of suffering and sorrow that shifts to a declaration of deliverance through the power of divine intervention. One would think this phrase would be the name of the chapter containing the passage above, an apropos scene of lamentation and the desire for salvation from those pains. Instead, however, the “De Profundis” chapter details the torment that the *French colonials* undergo due to Mackandal’s poisoning. While there is potential ambiguity with regard to where the cry of supplication is coming from—is it the French who voice the “De Profundis?” Or, is Mackandal’s poison the answer to the “De Profundis” of the enslaved?—it is interesting that Carpentier passes the opportunity to match title with content according to such a clear alignment. Hence, I find it is for the purpose of setting into place an African versus European bifurcation to be later syncretically reconstituted that Carpentier represents Mackandal’s arc in such Afro-Cubanist fashion. One may readily adduce the primitivist overtones to his character, yet there are other interpretive possibilities to them besides an underthought gesture of white exoticism. In my estimation, there is a sense of self-reflexivity in operation. In this opening act of the novella, Mackandal marks a starting point for the inquiry into an autochthonous Latin American-Caribbean collective identity and creative expression—one that, in a sense, may even loosely parallel the evolution of developments in modern artistic movements from *Afrocubanismo* onward.

Such an interpretation is at its most pronounced in the veritable climax of the first part of the narrative: the iconic scene of Mackandal’s execution—not only the apogee of the plot of the opening portion, but the moment in which the contrapuntal dynamic between Europe and Africa reaches an absolute fever pitch. Critics have been more-or-less unified in interpreting this scene as Carpentier’s staging of the clash of two cultures and worldviews that are wholly and utterly at

odds—for instance, William Luis registers its juxtaposition of not “one but two interpretations of events, [...] one corresponding to the white world and the other to African religion”—a “polarity” about which he maintains that both “cultures and interpretations are diametrically opposed and irreconcilable.”³⁷⁷ Indeed, in Carpentier’s construction, the very composition of the scene is ruled by a guiding principle of stark contrast, duality, and separation. In the town plaza where the execution takes place, the arrangement of the crowd of spectators forms a visual representation of the racial hierarchy of Saint Domingue in itself. In the elevated spaces of the plaza, French figures of social power and prominence sit in attitudes of pronounced leisure and extravagance, overt significations of their status: for the men, “the governor, the judges, and the king’s officers, the authorities from the capital” are seated on “tall red chairs” in “the atrium of the major parish church,” in evocation of institutional power and grandeur.³⁷⁸ For their female counterparts, in the balconies sit ladies outfitted “with fans and gloves” and “parasols [that] moved like colorful arrangements of flowers on a windowsill” who “chatted loudly as if from the box seats of a theater,” with “lemonade and almond drinks” for refreshment—portraits of refinement bordering on the caricaturesque.³⁷⁹ In clear contrast, “Below, the blacks were increasingly packed together, sweating and expecting a spectacle prepared especially for them: a gala function for blacks with no expense spared.”³⁸⁰ Filtered through a tone of ironic scorn indicative of the white point-of-view, the lens renders the slaves as, to be expected, an undifferentiated mass of chattel.

In a manner akin to the concentric rings of a mandala, nested in this scene are layers of such contrapuntal movements, each echoing and reverberating the other. Amplifying the counterpoint of racial hierarchization above is the all-important counterpoint on the matter of

³⁷⁷ Luis, 25, 192.

³⁷⁸ Carpentier, 31.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 31-2.

epistemology: the polarity of enlightened reason versus enchanted belief. Back and forth, the narration switches from the white viewpoint to the Black viewpoint in turn. Take for instance the passage representative of the latter, in which Mackandal's abilities manifest as occult power of which the colonials are ignorant:

“The masters looked intently at the faces of their slaves but the blacks showed a disarming lack of interest. What did whites know about black matters? In his cycle of metamorphoses, Mackandal had entered into the hidden world of insects, countering the loss of his arm by acquiring several legs or four wings or long antennae. [...] At the right moment, the ropes around the Mandingo, now loose around his body, would draw for a moment the outline of a man made of air, before slipping down the length of the pole. And the Mandingo, transformed into a buzzing mosquito, would go to rest on the tricorn of the captain of the troop to better enjoy the bewilderment of the whites. That's what the masters ignored; that's why they had wasted so much money in organizing this useless spectacle, which would reveal their impotence in fighting a man anointed by the Great Loas.”³⁸¹

In this visualization, readily ascertainable is the function of *Vodou* as insurgent force made ever-more powerful in no small part due to white disbelief. A total subversion of the prevailing alignment of rationality with power and supremacy versus belief with inferiority and backwardness manifests; the hyper-rationalism of the French here operates not to illuminate their vision, but to blind them to the strength of their foe: the “bewilderment” they experience as the enemy sits poised quite literally just past the tip of the nose indicative of “their impotence in fighting a man anointed by the Great Loas.”

And yet, one cannot exactly jump to this conclusion so rapidly—rather, here the reader must proceed with the utmost deliberation, as the course of events that transpires contain multitudes that the brevity of the chapter strongly belies. Let us provisionally distill in simplest form the content of the chapter: a man is burned at the stake. However, taking into consideration the passage's function as literary experiment in variable epistemologies as generative of variable

³⁸¹ Ibid., 32.

reals, we witness two separate trajectories emerging from the starting point of the moment Mackandal stands tied to the pole: one in which he survives, and one in which he does not. As the fire is lit, the course of the narrative runs as follows:

“His [Mackandal’s] ties fell and the black man’s body shot up into the air, flying overhead before disappearing into the black masses of slaves. Only one scream filled the plaza.

‘Mackandal sauvé!’ [‘Mackandal is saved!’]

All was confusion and chaos. The guards threw themselves at the wailing crowd, hitting them with their gun butts. The crowd no longer seemed to fit amid the houses and climbed toward the balconies. And the noise and screaming and the mob was such that few saw that Mackandal, held down by ten soldiers, was being forced headfirst into the fire and that a flame enhanced by his burning hair drowned out his last scream.”³⁸²

Though the disorder of the scene generates no small degree of ambiguity, each group departs from this moment confirmed in their respective worldviews. According to the Black population of Saint Domingue, Mackandal has indeed been saved, his power providing a means of escape: “the slaves returned to their plantations, laughing the whole way. Mackandal had fulfilled his promise to remain in the kingdom of this world. Once again the whites had been mocked by the Great Powers from the Other Shore.”³⁸³ According to the rule of the whites, what transpires is fairly straightforward: the insurgent perishes, and the slaves’ deportment at the execution confirms for them their eugenicist Enlightenment conviction in the “scientific” clout of white supremacy. Indeed, what follows is the image of Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy, the owner of the plantation where Ti Noël resides and personification of the figure of the slave master, making “a comment to his saintly wife about the insensibility of the blacks before the suffering of one of their own—reaching some philosophical conclusions regarding the inequality of the races that he hoped to develop into a speech laced with Latin phrases.”³⁸⁴

³⁸² Ibid., 33.

³⁸³ Ibid., 33-4.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 34.

While a less-than-scrupulous reading in concurrence with the white view—that it is a failure on the part of the slaves to realize Mackandal is in fact dead, with their superstitious beliefs obfuscating better judgment—may be available to some, I find Carpentier’s wry representation of Lenormand de Mézy safely undercuts that possibility. Furthermore, the juxtaposition between de Mézy’s fatuous “philosophical conclusions [...] laced with Latin phrases” and the concluding image of Ti Noël fathering twins on a woman gestures toward the slaves’ ascendancy in the power struggle. While the master and his ethos can only bring forth highly embellished yet ultimately evacuated prattle, the slave and his ethos exultantly engender new life twofold. In the aftermath of the cry of “*Mackandal sauvé!*” above, after all, we see the slaves climbing up from the ground to the balconies—an assay to reconstitute the racial hierarchy and claim higher status.

However, the text’s presentation of Mackandal as indeed engulfed in flame raises some concern—and critics have been inclined to find a pathway that preserves the chapter’s internal contradiction of seeking to affirm the slaves’ vision and integrity over those of their masters, while simultaneously accounting for the demise of Mackandal’s physical form that works against that very objective. Some have turned to the route of myth formation, reading Mackandal’s burning as his transformation into the stuff of legend. Michael Bell for instance considers a “third possibility” between what he describes as the slaves’ “perception of a miracle and the narrative’s rational account of the event,” in which Mackandal is

“metamorphosed, not into a mosquito, but into a myth: [...] At that moment he lost his personal existence to become part of the collective consciousness; and the blacks’ shout, based on their visual misperception, speaks a deeper truth. When a man becomes a mythical vehicle of collective values these are inevitably vulnerable to destruction through his possible human weakness; as indeed Mackandal’s last cry may signify. But a dead man is invulnerable at least to certain kinds of destruction, and the death of

Mackandal at his most mythopoeic moment protects his meaning forever. As a myth, as the expression of collective feeling and purpose, he is indeed saved.”³⁸⁵

Such a reading is doubtlessly well-intentioned, its aim to reframe Mackandal’s death through valorizing the event as an empowering juncture in the struggle for freedom. Though no longer part of the corporeal realm, Mackandal indeed lives on as “expression of collective feeling and purpose,” his enduring memory a continual source of strength for his disciples—namely for Ti Noël years afterward, to be discussed below. While I do not contest this interpretation, I find the manner in which it is carried out to be nonetheless representative of a greater problem that harrows the task of the cultural critic in approaching the matters of belief and quote-on-quote superstition: the entrapment of *reproducing the self-same viewpoint one sets out to critique*. To take Bell’s analysis as an example, he is extremely conscious of the web of internal biases in operation here, and makes great effort to avoid the enlightened subject’s paternalistic gaze in his approach to the text: “Published critics, as well as students, often [find] the interplay of perceptions in this book difficult to appreciate as a positive meaning. [...] This shows how the modern readers’ own rationalistic assumptions constantly get in the way; what is at stake is not perceptual reality, but meaning.”³⁸⁶ His own solution is to turn to the realm of allegory—though the slaves’ perception of the event is deemed unreal according to the rule of the material plane, one may ascribe a certain realness to it as a “mythical vehicle of collective values” in the abstract realm of signification. The negotiation seems to be a healthy one, meeting the intention to “appreciate a positive meaning” while not compromising one’s status as a rational being. And yet, there is *still* a pronounced willfulness in refusing the slaves their ability to actually perceive. Peppering the analysis are reminders of where we really stand on the matter:

³⁸⁵ Bell, 186.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

“they are indeed, *in their own minds*, coming to witness the quite different spectacle of their masters’ discomfiture” or “They *think* they have seen what we would call a miracle,” and so on.³⁸⁷ At the end of the day, we are ourselves situated comfortably in the balconies alongside the king’s officers and such other enlightened beings, sipping lemonade under the shade of a parasol—spectators who are more conscious and sympathetic to the experiences of the masses below than a Lenormand de Mézy, granted, yet formulating our own self-serving “philosophical conclusions” that invariably reinscribe a sense of the worldview of those masses as at least in part illusory.

While I cannot pretend to possess a solution to the conundrum altogether of approaches to belief that are disinclined to meet the believer on their own epistemological terms—or for that matter, to absolve myself of being implicated in the very same conundrum within the pages of this project—for this particular scene, I find there is an under-considered factor which would in fact generate a positive meaning while not denying validity to the believers’ convictions: the element of *lo real maravilloso*, in which the marvelous event is understood to be actually transpiring in the reality of the text. Across the narrative of *Kingdom*, there are certain key moments thought of as emblematic of the marvelous real: the apparition of Corneille Breille at Limonade, for instance, or the iconic concluding chapter of “Agnus Dei,” both to be discussed below. While Mackandal’s execution may certainly be held among these moments, the fact that a fantastic event *does more than plausibly transpire* in this scene plays a curiously negligible role in analyses of it. In his study, Bell forwards a reading of the narrative voice as from an enlightened point-of-view, presenting a “rational account of the event” juxtaposed with the illusory perceptions of the slaves. For the latter, he describes their belief in the insurrectionist’s

³⁸⁷ Bell, 185-6. My emphases.

survival to be so ardent that they “actually ‘see’ it happen when the one-armed Mackandal wriggles from the rope in his agony and throws himself with a cry into the crowd” when it does not actually take place.³⁸⁸ I want to cast some doubt on this assessment. In the narration immediately prior to the burning in which the slaves visualize Mackandal transforming into a mosquito, quoted above, Bell’s analysis rings true. The sentences here are written in the conditional mood, confirming their contingency: “would draw [*dibujarían*]” or “would go to rest [*iría a posarse*]” and so on. However, in the moment of the burning itself, the narration does indeed plainly state, in simple past tense just as in the sentence describing him perishing in the flames, that his body *shoots up and flies*: “His ties fell and the black man’s body shot up into the air, flying overhead before disappearing into the black masses of slaves. [*Sus ataduras cayeron, y el cuerpo del negro se espigó en el aire, volando por sobre las cabezas, antes de hundirse en las ondas negras de la masa de esclavos.*]” While one might say this choice in language could be wholly figurative, in this novel filled with ghostly apparitions and lycanthropic transformations, there is no reason why Mackandal’s flight ought not to be taken as literally transpiring either. While I cannot claim that virtually no ambiguity exists, I can in fact say that we are presented with arguable confirmation of *the realness of Mackandal’s supernatural powers*, as well as *the validity of his followers’ convictions* in those powers.

In the above manner, the integrity and liberatory power of *Vodou*, along with the validity of the slaves’ belief in it, is affirmed. Hence, in the grand moment of the revolution’s onset, we see Mackandal’s prophecy above fulfilled to the very letter. As it was foretold that “the Lords from Over There, led by Damballah, by the Master of the Roads, and by Ogun of the Metals, would bring the lightning and thunder and unleash the hurricane that would complete the labor

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

men had begun,” this self-same vision materializes in Carpentier’s representation of the historic moment of the rebel slaves gathering in the Bois Caïman: “Thunder seemed to break in avalanches [...] rolling loudly into the far reaches of the gullies when the delegates from all the plantations of the Plaine du Nord arrived in the dense forest” to commence the great revolt.³⁸⁹ What follows is a description of a rite rife with Afro-Cubanist imagery, in which a *mambo* (a *Vodou* priestess), notably of the Rada rite, summons figures of Damballah’s pantheon: “Ogun of the Irons, Ogun the Warrior, Ogun of the Forge, Marshal Ogun, Ogun of the Spears, Ogun-Chango, Ogun-Kankanikan, Ogun-Batala, Ogun-Panama, Ogun-Bakule were all invoked now by the priestess of Rada,” who with “twirling movements with a ritual machete” pierces “the belly of a black pig, which spilled its entrails and lungs after three howls.”³⁹⁰ Continuing in the spirit of the chapters of Mackandal’s ascendancy, this scene is not only characterized by Afro-Cubanist elements, but even more so a vision of the spiritualities of Europe and Africa—and, by extension, the respective races that worship them—as ineluctably opposing forces, with the destruction of the former by the latter as the clear pathway to emancipation. Such is the vision Bouckman here proclaims, in what is interestingly the famous revolutionary’s sole appearance in the text: ““The god of the whites demands crime. Our gods seek vengeance. They will guide our arms and give us aid. Break the image of the god of the whites, who thirsts for our tears, and let us hear inside us the call to freedom!””³⁹¹

And yet, already in this moment the text intimates the appearance of cracks in the stark dividing line: a “chance that the Spanish settlers from the other side of the island would lend some aid, as they were mortal enemies of the French” or “since it would be necessary to write a

³⁸⁹ Carpentier, 42.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

proclamation and no one there knew how to write,” enlisting the services of “the flexible goose quill pen of the abbot of Haye, the priest of Dondón, a Voltairean who had shown signs of fully supporting the blacks after he had learned about the Declaration of the Rights of Man.”³⁹² In the racially, culturally, and spiritually multifarious arena of the colonial and postcolonial New World, the vision of replicating a wholly pristine cultural identity and expression from the originary continent—be it Africa or Europe, for that matter—proves unsustainable. It is a recognition of the impossibility of cultural mimesis for the Latin American-Caribbean subject in the aftermath of the advent of the modern age—figured in one’s relationship to a syncretic spirituality which maintains a view of the material world as enchanted—that becomes the central dilemma for the principal characters hereafter.

The Final Resort of Kings: Henri Christophe and the Failure of European Mimicry

On the matter of the impossibility of cultural mimesis in the New World, it is vital then to discuss *Kingdom’s* representation of the reign and demise of Henri Christophe—the self-proclaimed, first, and only king of Haiti. It would not be amiss to read this figure as the absolute foil to Mackandal’s affirmation of ancestral culture and spirituality as the pathway to collective self-determination and liberation from colonial servitude, as indeed he stands for the total inverse: a devout embrace and imitation of all things pertaining to the colonizer—from fashion to religion to intellectual culture, and significantly the same exploitative labor practices whose dissolution was the very endeavor that brought him into power. As a matter of course, this Francophile mimicry necessitates a rejection—at least, on the surface—of the emergent postcolonial nation’s African origins, in particular the allegiance to the all-powerful *loas* who ushered in the revolution. Here again we find a figure that would speak remarkably well to

³⁹² Ibid., 44-5.

Hurston's Black modernist project as I have discussed it above—a cautionary tale of the malefactions that constitute a disavowal of Blackness and the forging of an unholy alliance with the rule of white supremacy, even for the sake of uplift. As well, critics have been both united and consistent in their interpretations which aver that very conclusion. Speratti-Piñero for one writes of “uno de los propósitos caros al rey—la total catolización de su corte—sobre lo cual Carpentier hace hincapié insistente para mostrar que este serio error de Christophe fue una de las causas, y no la menor, de su caída” (tr. “one of the king's utmost purposes—the total Catholicization of his court—about which Carpentier emphasizes insistently to show that this serious error of Christophe's was among the causes, and not the lesser, of his fall”).³⁹³ By no means do I contest this reading; rather, my objective is to contribute further dimension to it and mobilize it in support of a reframed upshot. While it may be inferred that Christophe's transgression stems from his rejection of the credo that Mackandal and Bouckman profess, I find such a conclusion to be something of a partial truth. To be sure, his betrayal of the *loas* is a significant factor in his ruination, as the text imparts and as I will discuss. In addition, there is the element of *imitation* to consider—particularly in conversation with an analysis of the novel as exploration of a modernist Latin American literary project. In consideration of Mackandal and Christophe as absolute foils, such a dynamic suits not only the degree to which they are loyal to an ancestral heritage, but also how they represent the range of approaches in the development of a New World literary expression. If Mackandal's reign is a portrait of the spirit of *Afrocubanismo*, then Christophe's may be read as a representation of an aesthetic style that strives to emulate European modes of expression—his fall ascribable as well to an unwillingness to acknowledge the imperative to syncretic transformation, thereby reinscribing the rule of

³⁹³ Speratti-Piñero, 95.

Western cultural hegemony. In this way, an alternate configuration emerges to interpreting Mackandal as the pure standard of cultural authenticity whose replication the subsequent New World figures are beholden to—thereby opening up a more accessible pathway to reading the text as syncretic and transculturated, rather than primitivist and/or essentialist.

While such a take on Christophe may be thought a stretch, consider his distinct association with architecture—a craft of significant influence not only in Carpentier’s formative years,³⁹⁴ but in his famed theorizations on New World forms of artistic expression, *lo real maravilloso* and the baroque. Marking Christophe’s reign—in the text as well as in history—is the creation of grandiose edifices, namely the palace of Sans-Souci and the citadel of La Ferrière. These monuments to the revolution’s tumultuous aftermath stand as vital symbolic backdrops for Christophe’s time at center stage in the narrative, not to mention for the text as a whole. Indeed, Carpentier imparts in the novel’s preface the significance of his visit to “the kingdom of Henri Christophe” as a major catalyst to his meditations on *lo real maravilloso* as an autochthonously Latin American-Caribbean aesthetic practice to challenge and even exceed that of Europe:

“I had visited the Citadelle of La Ferrière, a building without architectural precedent, [...] I had breathed the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, a monarch of remarkable endeavors, which were much more surprising than those of the cruel kings invented by the surrealists, given as they were to imaginary tyrannies although they didn’t experience a single one. Every step I took, I came across the marvelous real. Then I thought that the presence and relevance of the marvelous real was not a privilege only of Haiti, but, rather, a patrimony of all of the Americas, where, for example, an accounting of its cosmogonies is yet to be completed.”³⁹⁵

In Carpentier’s turn to the baroque in later years, moreover, the craft of architecture would for him only grow in significance. Decades after the publication of *Kingdom*, in his aesthetic treatise “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” he would reinvolve Henri Christophe and La Ferrière to

³⁹⁴ I am referring here to his father’s profession as architect, as well as his own studies in architecture at the University of Havana in early adulthood, foregone to support his mother after his father’s desertion.

³⁹⁵ Carpentier, xiii, xvii-xviii.

support the statement: “Our world is baroque because of its architecture [...] the unruly complexities of its nature and its vegetation, the many colors that surround us, the telluric pulse of the phenomena that we still feel.”³⁹⁶ Hence, one would not be grasping at straws to think of the author’s representation of Haiti’s only king as commissioned to construct the edifices to serve as “patrimony of all of the Americas,” with strongly varying and highly suspect degrees of success.

Though La Ferrière stands as the most arresting of Christophe’s creations in Carpentierian thought, to invoke European mimesis in *Kingdom* is to necessitate an exposition of its representation of the palace of Sans-Souci—a veritable temple dedicated to the worship of the French patriciate. One must note the deliberateness to the narrative’s method of framing this ornate panorama, mediated through the perspective of Ti Noël. No inconsequential detail, we find the former slave just returned to Haiti after an absence of some twenty years, having been taken to Cuba by his master de Mézy shortly after the onset of the revolution. What makes this perspectival maneuver noteworthy is its arrangement of expectations regarding the outcome of the revolution that, with the harrowing divulgence of the insurrection’s actual fate, become violently and monumentally subverted. As Ti Noël makes his way across the landscape of his youth and former enslavement, he rejoices in the sight of an offering to “Legba, the Lord of the Roads” at which he “fell on his knees and gave thanks to heaven for having provided him the joy of returning to the land of the Great Pacts. Because he knew [...] that Dessalines’s triumph was due to extensive preparations, in which [...] all the divinities of gunpowder and fire had intervened in a series of possessions of such violence that some men had been hurled into the air or thrown to the ground by the incantations.”³⁹⁷ Journeying to the site of de Mézy’s plantation,

³⁹⁶ Zamora and Faris, 105.

³⁹⁷ Carpentier, 75.

he finds the place “turned into a wasteland” in alignment with the dissolution of the plantation complex and the institution of chattel slavery which sustains it. His exultation is quickly profaned, however, with the vision of the nearby structure that outdoes by far even that which stood before it:

“On a background of mountains [...] rose a pink palace with arched windows, made as if to float on a base of tall stairs. [...] On the other side was a round building crowned by a cupola resting on white columns, out of which several priests wearing surplices were walking. [...] Ti Noël saw terraces, statues, arcades, gardens, pergolas, artificial streams, and boxwood labyrinths. At the foot of massive pilasters that held up a huge sun made of black wood, two bronze lions stood guard. [...] he could see and hear a dance orchestra in rehearsal. Ladies leaned out of the palace windows, their heads crowned with feathers and their breasts pushed up by the high waist of the dresses then in fashion. In the patio two liveried coachmen were washing an enormous gilded carriage, totally covered in bas-relief suns. As he passed in front of the circular building that the priests had left, Ti Noël realized it was a church, filled with curtains, tapestries, and canopies that covered a tall image of the Immaculate Conception.

But what surprised Ti Noël the most was the discovery that this marvelous world was a world of blacks such as the French governors had never known. Black were those beautiful ladies, [...] dancing the rondeau around a fountain of Tritons; black were those ministers in white stockings who descended the grand stairs [...] black the Head Butler [...] who, in the company of the Principal Master of Falconry, observed the rehearsals of black actors in an outdoor theater; black those white-wigged footmen whose gilded buttons were counted by a majordomo [...] lastly, black, oh so very black, was the Immaculate Conception, who loomed over the main altar of the chapel, smiling sweetly toward the black musicians rehearsing a Hail Mary.”³⁹⁸

In the aftermath of the revolution, the civilization that Ti Noël finds constructed could not diverge further from what its early leaders might have first envisioned. To recall Mackandal’s tales of the glory of West Africa, Sans-Souci stands as the total inverse of the legendary cities of Guinea. Rather than a reconstruction of the “clay cupolas that rose over large fortresses surrounded by battlements and markets that were known beyond the edges of the desert” on the African home continent, one finds instead a reproduction of a Roman Catholic church “crowned by a cupola resting on white columns [...] filled with curtains, tapestries, and canopies that

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 78-9.

covered a tall image of the Immaculate Conception.” The holy men of the “Great Over There” whose incantations could control the rains have in the New World donned the surplice, the “princes hard as anvils” turned to “ministers in white stockings” closer in appearance to the French nobility and their “girlish legs.” The music of the “mother drums, with legs painted red and human figures depicted on them” has gone silent, to be replaced by the rondeau of an orchestra or the hymn of a Hail Mary. While one might say that the image of a dark-skinned Immaculate Conception could be a manifestation of religious syncretism, some caution must be maintained, as the Black Madonna before us here is no analogue of the Rada *loa* Erzulie Fréda, goddess of love and beauty, but a faithful imitation of the mother of Christ. Indeed, life at Sans-Souci is not the result of processes of transculturation, but of mimicry—the passage itself populated with evocations of dissimulation in the forms of symbol, personage, and language. Carpentier makes use of the word “gilded [*dorada, dorados*]” two times, a description that speaks to not only the objects represented, but the people as well: women in empire waist dresses, men in powdered wigs, performing Frenchness amidst “artificial streams and boxwood labyrinths” as scenery, with an affectation underlined by the presence of a troupe of actors. In a sense, each person at Sans-Souci is something of an actor—foremost among them the royal family of Henri Christophe. In imitation of the iconography of the French monarchy—the “suns, swords, and laurel branches” adorning a print of Louis XVI in the opening chapter—Christophe takes up the image of the sun as festoon to his noble authority, carved in “bas-relief” as if the palace were a lithograph of itself. It is interesting to note, moreover, the preponderance of religious iconography as a central ingredient in the making of a convincing imitation. The entire tableau quite literally rests under the “looming” gaze of the Virgin Mary, and members of the clergy circulate among the ministers and well-dressed ladies of high society—that first estate of

the realm, so to speak, whose prominence gestures toward a New World iteration of the *Ancien Régime*. Indeed, the text imparts that “the only light-skinned person” at the scene is the queen’s chaplain, found “reading Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* to the crown prince, under the satisfied look of Henri Christophe,”³⁹⁹ an unequivocal allegory of the monarch’s embrace of Western knowledge and its cultural, intellectual, and epistemological supremacy.

As the scope of Christophe’s mimesis extends to every facet of the institution of the French *noblesse*, reproduced alongside the dances, dresses, and hymns is the system of chattel slavery sustaining the prosperity and grandeur of the elite. All-in-all, the persistence of and reliance on forced labor in Christophe’s despotic regime stands as a testament to the failure of imitation as decolonial method, due to its reproduction of the power imbalances constitutive of colonial subjugation. Indeed, while Christophe may be thought of as the architect of Sans-Souci and La Ferrière, to say that he built them would be an outright misrepresentation. It is out of the toil of the common people of Haiti that these edifices stand, constructed by a captive third estate held in bondage to the will of the tyrannical monarch. Ti Noël himself is arrested and coerced into hard labor in the construction of La Ferrière, suffering a blow to the head and made to carry stones up “the steep ascent of the mountain, joining in a long line of children, pregnant girls, women, and old people”⁴⁰⁰ who struggle under the threat of violence and death. It is this ultimate betrayal of the values of the revolution which foments the opposition that brings about Christophe’s demise, encapsulated by the internal monologue of Ti Noël as he labors once more beneath the tyranny of the whip:

“Moving, always moving, up and down and down and up, the black man began to think that the chamber orchestras of Sans-Souci, the fancy uniforms, and the statues of white nudes [...] were the result of a slavery as abominable as the one he had known in the plantation owned by Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy. Worse still, since it was an infinitely

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

miserable thing to be beaten up by a black man as dark as oneself, [...] as equal, as low-born, as marked by iron, possibly, as oneself. It was as if in the same household the children hit the parents, the grandchild hit the grandmother, and the daughters-in-law hit the mother at the stove.”⁴⁰¹

The comparison above that likens the reinstitution of slavery in post-revolutionary Haiti to a violent rejection of the laws of kinship is apt, underscoring how the treachery of the act is not only a betrayal of values, but even more so of heritage and collective identity. In spite of Christophe’s best efforts, however, ancestral traditions, beliefs, and practices resist these efforts towards erasure—even in the monuments of his design. Such is the nature of the mask: it cannot expunge what lies beneath, but only obscure it from vision. In the case of the citadel of La Ferrière, which the text presents as a sort of monument to the tumultuous earlier stages of transculturation, this notion rings true. As with Hurston’s representation of the governance of President Simon and Celestina in *Tell My Horse*, in which the Western rituals of state are but a façade to the voodoo ceremonies taking place beneath, so too does Carpentier’s La Ferrière engage with the dynamics of foreign exterior and ancestral interior, European trappings and African “essence,” the contrapuntal motif come to the forefront once again. Positioned about the citadel, its collection of cannons stands as archaeological paraphernalia to histories of European conflict and influence: some engraved with classical names of “Scipio and Hannibal and Hamilcar,” others “born after ‘89, with the still-uncertain insignia stating *Liberty, Equality*” and still others with “fancily adorned backs bearing the Sun King’s [Louis XIV’s] insolent emblem, *Ultima Ratio Regum*.”⁴⁰² Taken together, these names represent the scope of Western ideological and cultural influence, as well as mimicry, in the newly independent postcolonial nation. Allusions to classical antiquity in the Roman and Carthaginian icons stand alongside

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 83-4.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 82. The Latin phrase “*ultima ratio regum*” translates to “the final resort of kings,” an epithet for war.

manifestations of the *Ancien Régime*, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution. Beneath the surface, however, is the persistence of African diasporic spirituality that signals to Carpentier's reading of La Ferrière as a monument to baroque America: in making the bricks of the citadel, the very foundation and substance of the edifice, "a number of bulls had their throats slit daily to mix the blood into a mortar that would make the fortress invulnerable."⁴⁰³ This covert persistence of *Vodou* practice carries with it multiple interpretive implications, first among them intimations of a vision of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Hispanic presences as vital components in conceptualizing an autochthonous New World cultural collective—not just in labor, but in substance. An additional dimension to Christophe's character also emerges, in which his misguided actions take on a layer of self-reflexivity, even complexity. With an awareness of the persistence of Christophe's belief in the power of the *loas*, his mimicry of European culture takes on an even greater aspect of performativity and artifice. Consider the following passage, in which the reader gains some interiority into Christophe's motivations:

“In case France might decide to reconquer the island, he, Henri Christophe [...] could resist there above the clouds, [...] the Citadelle of La Ferrière would become the country itself, with its independence, its monarch, its living quarters, and its pomp and splendor. [...] the blacks of the Plaine would raise their eyes toward the fortress [...] thinking that there [...] a king of their own race awaited close to the sky, which is the same everywhere, the thundering bronze hooves of Ogun's ten thousand horses. It was for a reason that those towers had been erected over the loud bellowing of bulls with their throats slit open, their testicles exposed to the sun, by builders fully aware of the profound significance of the sacrifice, even though they might tell the ignorant rabble that it was simply an advanced technique of military masonry.”⁴⁰⁴

In the above, a major point of interest emerges in how Christophe's tyranny is ironically motivated—at least in part—out of resistance *against* the colonizing forces, as well as from a sense of responsibility to the task of forming a sense of collective identity and self-determination

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 85.

for the people of the postcolonial nation. La Ferrière is meant to be not only a bulwark against a French counter-offensive, but even more so a representation of “the country [of Haiti] itself,” one that would impart the desired strength and prosperity of the emergent state. Notions of uplift operate here as well, with the fantasy of his subjects looking up figuratively and literally to see “a king of their own race [...] close to the sky,” indicating the potential of ascendancy and recognition at the scale of the world stage. And while adorned with mementos of Roman generals and French monarchs, the citadel is in its essence a tribute to the *loa* Ogun; the rationalism evoked by the “advanced technique of military masonry” in actuality a façade to the enduring power of the *Vodou* cosmology. Yet in spite of these underlying motivations, Christophe’s strategy of sovereignty for Haiti through mimicry and masquerade is too much a devaluation of the inhabited realities and cultures of the people themselves—a prevailing one-sidedness that is the cause of his failure.

Indeed, the grotesquerie of Christophe’s mimicry reaches a fever pitch in the iconic scene of the apparition of the Archbishop Corneille Breille during the Mass of the Assumption at the church of Limonade. This moment is arguably the most vivid instance of *lo real maravilloso* in the entire text, in which the counterpoint of African and European spiritual powers begins to monstrously meld—a tumultuous process not without sensations of cacophony, yet also with plausible intimations of synchrony to come. Interestingly, one finds in Breille a victim of Christophe’s despotism not of the king’s own people, but of the Roman Catholic Church whose influence is so vital to his regime. Condemned to a gruesome end “for wanting to leave for France knowing all of the king’s secrets and all of the secrets of the Citadelle,” the European friar, “Duke of Anse, confessor of Henri Christophe” is “buried alive in his chapel,”⁴⁰⁵ sealed

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 89.

into the wall, his screams filling the surrounding streets until the arrival of his death. In an unmistakable moment of the marvelous, his vengeful spirit returns to terrorize the monarch for his misdeeds—and as with Mackandal’s execution, it is a scene of extreme ambiguity and perplexity, necessitating the utmost analytical deliberation. Even the nature of what exactly transpires in this moment is a point of debate—namely, whether it is European divine power or the power of the *loas* that animates the gruesome apparition. One might even say that dual perspectives operate in this scene as well: one view that presumes we see Catholic spiritual forces at work, another that presumes African spiritual forces instead. To better disentangle these threads, the event plays out as follows:

“Before the altar, facing the faithful, another priest stood, as if born out of the air, his shoulders and arms drooping awkwardly. [...] a frightening voice came from his lipless, toothless mouth, black as a bull’s eye, which filled the nave with the vibrations of an organ at full register and made the lead of the stained glass windows tremble. *Absolve, Domine, animas omnium fidelium defunctorum ab omni vinculo delictorum...* [...] the figure was none other than the immured archbishop, whose death and decay everyone knew, there in the middle of the main altar, dressed in ecclesiastical pomp and crying out the *Dies Irae*. [...] the cymbals rolled and the word *Coget omnes ante thronum* sounded [...] Confused, Henri Christophe stood still until the *Rex tremendae majestatis*. At that moment a bolt of lightning struck the church tower with a deafening boom, cracking all the bells at once. The precentors, the thuribles, the lectern, and the pulpit came down. [...] In his ears Christophe heard a beating which could be that of his own veins or that of the drums pounding in the mountains.”⁴⁰⁶

In this brief yet arresting moment, there is much to consider—for one, the persistent operation of *Vodou* here and throughout the text, ever-present even in figures and locales whose appearance would belie its involvement. Of great note, there is the sound of beating drums which functions as undercurrent to the scene—not only as the closing note of the passage above, but also prior to and following it. At the start of the Mass, Christophe in his paranoia feels “surrounded by hostile forces” among the people, who recall “too vividly the harvests of a fertile

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 92-3.

soil that were lost as a result of having the men work on construction of the Citadelle.”⁴⁰⁷ The king then contemplates suspicions of insurgents “sticking his image with pins or hanging it by the neck with a knife in his heart” and how in “the distance he could hear at times the beating of drums that most probably didn’t play in supplication for his long life.”⁴⁰⁸ It is chiefly for this reason that the scholarship conveys a prevailing sense that *Vodou* is the puppeteering force at hand here. William Luis, for instance, refers to this passage in concluding that “Breille’s presence is a direct result not of European magic but African voodoo performed against Christophe.”⁴⁰⁹ As well, he highlights the allusion to the *loas* in the stroke of lightning that rains destruction on the scene, “a representation of Ogoun, the god of iron and fire and Shangó, the god of thunder and lightning.”⁴¹⁰ Based on this analysis, one would then presume that Carpentier here represents the vengeance of those who work to continue the mission of Mackandal and Bouckman, proclaiming the strength of the Black gods over the white. Indeed, it is notably the instruments that work to perpetuate and resound Christian liturgy—bell, precentor, thurible, lectern, and pulpit—that are brought down by the might of the *loas*. This conclusion would imply that Breille’s form has been in some way reanimated through *Vodou*, a sinister puppet made to perform for Christophe the grotesqueness of his own European mimicry and the arrogance of his rejection of the African gods.

To be sure, in the overthrow of his regime that shortly follows, the reader witnesses a powerful resurgence of African spirituality, embodied in the motif of drums that permeates the landscape through and through: “Calling one another, responding from mountain to mountain, rising from the beaches, coming out of the caves, running under the trees, descending down the

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Luis, 189.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

ravines and through the riverbeds, the drums thundered, the Rada drums and the Congo drums and the drums of Bouckman, the drums of the Great Pact, all the drums of Vodou.”⁴¹¹ The line invokes not only the spirit of the scene at Bois Caïman, but of Mackandal’s insurgency as well, evident in the tempestuous imagery so deeply associated with the Lords from Over There: the drums form a “vast tumult of percussion advancing toward Sans-Souci,” that monument to white civilization and neocolonial oppression, a “horizon of thunder narrowing—a storm, the vortex of which was at that moment the throne without heralds or sergeants-at-arms.”⁴¹² With the sound of the drums comes a great conflagration that devours the palace grounds and the glittering edifice itself, the revolution come to pass once again to destroy that which is inimical to the people’s freedom. In one particularly evocative passage that affirms as well the rejection of Western mimicry as means of ascendance, “the palace mirrors caught on fire, both the glass and the frames, the crystal goblets, the crystal lamps, the glasses, the stained glass, and the nacre of the side tables. The fires were everywhere, the real ones mixing with their reflections.”⁴¹³ Indeed, Madureira notes that in this excerpt, “it is as if the very principle of mimesis is set on fire here: not only the bedrock of Christophe’s simulacral marvelous royalty but also the instrumentality of the sign system.”⁴¹⁴ Amidst the bedlam, the king at last recognizes the grave error of his devaluation of the African gods: “Christophe the reformer had wanted to ignore Vodou, creating a cast of Catholic gentlemen by force of the whip. Now he understood that the true traitors to his cause that night were Saint Peter with his key, the Capuchins of Saint Francis, the black Saint

⁴¹¹ Carpentier, 100.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 101.

⁴¹⁴ Madureira, 181.

Benedict with the dark-faced Virgin in her blue cloak, the Evangelists,”⁴¹⁵ a realization to in effect “break the image of the god of the whites,” just as Bouckman calls for at Bois Caïman.⁴¹⁶

While such an interpretation that avers the “African” perspective of Christophe’s doomed reign is salient, I find there is more to discuss here on how one might read the matter of Breille’s apparition and the downfall of the Haitian king. It is not just the ambiguity of whether the source of the beating sound that Christophe hears in the church of Limonade is drums or his own pulse, or how the visions of rebels “sticking his image with pins or hanging it by the neck with a knife in his heart” are technically presented as the king’s thoughts, and could therefore be possibly imagined. It is more so that the Christian elements of the scene are far too intricate and evocative for their significance to be neglected. Perhaps if the apparition was a *houngan* such as Mackandal, the scene would be an open-and-shut case for the perspective that *Vodou* is at work. However, the fact that these marvelous forces are enacted through the rites of Christian liturgy merits honest consideration of the extent to which European supernatural forces are also implicated. To be sure, Christophe has done much to incur the wrath of the *loas*; yet they are not the only pantheon against which he commits offense. Beyond ordering the murder of an archbishop, he has cursed an eminent spirit of the Catholic cosmology as well—having “insulted Saint Peter for sending a new storm over his fortress”⁴¹⁷ in a gesture indicative of mounting delusions of grandeur. There are moreover intense resonances of reckoning and retribution in the contexts of the rituals involved and the arrangement of the Latin intonations recited therein. The Mass of the Assumption, the occasion at hand, is a commemoration of the ascent of the Virgin Mary into the heavens, entering into communion with the divine without the demise of her

⁴¹⁵ Carpentier, 101.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

earthly form. This Mass takes place each year on the fifteenth of August—hence the chapter’s title, “Chronicle of August Fifteenth.” While the detail may appear extraneous, it gains meaning when read as a tie-back to the image of the Immaculate Conception at Sans-Souci, that veritable icon of European mimesis. In Catholic doctrine, the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception are two vital Marian dogmas, in which the former is made possible by the latter. As the Immaculate Conception affirms the Virgin Mary as a sinless being, it is due to this state that both her incorporeal soul and physical body may be taken up into paradise. While I imagine this incursion into the weeds of Mariological doctrine might be wearisome, the point here is how it starkly underlines the occasion at hand as intended to be an unequivocal performance and celebration of Western mimicry.

That intent, however, becomes violently subverted with the incursion of Breille’s specter—a subversion whose ultimate function is to inflict divine retribution on the king for his numerous transgressions and purify the state through cataclysmic destruction. A harbinger of reckoning and repentance, Breille transforms the celebratory ritual into another one entirely, turning the Mass of the Assumption into a dreadful Requiem—a funerary Mass for the Dead. One ascertains this shift through the Latin phrases the fearsome apparition intones. Breille opens his Requiem for the king with a “tract,” a recitation for penitential occasions that takes the place of the rejoicing “Alleluia” in the typical order of the mass, or liturgy: “*Absolve, Domine, animas omnium fidelium defunctorum ab omni vinculo dilectorum...*” he proclaims, or “Absolve, O Lord, the souls of all the faithful departed from every bond of sin,” an exhortation for repentance for one’s misdeeds. The tract then melds into the Dies Irae, or “Day of Wrath,” a funeral hymn that summons visions of the Last Judgment, in which a speaker filled with the fear of God by the coming of the Apocalypse calls out in anguished contrition for divine mercy. The two fragments

of the Dies Irae that Carpentier incorporates into the scene are particularly evocative of holy might and fury. For the first, the phrase “*Coget omnes ante thronum*” derives from a stanza in which the proverbial seven trumpets of the Book of Revelation “summon all before the throne.” For the second, “*Rex tremendae majestatis*” or “King of tremendous majesty” are the words that bring down from the heavens the destructive bolt of lightning to not only the assorted relics of Christian ritual, but the wrath and pride of Henri Christophe himself. Indeed, the king of which Breille here speaks is no Sun King or his Haitian imitation, but the omnipotent divinity of the Christian cosmology—a punishing condemnation of the vainglorious monarch for believing himself to stand among the gods.

It is in consideration of the above that, on whether my analysis aligns with the “white” view or the “black” view of Breille’s apparition and Christophe’s demise, my own stance is somewhat idiosyncratic. I want to suggest that while consideration of the contrapuntal paradigm between African and European in this scene is imperative, there may be an alternate pathway through its interpretation beyond an either/or framework. I think it plausible that it is not necessarily mandatory for these supernatural forces to be ruled as either wholly African or wholly European—in fact, I do find that *both* could be implicated. True, it is strongly implied that insurgent *Vodou* forces are here taking on the appearance of Christian spirituality—yet, to what extent could this transformation constitute *mimicry*, and to what extent could it constitute *syncretism*? As the former implies taking on another appearance as superficial guise, the latter implies a combination of multiple traditions existing in close proximity. Interestingly, shortly following the scene of the haunting at Limonade, as the royal family waits at Sans-Souci in dread of the uprising to follow, the chapter closes with what is arguably a syncretic moment: “No one could tell for sure if drums were beating in the mountains, but, at times, a rhythm descending

from the high distances blended [*se mezclaba*] strangely with the Hail Mary of the women praying in the Throne Room, resonating sympathetically in more than one unconfessed breast [*hallando confesadas resonancias en más de un pecho*].”⁴¹⁸ While the phrase “sympathetically” is found only in the translation and not the original, the evocations of resonance (“*resonancias*”) and blending (the verb “*mezclar*,” which is literally “*to mix*”) that are common to both fairly signal towards processes of transculturation. The sounds of the drumbeat of *Vodou* ritual and the prayer of Catholic ritual do not necessarily vie for dominance here, nor are they necessarily contrapuntal, but something of a chorus—a strange one, to be sure, yet one nonetheless. It is clear even from La Ferrière that, in spite of the greatest of efforts, the presence of African diasporic spiritualities will inevitably persist; the voice of the *loas* and *houngans* in the counterpoint will not be erased. And, while Sans-Souci and various artifacts in the church at Limonade are destroyed, the Catholicization and Westernization of Christophe’s regime has made its mark on the Haitian landscape, both cultural and geographical. Indeed, that Christophe’s corpse is literally immured within the infrastructure of the monument to a baroque, syncretic New World civilization that is La Ferrière—the body pushed into wet mortar to become “one with the very substance of the fortress” now serving as “the mausoleum of Haiti’s first king”⁴¹⁹—is not just an ironic twist of fate as comeuppance for the murder of Breille, entombed in the walls of his Archbishopric. As a figure representing the stages in Latin American-Caribbean political, cultural, and aesthetic history in which the colonizing civilization was held as a gold standard to imitate, Christophe transforms into a chapter of that overall history of which La Ferrière is the record—literally “*inscribed* within its architecture and

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 107.

integrated into its body held up by buttresses.”⁴²⁰ All-in-all, and to recall Breille’s specter in particular, just as readily as one may view the Catholic liturgy and European culture as masquerade, they are just as well *subsumed* and *mobilized* for the purposes of resistance against and liberation from an oppressive neocolonial regime. Despite the etymology of the word, syncretization is by no means a harmonious process by default. Rather, it is so often born out of violence and conflict—and the history of the Caribbean is absolute testament to that fact. In this way, born out of the death of Christophe’s dark reign is intimation of the strange fusion of the two lines of the counterpoint—a syncretized supernatural power that still works to reassert the sovereignty of its people, even and especially when the mission for that sovereignty goes afoul. Indeed, in the passage above in which Christophe comes to denounce the European spirits, as he looks “hatefully at the chapel’s white cupola,” the narration describes it as “filled with images that turned their backs on him and *signs that had passed to the enemy, [signos que que se habían pasado al enemigo,]*”⁴²¹ arguably indicating that the imperious powers of European spirituality no longer belong just to the colonizing culture of their origin and those who strive to mimic it. Rather, they have been taken up by another people and for another cause, rendering “new” the culture of that people not through mimesis, but, as Madureira writes, “unrepeatability: the *difference* in its adaptation of borrowed cultural and political models, which the novel’s Christophe discovers only too late.”⁴²²

By way of concluding this discussion on Christophe, I want to highlight another, somewhat under-considered transgression of his reign, in addition to his betrayal of the values of the Revolution, his devaluation of the power and integrity of ancestral origins, and the hauteur of

⁴²⁰ Ibid. My emphasis.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 101. My emphasis.

⁴²² Madureira, 172. Emphasis in original.

his attempt to reform Haitian society through imitation instead of *re-forming* it. That other transgression is his denigration of enchanted, supernatural power *as a whole*—not just of the African gods, but his adopted gods as well. In Catholic theology, the gravest of the deadly sins is that of pride—and surely, it is a sin that Christophe has committed in spades: arrogance, an overinflated sense of superiority, disregard for the well-being of others due to fixation on one's own personal advancement, and so on. In building La Ferrière, he imagines himself as enthroned among the gods, as one of them, whom he may embrace and denounce freely as he sees fit—and in a sense, to scorn the might of the gods, all the *loas* and the saints, is a sort of disenchantment in itself. It is those who strive to foster a greater sense of reciprocity and communion with the enchanted world that fare better—once again, to varying degrees of success.

An *Entremés*: Soliman, Pauline, Syncretism...and the Question of an Enchanted Europe

As the focus of my analysis is *Vodou's* function in *Kingdom* as postcolonial method to contest Western hegemony and explore the formation of an autochthonous Latin American-Caribbean cultural expression, a consideration of the strange yet humorous pair that is Pauline Bonaparte and Soliman becomes vital. For the former, Pauline is Carpentier's highly comic—and, in my view, highly underrated—fictional representation of the French aristocrat and sister to that other self-crowned monarch, Napoleon I. For the latter, Soliman is a Haitian *masseuse* and *houngan* working in Pauline's service during her time in the Caribbean, who later becomes steward to the royal family of Henri Christophe. I bring these two under the same subsection for the reason that, though each possesses his and her own trajectory, they are very much a pair—in other words, one cannot effectively interpret either without close attention to the impact of their encounter. In her analysis of the influence of Cervantes—and, by extension, baroque literature—on Carpentier's thought in *Kingdom* and the marvelous real, Julia Cuervo Hewitt describes the

chapters in which Pauline and/or Soliman appear as “Cervantine *entremeses* (short comedy interludes within a larger work), which he interpolates in the middle of the novel as a two-act story, that mirrors (reflects and inverts) the larger story” of the Haitian Revolution.⁴²³

Carpentier’s use of this baroque narrative technique of the story-within-a-story that plays on and underlines the central concerns of the main storyline operates as a hybridized modernist Latin American literary method in multiple ways. First, from an aesthetic point-of-view, it is a prime example of a New World literary experimentation that does not reject European models outright, but subsumes and *retools* them in a self-reflexive, generative, and even subversive manner—to reinvoke the words of González Echevarría above, that “similarity [which] often constitutes the difference in Latin American literature.” Second, and interwoven with these aesthetic reconfigurations, the strategy forwards a thematic and sociocultural critical commentary on the turbulent clash between cultures that is central to the principal narrative—the tensions, misfires, yet resultant reconstitutions involved in syncretic processes, especially the overarching allegory on the formation of a distinctly Latin American-Caribbean literary history. In the dynamic between Pauline and Soliman, the contrapuntal motif comes yet again to the forefront; each is a representation of their respective sides in the counterpoint, together forming a sort of transculturated duet that, fully granted, does end for them in tragedy. Indeed, the recent criticism tends toward a negative reading of their encounter. In Hewitt, for instance, while her analysis views their dynamic as transculturated, she imparts that it is ultimately destructive in result. Referencing Ortiz’s iconic paradigm of tobacco and sugar, she notes how each is “transformed by the colonial experience” into commodities to be consumed and discarded as offal.⁴²⁴ In going to Haiti, Pauline as an embodiment of whiteness undergoes “the process of making sugar [that]

⁴²³ Hewitt, 86.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

destroys the living sugar canes, and leaves only the waste pulp of the plant,” while Soliman as tobacco and embodiment of darkness is brought to Europe and there consumed by an idolatrous worship of Western culture that his time with Pauline catalyzes.⁴²⁵

While I do not contest this reading, my aim is to highlight the somewhat under-considered generative, even constructive aspects of their encounter. To be sure, the story of Pauline and Soliman is by no means a happy one, rather a comedy that culminates in tragedy—strongly paralleling Cervantes’ *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, as Hewitt observes, and which Carpentier references in the prologue.⁴²⁶ Yet I find here as well that out of the unmistakable violence of the colonial, transcultural encounter comes another intimation of something “new” and reconstituted: a syncretic, enchanted spiritual practice whose power fairly challenges Western hegemonies both aesthetic and epistemological. While the epistemological intervention is more plainly apparent—manifest in the implication that their appeals to enchanted forces, and moreover their *belief* in those enchanted forces, saves them from a deadly epidemic—the aesthetic intervention is more implicit, yet is the chief reason why I find Pauline’s character so underrated. The crux of that analysis is Carpentier’s emphasis on her Corsican provenance, an island with a history not wholly dissimilar to that of Haiti, as I will discuss. It is the parallels therein, as well as Carpentier’s accentuation on how the island represents the persistence of enchanted belief *in Europe*, that inform my interpretation. As Hewitt notes above, the Cervantine *entremés* may operate to both reflect and *invert* the primary narrative. As such, I emphasize how Pauline’s narrative arc constitutes what one may think of as a reverse colonization of sorts. In the chapters in which Soliman and Pauline appear, the reader not only witnesses the fetishization of *European* culture, but also may discern an implicit critique on

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 86-7.

Carpentier's part regarding the shortcomings of Western civilization due to its *disenchanted status*. Through his representation of the Corsican aristocrat, Carpentier incorporates in *Kingdom* a manifestation of his criticism against European arts and society in the prologue, above, in which its prevailing *disbelief* in the enchanted results in a cultural and creative expression that is evacuated, disingenuous, and alienated in quality. Pauline's story thereby stands as the novel's injunction for the West to regain contact with its enchanted past; as she arguably survives a deadly pestilence through placing trust in the "terrifying card of faith," so too must Europe re-enchant itself to cure its condition of cultural malaise. All in all, while it is true that neither Soliman nor Pauline may enter the promised land, so to speak, their efforts do carve a rudimentary pathway to it that others may follow, if given the right direction.

To turn now to analysis of the text, I chart three distinct stages of the intertwined arcs of these characters: first, an initial stage in which each projects a fetishizing and exoticizing gaze on the other, standing as unidimensional representations of their respective spheres. While many find that this dynamic remains static across their storylines, I purport a palpable shift takes place with the onset of another cataclysmic event in the narrative, the advent of a deathly plague. This catastrophic event inaugurates a second stage of their trajectory, in which out of the destruction a multidimensional, syncretic, and transculturated spiritual practice emerges—one whose combined enchanted power, while viewed externally as outlandish superstition, arguably shields them from demise and thereby challenges the epistemological hegemony of Enlightened thought as empiricism. The third stage, in which their narratives eventually culminate in failure, results from their separation and respective departures from the Caribbean—in which an inability to maintain that syncretic, enchanted worldview in the midst of Western civilization and its pressures leads to retrogression and, in Soliman's case, fatality.

Taking up the initial stage, scholars are mostly unified around a sharply critical view of Pauline as, quoting Hewitt, an “allegorical figure” for a “foreign, white, effeminate civilization.”⁴²⁷ In a similar vein, Speratti-Piñero notes that “*las mujeres [francesas] de la colonia demostraron mayor inhumanidad y licencia de costumbres que los hombres*” (“the [French] women of the colony demonstrate greater inhumanity and moral dissolution than the men”), suggesting that Pauline may be read as embodiment—not without a degree of implicit sexism on the part of the novel and historiography on the Haitian Revolution—of the moral depravity of the colonizing French elite.⁴²⁸ To be sure, for much of her time in the narrative, Pauline is a stereotypical representation of the flighty, frivolous, self-absorbed ditz—sexually promiscuous for the love of male attention, and thoughtlessly dismissive of the turmoil and destruction surrounding her in revolutionary Haiti, preoccupied instead with luxuriating in the decadence of a quote-on-quote “tropical dream.”⁴²⁹ Accompanying her husband General Leclerc on his expedition to reconquer Saint Domingue, she ignores his complaints “about slave rebellions, the difficulties with monarchist settlers, and threats of all sorts”—preferring instead to adorn herself with “handkerchiefs from the island of Mauritius, corselets in a pastoral style,” imagining herself as “somewhat like a bird of paradise and somewhat like a lyrebird in her muslin skirts,” or to swim in a “blue mosaic swimming pool built under the cover of tamarind trees” in a “huge house of white stone surrounded by a shady garden.”⁴³⁰ Indeed, her perception of the Caribbean is shaped not by the reality of the hellacious conflict that is the very occasion for her voyage, but by exoticized fabrications of it generated by a fetishizing and sentimentalizing European gaze: “*The Negro Equaled by Few Whites*, the lachrymose novel by

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁴²⁸ Speratti-Piñero, 29.

⁴²⁹ Carpentier, 64.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 60, 62, 63.

Joseph Lavallée,” “the loves of Paul and Virginie and [...] a pretty Creole contredanse, of unusual rhythm, titled ‘The Island Girl,’ published in Paris in the rue du Saumon.”⁴³¹ This gaze she directs on the landscape herself, and as such is “charmed” by the “sight of the City of the Cap and the Plaine du Nord, with the mountains in the background blurred by the mist rising from the sugarcane fields,” and lives as if she were taking part in a masquerade of paradisiacal fantasy, laughing “when the mirror in her room revealed to her that her skin, browned by the sun, had turned her into a splendid mulatta.”⁴³²

It is as accoutrement to her “tropical dream” that she takes Soliman into her service, in which he becomes for her a loyal and adoring servant, reminiscent of an exoticized and eroticized dynamic between an enslaved eunuch and a queen. Pauline has him bathe and massage her in lieu of her maids, gratified in finding “the servant was constantly tormented by desire and looked at her sideways with the false meekness of a dog that’s been beaten too much.”⁴³³ For Soliman, he appears content to play the role, viewing her in turn as a sort of abstraction of genteel whiteness, often given “to kiss her legs while he knelt before her on the ground with a gesture that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre would have interpreted as a symbol of the noble gratitude of a simple soul before the generous ideals of the Enlightenment.”⁴³⁴ Such a conceptualization of Pauline as goddess of Western civilization and reason is recurrent throughout these *entremeses*, from the moment we are introduced to her character, in which she is likened to “the Greek statue of Galatea” and up to her final appearance of sorts in sculpture form, to be discussed below.⁴³⁵

⁴³¹ Ibid., 63, 62.

⁴³² Ibid., 62, 65.

⁴³³ Ibid., 63.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 62.

Overtly saccharine and sentimentalized, their early dynamic thoroughly justifies the deprecating tone with which many critics approach this episode of the novel.

While the scholarly tendency is to persist in this attitude for the entirety of the pair's narrative, I want to posit that the syncretic transformation taking place midway through the *entremés* merits a greater degree of analytical regard, even with the continuation of the comedic tone throughout. Their transcultural encounter does not solely result in, quoting Hewitt, a temporary and deleterious "libidinal relationship that transforms each one into the other,"⁴³⁶ but also the genesis of a hybrid spiritual culture to meet the demands of a tumultuous and uncertain postcolonial condition. Above, I put forward that the arrival of a deadly plague is the catalyst for this transformation—a plausible figurative representation of the social upheaval that ensues in the Caribbean in the Age of Revolution. What facilitates such a reading is not only the factor of the *entremés* as microcosm of the broader narrative as a whole, but also the syncretic name of the chapter in which this plague takes place: "Saint Calamity," or "San Trastorno" in the original. Hewitt notes that in Afro-Caribbean lore, San Trastorno is "an important Haitian loa who brings about change and who presides over the turmoil of social chaos" and is prayed to "in order to overturn a situation or [...] destroy or defeat someone or something."⁴³⁷ Such an allusion opens up multiple interpretive possibilities. For one, we may very well read it as an act of resistance from the insurrectionists in communion with the *loas*, to rout the French offensive; after all, the yellow fever is what brings about the death of General Leclerc and devastates his forces, both in the text and in history. It is worth noting, in addition, the syncretic attributes of San Trastorno, as it is due to the Catholic presence that such spirits take on the label of "Saint." As such, it is plausible that, in the syncretic rituals Pauline and Soliman together mobilize to survive the

⁴³⁶ Hewitt, 86.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

disaster, one witnesses the creation of a distinct and hybridized cultural practice that begins to distinguish itself and assert its own power from European hegemony:

“Convinced that the doctors were useless, Pauline listened to the advice of Soliman, who recommended burning incense, indigo, and lemon peels, as well as offering orations of extraordinary power to the Great Judge, Saint George, and Saint Calamity. [...] She knelt at the foot of a crucifix of dark wood, reciting a flamboyant, somewhat primitive [*un poco campesina*] devotional litany, screaming along with the black man at the end of each prayer, *Malo, Presto, Pasto, Effacio, Amèn*. [...] Leclerc’s agony increased her fear and led her to the world of powers that Soliman invoked with his spells. He was the true lord of the island, the only possible defender against the blows from the other shore [*el azote de la otra orilla*], the only possible doctor before the uselessness of the medical manuals. [...] They had to defend themselves from the sickness in any way possible: promises, penance, hair shirts, fasting, invocations to whoever was listening, [...] Pauline began wandering strangely about the house, avoiding stepping on the intersections of the tiles, which were cut squarely—this was a well-known fact—by the impious insistence of the Freemasons, who wanted people to step on the cross every hour of the day.”⁴³⁸

What makes the above passage noteworthy is not just the melding of African-derived and Western-derived spiritual practice—offerings to syncretic figures, kneeling “at the foot of a crucifix” alongside “burning incense, indigo, and lemon peels,” “penance, hair shirts, fasting, invocations”—that forges a new ritual practice distinct from that which it derives due to its hybrid composition. (Indeed, critics have drawn connections between Pauline and the amorous, feminine *loa* Erzulie Fréda, goddess of beauty and love.⁴³⁹) Even more so, a key commonality here emerges with the other texts discussed in this project thus far: that which appears on the surface as mere superstition operating to demonstrate the worth of enchanted power and belief, thereby revealing the limitations of Western epistemological supremacy. Faced with “the uselessness of the medical manuals” as the yellow fever wreaks havoc about her, Pauline must turn to another form of knowledge if she is to survive. The final sentence of the excerpt above

⁴³⁸ Carpentier, 66, 67. Italics in original.

⁴³⁹ See, for instance, Hewitt, 90-1.

especially highlights this shift: considering the role of the Masonic lodge in the development of the Enlightenment, her censure of the Freemasons underlines her rejection of enlightened Western thought. Another noteworthy element is how her turn to the enchanted defends her against “the blows from the other shore,” or “*el azote de la otra orilla*,” literally “the whip of the other shore,” indicating the insurgent forces of the Haitian Revolution. As this wording ties back to the interpretation of the *loas* here taking their revenge, so also does it imply that if white culture is to survive in the New World, it cannot be as an exact reproduction. Rather, it needs must morph in response to the new environment—not only by taking on the characteristics of other spiritual practices in proximity, but also by returning to previously abandoned outlooks shared in common with those practices.

On that note, the fact that Pauline’s Corsican origins come to the forefront in the “Saint Calamity” chapter also indicates a rejection of enlightenment in favor of enchantment—not only in the New World, but even in Europe itself. Regarding the various rituals this chapter represents, scholars tend to read them as primitivist; I do not deny this reading necessarily, but find that there is a matter of wording to note that nuances it. In the English version, the phrase “primitive devotional litany” is not quite a one-to-one translation; in the original, the litany is described as “*campesina*”—literally meaning “farmer” or “peasant” in noun form, and therefore in adjective form something along the lines of “rural,” “rustic,” or “countrified,” as it is used in this passage. As such, while I would not say the translation is “off,” I find that reference to the original opens up additional connotations on enchanted worldviews in other peripheries—namely European ones. It is here that I may proudly make my own observation on an inconsistency between *Kingdom*’s prologue and the text itself: while in the former Carpentier strongly implies that European civilization has been evacuated of the enchanted, in the latter he takes up the

possibility of its persistence, namely through Pauline’s reflections on her homeland of the Mediterranean island of Corsica. When she first goes into isolation from the plague on the island of La Tortue—historically famous as an outpost for Spanish, French, and English colonial forces in the Caribbean; indeed, Columbus himself landed on it in 1492—she observes that “its parched soil, its red cliffs, its wastelands of cacti and cicadas, its always visible sea, resembled her native island.”⁴⁴⁰ This sense of affinity only grows within her as she becomes further involved in Soliman’s curative rituals: “those incantations, along with hammering nails in the form of a cross to the trunk of a lemon tree, shook awake in her the lees of her Corsican blood, which were closer to the living cosmogony of the black man than the lies of the Directory, whose lack of faith she had come to accept. Now she repented of having mocked so often matters of holiness simply to follow the day’s fashions.”⁴⁴¹ Here we may note further indication of cultural-religious syncretism through a shared enchanted cosmogony, as well as of Pauline’s rejection of enlightened, cosmopolitan Europe in favor of an alternate system of knowing and being rooted in an awareness of the supernatural interwoven in the natural plane of existence.

That being said, what is it about the island of Corsica that supports this interpretation? While a detailed exposition of this Mediterranean locale goes beyond the bounds of this study as well as my own expertise, there do exist subtle affinities between it and Haiti that are, for the purpose of supporting my analysis above, worth mentioning. Situated in the Mediterranean Sea between France and the Italian peninsula, the island bears a history marked by a succession of regimes coming into and falling out of power, with all the conflict that is to be expected from such events. In the long 18th century in particular, French, Genoese, and Corsican Republican forces vied for control over the island, with the French gaining sovereignty over it in 1768,

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

though unsuccessful resistance movements on the part of Corsican nationals would persist until the century's close.⁴⁴² As such, an interesting parallel between Haiti and Corsica here emerges: that in the Age of Revolutions, both were arenas over which major European powers fought for dominance, and in which native-born insurgents spearheaded fights for independence from those powers. And, of course, the French empire was for both the primary hegemonic regime that their insurgencies faced towards the close of the long 18th century. Furthermore, both may be considered sites in which belief in the enchanted persists to an exceptional degree. We have by this point discussed Haitian *Vodou* at length. In Corsica, as Grace L. Hudson writes, beliefs “in supernatural powers and prophetic dreams are [an] aspect of the island's traditional culture” in which “popular medicine has co-existed with religion and modern medicine” and religious folk festivities as well as other spiritual traditions persist.⁴⁴³ Based on these commonalities, it would be reasonable to suggest that Carpentier in this Cervantine *entremés* considers the potentiality of a *European* marvelous real. In other words, quoting from the prologue, one may read this story framed by narrative structures of the Spanish Golden Age as an exhortation for the West to reject the “literary ruse” of “the marvelous invoked in disbelief” and instead access the worldview “in Cervantes's time” when “it was believed that there were individuals who suffered from lupine mania”⁴⁴⁴—a worldview that in the mid-twentieth century still persisted in certain peripheral spaces of Europe, and which persists even today.

With regard to the outcome of Soliman and Pauline's syncretic rituals, the dual perspectives operating in the other marvelous moments of the text may here apply: a rationalistic view that maintains their survival is but the result of chance, and an enchanted view that

⁴⁴² Hudson, xxii-xxiii.

⁴⁴³ Hudson, xxviii.

⁴⁴⁴ Carpentier, xvii, xvi.

maintains their efforts did protect them from a terrible demise—the latter imparting that the influence of alternate modes of knowledge production beyond Reason is not to be so readily dismissed. Still, the aforementioned fact of the pair’s subsequent failure must be taken into account. However, I find it not entirely remiss to say that an outcome of failure in itself does not necessarily make a staunchly negative reading the only interpretive possibility, one that devaluates their efforts and forwards a view that the two spheres ultimately cannot synthesize. Rather, one must consider the determining factors bringing about that failure in one’s judgment as well—and I maintain that their inability to sustain their hybridized ritual practice and overcome the force of European hegemony is what brings about their failure, thereby contributing to my overall interpretation of the text as valorizing a New World syncretic, enchanted belief system as a practice through which to culturally and aesthetically thrive. For Pauline, as she departs from the Caribbean, the pull of the metropole proves too great for her to overcome; on the return voyage to Europe, though “her chest was covered with scapulars” and she carries with her “an amulet to Papa Legba made by Soliman,” dedicated to the *loa* of the crossroads, “the sensation that Paris grew ever closer before the prow” wins over her, and she leaves the narrative presumably to take up her former life as a fashionable aristocrat.⁴⁴⁵ For Soliman, his presence in the text is more prolonged, and his narrative trajectory more complete: regressing back into worship of the cult of European civilization, his abandonment of the New World proves to bring about his downfall.

Indeed, that he goes on to enter the service of the royal family of Henri Christophe is especially indicative of his regressed alignment—such that although Soliman is himself a *houngan*, William Luis reads both him and Christophe equally as “the antitheses of Mackandal

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 68.

[...] punished for abandoning African religion.”⁴⁴⁶ Even after the mutiny against Christophe, Soliman stays loyal to his regime even after its end—not fleeing Sans-Souci with the majority of the king’s retinue, but guarding Christophe’s corpse and defending the queen and princesses from the insurgents, even following them in their subsequent exile in Italy, that veritable cradle of Western civilization. In Rome, Soliman is once again content to play the role of exotic specimen, marveled at by a populace for whom he is reminiscent of a “King Balthazar” or far-off locales the likes of “Madagascar or Persia or the country of the Berbers.”⁴⁴⁷ Living out an earlier fantasy, he takes up with a Piedmontese woman—the Piedmont a region that shares a border with France—working as a maid in the Borghese Palace, a luxurious locale most notably the seat of the noble family into which Pauline marries after the death of Leclerc. In this unequivocal monument to European nobility, it is his encounter with the neoclassical sculpture *Venus Victrix* by Antonio Canova—for whom Pauline Bonaparte was in fact the model—that triggers his realization of his betrayal of the enchanted New World. Amidst the sterile, Apollonian backdrop of a statue gallery on “an immense patio made of marble turned blue by the moon [...] a white world, cold and motionless,” encircled by ghostly embodiments of European culture in the nude figures of women who “held a swan in their arms, embraced the neck of a bull, pranced among greyhounds, or fed from horned men with cloven hooves,”⁴⁴⁸ Soliman is confronted with the ultimate personification of his faithlessness:

“In the rear of that small room was a lone statue of a woman, lying naked on a bed, who seemed to be offering an apple. [...] He remembered now the nights of fear on Île de la Tortue when a French general lay dying behind a closed door. [...] Then the coldness of marble moving to his wrists like the pincers of death immobilized him in a scream. [...] That statue, tinted yellow by the light of the lamp, was the corpse of Pauline Bonaparte, recently hardened, recently stripped of heartbeat and sight, which could perhaps still be brought back to life. [...] And his figure became so primitive [*tan primitiva*], his feet beat

⁴⁴⁶ Luis, 192.

⁴⁴⁷ Carpentier, 112, 113.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

so hard on the floor, making a drum out of the chapel below, that the Piedmontese woman ran horrified down the stairs, leaving Soliman face-to-face with the Venus of Canova.”⁴⁴⁹

That the sculpture of Pauline here holds an apple in her hand is not only an allusion to the Greco-Roman myth of the Judgment of Paris and its Apple of Discord; Hewitt notes the Biblical ties present here as well to “a primordial Eve intimating the fall of man.”⁴⁵⁰ As such, the statue operates as a site in which multiple significations convene: Western civilization, as well as a gesture toward his succumbing to the temptation of its forbidden fruit, and in doing so betraying the injunction of his gods—yet also subtle reminders of a syncretic Afro-Caribbean spirituality. As Venus is goddess of love and beauty in the West, so too is Erzulie goddess of the same in the *Vodou* pantheon—both of whom Pauline has been compared to, as mentioned above. In a sense, then, the Venus of Canova stands as a total inversion of the cosmology he has abandoned. Hewitt remarks that in the above passage, Soliman attempts to recuperate the “Pauline-Venus-Erzulie” that he once knew “with the magic, ritual, language of the drum”⁴⁵¹ that is a sign of his repentance. Notwithstanding, as with Henri Christophe, his penitence is a belated gesture, and he dies in exile. As to the particulars of his death, Luis notes that yet again we have an event that carries a “dual interpretation” of rationalistic versus enchanted viewpoints.⁴⁵² From the perspective of the Italians who catch sight of him after his encounter with the statue, the narration describes him “trembling with fever as a result of the malaria he had contracted from the Pontine Marshes,”⁴⁵³ forwarding a rationalist point-of-view. For the enchanted point-of-view, however, Luis considers his fatal illness as Soliman “being punished by the Loas”⁴⁵⁴—perhaps a

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁵⁰ Hewitt, 92.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Luis, 192.

⁴⁵³ Carpentier, 117.

⁴⁵⁴ Luis, 192.

belated death at the hands of disease, due to his abandonment of the powers that for him once guarded against it. Though he once again comes to reject “the uselessness of the medical manuals” in the figure of a “Doctor Antommarchi, who had been Napoleon’s doctor in Saint Helena and whose professional merits were well-known,” and instead recites invocations to Papa Legba,⁴⁵⁵ Soliman is now both spatially and spiritually too distant from the *loas* for his supplications to be heard. His tragic death in exile is by no means an affirmational story—yet it is all-and-all strongly representative of what I find to be the text’s critical commentary on the significance of syncretic Afro-Caribbean enchanted belief as a means for New World subjects to meet and withstand the challenges of the postcolonial condition, especially in the face of an overwhelming European cultural and aesthetic superiority.

Lamb of God: Ti Noël and Enchanted Syncretism as New World Cultural Practice

Across these many narratives, through the entirety of the text, the figure of Ti Noël has been the constant—a witness to the episodes of the struggle for independence from its earliest insurgent efforts, to its landmark junctures, as well as to the reactionary regimes that subsequently form in the emergent postcolonial state of Haiti. While critical viewpoints are varied in terms of whether Ti Noël is an active agent in the resistance or more so a passive participant, they are unified in their estimation of the Caribbean-born ex-slave’s overall importance—not just for practical storytelling purposes, as the through-line that the reader can hold on to as they move through the many stages of the text’s ambitious timeline, but for thematic purposes as well. Speratti-Piñero says it best in describing “*el simbolismo de Ti Noel [...] que representa la rebeldía constante y profunda de lo mejor de su raza, en que de algún modo ofrece a través de sí mismo casi cien años de la historia de su pueblo en la isla natal, en*

⁴⁵⁵ Carpentier, 118.

que parece encarnar la todavía hoy persistente memoria de su maestro y guía [Mackandal] y en que [...] a fuerza de sufrimientos, luchas y desengaños, llegar al alto renacimiento que cierra la novela” (“Ti Noël’s symbolism [...] that represents the deep and constant rebellion of the best of his race, that through his own near hundred years offers the history of his people on the home island, that appears to embody the still persistent memory of his master and guide [Mackandal] and that [...] as a result of suffering, struggle and disillusionment, reaches the great rebirth that closes the novel”).⁴⁵⁶

And yet, though his general significance as a covert protagonist of sorts is clear, beyond his function as register of a “*rebeldía constante*” and “*la historia de su pueblo en la isla natal,*” the exact implications of his character and the great revelation he undergoes in the final chapters of the text are still very much up for debate. Across the scholarship, I find that there are two general interpretations that critics gravitate towards—perhaps conflicting, though not necessarily so. The first is a reading which maintains that the central commentary of the text is a valorization of the New World Afro-Caribbean subject who, through spiritual practice in particular, upholds the preeminence of an African ancestral culture above all others. In other words, for this postcolonial subject to attain self-determination and sovereignty, they must strive to live as a disciple of Mackandal and his mission of liberation through affirmation of and loyalty to the spirits, stories, and customs of an African past—keeping assiduously alive the originary culture, rejecting that of others as alien and incompatible, and holding fast the boundary between “them” and “us” as an ineluctable truth. Such a reading avers that the counterpoint between African and European needs must remain unresolvable, holds Mackandal and that which he stands for as a golden standard, reads Christophe and Soliman as tragic apostates thwarted by their betrayal of

⁴⁵⁶ Speratti-Piñero, 62.

ancestral customs and values to live in a European fantasyland in which they simply do not belong, and interprets Ti Noël's final revelation as a turning back to this authentic, originary center. Luis, for one, writes that by remaining "loyal to his culture and religion" Ti Noël "follows in a tradition of African kings and of Mackandal in the New World" and "at the outset of the novel and at the end he reaffirms the separation of African and Western cultures."⁴⁵⁷ Such a viewpoint I term the essentialist reading, as while it clearly comes from a place seeking to valorize and center a marginalized Afro-Hispanic culture in Latin American-Caribbean literary expression, I maintain that the syncretic elements of Christophe's, Pauline's, and Soliman's narratives analyzed above, as well as of Ti Noël's character and the concluding chapters soon to be discussed, are too considerable for such a reading to be the text's ultimate bottom line. Or, at least, a bit of nuancing is in order. To be sure, the liberatory power of *Vodou* and the ennobling of African culture is a vital line of critical commentary in the text; yet these are not so much static practices in *Kingdom*, but living ones that shift in radical new contexts—the resultant hybrid spirituality carrying its own significance for the purposes of a Latin American-Caribbean literary and cultural project as well. Hence, I conclude that Carpentier's ethos of a New World decolonial practice needs must be *syncretic*.

The second common interpretation I term the materialist/disenchanting reading—one that reads the text as a broader inquiry into whether the spiritual world has the capacity to aid in decolonization efforts on the material plane, and interprets Ti Noël's final revelation to be answering that question with a resounding negative. Such a reading then necessitates the conclusion that spiritual belief is inimical to the quest for liberation—especially in a postcolonial context—and affirms that the New World subject must reject the world of the spirit as an illusory

⁴⁵⁷ Luis, 196.

distraction from the cause, and instead place their focus on the material world first and foremost to attain individual and collective sovereignty. Hewitt's reading of *Ti Noël* is one such example; though she discusses at length the syncretic religious elements of his character, her final judgment is that the "new day heralded at the end of the novel, proposes a new beginning that can 'happen' only through a radical historical transformation of society in which the old myths [...] are finally eliminated" thereby "privileging reason over myth, faith, and magic."⁴⁵⁸ That the scholarship finds itself compelled to make this conclusion, even in spite of Mackandal and *Vodou*'s undeniable importance throughout the text, is understandable. Indeed, the closing pages of the novel do state that "man can find his greatness, his greatest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World."⁴⁵⁹ However, I must state that I find this reading to be too hasty and even problematical, in that it projects onto the consciousness of the believing subject conceptualizations of what exactly constitutes the material world from a rationalist and secularist point of view—thereby subconsciously erasing the validity of the believer's perspective that maintains a view of the material world as enchanted, and reinscribing the secular viewpoint of the material world as synonymous with a disenchanted world as the defining standard. In an attempt to read these closing passages in such a way that honors and preserves the standpoint of the believing subject that is represented, recalling as well the concept of the marvelous real that presumes the involvement of spiritual forces on the material plane, I hope to show that Carpentier's ethos of a New World decolonial practice is *enchanted* as well as syncretic—or, at the very least, to provide a salient alternative to the materialist/disenchanted reading that is so popular amongst the extant scholarship.

⁴⁵⁸ Hewitt, 74.

⁴⁵⁹ Carpentier, 130.

To begin with an exposition and reappraisal of the essentialist reading, to be sure, those who affirm it have a certain degree of justification in doing so. This justification comes namely from the first part of the text, in which the figure of Mackandal reigns, and the young Ti Noël serves as devout acolyte to the revolutionary *houngan*. Speratti-Piñero refers to Ti Noël as “*discípulo*” or “disciple” of Mackandal,⁴⁶⁰ and he very much works as a sort of John the Baptist or Saint Peter to the *Vodou* priest’s messianic message of ancestral preeminence. To refer back to my analysis of Mackandal above, it is in large part due to his influence on Ti Noël that we may understand the African-born *houngan* as custodian of cultural memory; indeed, the young, Caribbean-born slave comes to know the magnificence of African civilization not through direct experience, but through “Mackandal’s deep well of knowledge” and “the world evoked by his stories” of “Kankán Muza, Adonhueso, the royal kings, and Widah’s rainbow” as well as the great cities of Guinea in the “Great Over There.”⁴⁶¹ Moreover, it is Ti Noël’s voice that early on announces the prophecy of “the great uprising,” in which Mackandal summons the African gods to eradicate the white colonial oppressors from Saint Domingue: “‘In that great hour,’ Ti Noël said, ‘the blood of the whites will run in the streams, where the *loas*, inebriated with joy, will lie facedown and drink it until they are full.’”⁴⁶² Towards the end of the text, these visions and the early influences will return to Ti Noël’s consciousness decades later, after the fall of Christophe’s regime, when as an elderly man “thoughts of Mackandal [come] once again to his memory” and grant him access to the *houngan*’s lycanthropic powers in which he may transform into whatever animal he pleases.⁴⁶³ What’s more, in his “supreme moment of understanding” on the quest for freedom and self-determination in the closing chapter, Ti Noël recalls “once again

⁴⁶⁰ Speratti-Piñero, 131.

⁴⁶¹ Carpentier, 7, 17.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 26-7.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 125-6.

the heroes who had revealed to him the strength and abundance of his ancestors in Africa, allowing him to believe in all the possible manifestations of the future.”⁴⁶⁴

That being said, my objective here is not to insinuate that he rejects his African heritage, which would plainly be far from the truth. It is more so that in the reiteration of his performance of that heritage in the New World, the Caribbean context makes its mark, resulting in a culturally hybridized ritual practice. For this reason, the fact that Ti Noël is a *Caribbean-born* Afro-Caribbean rather than an *African-born* Afro-Caribbean like Mackandal cannot be overstated, as it underlines the former’s significance in registering the emergence of syncretic New World cultures. As the cultural mimesis of Christophe’s regime undoubtedly fails to replicate French society in the Caribbean, so readers must consider as well the extent to which the mimetic replication of a culturally exact African society is or is not a possibility either. For Ti Noël, while he is a staunch devotee of Mackandal’s mission at the beginning, as the narrative progresses, he does not remain static on that matter. Rather—and, most notably, as he experiences more of the Caribbean outside of his homeland of Saint Domingue—his syncretic consciousness grows and persists to the story’s close.

To be sure, what I find to be an underrated passage in the extant criticism is the interval that Ti Noël spends on Carpentier’s own home island: the “Santiago de Cuba” chapter, in which he is brought to the Spanish colony by his master Lenormand de Mézy, who with the other surviving French colonials takes up exile in Cuba. While an exact measure of the passage of years in this novel’s expansive timeline is difficult, we may infer that Ti Noël spends a considerable amount of time in Cuba; he leaves his homeland at the onset of the Revolution in the prime of life, and does not return until some thirty years later as an old man during the reign

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 129.

of Henri Christophe. In this interval, he is able to maintain contact with the *Vodou* of his early years—interestingly enough, through the presence of a syncretic Spanish American Catholicism well-underway in the New World. Consider the following noteworthy passage, which finds Ti Noël in the cathedral of Santiago:

“the black man found in Spanish churches a Vodou warmth he had never found in the Sulpician churches of the Cap. The baroque golds, the human hair of the Christ figures, [*el misterio de*] the heavily ornamented confessionals, the dog of the Dominicans, the dragons crushed by the feet of saints, Saint Anthony’s pig, the strange color of Saint Benedict, the black virgins, the figures of Saint George wearing buskins and doublets like actors in French tragedies, and the pastoral musical instruments played during holy days had an engrossing force [...] through [*presencias,*] symbols, attributes, and signs similar to that which emanated from the *houmfort* altars dedicated to Damballah, the Serpent God. Besides, Santiago was Ogun Fai, the marshal of storms, under whose spell Bouckman’s men had risen up. For that reason, Ti Noël, by way of prayer, often recited an old song he had heard from Mackandal: *Santiago, I am a child of war: Santiago, can’t you see I am a child of war?*”⁴⁶⁵

In the above, we see the contrapuntal dynamic between European and African take on a much more intricate and complex structure beyond that of mere duality. Rather than a simple binary contrast between European and African spiritualities, a comparison emerges between a syncretic Afro-Caribbean *Vodou* and a Spanish American Catholicism that is equally syncretic—both of which thereby contrasted with a continental European institutionalized Roman Catholicism which “the Sulpician churches of the Cap” seek to mimetically reproduce. A continuity is therein established in the various “symbols, attributes, and signs” of the two of these transculturated spiritual practices, most notably as these syncretic elements contribute to the efforts of their respective cultures to resist the cultural and political hegemony of a continental European oppressor. For Haitian *Vodou*, we may observe that while the revolutionary efforts of both Mackandal and Bouckman to win liberation through the power of the African

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 58.

gods are invoked, the *loa* that Ti Noël summons alongside them is an *analogue*—in other words, a syncretic blend of an African spiritual figure with a Catholic spiritual figure, a practice unique to the African diasporic spiritualities of the Caribbean and Latin America. Indeed, it is clear that Carpentier has put in his research here, as the Haitian manifestation of Ogun here named is in fact syncretized with St. James, or *San Iago/Santiago* in Spanish. For Spanish American folk Catholicism, while the connection to efforts towards self-determination is more implicit in this passage, the element of the cathedral as a manifestation of baroque architecture, the “*oros del barroco*” or “baroque golds,” evokes in the realm of Carpentierian thought a direct tie-in to his conceptualization of the baroque as autochthonous Latin American expression, mentioned in the analysis on La Ferrière above. As such, Carpentier’s meditation across *Kingdom* on the potential of syncretic New World spiritual belief systems as a practice through which Latin America and the Caribbean together may define and distinguish themselves from Europe and its looming influence is also involved.

To be sure, it would appear that the central task of this portion of the text is to build a bridge between Haiti and Cuba based on these shared pursuits of self-determination and syncretic cultural and spiritual dynamics. As Ti Noël in Santiago de Cuba makes these connections above, back in the emergent nation of Haiti, the narration describes an intensification of the development of a transculturated spiritual practice that bolsters the liberation efforts as the revolution progresses:

“the Great Loas favored the weapons of the blacks. Those who invoked the warrior gods were the ones winning the battles. Ogun Badagri guided the charges of the cold weapons against the last trenches of the goddess Reason. [...] there were in those days men who blocked the mouths of enemy cannons with their chests and men who had the power to deflect the lead of rifles from their bodies. It was then that some black priests, who hadn’t been tonsured or ordained, appeared in the fields. They were called the Fathers of the Savannah, and they were as knowledgeable in the act of reciting Latin over the straw

mattress of a dying man as the French priests. But they were better understood, because when they recited the Our Father or the Hail Mary they knew how to inject the text with certain accents and inflections that were similar to those of hymns everyone knew.”⁴⁶⁶

This passage, which notably brings the second part of the novel to a close, foregrounds a discernible shift in the configuration of the religious culture of the population. If the first part of *Kingdom* was the Age of Mackandal, the second marks a phase of metamorphosis into a hybridized spirituality. As in the earlier days of the Lord of Poison and the Bois Caïman, the ancestral gods continue to operate as a source of power to the revolutionaries, who, through their *belief* in the Great Loas, become steadied against the colonial forces to challenge and resist Western hegemony in “the last trenches of the goddess Reason.” Alongside these adherents to the “warrior gods” moreover emerges a new, hybridized spiritual class of “the Fathers of the Savannah,” who assist in the revolutionary endeavors. The fact that these priests are not “tonsured or ordained” is especially noteworthy here, as while they are “as knowledgeable in the act of reciting Latin [...] as the French priests” and indeed primarily operate through the practice and incantations of a Western-derived Catholic religion, they stand apart from the normative institution of Rome. Their power derives not from alignment with the chain of authority crowned by the Vatican, but from their ability to wield and balance the ritual methods of both cultural religious spheres, delivering “the Our Father or the Hail Mary” but “with certain accents and inflections that were similar to those of hymns everyone knew.”

While the third part of the novel that follows, focusing on Henri Christophe’s mimetic reign, is a departure from this synthesis, this section’s ultimate injunction towards syncretism has already been discussed at length in the analysis focusing on this Haitian monarch above. And, to complete my reappraisal of the essentialist reading in favor of a syncretic reading, what remains

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 70.

is to take up the fourth and final section of the novel in which, centering around the figure of Ti Noël, the process of transculturation as a means to collective self-determination attains full and open expression. In my analysis on *Mackandal*, I remark on the shift that occurs between the first section and the last concerning the chapter titles that contain Biblical allusions; while towards the beginning the “De Profundis” title speaks to the experiences of the French colonials, the Biblical title of the closing chapter, “*Agnus Dei*”—or “Lamb of God” in Latin, in reference to Christ—refers unmistakably to an Afro-Caribbean, Ti Noël. One may make this judgment not only because he is the only character to appear in the chapter, but also due to the Biblical allusion contained in his very name. Many critics have noted the Christ figure connotations of the moniker “Ti Noël,” an abbreviation of “*petit noël*”—literally “little Christmas”—in reference to the divine mystery of the Nativity in Catholic belief.⁴⁶⁷ This invocation of the Western messianic figure in relation to Ti Noël, moreover, may also be plausibly read as an analogue akin to that of Ogun-Santiago above. Noting the affinity between Ti Noël and the *loa* Papa Legba—“the divine transformer, Lord of crossroads”—when the protagonist first returns to Haiti from Cuba, Hewitt forwards that the “double image of a syncretic Voodoo-Christian union” converges about his character, as “Christ and Legba are always found together in Voodoo altars, and the cross represents both, as mediators between earth and sky, between the visible and the invisible.”⁴⁶⁸ Through this invocation of the Haitian Christ-Legba analogue, Ti Noël becomes “an agent of transformation and metamorphosis;”⁴⁶⁹ in his grand revelatory moment in the closing pages of the text—which one may furthermore fairly read as its final marvelous event as well—he renews the ongoing struggle for sovereignty, imbuing it with a consciousness of the cyclical pattern of a

⁴⁶⁷ Hewitt, 96; Madureira, 189; Speratti-Piñero, 62.

⁴⁶⁸ Hewitt, 95, 96-7.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

cosmic time out of mind in which the liberatory spirit endures across successive generations at once distinct from the others yet interconnected.

Indeed, at this stage in the text as it follows the course of postcolonial Haitian history, Ti Noël witnesses the rise of yet another oppressive social elite: quoting from the text, a “return of chains,” “rebirth of shackles,” and “proliferation of miseries” from the emergent upper class of “Republican mulattoes, the new masters of the Plaine du Nord” who like Henri Christophe resort to forced labor for their own material gain.⁴⁷⁰ Though the former slave has until now retreated from this new tyranny, he comes to the realization that though the freedom-seeking subject “never knows for whom he suffers and waits [...] and works for people he’ll never know, and who likewise will suffer and wait and work for others” with each succeeding generation, “the greatness of man lies precisely in wanting to improve on what already is by taking on labors.”⁴⁷¹ The struggle for liberation resurrected, as he announces “his declaration of war against the new owners,” a marvelous event occurs: “a great green wind coming from the ocean fell over the Plaine du Nord, rushing through the valley of Dondón with a huge roar.”⁴⁷² Though a rationalist interpretation of this event is plausible, accompanying it as ever is a plausible enchanted interpretation: that, as Bouckman and the early rebels brought forth the power of the gods with the forces of the natural world as conduit for revolutionary purposes, so does this New World disciple of an insurgent *houngan* do the same.

By way of concluding this analysis, what remains is the reappraisal of the aforementioned materialist/disenchanted reading of the novel’s final scene in favor of an enchanted reading that persists through the entirety of the text. Such a task proves itself to be more delicate than that of

⁴⁷⁰ Carpentier, 124, 125.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

the essentialist reading, as while evidence of Ti Noël as a syncretic figure is abundant, what one has to work with here is but a mere fragment of the closing revelation:

“There is no greatness to achieve in the Kingdom of Heaven, since it has an already established order, the unknown made clear, existence without end, without the possibility of sacrifice, rest, and delight. That’s why, burdened by sorrows and labors, beautiful within his misery, [...] man can find his greatness, his greatest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World.”⁴⁷³

“En el Reino de los Cielos no hay grandeza que conquistar, puesto que allá todo es jerarquía establecida, incógnita despejada, existir sin término, imposibilidad de sacrificio, reposo y deleite. Por ello, agobiado de penas y de Tareas, hermoso dentro de su miseria, [...] el hombre sólo puede hallar su grandeza, su máxima medida en el Reino de este Mundo.”

What could possibly be contradicted here? The text plainly says it: “There is no greatness to achieve in the Kingdom of Heaven,” and “man can find his greatness, his greatest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World.” And yet, the fact that we perceive no other possibility to this statement beyond its calling for a rejection of the world of the spirit is what makes me so compelled to reassess it; we in academe are so accustomed to viewing the world through the spectacles of our erudition, we no longer register the frames that encircle these lenses in our field of vision. In my analysis on the scene of Mackandal’s flight above, and more specifically on its scholarly interpretation, I consider the unconscious tendency not uncommon among critics who take up dynamics in which matters of belief are implicated to project and reproduce a secular, rationalist viewpoint of such phenomena. Even in spite of intentions to present an affirming slant on the material, the validity of the believing, enchanted perspective is ineluctably devaluated through its erasure as a salient interpretive possibility. I want to suggest that a similar subconscious refusal of an enchanted worldview and reinscription of a disenchanting worldview as epistemological hegemonic norm is what takes place in a materialist reading of the “*Agnus*

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

Dei” chapter. To decelerate for a moment the pace of our thought processes, consider the following question: what, truly, is the connecting line between the phrase “the Kingdom of This World” and a materialist view of the world in which spiritual forces are presumed to have no power or presence? That it is juxtaposed with a “Kingdom of Heaven” that Ti Noël renounces? Yet even then, what exactly are the possibilities of what these phrases might entail under the given context—beyond that of our own unconscious cognitive tendencies? We might consider the source from which the titular phrase “kingdom of this world” derives, which is biblical. While there are multiple appearances of phrases akin to it, the likeliest possibility is that in the Book of Revelation—not only due to the earlier allusion to the Apocalypse in the “Dies Irae” intoned by the apparition of Corneille Breille, discussed above, but also that both Revelation and “*Agnus Dei*” are closing chapters centered on themes of great reckoning and deliverance. The exact verse in question, in English and Spanish, is as follows:

“The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become / the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, / and he will reign for ever and ever.’”⁴⁷⁴

“Tocó el séptimo ángel su trompeta, y en el cielo resonaron fuertes voces que decían: «El reino del mundo ha pasado a ser de nuestro Señor y de su Cristo, y él reinará por los siglos de los siglos».”

Taking the contextual factors of the allusion into account, the implications of the phrase “kingdom of this world” shift quite drastically in their connotations. Described in the above is a moment in which the boundary between the material and spiritual worlds is in fact destabilized; the Christ figure descends from the “Kingdom of Heaven” and the two spheres are reconstituted into one in an apocalyptic moment of monumental destruction which at once heralds a glorious new age. In “*Agnus Dei*,” Ti Noël carries out the very same process—and his status as Christ

⁴⁷⁴ Rev. 11:15.

figure has already been discussed. Indeed, considering both sides of the Christ-Legba analogue with whom he is associated, each is considered to be a bridge between the spiritual and earthly realms—the former a branch of the Catholic Holy Trinity who is at once wholly human and wholly divine, the latter the ruler of the crossroads and intermediary between humanity and the *loa*. As such, the possibility emerges that what we are here witnessing in this closing chapter is not so much a binary rejection of the spiritual world for the material world, but a more involved rejection of keeping his supernatural power isolated in a distant and removed spiritual world in which there is an “already established order, the unknown made clear, existence without end, without the possibility of sacrifice, rest, and delight.” Keep in mind that until this moment, Ti Noël has used his lycanthropic powers to *retreat* from the struggles facing Haiti in the human realm, and his realization of the error of that course of action is what prompts his grand revelation to begin with. That being said, one may subsequently read his resolve to return to the struggle for liberation and “find his greatest measure” in the “sorrows and labors” of “the Kingdom of This World” as the novel’s closing commitment to a spiritual power that works in service of postcolonial sovereignty from its first section to its last.

Finally, and to not rely so heavily on external allusions for support, I want to put forth my best effort to let the believing perspective stand in its own right—as, after all, the reader experiences this chapter through the vantage point of Ti Noël, who ascribes to this very perspective. It would assist to reinvolve that concept of *lo real maravilloso*, which maintains that the marvelous events taking place are not hallucinations or dreams or what-have-you, but are indeed actually transpiring. However, it is not so much the concept in itself, but the *limitations* of the concept that are helpful for my line of thought. Even in *lo real maravilloso*, the challenges of the non-believing subject reinscribing their viewpoint in approaching the matter of belief are not

exactly circumvented. If a believing subject fundamentally presumes that the marvelous is in fact real, then what that subject would call “real” would not be “marvelous real”—it would all simply be “real.” In a similar manner, what that same believing subject would call “this world” does not imply that they deny the existence and involvement of spiritual powers within it, just as what they would call “real” does not imply that they deny the marvelous as a part of it—it just already is. Such is in its simplest form the very definition of enchanted as I have here been discussing it: a worldview that presumes spiritual forces are ineluctably at work in the material world.

Interestingly, a general commonality across Haitian *Vodou* and Roman Catholicism even in its most institutional form is the view that the spiritual and material worlds share a boundary that is not rigid, but *porous*. While there is a spiritual realm and material realm, the two are not parallel lines, but crossroads that perennially intersect.

By way of conclusion for this chapter, I want to clarify that for both Hurston and Carpentier, neither of these writers’ representations of diasporic spiritualities are invulnerable to critique, or operate without certain flaws, potential dangers, or even controversies. For Hurston, the ongoing posthumous revival of her work and life story has been at times a selective one, the conservative propensities in her personal philosophy of staunch individualism and self-reliance often elided in favor of a version of the author far friendlier to the climate of the contemporary U.S. college classroom. These proclivities toward a decided liberalism would only grow over the course of her life, informing her then and still controversial 1955 statement in the *Orlando Sentinel* critiquing *Brown v. Board of Education*’s ruling on the unconstitutionality of segregated schools—the result of a commitment to self-determination taken to an extreme. Over the years, conscientious biographers have nuanced her stance, putting into proper historical and biographical context the motivations informing this view. Virginia Lynn Moylan, for instance,

writes that though her position may be alarming for present-day readers, “fear of the consequences of forced desegregation was not an isolated view but one that was shared by many Americans, black and white.”⁴⁷⁵ Considering that Hurston “devoted her life’s work to demonstrating the esthetic, ideological, and social significance of black culture,” Moylan underlines the author’s apprehension that “forcing black students to attend white educational institutions that excluded and devalued black culture robbed black children of traditions that contributed to their individual and cultural identities and self-esteem.”⁴⁷⁶ This “concern for the loss of this vital cultural cohesion and her confidence in African American educational institutions were not isolated political views but [...] shared by many African Americans, including Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”⁴⁷⁷ Valerie Boyd as well notes that it was not desegregation *per se* that Hurston objected to, but “the idea of achieving it by court order.”⁴⁷⁸ In addition to her opposition to judicial intervention, Hurston took issue with the ruling’s unconscious assumption that a white presence would necessarily improve Black communities; to quote from the *Sentinel* piece: “if there are adequate Negro schools and prepared instructors and instructions, then there is nothing different except the presence of white people. For this reason, I regard the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court as insulting rather than honoring my race.”⁴⁷⁹ Boyd here invokes Hurston’s childhood in Eatonville—a self-governing, all-Black community—as a vital point of context; however, she does remark that Hurston’s experience was “out of touch with the truth of most black people’s lives [...] the reality that most black schools in the South were far from equal to white schools—not because of the absence of white people, but because

⁴⁷⁵ Moylan, 141.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁷⁸ Boyd, 425.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 423-4.

of the absence of resources.”⁴⁸⁰ All-in-all, though the claim that Hurston was against desegregation full-stop is in actuality an oversimplification, her staunch commitment to self-reliance and resistance to governmental interference that inform her stance are nonetheless adorned with bootstraps for one to pull oneself up with.

To be sure, these factors by no means invalidate the profusion of work that celebrates her life and writing as subversive Black feminist expression—from the spaces of academe to the high school English classroom, even in children’s literature. What the conservative influences of her personal ethos do signal toward is the range of socio-political positionalities embedded among the interpretive possibilities and applications of her writing. As my study on Hurston considers her representation of conjure as a modern liberatory force in the Black diaspora, it is worth keeping in mind that the rubrics informing that liberatory vision—what a condition of liberation may look like, or how to go about it—do not result in a unified party or straight-ticket vote, but are as varied, uneven, and idiosyncratic as her own politics. While there is surely much to celebrate about her engagements with conjure as I have read them, I cannot claim that they are wholly without their dangers.

For Carpentier as well, it is worth underlining once more his positionality as a white Cuban as it informs his representation of Afro-Caribbean spiritualities—as performance, something imagined. This representation is moreover by no means the sole element in my reading of *Kingdom* that is imagined; this quality extends as well to the very notions of New World subjecthood and collective identities both pan-Caribbean and pan-American that the narrative explores—even also to the very conceptualization of cultural syncretism that engenders those paradigms. In her study of the figure of the mulata in Cuban nationalist configurations,

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 424.

Vera M. Kutzinski remarks on how the discourse of *mestizaje*, “a peculiar form of multiculturalism” which may “variably be translated as miscegenation, racial amalgamation (as in *blanqueamiento*, whitening), creolization, racial mixing, inter- or transculturation” and so on, is far from simply an innocuous utopian vision that rejoices in hybridity.⁴⁸¹ Rather, it is a highly fraught, nuanced, and double-edged paradigm—appealing in theory, yet on application rife with tensions and difficulties. As Kutzinski writes, for instance, this “multiculturalism acknowledges, indeed, celebrates, racial diversity while at the same time disavowing divisive social realities.”⁴⁸² Put differently, there was and is still the danger of downplaying, even eliding undeniable racial power imbalances persistent across the Americas in decolonial efforts towards nation-state formation—or other collective identity formations—through *mestizaje*. In the Cuban context, to signal back to the earlier discussion on *Afro-Cubanismo*, “entrenched in concurrent national struggles for decolonization” as it was, its motives of “economic, cultural, and political survival” was fueled by an “urgent need to formulate alternatives” to the mounting threat of U.S. incursion.⁴⁸³ These efforts, however, did commonly result in Afro-Cuban culture being “contained and defused [as] potential ethnic threats to national unification” in this process of incorporating it as a vital part of the Cuban national imaginary, giving rise to “a depoliticized ethnographic discourse whose effect was both to recuperate and to absorb *la gente de color*” in such a way as to “displace and obfuscate actual social problems and conflicts, especially racial ones.”⁴⁸⁴ In this way, one might even call this manifestation of *mestizaje* a kind of reinscription of the discourse of cultural homogeneity—a unified plurality arrived at via a selective and

⁴⁸¹ Kutzinski, 4-5.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 143, 145.

exoticized attention to difference. All-in-all, Kutzinski truly says it best when she describes “just how deeply contradictory a national ideology *mestizaje* really was in Cuba.”⁴⁸⁵

In my analysis on *Kingdom*, I discuss how, though the text certainly deals in Afro-Cubanist elements, it is more so a transitional piece of writing—a challenging text to place in an orderly critical narrative on his work, yet a vital turning point in the development of his cultural and literary philosophies. In it, one may ascertain movements away from *Afrocubanismo*'s primitivist cultural essentialism, as well as the exoticism and white fantasy it engenders—yet it does not necessarily prove itself innocent of all of *Afrocubanismo*'s sins. *Kingdom*'s representation of an Afro-Caribbean former slave as an embodiment of a transculturated, pan-Caribbean, New World subjecthood is a grand gesture, to be sure—yet Carpentier does draw broad strokes here, giving considerable weight to continuity in his diasporic engagements. I do find, however, that these engagements do not negate difference, nor do they elide an awareness of the history and continuity of racial hierarchization in the Caribbean. *Kingdom* is, in short, a chapter in a larger work-in-progress, rife with growing pains as paradigms mutate in complex and difficult ways. Its syncretic, enchanted utopian vision is a manifesto of an earlier time, and appears to contemporary readers accordingly—an earlier time that, shortcomings and all, is a key chapter in Latin American, Caribbean, and pan-American histories of ideas. Indeed, both Carpentier and Hurston—complex, imperfect, and changeful as they and their writings were—are considerable presences in the study of literatures of the Americas. And so, when it comes to a claim I can make with confidence—and thankfully it is my main claim—their respective engagements with Hoodoo and *Vodou* illustrate that a conceptualization of modernism—especially global modernism—as secular and disenchanting in character is one that does not take

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 162.

into account the work of writers beyond the orbit of the Anglo-European. As such, what the pursuit of these ongoing developments and expansions in the field necessitates is a reevaluation of the spiritual in both modernism and modernity—its persistence not an anachronism, and, more so, not even exclusively the provender of reactionary responses against modern developments. As cases such as the above illustrate, spirituality may even be read as fuel for the modern.

Chapter 3: “Suffering Redemption: Queer Modernist Revisionings of Catholicism in Djuna Barnes and Radclyffe Hall”

“The Christ looks as if he’s getting bored, up there on his cross. Look, he’s slowly climbing down and limping towards us. His hands are clasped together and he’s murmuring prayers in a tone of lamentation [...] He says he deeply regrets robbing the world of its beauty, he weeps for the lost *joie de vivre* of the ancients. He says he has been a poor replacement for the sunlit gods of Greece, with the pallor of his livid face, its weeping and suffering; but he has been poorly interpreted too, not understood...his disciples have deformed his religion. And in doing so they have rendered the earth barren of beauties and void of flowers.”

—from *A Woman’s Affair*, Liane de Pougy (1901)

If one were to go seeking Christ, one would not think to look for him in the pages of *Idylle Saphique*, the 1901 erotic autobiographical novel of Liane de Pougy, famed courtesan of the fin-de-siècle French demimonde and vedette of the Folie Bergère. Recently translated into English under the title *A Woman’s Affair*, the novel details the tragic passion between Annhine de Lys, a jaded French courtesan and stand-in for de Pougy herself, and Florence “Flossie” Temple-Bradford, a high-spirited American heiress modeled after the iconic salon hostess and writer Natalie Clifford Barney. And yet, the sensuous and extravagantly-written narrative is thoroughly rife with religious iconography, as the above epigraph exemplifies. In this scene, as the enamored Annhine and Flossie take on the streets of Paris arm-in-arm, they stumble into the space of a decrepit church, shadowy and strewn with cobwebs, “an unwholesome atmosphere of mildew and holy water” suggestive of the crumbling edifice of institutional religion amidst the bustle and decadence of metropolitan Europe.⁴⁸⁶ The impassioned Flossie here conjures a fantastic vision of the suffering Christ descending from his cross, in “tones of lamentation” beseeching the forgiveness of the lesbian couple for the trespasses his followers have committed against them, misinterpreting his message and thus “robbing the world of its beauty,” rendering it “barren of beauties and void of flowers.” Out of this marvelous sapphic revisioning of the

⁴⁸⁶ De Pougy, 83.

Passion of Christ, Flossie proclaims the modern rebirth of a religion of divine love and beauty, the “lost *joie de vivre* of the ancients” reconstituted, which their passion for each other will inaugurate. Unfortunately, their sapphic idyll is not to last; as Annhine dies prematurely, tragically, and elaborately in a manner befitting the novel’s melodrama, the promise of a new lesbian Elysium under the benediction of Christ is deferred. And yet, de Pougy’s bold queering of Catholic imagery stands as a formidable rejection of the homophobic doctrine of the church, which would deem such sapphic idylls a sin in its endeavor to maintain a heteronormative status quo. It is moreover a noteworthy predecessor to a queer modernist literary tradition which this chapter seeks to foreground. This tradition is, I maintain, literary engagements with Catholicism across the work of Djuna Barnes and Radclyffe Hall, who in divergent yet compelling ways retool and revision Catholic ritual, iconography, and theology to critique prevailing heteronormative regimes of power. In doing so, Barnes and Hall each generate narratives that speak to modern queer subjectivities and experiences through the discourse of the very institution that denies them. Through my analyses of their Catholic engagements in support of queer interests, I ultimately forward religion as a significant force in the making of a queer modernist literature.

Even more so, this chapter foregrounds a significant variability across these queer Catholic engagements in terms of how their authors each related to spirituality—in ways both constructive and deconstructive, believing and unbelieving, normative and antinomian. As my analyses show, like de Pougy, Barnes’ retooling is characterized by a motivation to critique heteronormative regimes through an irreverent subversion of Catholic ritual and iconography, wholly antinomian in sensibility. For Hall, on the other hand, who was famously a devout Catholic, her engagements show a clear commitment to working *within* the dictates of normative

church doctrine, reorienting its tenets in a thorny yet earnest attempt to reconcile the church to queer society, such that both Catholic religious belief and the dignity of queer individuals are somehow accounted for—even, as she would have it, mutually constitutive. The distinction is vital to foreground for the sake of illustrating how spirituality operated as a *constitutive force* as well as a destructive force in queer modernism. In other words, religious belief is not something which is wholly rejected, but can in fact be conducive to the articulation of queer modernist narrative in certain instances. To underscore this key dichotomy, I turn to a contemporary successor to this queer Catholic aesthetic tradition that encapsulates this divergence: American YouTuber, leftist political commentator, and transgender activist Natalie Wynn’s 2022 cinematic video, “The Hunger.” It begins with the image of an analog television, around which hangs a profusion of multicolored crucifixes, a coterie of flayed messiahs arranged clockwise about the screen in the order of the colors of the rainbow. The TV buzzes, then displays a verse from the Psalms on a background of clouds, set to angelic music: “I spread out my hands to you; I search for you like a parched land.” The sound of the chorus then switches to the blare of an emergency broadcast alarm, accompanied by the following message: “TEMPTATION WARNING: Addiction, Sexual Brokenness, Gender Confusion.”

The film then shifts to a lampoon of an alt-right podcast, cheekily christened “The Freedom Pod.” In-studio sit three figures, each played by Wynn herself, and each a personification of their respective political alliances. First is “Jackie Jackson,” the podcast’s freedom-loving, heavy-drinking libertarian hostess, dressed as the Statue of Liberty and holding a pint of beer aloft like a bright torch. Her guests for this evening: seated to her right, the hyper-evangelical conservative mouthpiece “Virginia Lamm,” vestal moniker highly appropriate, “Senior Pastor at Hope Truth Ministries.” Garbed in a dainty floral dress and delicate silver cross

necklace, Lamm is here to stand up for, quote, “the most persecuted minority in America, the Christian majority,” and to declare its right to decry the “sexual anarchy” of the “secular ruling elite,” under which “96.5 genders are being taught in American classrooms [...] and from there,” she avers, “it’s just one step away to pedophilia and bestiality.” To Jackson’s left sits transgender lesbian leftist political commentator “Justine Tableau,” the total inverse of Lamm, a voice crying out in the wilderness of conservative hate speech that Lamm and Jackson together form. As Tableau at one point interjects, for instance: “‘Reparative therapy?’ You mean, handing gay children over to exorcists for years of torture? What a terrible wound of self-disgust to inflict on young people, telling them they’re broken and polluted and they need God to make them whole. You people are selling the cure to a sickness you created.”

The conversation that ensues from the gathering of this unholy trinity is on the surface as unfruitful and maddening as one would expect, yet the imbroglio strongly belies what emerges to be Wynn’s covert orchestration of a compelling dialogue on queer desire and alienation in a hyper-Christian and homophobic U.S. socio-political landscape. As the parley carries on, the viewer grows increasingly aware that the dynamic between Tableau and Lamm as foils applies not just to their surface-level political beliefs, but to their divergent responses to survival as queer Americans—as their radically dissimilar conceptualizations of the titular “hunger,” what one may read as the video’s metaphorization of the force of desire, attest to. Surprising is the revelation that Virginia Lamm’s character is not just a caricaturization of far-right extremism, but a closeted queer individual who has drunk ravenously from the poisoned fountain of American evangelism, internalizing its gospel of staunch heteronormativity and rabid homophobia as a structured programme against the anguish and uncertainties of a painful and

disordered existence. Says Lamm, on describing her conversion narrative and pathway to a life lived in, quote-on-quote, “radical obedience to the Holy Spirit”:

I lived in the flesh. I lived in sin with another woman, hoping to satisfy that hunger. [...] I knew that lifestyle was wrong, but I couldn't quit until she broke my heart. And then, I was cast into the outer darkness. [...] I was suicidal. I was an addict. I was lost, until one day, I decided to go to church with my mom [...] And suddenly, my pain made sense. I don't have to live this way anymore. In that moment, I was transfigured by the Holy Spirit. I was cleansed. I was healed. I was delivered. I was sanctified. I was redeemed.

From the above, it becomes clear the extent to which Lamm's conception of “the hunger” that is her desire has been deformed by the normative forces of a far-right Christian hegemony seeking to lay waste to the flourishing of queer life, identity, and expression through their literal demonization: the negative figuration of erotic desire as “the chains of sin” and “the murmuring complaints of the flesh, the itch, the ache, the shame.” To be sure, the use of florid Christian imagery in stark excess is the prime rhetorical vehicle for such conservative discourse.

Throughout Lamm's monologues in which she relates her conversion story, the video continuously flashes back to the aforementioned crucifix-studded TV room, in which her valley-of-the-shadow-of-death narration overlays a dramatic reenactment of her conversion playing out on the television screen. Here, the viewer is shown a series of hellfire-and-brimstone illustrations of a red-silhouetted, lost and forsaken Lamm in such postures as donning the mask of a black horned devil as her form is overtaken by a sea of flames, or standing with arms outstretched in crucifixion as a web of chains rattles behind her, her voice intoning visions of divine wrath, suffering, and penitence: “I know the thorns, the seething cauldron, the great whirlwind that whips sinners round an endless wheel of pain, but my shame was hammered to the cross; for those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Through the imagery of the Passion as armature, Lamm's passion for women is transformed into earthly, base, and evil sins of the flesh to condemn to violent execution for some kind of deliverance and

ascension to a heavenly state of being—in the American evangelical context, that heavenly state merely a Trojan horse for the continuation of heteropatriarchal dominance. As such, this “Pastor at Hope Truth Ministries” character is Wynn’s lambast of the far-right tradition of weaponizing the Christian mythos for the systemic continuance of queer marginalization and oppression. And yet, one might also consider the extent to which Wynn upends the heteronormative function of Christian iconography through the supreme irony that is the story of The Conversion of Virginia Lamm: that what very much chains her is in fact her so-called “deliverance,” and that if her actual deliverance is anywhere, it is likely to be had in exactly what she construes as “chains.”

Such is the oppressive infrastructure of queer self-loathing built from the crossbeams of Christ’s Passion in whose operations the Justine Tableau character vitally intervenes—and, in my estimation, reconstitutes. This move manifests principally in her intervention in the evangelical Lamm’s negative conceptualization of desire—a.k.a. the video’s titular “hunger,” as I am reading it—as abominable sin. Consider the following exchange:

TABLEAU: What I think is that you have a vulgar, cracker-barrel understanding of human sexuality, [...] You talk about ‘the flesh’ and ‘same-sex temptation.’ Well, what even is that, Virginia? [...] Answer this: what do you think erotic love is a desire for?

JACKSON (*interjecting*): Wait, I know this one: sex.

TABLEAU: No, that’s too easy. Erotic love is not aimless pleasure-seeking. It’s a longing for connection, for recognition, for wholeness; [...] Love is not the flesh. It’s not temptation. [...] It’s not a craving. It’s a yearning. The desire for reunion with our other half, Aristophanes. But you people don’t understand that because you are vulgarians. You have no sense of humanity, and you have no sense of the erotic.

In Tableau’s declaration, her de-stigmatization and revalorization of the hunger that is desire—namely her queer desire as a lesbian transgender woman, as, let’s face it, heterosexual desire is not what is under moral scrutiny in the space of the Freedom Pod studio—in the face of evangelical bigotry resounds: a “longing for connection, for recognition, for wholeness; [...] for reunion with our other half,” rather than “aimless pleasure-seeking” or base temptation of the

flesh. It is in fact Tableau's toilsome quest to overcome a state of alienation, to find wholeness through desire for connection as a transgender lesbian in a heteropatriarchal society hostile to queer flourishing that emerges as the central narrative of "The Hunger." As the podcast recording session closes, it becomes clear that Tableau is the video's protagonist, facing her own proverbial dark night of the soul. After the recording ends, the viewer sees Lamm pose to Tableau the following (deadnaming her in the process):

LAMM: Listen, Justin, I'm just trying to help you understand how lost you really are. I know my place in this world. I've found love, family, belonging, fellowship, in the church. Have you found fellowship in the LGBT2A\$ community?

TABLEAU: Well, obviously not, because it's a bunch of wounded people wounding each other. Case in point, though you are one of the worst I've ever seen.

LAMM: So, you're alone, you're far from God's grace, [...] Can you honestly say that you're happy? That you're fulfilled? That you have purpose? That you have hope?

These final lines of the Freedom Pod segment of "The Hunger" intimate vital information on Tableau's inner conflicts: as the questions Lamm poses on her happiness and fulfillment are left unanswered, so too are they ongoing questions in Tableau's character arc. Over the course of the video, the viewer learns of Tableau's alienated condition at levels romantic, familial, and intra-communal: her failed relationship with a former girlfriend, her estrangement from a religious mother who rejects her transgender identity, and her subsequent entanglement in LGBTQ+ infighting, as she is quote-on-quote "cancelled" by the online queer community for appearing on the alt-right podcast. The narrative then shifts focus to follow Tableau's resultant struggles with opioid addiction as a coping method for her suffering; as she says to the character of "Lucy," the masked, cloaked, Mephistophelian personification of her addiction, in response to the question of what torments her: "Well, yeah, there's the shame. There's always gonna be the shame, but it's a complex cocktail. There's the heartbreak. There's the loneliness, the self-loathing. I'm a parched land, Luce. I've got the hunger, the emptiness inside." Though the Lamm character has by now

exited the narrative, such dialogue reinvokes the duality in operation between Lamm and Tableau as lost and wandering pilgrims of queer America, each on their own respective—yet not entirely dissimilar—journey through the badlands of evangelical conservatism in search of their own New Jerusalem. Indeed, it is interesting to contemplate how Lamm turns to the proverbial opiate of the masses as a coping mechanism, while Tableau turns to literal opiates. Through its engagements with religious subject matter, text, and iconography, “The Hunger” choreographs a complex and nuanced meditation on responses to queer alienation and the multiform systemic configurations of power between oppressor and oppressed. To be sure, it delivers its true and necessary critique of the violence of heteropatriarchal Christendom. Even more so, “The Hunger” does not foreclose on acknowledging that a shred of humanity may still be found deep within some oppressors, namely via its portrayal of the Virginia Lamm figure as both dehumanizer and dehumanized. Indeed, one may read her character as a victim of spiritual abuse, her belief in divine influence making her far more susceptible to the rhetoric of evangelical discourse than a hyper-intellectual Justine Tableau.

What is particularly fascinating about this critique, moreover, is not just how it acknowledges some degree of nuance in the agents of the oppressive heteropatriarchal system that constitute its object, but even more so how it uses the very same rhetorical instruments of that system as leverage: the crowns of thorns, the burning flames, the angelic choirs—and, in particular, the practice of psalmody. Consider the very psalm that “The Hunger” employs as its epigraph: “I spread out my hands to you; I search for you like a parched land.” This this cry of anguish from a yearning subject who thirsts for release from a condition of suffering “like a parched land” becomes in Wynn’s script an extended metaphor for metaphysical alienation and abandonment—but whose alienation and abandonment, ultimately? Beyond the epigram, this

parched land motif appears twice in the script. For the first, Lamm invokes the image in her sermonizing, employing it as a device to forward her homophobic rhetoric of queer life as an inherently damnable, wretched way of living—especially for the purpose of foregrounding heteropatriarchal hegemony as the only true, viable pathway for flourishing. As she says to Tableau: “Clearly, this transgender identity of yours is a defense against the emptiness you feel inside. There’s a hunger in your soul no pleasure of the flesh can satisfy. Do you not feel the thirst in your body, like a parched land? If I may quote Psalm 63: ‘You, God, are my god. [...] I thirst for you. My whole being longs for you in a dry and parched land where there is no water.’”

Let us break down the heterosexist implications of the above comparison: that transgender individuals living truthfully leads not to their flourishing, but to desolation—a proverbial wasteland where nothing can grow, without futurity. And of course, in Lamm’s analogy, the nourishment to remedy this barren condition is the internalization of heteropatriarchal Christian doctrine. While such rhetoric makes for distasteful reading, it highlights all the more vibrantly Tableau’s subtle yet powerful transfiguration of the motif in its second and final appearance. Taking the instrument of psalmody out of the hands of the Christian right, Tableau repurposes its sound as resonant accompaniment as she voices her own narrative, an anguished quest for fulfillment as a queer woman in a conservative America: “There’s the heartbreak. There’s the loneliness, the self-loathing. I’m a parched land, Luce. I’ve got the hunger, the emptiness inside.” Through her recontextualization, Tableau conducts her own queer exegesis of scripture—de-weaponizing the utterance as vehicle for homophobic dogma and ascribing to it a new, more queer-affirming signification. The thirsting, yearning voice is no longer that of a self-hating born-again Christian languishing at the well of heteropatriarchal hegemony and begging for a draught, or even a religious acolyte’s supplication for divine

intervention as in the psalm's original context. Wreathed as it is in the video's opening by a rainbow-colored circle of crucifixes—and what a pride parade to behold—the psalmodic voice of “The Hunger” is in its final manifestation a transgender lesbian's lament against the scourge of evangelical Christendom's persecution—the heartbreak, the loneliness, the self-loathing. It is addressed moreover not to a hegemonic paternalistic divine entity, but to the object of her own longing and desire. As to what that object is, I find it is multivalent—in moments taking on more concept-based forms such as impulses to escapism, yet considering the whole of Tableau's character, it could be just as much an unmet lover, her Platonic other half: “I search for you like a parched land.” In all, Wynn illuminates from holy scripture not just a queer lamentation—a portrait of Christ's Passion done in the colors of the rainbow—but arguably too a queer erotics of lesbian desire in defiance of a heteropatriarchal social norm.

I find Wynn's “The Hunger” to be so compelling and illustrative for this chapter for multiple reasons: for one, it exemplifies a recent installment in this queer aesthetic tradition whose historiography this chapter seeks to outline in part: in the West, the centuries-long engagement of queer writers, artists, and intellectuals with Christian ritual and iconography, more specifically Catholic ritual and iconography, as discursive practice to articulate, explore, and valorize a wide array of queer identities, experiences, and becomings. Furthermore, in its orchestration of the contrapuntal dynamic between Lamm and Tableau, it highlights two radically opposing approaches that in fact converge as a dialogue on the varied responses to queer survival and struggles for belonging in a hostile heteronormative social landscape. I see this selfsame duality manifest between the works of Djuna Barnes and Radclyffe Hall, in their divergent yet equally compelling representations of lesbian, bisexual feminine, and/or trans-feminine experiences. As in Wynn's “The Hunger” overall, the commentaries of these narratives

on queer survival in opposition to heterosexist norms are vitally constructed, heightened, and transfigured by the melodrama of Catholic symbolism and ritual. Between Barnes and Hall, moreover, while Barnes utilizes Tableau's method of approach—to queer and eroticize the discourse of heteropatriarchal Christendom, subverting its signs to critique it using its own language—Hall's sensibility is far more aligned with that of Lamm, in that both are conservative figures who place much stock in the power of a Christian divinity, and as such are determined to make sense of their experiences as queer individuals through the rhetoric of that divinity's hegemonic framework. Of course, in terms of how they each carry out these negotiations, the self-hating Lamm is wildly unsuccessful and misguided, while Hall at least can proclaim a sense of dignity that does not necessitate the repudiation and demonization of her identity. However, as both are conservative figures complicit in the preservation of hegemonic discourses and institutions such as the church, I find that their narratives—still responses to experiences of queer oppression, however misled they may be—are worth the effort of suspending one's judgments to more meaningfully engage with the complexities that arise from such conflicts between faith and sexuality. These conflicts and questions on how to negotiate them were common in Hall's time, and they are indeed still common in our era, even with the supposed advent of a post-religious age. This queer Catholic modernist literary tradition, then, is also prime evidence for this project's overarching argument on the persistence of spiritual cultures and beliefs as shaping forces in modern literature as a whole.

This notion of a queer Catholic tradition running into, through, and out of the literature of the modern era is indebted to the critical field of queer theology, a wellspring for my own project. Borne out of the union between queer theory and liberation theology, queer theology at its simplest involves the study of queerness in religion—the queering of religious cultures, texts,

practices, traditions, mythologies, and so on. Chief among its numerous critical interventions is a rejection of the popular notion—especially concerning the Abrahamic faiths—of queer culture and religious culture as ineluctably antagonistic forces, as if they were Eve and the Serpent, locked in a postlapsarian posture of eternal enmity in which the furious heel of institutional religious heteropatriarchy pounds tirelessly upon the earth to crush the skull of queer life. While there is certainly a great degree of truth to such a portrait, queer theology pulls back the curtains surrounding it to reveal it as but one vignette of an enormous tapestry that is the involvement of same-sex desire and gender fluidity in spiritual cultures, Abrahamic or otherwise. As Gerard Loughlin writes in reference to Christian queer theology in particular, the field illuminates not just the vast extent to which the “stories and images that [constitute] the Christian imaginary” are amenable to queering by contemporary scholars, but even more so “the queer interests that were always already at play in the Spirit’s movement, in the lives and devotions of saints and sinners, theologians and ecclesiastics.”⁴⁸⁷ From historical representations of a genderfluid Christ, to the homoerotic overtures of the poetry of St. John of the Cross, to the sapphic passions of a multitude of famous nuns throughout history—e.g., St. Hildegard of Bingen, Benedetta Carlini,⁴⁸⁸ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, to name but a few—and to the evolution of the figure of St. Sebastian as the patron saint of homosexuals, one cannot help but conclude, as Loughlin does, “that gay sexuality is not marginal to Christian thought and culture, but oddly central.”⁴⁸⁹

Of course, the politics of queer theological studies tend toward a deep investment in the radical reconfiguration of hegemonic power regimes of gender and sexuality that institutional religions construct and maintain—a task which may be held as a defining political mission of the

⁴⁸⁷ Loughlin, 9.

⁴⁸⁸ See Judith C. Brown’s iconic *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (1986).

⁴⁸⁹ Loughlin, 9.

work in Christian queer theology especially. As Loughlin avers, the potential of deploying the term “queer” in Christian theological studies is in the resultant “distancing or divergence from what is held as normative, [which] will serve to destabilize and undo that normativity: the surety of heteropatriarchal Christianity.”⁴⁹⁰ While there is certainly very much to celebrate about this subversive, antinomian critical habitude, queer theologians have more recently made moves to reflect on and further nuance the penchant for affirmations of resistance to the norm—a penchant now become practically requisite for research in this field. For instance, queer theologian Linn Tonstad delivers a measured critique of “the reflexive antinormativity characteristic of the field since its inception.”⁴⁹¹ Drawing from the work of Rita Felski and Eve Sedgwick presently giving rise to a “reparative turn” in contemporary criticism, Tonstad considers the “challenges entailed by the disciplining of queer theology by a primary methodological commitment to antinormativity” as well as the possibility of alternative reading practices to “approach the affective, political, and self-involving engagements with Christianity in queer theology from a different direction, beyond standard debates about the normativity of Christianity and its recuperative or destructive potentials.”⁴⁹²

Though on the surface Tonstad’s proposition may seem a reactionary one, a call for critics to divert their research away from acts of resistance and subversiveness—work that has transformed the landscape of possibility in humanistic studies and brought about the ongoing reconfiguration of inequitable power dynamics across it—it is important to clarify that the implications are not so much to devalue antinomian criticism in itself, but the admitted staleness that may come from too little variation, especially when there are other nodes of inquiry with

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 9-10.

⁴⁹¹ Tonstad, 475.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 473.

potential that a hyper-fixation on one particular pattern of analysis may obfuscate. “Pushed to its furthest implication,” Tonstad writes, “the over-determination of the normal becomes such that every person subtly disrupts it. As a result, the specificity of any particular disruption disappears, while ‘the normal’ comes to name no one and nothing.”⁴⁹³ In order to more fully apprehend Tonstad’s concern about the oversimplification of the norm, it is vital to turn to the work of queer theorist Janet Jakobsen on conceptualizations of normativity, which plays a considerable role in Tonstad’s analysis. As Jakobsen in “Queer Is? Queer Does?” writes, manifestations of the normal have the ability to function as something more than toxic, outmoded power regimes in need of total upending and “replacement in some kind of progress narrative.”⁴⁹⁴ Rather, they can also be “site[s] of frequently overlooked complexities. The regime of the normal” is “not a coherent thing; it is a matrix of multiple, contradictory norms [...] in complicated relation to various norms and to the power structure of normativity.”⁴⁹⁵ As such, “the reduction of resistance to the mere act of ‘resisting the norm’ has serious and unwelcome consequences” of not only merely replacing one with another—as Jakobsen remarks, “as if resistance to normalization undid the question of normativity rather than moved us into another normativity” —but also of passing over too quickly such matrices of complexity and the potential of their investigation.⁴⁹⁶ Indeed, for Jakobsen, “Recognition of the complex matrix of norms that make up any given normativity opens new doors to resistant action”—e.g., her concept of the “working alliance” that plays on the incoherence of intersecting normative networks “among those differently

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 475.

⁴⁹⁴ Jakobsen, 530.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 513.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 513, 520.

positioned in relation to the norms that make up a normativity. Such a shift decenters the norm-deviant relation by making alliances that focus on relations among various ‘deviants.’”⁴⁹⁷

Strategies such as Jakobsen’s working alliance necessarily involve the rejection of binary oppositional frameworks the likes of radical versus orthodox, subversive versus normative, progressive versus conservative, and so on. Indeed, subjects are inherently complex, occupying multiple positionalities at once of oppressor and oppressed—and yet, this awareness becomes harder to hold onto in the moment, especially when one meets face-to-face with, say, a Virginia Lamm. Still, I find it fair to say that even the positionality of a Virginia Lamm type—and by this I mean a queer religiosity not radically subversive, but firmly and deeply entrenched in the normative—has the potential to make for an extremely generative site of queer theological inquiry as well. For these reasons, and in the spirit of the ongoing conversations in the field of queer religious studies, the principal methodological objective of this chapter is to carry these conversations and interventions further into the realm of studies on queerness in literary modernism. Through this application, I aim to demonstrate in the resulting analyses of Barnes and Hall that such a move would greatly complicate, nuance, and enrich prevailing views on the role of spirituality not just in modernism and modernity, but also in the queer literary culture of those movements—ultimately underscoring religion’s major presence in that culture, and furthermore, the sheer variety and complexity of how that presence may operate discursively, whether subversively or otherwise. In the field of modernist literary studies, sexuality is now understood as an integral node of modernism’s characteristic antinomian rupture and play. As Robert L. Caserio reflects on queer theory’s influence in modernist scholarship, “‘Queer theory’ questions common assumptions about human sexuality, especially if that is thought to be

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 513, 526.

definitively anchored in social, historical, legal, or medical ‘certainty.’ The term ‘queer’ perplexes certainty. The modernist construction of homosexuality evolves from an alliance of plural erotic dispositions that are united in antagonism to opposite-sex love, bourgeois marriage, and family.”⁴⁹⁸ In Caserio’s survey of queer modernism as “wilful derangement of established order,” therefore, when and if at all the subject of religion comes into play, it is as one of the various outmoded, hegemonic social conventions and normative institutions to be subverted; as he writes, “Homosexuality as we know it arrives at the centre of modernism’s revolutionary challenge to cultural repertoires. This challenge is so comprehensive that modernism seeks to break with religion, nationality, and the state.”⁴⁹⁹ Such is certainly the case for many queer modernist engagements with religion, especially the institution(s) of Western Christendom. Indeed, my analyses of Barnes’ *Ladies Almanack* and *Nightwood* are largely focused on the subversiveness of their representations of Catholic iconography and ritual.

While the subversive impetus in queer modernist representations of spirituality is deeply manifest—not to mention an indispensable part of my own project—I find that as a comprehensive narrative, it paints an incomplete picture of the varying ways that queer modernists and proto-modernists related to spirituality in both their lives and work, even and including “Western” spirituality. As I aim to illustrate, the notion that queer modernism is characteristically antinomian and destructive in its engagements with spiritual cultures, even Christian ones—a literary historiography of marginalized iconoclasts breaking the integrity of religious institutions from the outside—belies the endeavors of those like Hall who were participating members of such institutions. Such figures very much inhabited these spiritualities’ contradictions, seeking to generate new ways of being and relating inside the space of a given

⁴⁹⁸ Caserio, 201.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 203.

religious normality in such a way that accommodated their beliefs, or even confirmed them. Indeed, to examine the scholarly archive on the study of Christianity and sexuality in other literary periods is to notice a shift in prevailing viewpoints not only on the role of religion in Anglo-European society, but also on the dynamic between religious and queer cultures. Of course, there is endless work on Christianity in Anglo-European literary cultures from late antiquity to around the *fin de siècle*. For the study of Christianity in modernism, however, the archive is much smaller, I would imagine due to the popular narrative of secularization.

And yet, within the past decade or so, academic studies on Christianity and/or Catholicism in Anglo-European modernism have appeared where before there were close to none. I have previously discussed Pericles Lewis' *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, though in his analysis Judeo-Christianity is more so an evacuated institution for high modernist prose writers to fill with their own metaphysics and reconstitute "the sorts of shared normative values that institutional religion no longer adequately supplied" through the "secular sacred, a form of transcendent or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world, without reference to the supernatural."⁵⁰⁰ Different are studies that put modernism and Christianity in closer contact—not outside of religious belief and tradition, but situated *within* their frameworks. Erik Tønning's *Modernism and Christianity* figures greatly here, in which he articulates a "distinct phenomenon of *Christian Modernisms*," and the plural is vital here, as he takes up the multiple positionalities of canonical modernist writers with respect to Christianity and Catholicism, whether as "Grand Enemy" and "principal adversary" or "precisely the tonic needed to regenerate a spiritually empty modern civilization."⁵⁰¹ Indeed—and published in the same year as Lewis' *Religious Experience*—Timothy J. Sutton's *Catholic Modernities, English*

⁵⁰⁰ Lewis, 19, 21.

⁵⁰¹ Tønning, 5, 6. Emphasis in original.

Nationalists focuses on the influence of the “old recusant English Catholic families who had remained in northern and western England since the Reformation” on canonical Anglophone modernist writers who converted to Catholicism—namely how the “conservative and nationalistic” and “pro-empire political views” of this distinct and age-old strain of English Catholicism “altered [the writers’] own form of English nationalism and attitude toward British imperialism.”⁵⁰² In a different field, yet also noteworthy, is historian Stephen Schloesser’s *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919–1933*—a historiography of the “*renouveau catholique*” or “French Catholic revivalism” in the nation’s artistic and intellectual cultures; a “renovation of tradition simultaneously modernist and anti-modernist,” an act of mourning and response to profound disillusionment in the wake of the Great War.⁵⁰³

My own study seeks to add to this body of work by focusing on the constitutive role of Catholicism in modernist texts written by queer women authors in particular. While Pericles Lewis’ monograph includes a chapter on Woolf, the above titles focus mostly on male authors. Furthermore, while a number of the writers they engage with are known to have engaged in homosexual relationships—e.g. W.H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf—their analyses are not engaged with questions of sexuality or the formation of a queer modernist literature. This specific arena of discussion—the intersection of gender, sexuality, and Catholicism in modernist literature—is that which my study contributes to. Interestingly, it is an arena in which preexisting work in Victorian studies has primed the field of modernism to engage with. Such is due in no small part to the fact of the Oxford Movement—an event in Church of England history in which many high-ranking members made returns to pre-Reformation theology and devotional practice, indeed often converting to Roman Catholicism—having taken place largely in the Victorian era.

⁵⁰² Sutton, 14, 17, 15.

⁵⁰³ Schloesser, 4.

As David Hilliard writes, “For many homosexual men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Anglo-Catholicism provided a set of institutions and religious practices through which they could express their sense of difference in an oblique and symbolical way.”⁵⁰⁴ Considering Anglo-Catholicism’s appeal as a means to circumvent marriage via the priesthood and form homosocial bonds through cloisters, so too its “ritualism provided a way of escape from the problems of sexual tension and forbidden love into a make-believe world of religious pageantry, ancient titles and ranks, exotic symbolism, and endless chatter about copes and candles,” possessing something of a revolutionary and even fashionable appeal in an English context.⁵⁰⁵ Hence Catholicism’s popularity among turn-of-the-century aesthetes and decadents—many of them famously queer—which Ellis Hanson’s *Decadence and Catholicism* focuses on. Here, Hanson forwards how the “sheer excess of the Church—its archaic splendor, the weight of its history, the elaborate embroidery of its robes, the labyrinthine mysteries of its symbolism” was for decadent writers “an aesthetic and fetishistic object of wonder” as well as “the ideal stage for the subversive gestures of the Catholic dandy.”⁵⁰⁶ With this subversive element in full focus, Frederick Roden’s *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* centers on queer Victorian writers’ “appropriation[s] of medieval religious models and Biblical/Christian typology” in which “the spiritual voice was almost always empowering” rather than oppressive, a “queer space for the deviant individual to claim.”⁵⁰⁷ From a feminist critical approach, Ruth Vanita’s *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* takes up queer literary engagements with both classical and Catholic spiritualities across romanticism, Victorianism, and modernism which each construct “alternatives to the dominant fiction that

⁵⁰⁴ Hilliard, 184.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 190.

⁵⁰⁶ Hanson, 6.

⁵⁰⁷ Roden, 2.

marriage and work produce happiness while singleness and contemplation spell misery or morbidity.”⁵⁰⁸ More specifically, Vanita discusses the queer feminist “interplay of Sapphic and Marian myths [that] posits continuing clitoral joy and romantic same-sex love and friendship as possibilities for both women and men.”⁵⁰⁹

As Woolf and Forster are the two modernist writers that Vanita engages with, critical studies on queer Catholic engagements in modernism are extant yet still few in number, an area where there is still much to be explored. The essay collection *Catholic Figures, Queer Narratives* is the only other major academic publication to focus on queer literary representations of Catholicism in the modern era. As each study in the collection takes up modernist writers’ engagements with Catholic theology in reckoning with questions on gender and sexuality, its contents altogether, as editor Frederick Roden writes in the introduction, “re-locate their concerns as very much on the radar of theologians at work in their age.”⁵¹⁰ Included are compelling studies on Barnes and Hall, and I view my own analyses as carrying on the conversations that each initiates. In her study on *Nightwood*, Patricia Juliana Smith focuses on the figure of Dr. O’Connor, reading the character as Barnes’ parody of “traditional Catholic doctrines of grace and virtue,” operating as an instance of the subversive aesthetic practice of camp as method of queer survival.⁵¹¹ As *Nightwood* is indeed replete with Catholic imagery, my analysis addresses the other key instances in the novel where Barnes subverts the iconography and ritual practices of Catholicism as intervention in heteropatriarchy: queer revisionings of the figure of the Virgin Mary in the dynamic between Nora Flood and Robin Vote, as well as the upending of the confessional, otherwise called the Sacrament of Penance, in the figure of Dr.

⁵⁰⁸ Vanita, 6.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁵¹⁰ Roden, 3.

⁵¹¹ Smith, 129.

O'Connor as trans-feminine priest. I also undertake an analysis of Barnes' parodic retoolings of the Catholic cult of saints in *Ladies Almanack*, constructing a sapphic utopia apart from the regime of phallogocentrism. For Hall, Richard Dellamora discusses the influence of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* on *The Well of Loneliness*, namely their shared representations of the "suffering of Christ [which] provides a context for experiencing, troping, and narrativizing the negativities, psychic and social, that accompanied non-conformity" in their respective declarations of queer dignity, speaking to the work of Anglo-Catholic theologian John Henry Newman on the importance of individual conscience as divine justice.⁵¹² While I consider Hall's representation of the Passion of Christ extensively in my own analysis, it is not just the Passion in general that I discuss, but specifically Hall's reorientation of its associated devotional images of the Sacred Heart and Blessed Sacrament for a politics of queer inclusion. Moreover, I consider additional Catholic theological discourses that Hall engages with in *The Well of Loneliness* for this same politics, namely those of omnibenevolence, grace, and *imago dei*, or man made in the image of God. To these analyses I now turn.

The Venerable Touches of May: Queer Hagiography as Unregeneration Myth in Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack*

"Go not with fanatics who see beyond thee and thine, and beyond the coming and the going of thee and thine, and yet beyond the ending thereof—thy life and the lives thou begettest, and the lives that shall spring from them, world without end—for such need thee not, nor see thee, nor know thy lamenting, so confounded are they with thy damnation and the damnation of thy offspring, and the multiple damnation of those multitudes that shall be of thy race begotten, unto the number of fishes in thin waters, and unto the number of fishes in great waters."
—Djuna Barnes, *Ryder* (1928)

Even in spite of the above, I am aware of the audacity of ascribing a central role in queer modernist aesthetics to anything vaguely suggestive of the musty, sour odor of the Catholic Church. I therefore want to lead my analyses with a discussion of a text indisputably born out of

⁵¹² Dellamora, 114.

the heart and soul of modernist literary culture, one that I find to be moreover exemplary of a queer Catholic modernist literary sensibility as I have been discussing it: the *roman à clef* of the iconic and critically-adored lesbian avant-garde coterie of the 1920s Parisian Left Bank, Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack* (1928). Dedicated readers of Barnes are more than aware of the story behind the infamous, polymorphic pastiche of seemingly all of European textual history stitched into a slim volume of some eighty pages, its peculiar, pseudo-medieval, quasi-erotic illustrations of the author's own making included. Commissioned by the magisterial Natalie Barney for the proper diversion of her glamorous salon, informally produced and circulated—according to Barnes' retrospective 1972 foreword, “anonymously written (in an idle hour), fearfully punctuated,” and “hawked about the *faubourg*”—the unapologetic, borderline pornographic lampoon was in its time a favorite among the bohemian cohort of sapphic expatriates for and about whom it was written. Since its critical revival—and the revival of Barnes as a noteworthy modernist writer, besides—the text has been for academics a source of delight and frustration in equal measure. For delight, its risqué irreverence continues to elicit laughter from its readers, its humor still palpable even as it nears its centennial. It has over the decades also proven a stimulating matching game for enthusiasts of the postwar era of expatriate writerly culture, who have extensively and variously identified the real-life analogues of its many characters from among the larger-than-life women of the Left Bank. Even more so, it has been a feast for the domain of feminist criticism, adored and celebrated as a subversive manifestation of *écriture féminine* in the manner of Cixous—the orgasmic and effusive texture of its prose readily interpretable as an expression of, to quote from Susan Sniader Lanser's famous analysis, a “gynocentric sexual rhetoric [...] creating alternatives to patriarchal ritual, dogma, and myth.”⁵¹³

⁵¹³ Lanser, 162.

Moreover, as it presents to the reader a “world in which the lesbian is normative”⁵¹⁴ and men of any sexuality are absent—true to the audience for whom it was originally composed—the *Almanack*’s antinomian clout works to intervene in heteronormative power structures as much as patriarchal. Put differently, what analyses of its society as sapphic utopia of erotic bliss affirm is its prowess to undo the intertwining hegemonic regimes of gender and sexuality—again from Lanser, via its euphoric representations of “the positivity of the female body and the lesbian experience.”⁵¹⁵ Deborah Parsons’ distillation of the text speaks to the prominence of the anti-heteropatriarchal reading: a narrative centered on the legend of its messianic central character, Dame Evangeline Musset,⁵¹⁶ who “dedicates her life to liberation and recruitment of lesbian women from the confines of heterosexual culture” and with these converts establishes a “lesbian community [...] in which women are encouraged to enjoy their sexuality and not feel self-hatred at their difference from the prescribed norm of heterosexuality.”⁵¹⁷

As well, the *Almanack* has been a persistent source of vexation for its sheer opacity and absolute incomprehensibility, a *cause célèbre* as much as a cause for celebration. Densely stuffed with archaisms, diversions, circumlocutions and miscellanea, it contains a narrative that eschews order, an ethos that evades coherence, a syntax that elides closure, a diction that resists demystification. Among the extant critical studies, not one has failed to comment on its unintelligibility—indeed, there is an entire monograph dedicated to the topic of incomprehension in the work of Barnes, *Almanack* included.⁵¹⁸ As such, the text has been a veritable paradise for poststructuralist analysis both queer and feminist. Rather than a wholehearted, earnest, radical

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 164.

⁵¹⁶ Critical consensus of course understands the Dame Evangeline character to be a stand-in for Natalie Barney.

⁵¹⁷ Parsons, 47.

⁵¹⁸ See Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus* (2009).

valorization of gynocentric identity, community, and sexuality, for these critics, its antinomian power resides in its implosive destruction of any unified and coherent categorizations of gender and/or sexuality. Frann Michel's study is representative here, in which, through the lens of poststructural feminist theory, she reads *Almanack*'s excess and evasion as a work of feminine writing that "[asserts] that Woman has no single, stable place, but rather is multiple, indefinable, outside or beyond ordered systems of representation and thought."⁵¹⁹ As it "inscribes Woman's exteriority" and enacts "a complex dialogue with the masculine cultural hegemony" via its engagement with archaic, institutional, and parochial textual forms, it carries out an "implicit project of subverting existing systems of signification—the phallogocentrism they signify and the patriarchy that phallogocentrism supports."⁵²⁰ Similarly, considering Barnes as a precursor to literary postmodernism, Diane Warren writes: "If *Almanack* draws on the pluralisation of attempts to define women and homosexuals, it also satirises the defining process itself," illustrating "a recurrent impatience with classification and definition in Barnes' oeuvre."⁵²¹ Parsons as well, whose analysis of the text is for the most part celebratory in tone, makes the important qualification that "Barnes refuses to define lesbianism as either a biological or culturally produced state, denying any single theoretical discourse applicable to all forms of lesbian identity."⁵²² Therefore, to demarcate *Almanack* as a paradigmatic "lesbian novel," full stop, without an awareness of its "resenting and denying essentialist categorizations," is "to delimit the very disruption that it performs in refusing sexual polarization."⁵²³

⁵¹⁹ Michel, 170-1.

⁵²⁰ Ibid, 172.

⁵²¹ Warren, xiv.

⁵²² Parsons, 59.

⁵²³ Ibid., 53.

Whether they find its satire to be celebratory or dissident, constructive or deconstructive, what these various readings share is an understanding of the overt antinomian quality of the text, its excessive idiosyncrasies and sharpened wit poised to overwhelm and eviscerate the irritable bowels of heteropatriarchal institutions and regimes of power—and, therein, its capacity to extend beyond the ambit of merely a light, “fearfully punctuated” *divertissement* penned in an “idle hour.” Interesting to note on the preexisting criticism, moreover, is the relative shortage of in-depth engagements with the ways that Barnes appropriates Catholic imagery in the *Almanack*—and, moreover, the monumental role these religious elements play in forwarding its antinomian crusade. Indeed, all four of Barnes’ major works now considered mainstays of the modernist literary canon⁵²⁴ incorporate and retool Christian—and, in large part, specifically Catholic—ritual and iconography to an extensive degree. For *Almanack*, it is the mythos and symbolism of the cult of the saints that Barnes irreverently and meaningfully repurposes via its representation of the life story of Evangeline Musset—or “Saint Musset,” as she is called—a noble campaign to spread and champion the virtues of sapphic eroticism, in the style of a medieval to early modern hagiography, or saint’s life. As yet, the only prominent academic study to place the *Almanack*’s representations of Catholic religious culture at the forefront is Monika Kaup’s analysis on the neobaroque in Barnes, which reads the text’s profusion of styles, forms, and signifiers that “mixes premodern and scientific knowledge” as a strategy of Sarduyan baroque artificialization—its excess, incongruency, and circumlocution being methods “to escape the realist truth claims of turn-of-the-century sexological discourse and challenge the scientific authority of its delineation of homosexual identities as pathological and degenerative.”⁵²⁵ In her reading, the imagery and narrative forms appropriated from the culture

⁵²⁴ Ryder (1928), *Ladies Almanack* (1928), *Nightwood* (1936), and “The Antiphon” (1958).

⁵²⁵ Kaup, 99, 92.

surrounding the cult of the saints are vital working components of its subversive neobaroque tableau, constructing “a collective, public subjectivity defined independently of the Freudian family and its known polymorphous perversions. The recourse to hagiography allows Barnes to draft a narrative of physical and spiritual love that steers clear of the script of modern scientific psychoanalytic and sexological discourse. In other words, premodern and early modern narrative is resuscitated to deflect the panoptic gaze of modern science.”⁵²⁶

As Kaup notes, while Barnes scholars have not been unaware of the influence of baroque style in her work, any “references, however, are typically casual asides, and the important assumptions and implications of Barnes’s use of the baroque are never unpacked.”⁵²⁷ Regarding the scholarship on *Almanack* written both prior and subsequent to Kaup’s study, I find that one could fairly make a similar statement concerning its use of Catholic iconography—beyond her analysis, gestures to its presence take the form of brief and casual asides as well, as the focus of these studies lies elsewhere. Pinkerton’s *Blasphemous Modernism*, for instance, does mention *Almanack* in his chapter on Barnes, yet its principal object is *Nightwood*. For feminist readings especially, a lack of interest in saintly imagery is understandable, as hagiographies of female saints tend to function as repressive tools for the purpose of keeping women docile and subservient to the authority of heteropatriarchal Christianity. While the figures of the saints, as mediators between the human and the divine, are considered to possess significant power and influence via intercession, hagiographical narratives tend to be largely instructive in function—a means to promulgate certain normative qualities as virtues, in particular those desirable to maintaining the hegemony of the Church. Historically, the male-to-female ratio of saints has always skewed overwhelmingly male—and to gloss the narratives of female saints is for the

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 68.

most part to be met with a dull parade of docile, subservient virgins, venerated for their sexual purity, meekness, and total self-sacrifice in service of an omnipotent patriarchal divinity.

Christine de Pizan's proto-feminist *City of Ladies* is an interesting illustrative example here.

While the text is incontestably revolutionary for its time, its first section comprised of legends of bold and brilliant queens and goddesses, women warriors, artists, and writers—largely from pagan antiquity—is to the modern reader undercut by its final section: a collection of hagiographies on beatified women in Christian history—largely martyrs and virgins—that ultimately reinscribes the notion of feminine merit as fully realized in the virtues of piety, chastity, and self-abnegation. Though in the first section, tales of women hailed for their political, intellectual, military, and/or artistic acumen serve as the foundations—the bedrock, as it were—of de Pizan's allegorical infrastructure of feminine excellence, the final section proclaims its tableau of canonized faithful as those who merit the highest praises in all of women's history—as, after all, the eponymous city is able to rise above ground level only through these hagiographies which constitute its pinnacles, their zenith occupied by none other than the Virgin Mary, the ultimate culmination of these feminine virtues who is proclaimed queen of all women.

And yet, it is precisely this normative function of hagiography that makes Barnes' representation of it especially noteworthy, the genre's long-standing associations with the institutional repression of women radically heightening the extent of *Almanack's* literary and socio-cultural subversions through extreme contrast. Indeed, the civilization of ladies that Barnes constructs is in its values a world apart from de Pizan's, affirming a corporeal ethics of physical pleasure and bodily autonomy rather than an incorporeal ethics of the spirit, or even the mind. As the portraits of female saints uphold chastity as the defining metric of a woman's value, Saint Musset is adulated for her prodigious and luxuriant sexuality, a virtuoso “noted and esteemed for

her Slips of the Tongue that it finally brought her into the Hall of Fame,” as the opening pages of *Almanack* proclaim.⁵²⁸ And as the life of a woman saint centers wholly around unconditional obedience to the Father—indeed, she is often deemed worthy of sainthood in the first place by surrendering her life for the sake of the Father in grisly scenes of martyrdom—Barnes represents the childhood origins of Musset’s saintliness as an act of defiance against the will of the patriarch: though “developed in the Womb of her most gentle Mother to be a Boy,” when “she came forth an Inch or so less than this, she paid no Heed to the Error,” spending her girlhood outdoors among a pack of dogs, “which her Father could see, would by no Road, lead her to the Altar.”⁵²⁹ In spite of his efforts “to bring his erring Child back into that Religion and Activity which has ever been thought sufficient for a Woman; [...] some nice Church of the Catholic Order, with their Babes at Breast, and Husbands at Arm” she rejects the phallogocentric order: “And she answered him High enough, ‘Thou, good Governor, wast expecting a Son when you lay atop of your Choosing, why then be so mortal wounded when you perceive that you have your Wish? Am I not doing after your very Desire, and is it not the more commendable, seeing that I do it without the Tools for the Trade, and yet nothing complain?’”⁵³⁰

It is also worth noting that the cult of saints has not in every instance worked toward hegemonic ends. Kaup registers “an anarchic element in saints’ cults” which “spring up locally, as part of popular religion;” a “transgressive excess [...] that seems to escape the panoptic power of the Foucauldian disciplinary confessional” as “the organized Church and the clergy [...] can only partially control this spontaneous process through canonization procedures.”⁵³¹ With this other dimension of the cult of the saints in mind, therefore, the “apocryphal legend of Dame

⁵²⁸ Barnes, *Almanack*, 9.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³¹ Kaup, 98.

Evangeline Musset, narrated anonymously by ‘a Lady of Fashion,’ simulates the popular creation of a heroine outside official institutions and history.”⁵³² As *Almanack*’s subversion of hegemonic categorizations of gender and sexuality has been such a generative object of study, producing a myriad of analyses over the decades, that Barnes’ representation of the cult of saints has a noteworthy role to play in that project merits the attention of more than one critic. With the aim of carrying on the conversation and contributing to the preexisting work on this text, I discuss a dimension of Barnes’ writing that Kaup’s analysis of the Catholic neobaroque as critique of “modern scientific psychoanalytic and sexological discourse” in *Almanack* opens up—and, moreover, that the queer feminist readings lead up to but have yet to examine in-depth and head-on: *Almanack*’s queer intervention in the heteropatriarchal and phallogocentric notion of the female body and erotic desire as centered on the function of biological reproduction.

To return to Caserio’s survey on queer modernism, one of its many dimensions that he discusses is works that operate as “anti-social” testimony to the failed promises of modernity, which “argue a need for queer eros to retreat from political mega-narratives that run the world. Why drag the queer human sexual constitution backwards by delimiting it in terms of already spoiled modes of social and political life?”⁵³³ Though in the diverse biome of queer literary modernism there is a branch that proclaims queer subjects as bannermen for the coming of a new, modern socio-political utopia—in Caserio’s words, a “Citizen Queer” as “ideal members of any republic” who illustrate “that liberation of same-sex eros is an ultimate realization of democracy [...] anti-patriarchal and anti-dictatorial”⁵³⁴—there is another branch whose “swerve from political engagement proposes same-sex love as a measure of the inadequacy of all political

⁵³² Ibid., 99.

⁵³³ Caserio, 210.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 207.

models whereby the contemporary world is ordered;” such queer subjects therefore retreat from the fruitless efforts to realize such projects. Caserio indeed catalogs Barnes under the latter group, her modernism “unafraid to exchange political action for passion and passivity.”⁵³⁵ On this matter of modernist political projects, as T.S. Eliot famously authors the preface to *Nightwood*, it is common for critics to read Barnes in conversation with Eliotic formulations of modernism—and, stylistically and otherwise, there are many commonalities between the two, such as their incorporation of antique literary forms. For divergence, we have their respective ultimate hopes—or lack thereof—and visions for the future. As discussed in my first chapter’s analysis of *The Waste Land*, though redolent with anxieties over the state of the modern world, the major works of Eliot still yearn for regeneration; Barnes, however, harbors no such yearnings. Of course in *Nightwood* they are wholly foregone and lamented, as I will discuss—yet in the glibly irreverent *Almanack*, the desire for regeneration is more so wilfully dismissed rather than lost. For whatever it is worth, the life of Barnes herself, a great object of fascination to critics over the decades, certainly aligns with such a view. Considering her upbringing in a polygamist household overflowing with children—its two mothers perennially anguished by the pains of unanesthetized childbed, as well as overworked by the hopeless undertaking of caring for the ever-expanding brood under conditions of extreme poverty—her lifelong antipathy for childbirth and motherhood is well-known; as she once wrote in a letter to Emily Coleman: “father and his bastard children and mistresses had thrown me off marriage and babies.”⁵³⁶ True to this testimony, she became spouse and mother to no one, having a clandestine abortion the only time in her life that she became pregnant.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 213.

⁵³⁶ Quoted in Herring, 33.

⁵³⁷ Herring, 184. Herring writes that the surgeon was Dan Mahoney, the model for Dr. Matthew O’Connor in *Nightwood* and *Ryder*.

These facts of her life are known to dedicated readers of her work—an antipathy towards wanton, unchecked fertility that manifests in her autobiographical novel *Ryder* (1928), published in the same year as *Almanack*. Indeed, one noteworthy scene in *Ryder* depicts the two women of the household, Amelia and Kate—stand-ins for Barnes’ mother Elizabeth and stepmother Fanny, respectively—giving birth simultaneously in different parts of the house; and being that at one point in Barnes’ childhood these two women gave birth within a mere twelve days of each other, the fictional representation is not so far off from its real-life model. Considering the shared publication year of *Ryder* and *Almanack*, many have considered how these two works complement each other, juxtaposing “the filiative and the affiliative, heterosexual and homosexual worlds, [...] the world of the [heterosexual] patriarchal and birth family and that of the affiliative homosexual community.”⁵³⁸ As the opening lines from *Ryder*—comprising this section’s epigram, above—suggest, the novel is in large part a lambast of the conditions of her upbringing, the afflictions resulting from the profligacy of the father figure Wendell Ryder, a stand-in for the author’s own father, Wald Barnes: “Go not with fanatics who see beyond thee and thine,” the narration proclaims, “thy life and the lives thou begettest, and the lives that shall spring from them, world without end.” It is more than worth considering how *Almanack* also articulates this viewpoint from another direction altogether: not within a heteronormatively reproducing context, but in the context of a sapphic eroticism that ultimately refuses reproduction. After all, the text at one point directly frames the rejection of motherhood as a pathway to self-actualization for women in a revelation of Saint Musset’s, wherein she realizes that wisdom comes to women best when unburdened by the obligations of childcare: “And at

⁵³⁸ Kaup, 71.

fifty what has a Man but his wisdom [...] but to Woman it comes when she has no cause for Children and no effect for Babes! Then is she wise!”⁵³⁹

That being said, the anti-reproductive dimension of *Almanack* as component of its queer feminist critique merits further investigation—especially as it manifests largely through Barnes’ appropriation of Catholic religious culture, on which, as mentioned above, there is more to be explored. Through its representation of Evangeline Musset as the sensual, polyamorous patron saint of Left Bank lesbians, manipulating the parochial narrative form of hagiography to relate her protagonist’s rise to glory, the text articulates an alternate narrative of femininity and queerness that, I argue, forwards an anti-regenerative and anti-reproductive critical commentary. Rejecting heteropatriarchal psychoanalytic formulations of *eros*, as well as glibly dismissing the modernist obsession with social and cultural regeneration, in *Almanack*, Barnes’ queer hagiography forwards a conceptualization of desire among women centered not on a phallogocentric impulse to reproduce—the divine mandate to “be fruitful and multiply,” as it were—the negative motivation of penis envy, or even the power of the maternal body, but on the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. Rather than articulating a regeneration myth, *Almanack* articulates what one might call an unregeneration myth. An antiquated term suiting Barnes’ proclivity for antiquated writing styles,⁵⁴⁰ the word “unregenerate” denotes in the *Oxford English Dictionary* a state of being “not regenerate or reformed, spiritually [...] morally or intellectually.” This definition captures two significant meanings: one a simple negation of regenerative, the other a descriptor of a lifestyle of impiety and attitude of unrepentance. In a double sense, then, her irreverent reworking of Catholic religious culture to promote an alternate vision of the

⁵³⁹ Barnes, *Almanack*, 74.

⁵⁴⁰ According to the *OED*, the word originates in the mid-sixteenth century; usage of the term peaks in the seventeenth century, then sharply declines thereafter.

erotic that eschews reproduction—both biological and socio-political—is unregenerate: at once irreligious and dismissive of regeneration projects. The sapphic, hedonistic Eden that Barnes constructs out of the lesbian modernist Left Bank is a place of stasis, a world apart held in suspension—not regenerate according to the process of heterosexual reproduction, nor even necessarily degenerate according to the condition of modern alienation. *Almanack*'s unregenerate refusal thereby forwards its own queer modernism which actualizes same-sex desire as pleasure without burden.

On the inner workings of this disruption as they manifest in the text, it is vital to account for Barnes' manifold subversions at the level of both generic and narrative form—especially to foreground the discursive role that hagiography plays within this form, and from there to consider *Almanack*'s irreverent subversion of it. Regarding the significance of the genre that Barnes selects as her model—and whose conventions she radically reconstitutes—an almanack is by definition utilitarian in function, its composition centered on the task of creating temporal sequence and order that dictate the actions and judgments of the reader: in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an “annual table, or (more usually) a book of tables, containing a calendar of months and days, with astronomical data and calculations, ecclesiastical and other anniversaries, and other information, including astrological and meteorological forecasts.” The opening pages of *Almanack* indeed highlight this instructive purpose: “Thus begins this Almanack, which all Ladies should carry about with them, as the Priest his Breviary, as the Cook his Recipes, as the Doctor his Physic, as the Bride her Fears, and as the Lion his Roar!”⁵⁴¹ Centering on vocation and its appropriate practice, these lines situate the text within an almost taxonomic logic of various entities relegated to their proper place in society, ruled moreover according to the

⁵⁴¹ Barnes, *Almanack*, 9.

systematic grammars of their respective roles. As “the Priest his Breviary” parochializes, “the Doctor his Physic” medicalizes, and even “the Lion his Roar!” naturalizes, syllogistically inscribing its various subjects within an institutionalized order, that the bride figure is categorically produced by the negative, subjugating affective experience of fear—rather than knowledge, method, or expression, as with the other figures—foregrounds a preexisting phallogocentric regime of power constitutive of the almanack genre.⁵⁴² One may readily consider the ecclesiastical material, such as saints’ days and lives, often present in such almanacks to be a mechanism of maintaining this social order—an important point to keep in mind, as the parts of *Almanack* that center Evangeline Musset’s sainthood operate as vital sites of this order’s disruption, as will be discussed shortly.

Reinforcing this normative paradigm, moreover, is the organizational method of *Almanack* itself, its twelve chapters titled and ordered according to the linear framework of the months of the calendar year. Few studies on the text have abstained from discussing to some extent the normative connotations of this narrative structure with respect to linear, teleological modes of conceptualizing temporality—and, even more significantly, the body of the text’s outright departure from this rubric, even as its ordering principle persists across the chapter headings. As early as Louis Kannenstein’s foundational study on Barnes conducted prior to her critical revival, scholars have remarked on its “play on the almanack tradition” that “reaches back to the medieval mode of creating systems out of cosmic uncertainty,” yet through the “elaborate obscurity” of its narration conveys an “attitude toward recorded history” suggesting “that the grand systems of thought in the past have become muzzy or distorted [...] that time

⁵⁴² It is curious to note, however, that in Barnes’ illustration of these lines, the cook is a woman—written below the figure, “her recipes” rather than “his recipes,” as in the body of the text. See *Almanack*, 7.

revolves back upon itself and that progress is an illusion.”⁵⁴³ In her aforementioned study of *Almanack* as *écriture féminine*, Michel discusses the poststructural feminist underpinnings of this intervention in progressive temporal frameworks and teleological epistemologies—its role in confounding essential categorizations and power hierarchizations of sex and gender from within. As she reads the “linear and representational” almanack and calendar forms as manifestations of masculine writing, the element of feminine writing in the text, “multiple, parodic, of indefinite genre, allows Barnes to displace masculine writing” as well as “explore and disrupt definitions of Woman.”⁵⁴⁴ To return to the aforementioned lines of “Thus begins this Almanack, which all Ladies should carry about with them, as the Priest his Breviary, as the Cook his Recipes,” et cetera, as the reader progresses further into the text, it becomes increasingly clear the extent to which Barnes subverts expectations regarding the almanack’s conventional function as parochially instructive. Contrary to what these lines suggest, what one encounters in the pages that follow is not a systematic handbook detailing the proper guidelines on how to be a Lady with a capital “L,” or a Woman with a capital “W,” but a narrative that flies in the face of the very thought of it.

This overturning of patriarchal, parochialized forms of course readily lends itself to feminist interpretation—as Michel writes, *Almanack* as an “implicit project of subverting existing systems of signification—the phallogocentrism they signify and the patriarchy that phallogocentrism supports.”⁵⁴⁵ Based on this rupture of phallic linearity and order at the level of form and politics, it is tempting to forward the text as therefore gynocentrically reproductive in structure and logic. Meaning, one may rightly discern the operations of a cyclical

⁵⁴³ Kannenstine, 55.

⁵⁴⁴ Michel, 175-6.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 172.

conceptualization of time in the perennial nature of the calendar year, in which periods of decline give way to periods of growth and renewal across the eternal passing of the seasons. And yet, an interruption of the phallogocentric does not necessarily constitute its total erasure and subsumption by its gynocentric absolute inverse. Rather—and I want to be clear that I do not seek to foreclose *Almanack*'s feminist possibility through this observation, but to diversify it—preexisting feminist readings forward a commingling and confounding of phallogocentric and gynocentric temporal frameworks in the composition of the text—in Lanser's words, “not a beeline or a circle, but an uneven, irregular expedition, now meandering, now dashing, now turning back,” which “allows time to be both cyclic and linear.”⁵⁴⁶ Indeed, Michel reads the text's formal, structural, and generic ambiguities such as its nonlinearity as a means for Barnes “to displace masculine writing” and “to explore and disrupt definitions of Woman” as maintained by patriarchal order—a feminine writing that does not necessarily seek to replace that order with a gynocentric one, but rather “to undermine and perhaps escape it.”⁵⁴⁷ That being said, as neither phallogocentrism nor gynocentrism wholly prevail structurally or discursively, I find it fair to say that the text may be read as a refusal of both paradigms of the normative binary framework—an interruption of phallogocentric reproduction as well as gynocentric reproduction that ultimately disavows any compulsory obligation to regenerate for the sapphic community at hand, reconstituting the function of sex among women as primarily acts of pleasure. As this study now turns to an analysis of the passing of the months of the narrative themselves, these subversive, unregenerate underpinnings of *Almanack*'s experimentation with structure and form are important to keep in mind—especially when representations of the Catholic tradition of sainthood come into play.

⁵⁴⁶ Lanser, 159.

⁵⁴⁷ Michel, 176.

Across the months of the year that make up the body of the text, then, discernable is not just a devolution of phallogocentric order and its value systems as the year progresses, but within it an inversion of the conventional alignment of heteronormative reproduction with the regenerative seasons of summer and spring. Upending the logic of these proscriptive regimes of gender and sexuality and obstructing their operations, Barnes relegates them to the winter months, placing in their stead a vision of a sapphic paradise neither phallogocentric nor gynocentric, but a world apart—an evergreen, Edenic realm in stasis, suspended in eternal summer. Indeed, a pivotal yet under-considered aspect of the woodblock images in *Almanack* is that, in its representations of foliage across the spring and summer months, none of the trees bear any sort of fruit or flower, despite it being the season of fertility, abundance, and revivification. In the illustration for the month of May, for instance, two nude women lie together beneath the boughs of a tree whose branches hold leaves only, contrary to one's expectations of the season. Though the background of this image is populated by frolicking animals—a pair of cows, for instance—the effect is fairly one of juxtaposition, as the women in their pleasure turn away from these representations of animal procreation in favor of a more sophisticated conceptualization of sexuality. In a sense, moreover, the couple's rejection of this animal plane of existence may be read in turn as a rejection of essentializing, heteronormative discourses on homosexuality—a sexology that pathologizes same-sex desire under the guise of upholding a quote-on-quote “natural” order of sexuality as heterosexual procreation. What's more, the text immediately below it renders the renewal of spring as a form of pestilence: “Sweet May stood putting on her last venereal Touches” are the chapter's opening words—the line from which my title for this study derives—in which the connotations of sexually transmitted disease radically reframe the process of procreation as debilitating infection, an obstacle to the enjoyment of erotic pleasure.

For the month of August, the accompanying image contains similar evocations of a sapphic eroticism that rejects constructions of “naturalized” sexuality. Here, a woman climbs up the branches of a tree likewise bereft of fruit and flowers, positioned such that her bare rear end is plainly visible in a cheeky gesture characteristic of the text’s overall playfully lascivious and irreverent mood; flying about her is a group of winged insects which appear to be honeybees—another implicit evocation of “naturalized” sexological discourse. Based on her disgruntled posture and expression, it appears as if the woman has in fact absconded into the tree in an effort to extricate herself from the verminous creatures about her—and the heteronormative reproductive order they gesture to—encroaching on her person, a veritable pestilence that upends the customary associations of the season with fertility. If the bees take her to be the absent flower that they are driven to pollinate, their instinct is mistaken, as here is a portrait of a woman’s refusal to be subsumed into that regime.

To round out this inversion of the seasons and its concurrent intervention in the machinery of heteropatriarchal narratives on sexuality and reproduction, Barnes in turn relegates the adherents to these narratives in the cold of winter—in effect, a sterilization of these normative views which takes from them their viability and futurity. For the month of January, a barren time in which “the Plough is put away with the Harrow, and the Fields give their Surface to a Harvest of now, which no Sickle garners, and for which no Grange languishes,”⁵⁴⁸ its sovereign figure is Patience Scalpel, the sole heterosexual woman of the *Almanack* who operates as embodiment of heteronormative womanhood. As the father of Dame Evangeline Musset is in the introductory section the rejected voice of heterosexual order from the patriarchal vantage point, as the year begins, Patience Scalpel takes up this same cause, but from the matriarchal

⁵⁴⁸ Barnes, *Almanack*, 11.

perspective.⁵⁴⁹ Her role is in essence to express confusion and incredulity at the lesbian community before her: ““In my time [...] Women came to enough trouble by lying abed with the Father of their Children. What then in this good Year of our Lord has paired them like to like, with never a Beard between them,””⁵⁵⁰ she exclaims. The line is not an unmitigated praise of heterosexual union, to be sure, yet its inverse is regarded as much the worse—an aberration and affront in the progression of “this good Year of our Lord” and the patriarchal teleological system it gestures to. The epithet “Father of their Children” in reference to men is also telling, centering the reproductive function as the constitutive purpose of sex—not to mention of the subjects who engage in it—according to the logic of a patrilineal social order. Indeed, what is for Patience Scalpel so especially outrageous about women pairing “like to like” is that they do not reproduce, which she views as a deviation from nature:

“where a Peewit [bird] was yet content to mate it hot among the Branches, making for himself a Covey in the olden Formula, ‘they love the striking hour, nor would breed the Moments that go to it. Sluts! [...] Are good Mothers to supply them with Luxuries in the next Generation; for they themselves will have no Shes, unless some Her puts them forth! Well I’m not the Woman for it! They well have to pluck where they may. My Daughters shall go amarrying!’”⁵⁵¹

Here, Patience is the mouthpiece of a telltale criticism levied against homosexuality since time immemorial—purportedly, that it threatens futurity because it begets no children: “they themselves will have no Shes, unless some Her puts them forth!” That the “Her” with a capital “H” in this passage refers not to the women of the *Almanack*’s sapphic cohort, but instead to women who biologically reproduce, is also indicative of an essentializing and limited notion of

⁵⁴⁹ Through the roman à clef lens, Patience Scalpel is widely understood to be inspired by the figure of Mina Loy—see Parsons, 53-4. However, to conclude from this parallel that the representation is indicative of ill-will on the part of Barnes against Loy would be hasty. The two were close friends, and Loy’s daughter Fabienne even assisted Barnes in the production of *Almanack*.

⁵⁵⁰ Barnes, *Almanack*, 12.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

womanhood. In Patience's estimation, claims to the designation of "Her" may only be made by the so-called "good Mothers" of society, and those women who do not take on the task of motherhood are beyond the pale of this circumscribed definition of femininity—not "Shes," but "Sluts!" In these closing lines of the "January" section, we observe Patience proclaim her commitment to the propagation of the species according to the logic of the "olden Formula," or the framework of heterosexual matrimony—that her "Daughters shall go amarrying!" And yet, her name ascribes an irony to her discourse of naturalizing heterosexuality: a first name suggesting puritanical notions of womanly virtue, attached moreover to a surname with overt medical connotations—which, as many critics have noted, gesture toward a satirization of the pathologizing sexological discourse of the moment. The prose of "January" echoes these associations; in a voice "as cutting in its Derision as a surgical Instrument," her jabs at the sapphic community are sharp: "'And what,' she said, 'the silly creatures may mean by it is more than I can diagnose!'"⁵⁵² That these women are *beyond* the scope of her diagnostic abilities is quite telling. Confounding the codifications of heteronormative taxonomy, they frustrate and exhaust efforts of dissection, demarcating the limits of its system of categorization and thereby undermining its status as universal and natural order. Indeed, meeting the sharpness of Patience Scalpel's moniker, Barnes playfully yet incisively undercuts the through the visual component of her chosen medium, cheekily inserting a woodblock image of the young Evangeline Musset in the center of the paragraph, blazoned with a ribbon on which the words "thus Evangeline began her career" are inscribed. The effects of this arrangement of text and image on the reading experience are subtle yet worth elaboration. As the reader attempts to move through this heteronormative diatribe, the figure of the child Saint Evangeline—self-willed and disobedient

⁵⁵² Ibid., 11.

toward the dictates of her father, not to mention of polite society as a whole—persistently and impertinently interrupts the dissemination of Patience’s message. The whimsical use of the almanack form—and all its aforementioned ideological trappings—is at once a spatial and ideological disruption in the progression of heteronormative hegemony.

Such is how Evangeline begins her career: a disruptive tendency that only intensifies as time progresses, and which the “February” section further evidences. In her monograph on Barnes, Diane Warren remarks on the “parallel text format” of this chapter, which is split down the center into two columns: in the left-hand column, the principal text, and in the right-hand column a catalog—also ordered according to the months of the calendar year, which therein also chart Evangeline’s life story from childhood to old age—which recounts the events that validate her canonization.⁵⁵³ As Warren discusses this split form as a point of evidence for *Almanack*’s overall sense of polyphony that confounds categorical gender formations, I seek to supplement her analysis through further examination of the implications of the right-hand column when considered from the hagiographical lens. Historically, the processes through which the cult⁵⁵⁴ of a saint emerges and a figure becomes canonized are highly variable, especially when taking into account the judgments of popular authority in addition to institutional authority. That being said, it is reasonable to say broadly that an individual is sainted for an assemblage of virtuous conduct and miraculous works. In other words, to be considered worthy of veneration, one must have lived an exceptionally godly life as well as performed marvelous deeds through the divine power that such godliness would grant. Of course, especially according to the view of institutional authority, another significant criterion of sainthood is not being alive—their spirit having

⁵⁵³ Warren, 77.

⁵⁵⁴ Here I use the word “cult” not in its contemporary pejorative sense, but in reference to a group of religious devotees.

departed this mortal realm for the spiritual, from which they may intercede in the affairs of the living as a shower of roses from the heavens, to evoke the language of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Again by dint of the almanack format's particularities, shaped at once by linear and cyclical frameworks, the right-hand column provides the reader with a chronicle of Evangeline's saintly deeds over the course of her life's entirety, from birth to grave, when her story has only just begun—notably, another interruption of the phallogocentric. While many stories of the saints are admittedly bizarre, the chronicle at hand is exceedingly outré: rather than a series of pious works evocative of a St. Thérèse strewing rose petals in reverence of the sweetness of the child Christ, Evangeline's are rose petals that one would encounter scattered about a perfumed boudoir in the pages of a courtesan novel. Such bold, irreverent displays of sensuality in effect profane oppressive models of Christian virtue, proclaiming in their stead a new paradigm of virtue centered on bodily pleasure among women. Playfully, the text recounts a series of erotic ventures—and whether understood as miraculous or exceptionally virtuous, the irreverence is appreciable—the likes of “[baying] up a Tree whose Leaves had no Turning and whose Name was Florella.”⁵⁵⁵ (And here the reader's mind may draw a connection between this suggestive line and the aforementioned image of a woman in the branches of a tree.) Spanning the whole of Evangeline's life, these ventures are truly a lifetime's worth—as November's event suggests, in which at the age of “eighty-eight she said, ‘It's a Hook Girl, not a Button, you should know your Dress better’”⁵⁵⁶ with the insinuation that Evangeline goes on to play the role of seductress nearly to her nineties, as Natalie Barney would herself go on to do.

Evident across these escapades, furthermore, is the subversion of heteropatriarchal power structures precisely through this practice of erotic virtue—for instance, “[hushing] a Near-Bride

⁵⁵⁵ Barnes, *Almanack*, 15.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

with the left Flounce of her Ruffle that her Father in sleeping might not know of the oh!”⁵⁵⁷ That Evangeline here seduces a “Near-Bride” is especially noteworthy, as this miraculous seduction takes a woman away from her imminent subsumption into the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage—and “that her Father in sleeping might not know” no less, an illicit conversion into the cult of sapphism that transpires beyond the orbit of the Father’s gaze, at once demarcating the limits of its authority and overthrowing its state of control from within. There are other examples on this point that one may consider—turning “a Harlot [into] a good Woman by making her Mistress” as “all Men before her,”⁵⁵⁸ for instance. Not to belabor the point, however, suffice it to say that, as the very first event heralding her saintliness is when “new whelped, she was found to have missed by an Inch”⁵⁵⁹—in reference to the opening passage in which she rejects relegation to a state of impotence despite being born “without the Tools for the Trade,” an act of defiance against her father’s judgments—phallogocentric interruption is her origin story, the inaugural force propelling her holy mission.

True to the centrality of Catholic iconography as vehicle for this mission, as well as its interruptive faculty, is again the use of a woodblock image as both spatial and ideological intrusion. Even as the pages of the “February” section themselves are bifurcated, the coherence of the chapter as a whole is further ruptured by the placement of a full-page illumination of Evangeline exactly halfway through it. The image presents to the reader the full vision of her sapphic cult and its grandeur; poised atop a tasseled cushion in all her saintly glory, Evangeline is here extravagantly adorned with all the accouterments of holiness in a manner fit to be ensconced in the halls of a chapel: bands of worshipers kneeling about her feet, hands clasped

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 14-5.

together in prayer; beams of light radiating in a halo about her crowned head, further framed by a semicircle of cherubs flapping their feathered wings about her. As Kaup writes, Barnes here borrows from “the baroque iconography of saints,” the “visual code of Catholic holy images” in which “saints are recognized by their ‘attributes’—emblematic objects such as clothing, animals, or physical postures and gestures that refer to key episodes in the saint’s personal life.”⁵⁶⁰ In reference to this image, Kaup identifies Evangeline’s attributes as the heart and the rose—a heart held up in her right hand, a rose in her left hand—which signify “her modern, queer ‘order’” and “her missionary service on behalf of earthly same-sex love.”⁵⁶¹ Indeed, nearly every religious emblem in this image may be fairly read as eroticized: the heart that she holds aloft not the burning Sacred Heart of Jesus representative of Christ’s love for all of man, but a sensuous heart of burning desire for all women; the rose in her hand not a Marian rose, or a miracle of roses recursive across various women’s hagiographies, but positioned such that it appears she is on the verge of tossing it to the flock of adoring women about her in an amorous gesture of seductive charm. And, to the reader’s great diversion, if one looks closely at the rainbow of cherubs arching over her, one observes that these are not infantile cherubim evocative of unsullied purity and innocence; rather, they are in fact winged women, each of them endowed with a pair of heaving breasts. Here I will add the possibility of this facet contributing to the “unregenerate” reading of *Almanack*, as I have been calling it: Barnes’ winsome and unapologetic vandalization of images of holy infancy, redolent as they are of futurity, promise, and renewal. As these images are overlaid and subsumed by illustrations of female anatomy, breasts, which are detached from their biological function of nourishing offspring, they center an alternate function divorced from the reproductive impetus—one meant instead for mirthful enjoyment in sensuous pleasure for its

⁵⁶⁰ Kaup, 101.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

own sake among the sapphic community here represented, the selfsame community constitutive of its contemporaneous readership. Thus the multilayeredness of Barnes' retooling of Catholic cults of the saints—both the imagery and narratives of the creative productions these cults generate—justify a renewed attention to the significance of religious culture in queer literary modernism as armature for its varied projects against heteronormative, phallogocentric, and patrilineal injunctions.

Concerning its critique of the above power structures, moreover, *Almanack* by no means limits its scope to their more overt manifestations in patriarchal and matriarchal figures such as Musset's father and Patience Scalpel, respectively. As the narrative moves out of the coldest and least generative months—ironically associated with the two figures most dedicated to a heteronormative reproductive order—and into the liminal time of March that hovers between winter and spring, the lampoon here shifts its attention to how this order may manifest even within the fold of same-sex partnerships. Here enter the figures of Tilly-Tweed-in-Blood and Lady Buck-and-Balk, a pair committed to lesbianism and expressive of misandry, yet who ultimately fail to extricate themselves from the firm hold of phallogocentric hegemony. The two are widely recognized to be caricatures of English writer Radclyffe Hall—whose *Well of Loneliness* and its Catholic engagements will be examined further on—and sculptor Una Troubridge, life partners and larger-than-life figures in early-twentieth-century British queer history. As both of these creatives are controversially known for their devoted Catholicism and decided conservatism, so too do their avatars champion the adoption of conservative values for lesbian couples. Whether these figures may be considered a part of Musset's sapphic cult is difficult to ascertain, an indeterminacy that speaks to their ambivalent and ultimately complicit positionality; while they are part of Musset's circle, seated in her salon and engaging in dialogue

on sapphic matters, by no means do they share that salon's values. Though Buck-and-Balk remarks "would that we could do away with Man altogether!" with yearning for a society of women the likes of Musset's cult, Tweed-in-Blood rejects the possibility, her remark reinscribing the paradigm of clearly demarcated gender roles according to a masculine-feminine binary: 'we need them for carrying of Coals, lifting of Beams, and things of one kind or another.'⁵⁶² The most overt indication of their complicity in heteronormative hegemony is their affirmation of the adoption of marriage for same-sex couples. As they proclaim to Dame Musset in unison:

"Just because woman falls, in this Age, to Woman, does that mean that we are not to recognize Morals? What has England done to legalize these Passions? Nothing! [...] Most wretchedly never that I have heard of, nor one such Pair seen later in a Bed of Matrimony, [...] But have, ever since the instigation of that Alliance, lain abed out of Wedlock, sinning in a double and similar Sin; rising unprovided for by Church or Certificate; Fornicating in an Evil so exactly of a piece, that the Judgement Call must be answered in a Trembling Tandem! Therefore we think to bring the Point to the Notice of our Judges, and have it set before the House of Lords."⁵⁶³

Permeating the language of the above diatribe are two significant and deeply interwoven discursive strains of heteropatriarchal authority, in effect unified as two extensions of the same institutional order. The first is that of legal authority, in which relationships between women who have "lain abed out of Wedlock" will be put under the jurisdiction of the state, subject to the "Notice of our Judges" and the sway of the "House of Lords." While they maintain that such measures would turn out for the greater good of women—"For when a Girl falls in Love, with no matter what, should she not be protected in some way, from Hazard, ever attending that which is illegal?"⁵⁶⁴—such notions are still founded in a paternalistic view of femininity. Note that in their vision, it is only "Girl[s]" who merit such protection, from the "Hazard" of a vague, dehumanizing "what," no less, rendering the parties involved as either exploitable ingenues or

⁵⁶² Barnes, *Almanack*, 24.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

enigmatically threatening genderless nonentities—a bizarre assumption, as neither Buck-and-Balk or Tweed-in-Blood appear to align with either side of this paradigm. The power of such a state, moreover, is inextricably linked with that of the church, the second heteropatriarchal institution in operation—and here the language is unequivocal as mechanism of subjugation: “sinning in a double and similar Sin; rising unprovided for by Church or Certificate; Fornicating in an Evil so exactly of a piece, that the Judgment Call must be answered in a Trembling Tandem!” In this manner, religious discourse again comes into play as regulatory force against homosexuality; while according to its logic even heterosexual intercourse would be considered “Fornicating in an Evil” if taking place outside of wedlock, in the case of two women, the offense to conventional morality is multiplied twofold: “sinning in a double and similar Sin [...] so exactly of a piece,” the perennial function of sin as social stigma and regulatory apparatus in full force.

While it may be argued that this campaign for same-sex marriage still constitutes an interruption due to its lack of consideration for issues of progeny, Barnes forecloses on that possibility through the entrance of the character of Masie Tuck-and-Frill into Musset’s salon. This Tuck-and-Frill is a veritable caricature of social mandates to reproduce, more specifically as that mandate is conceived and perpetuated by a stereotypical maternal impulse rooted in traditional notions of femininity as nurturing motherhood. In a sense, then, following on the heels of Buck-and-Balk and Tweed-in-Blood’s diatribe, their viewpoint may be said to open the door, so to speak, for her intervention in Musset’s space. Accompanying her entrance is an illustration expressive of this maternal rhetoric: a piece of sheet music entitled “Lullaby for a Lady’s Lady,” encircled by an ornate frame of arabesques and curlicues from which flowers grow. At the conjoining point of this gilt wreath, these flourishes converge upon an all-too-

telling picture: an infant ensconced within the shape of a heart, behind which shines an image of the sun peeking out over the horizon—and whether it be a rising sun or setting sun is perhaps a matter of the reader’s discretion. As for the text, it makes clear that the “Lady’s Lady” of the song’s title gestures not to an amatory dynamic as with Musset, but a maternal one, as Masie Tuck-and-Frill “sing[s] the first Lullaby ever cast for a Girl’s Girl should she one day become a Mother.”⁵⁶⁵ The promulgation of ingrained notions of femininity as motherhood are here palpable, as this “first Lullaby” presents the social conditioning towards reproduction commencing even before a child leaves its cradle. As with Buck-and-Balk and Tweed-in-Blood’s monologue, moreover, the use of “Girl” is condescending; to Tuck-and-Frill, there are but two roles among the feminine: either a girl or a mother, not simply a woman.

As with the previous caricatures, however, *Almanack* thoroughly skewers Tuck-and-Frill, presenting her role as entirely at odds with modern womanhood: as the cult of sapphism grows, she is “because of the Trend of the Times, lamentably out of a Job, [...] called to no Beds,” yet clinging to the “fond Delusion that in one Way or another, the Pretties would yet whelp a little Sweet [...] ‘For,’ as she said, ‘Creation has ever been too Marvellous for us to doubt of it now, and though the Medieval way is still thought good enough, what is to prevent some modern Girl from rising from the Couch of a Girl as modern, with something new in her Mind?’”⁵⁶⁶ Considering the antiquated quality of the almanack genre at hand, in particular its attendant characteristic of reinscribing order, that Tuck-and-Frill’s “fond Delusion” of motherhood as “Medieval” is multivalent, especially in contrast with the “Trend[s] of the Times” such as increasing proliferation in modes of sexual expression, as well as shifting social norms on the rights and status of women. And yet, considering as well the multiplicities of organizational and

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 21-2.

discursive paradigms contained within the almanack form—e.g. linear, cyclical, Christian, pagan—that in their variance contradict and undermine each other, in this month of March we find another self-reflexive use of the space of the page itself for satirical purposes. As if in answer to the social anxiety that Tuck-and-Frill’s dialogue registers on the futurity of the species as she is “called to no Beds,” the text intercalates its own tongue-in-cheek, unregenerate creation myth into the fretful banter on the degradation of traditional values that dominates the chapter. Considering that this myth first nudges its way into the lower right-hand corner of the penultimate page of the chapter, then on the final page overtakes half of the space in another two-columned arrangement, one may fairly read it as akin to the spatial manipulations of the previous sections: discursive interruptions as much as formal ones. And, indeed, the myth flies in the face of Tuck-and-Frill’s concern, absolving its readership of the responsibility to bear and raise children:

“all the Angels, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricornus, Aquarius, Pisces, all, all gathered together, so close that they were not recognizable, one from the other. And not nine Months later, there was heard under the Dome of Heaven a great Crowing, and from the Midst, an Egg, as incredible as a thing forgotten, fell to Earth, and striking, split and hatched, and from out of it stepped one saying ‘Pardon me, I must be going!’ And this was the first Woman born with a Difference. After this the Angels parted, and on the Face of each was the Mother look. Why was that?”⁵⁶⁷

Looking back as well to Patience Scalpel’s critique of Musset’s cult—that “they themselves will have no Shes, unless some Her puts them forth”—the above passage is an outright refusal. While the perspectives of Scalpel and Tuck-and-Frill demand that this community hold itself accountable to the question of reproducing itself, to *Almanack*, it is simply a non-issue—a matter left to the stars, nothing of concern for any woman in Musset’s fold. In the extant scholarship, critics have undertaken various readings of this curious scene and its subversive capacities, in

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 24-5.

which its challenge to patriarchal regimes, both theological and empirical, is recurrent. Lanser, for one, reads it as a parody of Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, namely its “discussion of ‘Whether Women Should Have Been Made in the First Production of Things’” which upholds the normative view that “the value of woman is in her role as man’s helper in reproduction.”⁵⁶⁸ Michel in turn broadens the scope of the scene’s satirization of religious discourse, writing that it “also speaks to any theological account of Woman’s origin” as it “displaces the myth of castration, of Woman as made from Man,” and moreover “resonates in dialogue with psychoanalytic, sexological, and evolutionary accounts.”⁵⁶⁹ Indeed, Kaup expands on this latter point, reading the scene as an instance of the text’s appropriation of “biblical narrative to invent a countermyth to sexology’s social Darwinist account of degenerate sexuality” and to “multiply rather than reduce principles of understanding, highlighting the creative principle underpinning philosophy and science.”⁵⁷⁰ To this conversation on the passage’s confounding biblical and biological imperatives undergirding hetero-patriarchal power structures, I add that there is also a rejection of the condition of maternity as social necessity writ large. In this I am somewhat reading against the grain, especially as the scene does constitute an act of creation. There is some openness, however, to the question of who or what brings this “first Woman born with a Difference” into being, or exactly how she is brought into being. And here my analysis differs from those of Michel and Lanser, who read the scene as an affirmation of collaborative gynocentric reproduction: for the latter, the moment is a “myth of all-female birth,”⁵⁷¹ and for the former “this ‘Eve’ is exclusively, and multiply, mothered.”⁵⁷² Nevertheless, it is important to

⁵⁶⁸ Lanser, 162.

⁵⁶⁹ Michel, 178.

⁵⁷⁰ Kaup, 101.

⁵⁷¹ Lanser, 162.

⁵⁷² Michel, 178.

recall the above point that neither phallogocentric nor gynocentric paradigms prevail in this text—and here, there are beings who participate in her creation that are neither men nor women. As this story is titled “Zodiac,” after all, it is not just the angels—whose gender, based on the description in the text as well as the illustration provided, is indeterminate—who make up the cosmic soup that brings forth this woman, but also “Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricornus, Aquarius, Pisces, all, all gathered together, so close that they were not recognizable, one from the other.” In this celestial melange where divinities, humanoids, animals, and even objects commingle, discernible as well is a confounding of cosmologies that undercuts the supremacy of hetero-patriarchal Christian discourse—and here I am taking from Warren, who writes on how the “scene conflates mythologies, in this case combining Christian angels with the constellations expressed in the classical and pagan zodiac” whereby “Classical/Christian distinctions are elided” and “the Christian hierarchy of angels has vanished.”⁵⁷³ Moreover, it must be remarked that no acts of mothering or nurturing occur in the above passage—in fact, they are quite unnecessary, as the woman with a difference appears to be fully grown, a sapphic Athena of sorts, yet without a patriarchal Zeus’ cranium to spring from: “an Egg [...] split and hatched, and from out of it stepped one saying ‘Pardon me, I must be going!’” To be sure, as the closing line of the section ends with a question, that “After this the Angels parted, and on the Face of each was the Mother look. Why was that?” it is as if the text were questioning and professing its skepticism at the maternal impulse itself. Indeed, the only other image in *Almanack* that could be said to gesture to motherhood, in the “August” chapter, is a woodblock picture of a woman holding up over her head what appears to be a small child, her

⁵⁷³ Warren, 91.

opposite hand and leg pulled back, as if she were about to punt it into the sky—by no means a benevolent Madonna figure.

To close this analysis on *Almanack*'s appropriation of Christian—and predominantly Catholic—religious culture as armature for its critique of hetero-patriarchal hegemony and valorization of an unapologetically unregenerate, sapphic sexuality centered on pleasure rather than procreation, there remains one major passage to discuss: the death of Saint Musset that concludes the text in the “December” chapter, and most importantly its irreverent retooling of the concept of the holy relic. While in the religious sense of the word—as in, a venerable object with spiritual significance—relics are to be found in belief systems the world over, Barnes’ use of hagiography and iconography of the saints compels a reading of this final chapter with its Catholic engagements in full consideration. To circle back to hagiography, then, Kaup remarks that in the history of the saints, the narrative of Musset’s sainthood is more a gesture to medieval hagiography rather than ancient; as opposed to “the martyrs of the early Christian Church [...] saints that have emerged since the Middle Ages have tended to be founders, reformers, or simply members of religious orders [...] who typically died a natural death.”⁵⁷⁴ As Musset here passes away at the advanced age of ninety-nine, having lived a full life carrying out her mission of converting women to lesbianism, Barnes thereby rejects “the paradigm of holy martyrdom to eschew the tragic script of lesbian identity,” taking as her model instead “the persona of legendary founders of religious communities” in an irreverent gesture which overlays “the elitism of Natalie Barney’s Left Bank salon with the religious countersocieties of the past.”⁵⁷⁵ To be sure, here is another instance of *Almanack* donning the costume of normative religious discourse to forward its own mode of being and confound pre-existing order. On that note, it is

⁵⁷⁴ Kaup, 97.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 97, 103.

significant that Musset's cult of devotees holds not one funeral for her commemoration, but several, in which her body is variously interred and disinterred in numerous locales. We witness her devotees mourn her "in the darkness of the Catholic Church," bury her alternately "in the Earth of a little Village," then "in a great City," and thereafter numerous places "shallow and some deep," until finally they "put her upon a great Pyre and burned her to the Heart,"⁵⁷⁶ a gesture that undercuts the Catholic starting point of her memorialization, considering the Church's historical disinclination toward cremation. This elaborate process is in fact carried out according to Musset's specifications, based on her mission as a converter of women: having "many Mourners of many Races and many Tempers," she declares it fitting for her to have "as many manner of Rites of Interment and ending, burning and cracking as there be ingenuity,"⁵⁷⁷ an act in which the funeral rites of multiple traditions are blended and undermine each other for preeminence, a de-hierarchization of cosmologies.

Within these multitudinous funeral rites, moreover, is an irreverently subversive retooling of the notion of the holy relic, especially in the context of the religious history and culture of the Catholic saints. This element appears in the moment of Musset's cremation, in which one final, posthumous miraculous event occurs in testament to her sainthood:

"And when [her followers] came to the ash that was left of her, all had burned but the Tongue, and this flamed, and would not suffer Ash, and it played about upon the handful that had been she indeed. And seeing this, there was a great Commotion, and the sound of Skirts swirled in haste, [...] but Señorita Fly-About [a devotee] came down upon that Urn first, and beatitude played and flickered upon her Face, and from under her Skirts a slow Smoke issued, though no thing burned [...] And yet a little later between them in its Urn on high, they took the Ashes and the Fire, and placed it on the Altar in the Temple of Love."⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁶ Barnes, *Almanack*, 82-3.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

As touched on in the earlier discussion of the “February” chapter, a major criterion for canonization is a catalogue of marvelous signs in demonstration of their proximity to God—and here is an overt indication, in which Evangeline’s tongue not only survives the blaze of her funeral pyre, but persists in the work of her ministry besides. To be sure, many critics have taken up analyses of this image in its feminist multivalence, principally its connections to language and eroticism. In Lanser’s words, Musset’s reanimated tongue carries a “double signature of sexuality and textuality” which is at once a reclamation of “the positivity of the female body and the lesbian experience” through its centering of oral pleasure, as well as a “reclamation of female voice;” a “Last Signifier that displaces the Phallus in preeminence.”⁵⁷⁹ Michel likewise takes up how the image “symbolically links specifically female, lesbian passion and the power of women’s language” yet considers the ambiguity of its severance from the body: that “a tongue without a mouth may [...] give sexual pleasure, but it cannot speak.”⁵⁸⁰ Such equivocality thereby speaks to her broader reading of *Almanack* as representation of “the value of ideas of the feminine and feminine writing [that] consists less in their postulation of a new language [...] than in the possibilities they offer for new ways of thinking language” through “an unstable irony that also invokes the masculine: the text is always potentially compromised by that which it subverts.”⁵⁸¹ As these distinct connotations of the tongue speak to its queer feminist intervention, so too does its implicit religious dimension: as Lanser at one point refers to it as a “pentecostal ‘tongue of flame’”⁵⁸² in passing, in reference to the episode in the Christian mythos following the resurrection of Christ, in which the spirit of God descends on his disciples, compelling them to go forth and bring the masses into the fold of the nascent church. Kaup explores further the

⁵⁷⁹ Lanser, 163, 164.

⁵⁸⁰ Michel, 182.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Lanser, 163.

parallels between this biblical event and Musset's own impetus to convert women to the church of sapphism, that "Barnes heretically appropriates the Pentecostal imagery of holy tongues given to the apostles" for parodic purposes, thereby subverting dominant discourses on homosexuality as abnormality.⁵⁸³

With this scene's satirical appropriation of Christian elements in mind, then, another instance worthy of discussion is the presentation of Evangeline's tongue as holy relic. In the Catholic religious tradition which *Almanack* parodies, while there are multiple classifications and gradations on what constitutes a relic, the bodily remnants of saints are an especially well-known and venerable category—the skull of St. John the Baptist, for instance, or the finger of St. Thomas. Historically, locales that house such relics are often sites of pilgrimage for devotees of the given saint to profess their devotion and request intercession; and, while the worship of relics is technically discouraged by church authority, many popular and folk traditions ascribe to these remains a certain supernatural power. It is thereby fair to read Musset's tongue as a relic, as it comes from the body of a canonized saint, possesses miraculous powers in its ability to move and act on its own in service of its devotees, so to speak, and is enshrined in a reliquary at which her followers may gather and venerate her, the so-named "Altar in the Temple of Love." In many cases, moreover, body parts representative of the saint's particular virtues, good works, or miraculous signs are especially prized—e.g., the head of theologian St. Thomas Aquinas. That Saint Musset's relic is her tongue, then, is *Almanack's* final grand gesture in its project to intervene in the heteronormative order perpetuated by institutional religion, namely through its articulation of a new paradigm of virtue as the giving and receiving of erotic pleasure. If the skull of Aquinas is a manifestation of the godliness in that saint's faculties of mind, then the tongue of

⁵⁸³ Kaup, 103.

Musset is likewise a manifestation of the godliness inherent in her sexual faculties. In the language of the passage itself, moreover, the look of “beatitude” on the face of the acolyte Señorita Fly-About is indicative of a state of joy and blessedness due not to having received the wisdom of Christ, but to having received the sensual bliss of orgasm; the “Temple of Love” that her followers construct dedicated not to brotherly love, but to homoerotic love between women. In all, the moment is an ultimate profanation of the seeming inviolability of religious institutional hegemony via the eroticization of what those institutions hold sacred. Indeed, if one applies a Durkheimian formulation of the sacred as the collectively-imagined socially inviolable to this scene—to quote from the *Elementary Forms*, the “sacred thing” as “that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity”⁵⁸⁴—then the fact that the tongue here pleasures the bodies of its devotees, and with great impunity indeed, may be read as a breach of the utmost extreme. It is lastly a prime example of Barnes’ unregenerate subversion as I have been discussing it, in the double sense of irreverence as well as refusal to participate in the modernist task of sociocultural regeneration. As oral sex is the act at hand—one that circumvents the procreative function of sex in favor of pleasure exclusively—it removes biological reproduction from its place of prominence on the altar of sexuality, putting in its stead an icon representative of the primacy of sapphic erotic desire. Through the examination of *Almanack*’s meaningful, subversive, and exceptionally humorous engagements with sainthood such as this moment, therefore, I hope I have made a case that sufficiently justifies further exploration of Catholic engagements in Barnes’ work—elucidating the text as a key enclave of the queer feminine Catholic modernist tradition that is the focus of this chapter.

⁵⁸⁴ Durkheim, 38.

Our Lady of Sorrows: Mariology, the Latrine Confessional, and the Impure Sacred in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*

Of course, the discussion of a single text does not constitute sufficient evidence—and one could not make a thorough study of engagements with Catholicism in Barnes' oeuvre without an examination of her 1936 magnum opus, the iconic *Nightwood*, which shares with *Almanack* a marvelously subversive retooling of Catholic iconography and ritual as antinomian critique of heteronormative regimes. To be sure, there are marked dissimilarities between *Almanack* and *Nightwood* that one must be conscious of, namely factors of tone and ultimate social vision. Considering the former's pronounced satirical slant, while it may be an oversimplification to proclaim *Almanack* an unequivocally celebratory representation of lesbian community, its profuse humor makes for an unabashedly whimsical reading experience—not unchallenging in the density and obscurity of its prose, yet an occasion for great amusement in its caricaturization, suggestiveness, and overall mood of irreverence. Moreover, to gesture back to my above discussion on *Almanack*'s unregenerate subversion of the seasons, its representation of the queer expatriate subculture constituting its subject is rendered in lighter hues—an unrepentant refusal of heterosexual regeneration on the part of an Edenic, sapphic otherworld whose preoccupation is an unfettered delectation in orgiastic delight. By contrast, and true to its name, *Nightwood* presents to the reader a dark and despairing vision of an underworld in an advanced state of decay, its representation of the very same queer expatriate subculture famously peopled by wayward and forsaken social pariahs plagued by conditions of extreme alienation and anomie.

However, for my purposes of considering Barnes' modernism as running counter to the paradigmatic quest for regeneration via her queer retoolings of Catholic religious culture, this point of divergence between *Almanack* and *Nightwood* is simultaneously a commonality. To refer to my earlier phrasing of unregeneration, if the unregenerate is at once an embrace of the

irreligious and a disavowal of the regenerate, then *Nightwood* in its widely-known preoccupation with social degeneration, as well as its denial of futurity, is a decidedly unregenerate novel. Indeed, the only biological mother in *Nightwood* who reproduces under heteronormative kinship structures, Robin Vote, is an absentee mother who vehemently rejects the maternal role, not to mention heterosexual marriage and monogamy writ large: “I didn’t want him!” she vehemently exclaims to her husband Felix shortly after the birth of their son Guido, thereafter leaving child and spouse to take up a nomadic lifestyle propelled by a series of lesbian affairs.⁵⁸⁵ While the product of this abortive marriage will be discussed in greater detail below, suffice it to say that the child’s constitution is one of illness, weakness, and stunted development, indicative of an enervated heteropatriarchal institution’s declining capacity to reproduce itself: it “slept too much in a quivering palsy of nerves; it made few voluntary movements; it whimpered.”⁵⁸⁶ As Daniella Caselli observes in her monograph on Barnes, “*Nightwood* presents us with children that in addition to finally disrupting the heterosexual dream of regeneration, figure the inevitable process of orphaning and descent into human consciousness and decay,” embodying the novel’s “resistance to the heterosexual generative logic of procreation,”⁵⁸⁷ as well as providing a grim vision of the fate in store for queer women who stand beyond the protective orbit of Saint Musset’s sapphic fold.

That being said, and almost needless to be said, the critical acclaim surrounding *Nightwood* as a watershed title of the queer modernist literary canon foregrounds between the two works a shared project of confounding the logic of heteronormative, phallogocentric order. Judith Lee for instance discusses how “the significance of *Nightwood* as a modern text derives

⁵⁸⁵ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 53.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁸⁷ Caselli, 188, 190.

largely from its reworking of our assumptions about masculine and feminine,” the gender performativity, caricaturization, and/or subversion of its numerous characters constituting a “parody of conventional conceptions of masculine and feminine.”⁵⁸⁸ As well, Andrea Harris writes that by “making the relation between sex and gender asymmetrical and indeterminate, the text denaturalizes the supposed congruence between sex and gender that is promoted by means of the gender binary [...] challenging the idea of the binary opposition on which gender has been understood to rest.”⁵⁸⁹ While each of the numerous studies taking up engagements with gender and sexuality in *Nightwood* has its own particular slant, unifying them is a general critical consensus of the novel’s disruptive capacities in prevailing normative constructs, confounding the oversimplified and oppressive categorizations of dominant hetero-patriarchal discourses—as does *Almanack* through its representation of Evangeline Musset’s sapphic counter-cultural cult.

Regarding the ways that *Almanack* and *Nightwood* carry out these disruptions, moreover, central to both texts is the strategic deployment of religious practices and imagery to articulate narratives of queer feminine being that run counter to institutional order. As I discuss above in the case of *Almanack*, while its incorporation of saintly imagery is known among readers, detailed studies of its religious engagements—and particularly its Catholic engagements—are few. Considering the extent of *Nightwood*’s fame, as the amount of scholarly work on this acclaimed text greatly exceeds that on *Almanack*, discussions of religious culture in the novel are greater in number. As early as the publication of the foundational essay collection *Silence and Power*, Jane Marcus foregrounds the novel’s intervention in the phallogocentric discourse of the Old Testament—that, as Barnes “celebrates the nonphallic penis, the limp member of the transvestite Dr. O’Connor [...] and [Nikka] the black man’s impotent genitals that bear the white

⁵⁸⁸ Lee, 208, 210.

⁵⁸⁹ Harris, 64.

man's sexual burden" the "symbolic phallus as law is absent from *Nightwood*, replaced by the wayward penis of outlaw and transvestite."⁵⁹⁰ Considering the rootedness in this notion of the "symbolic phallus as law" in both psychoanalytic and fascist discourses, Marcus thus forwards the reading that "*Nightwood's* project is to expose the collaboration of Freudian psychoanalysis with fascism in its desire to 'civilize' and make 'normal' the sexually aberrant misfit."⁵⁹¹

Supporting Marcus' reading is Kannenstine's early observation of the allusions to Old Testament chronicles across the chapter titles, each displacing Judeo-Christian narrative with the narratives of the novel's abject wanderers: "Watchman, What of the Night?" a reference to the Book of Isaiah, "Where the Tree Falls" to Ecclesiastes, and "Go Down, Matthew" to the spiritual "Go Down, Moses," in which O'Connor takes on the role of "the prophet and lawgiver [that] goes down with his people in the common descent of humanity."⁵⁹² Taking up Christianity more broadly, Pinkerton reads *Nightwood's* profanation of the sacred as illustrative of a "blasphemous modernism that accounts for Barnes's most pointed disarticulations of early twentieth-century sexology."⁵⁹³ Recently, moreover, through the lens of Byzantine Eastern Orthodox hagiography, Christos Hadjiyiannis reads the gender-fluid characters of Dr. O'Connor and Robin Vote as parallels to the likewise gender-fluid figure of the holy fool—that, "as the Byzantine [saints'] *Lives* of women/men demonstrate gender to be performative, so too in *Nightwood* gender exists as performance."⁵⁹⁴

As the recentness of both Pinkerton and Hadjiyiannis' studies attest to, the critical dialogue on religion in *Nightwood* is very much ongoing. As with *Almanack*, then, I find that the

⁵⁹⁰ Marcus, 228, 229.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 233.

⁵⁹² Kannenstine, 113, 124, 111.

⁵⁹³ Pinkerton, 111.

⁵⁹⁴ Hadjiyiannis, 505.

Judeo-Christian engagements of *Nightwood* merit additional scrutiny through the context of Catholicism specifically—especially as, if I may, *Nightwood* is a thoroughly Catholic novel. By this I do not mean that the text conforms to the conventions of Catholic doctrine, which would make me “the greatest liar this side of the moon,” to borrow a phrase from O’Connor’s dialogue.⁵⁹⁵ Rather, I mean that *Nightwood* is a text rife with elements that may be considered constitutive of Catholicism, a world positively littered with religious icons: “cherubim from Vienna, ecclesiastical hangings from Rome,” numerous images of the Virgin Mary, “holy pictures and *petits Jésus* [...] vestments and flowering candles.”⁵⁹⁶ Furthermore, its characters haunt the spaces of churches and convents as much as they do the cafés and cabarets typical of Parisian expatriate culture. Indeed, it is infrequently remarked upon that three of the novel’s four principal characters—O’Connor, Felix, and Robin—are technically Catholics—by no means exemplary Catholics, but Catholics nonetheless. Considering that Nora Flood’s Protestant sensibilities justify a reading that all four are Christians of a sort, these dimensions of Nora’s character come into fuller focus when read in juxtaposition with O’Connor and Robin’s Catholic sensibilities, as I discuss below. With all this in mind, the preexisting studies that do engage directly with *Nightwood*’s Catholic elements are small in number, yet invaluable. In a study that nuances Marcus’ aforementioned reading of *Nightwood* as anti-fascist critique, Erin Carlston discusses the parallels between the novel’s aestheticization of Catholicism and interwar fascism’s similar engagements with Catholic religious discourse, complicating any binary assessment on the novel’s representation of fascist politics. In Carlston’s estimation, shared thematic concerns that triangulate across the novel, Catholicism, and fascist thought—ideas such as irrationality and deindividuation, among others—enable a reading that “the ‘Catholic’

⁵⁹⁵ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 144.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61, 32.

narrative/ideological position” in *Nightwood* “can rather easily be aligned with certain predominant impulses in fascist writing.”⁵⁹⁷ For a different purpose altogether, Patricia Juliana Smith considers how the novel is “deeply inscribed with traditional Catholic doctrines of grace and virtue,” yet “presented in a most irreligious manner” such that an “inversion of values and positions” occurs—an inversion which she reads as *Nightwood*’s enactment of the subversively parodic queer discursive practice of camp, such that “the universal sorrows of humankind become, to some extent, more endurable if never actually acceptable.”⁵⁹⁸ Centering her analysis on the figure of Dr. O’Connor, Smith reads this character as a paradoxical “spiritual cynosure,” bearing “qualities that coincide with what Catholic theology has traditionally deemed ‘moral virtues’”—such as the embrace of mystery and unknowability, or “the impossibility of explaining the inexplicable” in contemplation of the night—yet for the purposes of queer survival, “the refuge and cold comfort [...] for many a soul in pain.”⁵⁹⁹ Kaup, moreover, considers how *Nightwood*’s “baroque iconography of martyrdom and its characteristic images of tears, hearts, blood, and severed limbs” which constitute gestures of “idealization and glorification in representing the subject in pain,” indicate Barnes’ appropriation of “the iconography of the Catholic baroque to create an autobiographical and secular mythology for her personal suffering.”⁶⁰⁰ Interestingly, this element of martyrdom carries the antinomian slant of Barnes’ representations of sainthood into *Nightwood* as well as *Almanack*—as, while not all saints are martyrs, all martyrs are in fact saints.

Taking into account the preponderance of *Nightwood*’s Catholic engagements, then, I find there is still much more to add to the conversation. I center my own analysis on two

⁵⁹⁷ Carlston, 67.

⁵⁹⁸ Smith, 129.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 131, 141, 148.

⁶⁰⁰ Kaup, 80, 85, 81.

quintessentially Catholic elements, whose resonance through the lens of the Catholic context in particular still merits further discussion: Barnes' queer retoolings of the Sacrament of Reconciliation—or the act of confession—in her representation of Dr. O'Connor, as well as of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the dynamic between Robin Vote and Nora Flood. Critical consensus understands the cast of *Nightwood*'s characters to be definitive examples of social pariahs and outcasts in some way, shape, or form—hence the preponderance of readings that approach the text through the Kristevan conceptualization of the abject, “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”⁶⁰¹ According to such applications of Kristeva's paradigm to *Nightwood*, the seemingly coherent social body constituted according to heteronormative order comes to stand for the “I,” or the properly differentiated and atomized Subject. Figures such as O'Connor, Robin, and Nora—whose sexual and gender fluidities signify the contingency and permeability of that order—are thus the excrescence of that social body, the proverbial “wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat,”⁶⁰² unsettling indications of the ultimate incoherence and fragility of the body's supposed unity. Though it is disruption rather than uncleanness that definitively constitutes the abject, as metaphorizations of waste and filth so paradigmatically figure it—in which the “clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy,”⁶⁰³ in other words—I find that the motif of purity versus impurity opens up the possibility of constructively applying to *Nightwood* Durkheimian formulations of the pure and impure sacred—especially considering its disruptive function in the anatomy of heteronormative regimes. In the *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim enumerates two diametrically opposed

⁶⁰¹ Kristeva, 4.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 3.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 8.

manifestations of the sacred: the pure, or the “benevolent, guardians of physical and moral order, as well as dispensers of life, health, and all the qualities that men value” and the so-called “evil and impure powers, bringers of disorder, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege.”⁶⁰⁴ Though they are opposing forces, the sociological function they carry out is ultimately the same: to integrate the imagined community that constitutes a religion into a unified collective, its boundaries demarcated according to a socially-constructed consensus of the prohibited and unprohibited. I find that this paradigm enables an alternate reading of *Nightwood* beyond that of mere profanation—that to consider its cast of abjected characters as manifestations of the sacred impure rather than the profane, the novel carries out a total inversion of the careful yet precarious arrangement of pure and impure which undergirds heteronormative society. Many critics have remarked on the indeterminacy—even the impossibility—of whether *Nightwood*’s denizens may wholly extricate themselves from the stranglehold of heteropatriarchal hegemony, that its fatalistic vision forecloses on the very possibilities that it opens—in Lee’s words, that Barnes’ pronouncement of “nothing but wrath and weeping” which O’Connor proclaims ultimately “denies the signifying value of her own deconstruction.”⁶⁰⁵ If this prophecy is in fact the case, then perhaps considering a means through which *Nightwood* reconstitutes the prevailing categorical formations on which heteronormativity rests, yet still within the design of that system’s own architecture, may provide some sort of means to, if not carve a pathway out of the proverbial woods, then make of them a dwelling. Overall, through the queer arrogation of the space of the confessional in the figure of O’Connor—who dissolves the boundary between confessor and penitent, sinner and absolver of sins—and the sapphic representation of Madonna and Child in the relationship between Robin and Nora, *Nightwood*

⁶⁰⁴ Durkheim, 412.

⁶⁰⁵ Lee, 217.

ascribes a sacredness to the abject through resituating the sacred impure into the space of the sacred pure, thereby articulating a queer intervention in the system of heteropatriarchal order.

Considering the institution of the Catholic Church as part and parcel of this order, then, it is worth briefly considering how *Nightwood* first foregrounds the normative function of Catholicism in its representation of the Volkbeins, to then overturn it in the figures of O'Connor and Robin. To be sure, critics have long regarded the Volkbein family as a manifestation of obeisance to a distinctly Old World heteropatriarchal and phallogocentric hegemony—as well as its affectedness and contingency. The elder Guido Volkbein is well-known for his pretensions to European aristocracy, alongside it the disavowal of his Jewishness as mark of overt otherness: “he had said that he was an Austrian of an old, almost extinct line, producing, to uphold his story, the most amazing and inaccurate proofs: a coat of arms that he had no right to and a list of progenitors (including their Christian names) who had never existed.”⁶⁰⁶ As such a preoccupation with progenitors and pedigrees demonstrates an archetypal enmeshment in the preeminence of a patriarchal value system, Lee reads Guido as indeed “a caricature of the masculine in his obsession to identify himself with the line of power” of a continental European elite ruled by the mandate of primogeniture—one whose cultural currency is readily counterfeited due to its ultimate constructedness.⁶⁰⁷ True to the process of patriarchal inheritance, Felix likewise harbors “an obsession for what he termed ‘Old Europe’: aristocracy, nobility, royalty.”⁶⁰⁸ This obsession leads not to his ascendance, however, but to abasement: “He felt that the great past might mend a little if he bowed low enough, if he succumbed and gave homage.”⁶⁰⁹ As Lee writes, “Felix is a comic figure, not only because his attempts to ingratiate

⁶⁰⁶ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 5-6.

⁶⁰⁷ Lee, 209.

⁶⁰⁸ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 11.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

himself and be assimilated are so obviously futile, but because he represents the falsity of the values embedded in the masculine. His reverence for culture is a reverence for military and economic power, and [...] the messianic purpose of siring a son who would redeem the past” in the form of the younger Guido, named after his grandfather, further underscoring his allegiance to phallogocentric paradigms.⁶¹⁰

Vital to this process of accession to the ruling European class is the Volkbeins’ Christianization, especially considering the sociological function of religion in the construction of hierarchized, categorized identity formation systems. In the process of fashioning himself into an Austrian baron, the elder Guido takes up “the sign of the Cross;” and the woman he marries in an effort to subsume himself into a blue-blooded elite is especially prized for her Christianity: “And childless he had died, save for the promise that hung at the Christian belt of Hedvig.”⁶¹¹ While the Volkbein men’s failed Christian aspirations are known, especially in analyses taking up *Nightwood’s* engagements with anti-Semitic discourse, the fact that it is not just Christianity that so appeals to them, but Catholicism in particular, is highly resonant with respect to their aspirations for nobility—as, after all, it is not solely assimilation into European culture that they desire, but ascendance to its upper echelons. Centering the headquarters of the Catholic Church as a point of origin for his assumed “old, almost extinct line,” Guido is especially keen to give the impression “that one branch of his family had bloomed in Rome.”⁶¹² Felix in turn takes up these Catholic proclivities to a much greater extent: he is pictured “contemplating relics and parts,” as well as numerous other Catholic activities: “he searched the face of every priest he saw in the streets; he read litanies and examined chasubles and read in the Credo; he inquired into the

⁶¹⁰ Lee, 210.

⁶¹¹ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 5.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

state of monasteries. He wrote, after much thought, to the Pope, a long disquisition on the state of the cloth.”⁶¹³ Such preoccupations with the institutionality of Catholicism harbor pronounced investment in hierarchical systems of power. If Guido had constructed a lineage claiming French Huguenot origins, say, it would make for a radically different portrait—as what the Catholic element provides, distinct from most other forms of Christianity, is an age-old, pre-Reformation notion of the Church as arbiter of a strict social order demarcating the privileged elite from the disempowered masses.

The supreme irony, however, is that this intergenerational devotion to the Catholic Church as representation of European heteropatriarchal power results in this paternal line’s termination—marked, moreover, by a shift away from devotion to a phallogocentric God, and towards a feminine cult of the Virgin Mary. Among the Volkbeins, the most devout Catholic is the younger Guido. Represented in such postures of absorbed piety as “staring at paintings and wax reproductions of saints, watching the priests with the quickening of the breath of those in whom concentration must take the place of participation,” this Guido possesses such religious fervor that he is called to the priesthood—a calling that necessitates a vow to celibacy, foreclosing on the possibility of legitimate progeny according to the law of patriarchal succession.⁶¹⁴ This factor underscores ever further the character’s aforementioned associations with sociocultural degeneracy, the failure of the prevailing order to reproduce itself: “Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive, an addict to death: at ten, barely as tall as a child of six,” he embodies for his father Felix “a demolition of his own life” as the child is a figure “born to holy decay.”⁶¹⁵ The seemingly paradoxical phrase of “holy decay” is compelling here, refiguring the

⁶¹³ Ibid., 114, 115.

⁶¹⁴ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 115.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 114, 115.

eschatological discourse of Christianity from a narrative of redemption and regeneration to one of degeneration and ruination. Interestingly, moreover, the younger Guido's religious devotion centers not on the patriarchal triangulation of the Holy Trinity, but on the matriarchal figure of the Virgin Mary—an additional rupture in the progression of phallogocentric order. Consider the following exchange between Felix and O'Connor on the child, in which O'Connor remarks that “‘Guido is the shadow of your anxiety, and Guido's shadow is God's.’ Felix said: ‘Guido also loves women of history.’ ‘Mary's shadow!’ said the doctor.”⁶¹⁶ Here, the force of a divine feminine displaces both patriarchal divinity and the patrilineal line of succession, figured moreover as a retrogressive chain of haunting rather than an advancing sequence. And, famously, the younger Guido wears about his neck not even a crucifix, but “a Virgin in metal, hanging from a red ribbon,”⁶¹⁷ a key instance of *Nightwood's* engagements with Marian imagery as a means to disrupt heteropatriarchal hegemonies.

Of course, the most prominent manifestation of Marian imagery in *Nightwood* is its function as an emblem of Robin and Nora's tortured romance, and the antinomian implications of this gesture are compelling. Here, the absolute paragon of heteronormative femininity—representative of a patriarchal view of the feminine that hegemonically and paradoxically marks both sexual purity and motherhood as the ultimate virtues for women—is stripped of these hallmark associations, the Mother of God refashioned into a lesbian goddess. In all, the move constitutes a powerful queer retooling of Catholic institutional iconography in which the sacred impure takes on the garb of the sacred pure, reorienting the heteronormative power structures that Catholicism undergirds in such a way that the marginal and abjected infiltrate its very center. A key motif, the Madonna appears repeatedly throughout the text in reference to the relationship

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 127.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

between the two women—and considering its place of prominence in the enigmatic concluding chapter, quite literally atop an altar, it demands intense contemplation. While veneration of the Virgin Mary is not exclusive to Catholicism, it is certainly characteristic and constitutive of Catholicism. Indeed, the line between veneration and worship in acts of devotion to the Virgin is an often blurred one, especially in syncretic folk traditions. Here emerges another possibility in the appeal of Catholicism, with all its contradictions and tensions, for Barnes in the making of *Nightwood*: not only as representation of heteropatriarchal institutions of power, but also, paradoxically, as a starting point for the creation of a spirituality of the feminine. As Kaup writes in her analysis on *Almanack*, persisting in Catholicism are cults of devotion centered around distinctly feminine divinities, yet “Protestant iconoclasm and rejection of the cult of saints and of the Virgin Mary as intermediaries between God and living Christians erased all feminine figures from Christian religion.”⁶¹⁸ Through its appropriation of the feminine cult of saints in the figure of Evangeline Musset, then, Barnes creates a patron saint for the women of the Left Bank which “celebrates lesbian sexuality and culture by playfully sanctifying it.”⁶¹⁹ In a different tone yet through an identical process, then, *Nightwood*'s mariological elements generate a second modern sapphic cult—what one might call, in this bleak text, a lesbian Our Lady of Sorrows—via its engagements with the cult of the Virgin in the morose congregation that Robin and Nora together form.

As Kaup notes above the historical contrast between Protestantism and Catholicism on their attitudes toward feminine divinities, this same dichotomy manifests in *Nightwood*, in the figures of Nora and Robin, respectively. As Nora, a character whose vision is subtly yet markedly influenced by her American Protestant heritage, embodies a Protestant ethic of

⁶¹⁸ Kaup, 98.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

masculine order, Robin's turn to Catholicism—especially the image of the Madonna—is conversely the expression of an impulse to break from the strictures of patriarchal hegemony. While Felix aspires to an Old World elitism, the text ascribes to Nora a cultural inheritance evocative of a distinctly New World sensibility, attributing to her ancestral home in the United States a rootedness in white settler colonial culture, a place in which

“one felt that early American history was being re-enacted. [...] Whigs and Tories were in the air; bunting and its stripes and stars, the swarm increasing slowly and accurately on the hive of blue; Boston tea tragedies, carbines, and the sound of a boy's wild calling; Puritan feet, long upright in the grave, striking the earth again, walking up and out of their custom; the calk of prayers thrust in the heart. And in the midst of this, Nora. By temperament Nora was an early Christian: she believed the word.”⁶²⁰

The above passage paints a vivid portrait of American settler discourse, the seizing of control and imposing order over a dark and unknown wilderness through devastating violence—the colonization process a pestilential “swarm” that subsumes territories into its voracious national body, for instance, melded with the haunting image of reanimated Puritans in all their severe and exacting piety, felt as a “calk of prayers thrust in the heart.” As the text places the figure of Nora at the center of this landscape, this ethos of rigidity and dominance manifests itself in her demeanor, that of “an early Christian: she believed the word.” Indeed, critics have long been sensible to this normative aspect of her character. Parsons for instance writes that in spite of “her affluent pose of bohemianism,” she has “internalized the moral perspective of her American heritage,” as her “desire for Robin is conducted entirely through a frame of monogamous domesticity. While she desperately wants to possess Robin, Nora's understanding of love and desire is ultimately conventional, her inversion merely a reflection of the heterosexual male.”⁶²¹ Benstock's reading of Nora is likewise decided on her enmeshment in the order of masculine

⁶²⁰ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 56.

⁶²¹ Parsons, 63.

hegemony, describing her as “the unknowing instrument of the patriarchy.”⁶²² Truly, that which animates her is an impulse to make knowable the unknowable, an impossible endeavor to illuminate an interminable darkness, as patriarchal discourse attempts to construct orderly facsimiles of the unrepresentable: ““Doctor, I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night.””⁶²³

That being said, as the figure of Robin and the mystery of night together constitute the object of Nora’s unrealizable normative yearnings, these two elements converge—in effect, operating as interchangeable demonstrations of the limitations of heteropatriarchal order, and manifesting ultimately in the iconic dark Madonna of “The Possessed.” Critical consensus has long understood the silent, enigmatic, and elusive character of Robin as the practitioner of a mode of being that eschews subsumption into the normative frameworks of the society into which she is born. As Kaup writes, Robin is “the embodiment of everything that is alien and deviant in the human social order: an emblem of the female Other in Western culture, [...] the empty center of *Nightwood*’s tragic narrative, the traumatic void that fuels its melancholic language.”⁶²⁴ Indeed, the text presents her as the inhabitant of a remote, untamed sphere of existence that stands beyond the systematizing reach of human civilization—a naturalistic, animalic world that resists representability and knowability. Such imagery veritably bookends her character, the novel famously introducing her as the denizen of a lush botanical tableau. As her apartment is described as a “jungle trapped in a drawing room,” a “confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers,” her body having “the texture of plant life,” giving off an odor of “earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness,” parallels emerge between her

⁶²² Benstock, 263.

⁶²³ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 86.

⁶²⁴ Kaup, 106.

embodied self and the wild flora that chafe under attempts at domestication. Her infamous lycanthropic transformation in the closing chapter, moreover, discussed in further depth below, has led to a proliferation of readings that identify here a disruption of the order of human and nonhuman, as well as of human convention writ large. Parsons for instance describes Robin's animality as "pure abjection and liminality," a personification of "the vestiges of primitive animal spirit remaining embedded somewhere beneath the palimpsest of human memory."⁶²⁵ Considering Robin's wide-scale rejection of numerous prevailing norms that govern hegemonies of sexuality and kinship—heterosexuality, monogamy, maternity—she "exists within a pre-socialized conception of identity and behaviour"⁶²⁶ that pushes back against the dictates of heteronormative society.

It is a curious matter, then, to consider how Robin's pronounced religious yearnings fit into this struggle against order—the extent to which they manifest due to the pressures of social conformity, and to which they constitute an expression of rebellion against it. Readers of *Nightwood* are aware of the spiritual impulses evinced in Robin's character—in particular, an interest in Catholicism. It can be said that her very name underscores these impulses, and therein their centrality in her character. As Marcus notes a parallel between Robin's surname of "Vote" and the suffragette movement,⁶²⁷ so too does this appellation evoke the act of devotion or the role of votary, a term synonymous with worshiper; indeed, Robin is at one point seen taking "the Catholic vow."⁶²⁸ The premises of Catholic churches and convents moreover become a haunting ground of choice for her: "Many churches saw her: *St. Julien le Pauvre*, the church of *St.*

⁶²⁵ Parsons, 62.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶²⁷ Marcus, 248.

⁶²⁸ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 49.

Germain de Prés, Ste. Clothilde [...] the gardens of the convent of *L'Adoration Perpétuelle*.⁶²⁹

Speaking to the abovementioned understanding of her character as manifestation of ultimate otherness in a heteropatriarchal society, and in alignment with the aspect of the Catholic Church as an institution undergirding that social norm, these early scenes of Robin's devotion underscore her state of abjection from the socialized and unified collective body that a church represents:

“She came into the church silently. [...] Then, as if some inscrutable wish for salvation, something yet more monstrously unfulfilled than they had suffered, had thrown a shadow, they [the congregation] regarded her, to see her going softly forward and down, a tall girl with the body of a boy. [...] She talked to the nuns and they, feeling that they were looking at someone who would never be able to ask for, or receive, mercy, blessed her in their hearts and gave her a sprig of rose from the bush. [...] She prayed, and her prayer was monstrous because in it there was no margin left for damnation or forgiveness, for praise or for blame—those who cannot conceive a bargain cannot be saved or damned.”⁶³⁰

One would not be amiss to observe in the above passage the supreme irony in the devotees' distant and dismissive response to the “wish for salvation” in Robin's air—that the adherents of a faith which professes acceptance and forgiveness of even the most forsaken would decidedly consider her “someone who would never be able to ask for, or receive, mercy,” when the love of Christ for humankind is supposedly boundless and unconditional. The church here represented, however, is rather a church in the Durkheimian sense of the term, a bounded community united by a shared understanding of sacred and profane. To be sure, the congregation displays a hyper-conditioned, almost innate awareness of Robin's belonging to the sphere of the sacred impure due to the indeterminacy of her gender that contests the solidity of heteronormative paradigms: “a tall girl with the body of a boy.” That the sight of her androgynous form carrying out the devotional act of kneeling in prayer is twice described as “monstrous” doubly magnifies her otherness; in spite of her endeavors to enter the space of the sacred impure and take part in its

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 49-50, 51.

practices, her refusal to “conceive a bargain” of deference to the prevailing order expels her from its orbit, making her unable to “be saved or damned.”

That, in this scene, Robin then doubles over the prayer bench in a fit of laughter—returning home to peruse the memoirs of the Marquis de Sade, no less—certainly signals a disavowal of subsumption into the order of the church as a viable pathway to the redemption she seeks. Her laughter, described as springing from “some lost subterranean humor;”⁶³¹ is after all thoroughly Medusan in character, an exultant eruption in the quietude of the domain of patriarchal hegemony. Whether her spiritual impulses writ large are here totally extinguished is another matter, however—as in the infamous final chapter of “The Possessed,” now in the United States, she takes to the same practice, illustrative that her quest for redemption and salvation as antinomian figure has not yet been wholly abandoned:

“she began to haunt the terminals, [...] going into many out-of-the-way churches, sitting in the darkest corner, or standing against the wall, one foot turned toward the toe of the other, her hands folded at their length, her head bent. As she had taken the Catholic vow long before, now she came into church as one renouncing something; her hands before her face, she knelt, her teeth against her palm, [...] Moving like a housewife come to set straight disorder in an unknown house, she came forward with a lighted taper, and setting it up, she turned [...] and with her slow headlong step, left the church.”⁶³²

This passage presents certain ambiguities regarding the condition of Robin’s spiritual state, especially as it relates to her position in the systematized arrangement of a prevailing heteropatriarchal social norm. Here, she takes up again the devotional posture of kneeling in prayer, a deferential gesture suggestive of a yearning to be subsumed into the bounded hegemonic collective that the church edifice readily represents. However, that she is situated at the margins of this institutional space, “the darkest corner, or standing against the wall,” is indicative of a continued assignation as sacred impure by virtue of her queerness. The text’s

⁶³¹ Ibid., 51.

⁶³² Ibid., 176-7.

description likening her movements to those of a “housewife come to set straight disorder in an unknown house” further captures these tensions; as the role of housewife is a paradigmatic figure of patriarchal discourses of feminine domesticity, the act of “set[ting] straight disorder” underscores its normative function. And yet, this ideological space is for Robin an “unknown house,” another indication of her marginalization. Such ambiguities complicate a direct answer to the question of what exactly Robin here disavows, as she is described as “one renouncing something;” is that “something” a desire for integration into the normative social body? The search for salvation on her own terms? Or something else besides?

With the above description of the inviolable space of the sacred pure as an “unknown house” in mind, then, I read *Nightwood*’s concluding scene—in which Robin moves from the perimeters of the heteropatriarchal house of worship to its core—as the sacred impure taking up residence in the domain of sacred space. To be clear, I am in no way suggesting that some sort of Catholic conversion is occurring here, or that the moment registers obeisance to the prevailing order on Robin’s part. Indeed, it is important to foreground that in the process of occupying the church, Robin queers it, as I will discuss shortly. My suggestion is that what transpires is a queer territorialization of heteronormative discursive space—that Robin is more syncretic than iconoclastic, resignifying the accouterments of the prevailing regime and thereby contesting its hegemonic dictates from within it. In this manner, the “Possessed” of the chapter’s title may be read as alluding not only to Robin herself—as a bizarre spirit does overtake her—but also to Robin’s own act of taking possession over the space of the church. On the significance of the particular setting of this closing scene, the chapel on Nora’s estate, there is a peculiar yet noteworthy discordance in its arrangement with respect to the institutional norms of Christian denominationalism: that, based on knowledge of Nora’s family history, though the edifice is a

Protestant house of worship, in a place of prominence within it is an icon of the Virgin Mary: “On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning.”⁶³³ Such an image would of course have no place in a Protestant church, at least as an object of worship or veneration, as to do so would constitute an act of blasphemous idolatry. From the Protestant theological viewpoint, a key rationale informing this perspective is the rejection of divine attributes in the human beyond the figure of Christ—a view that, in doing so, implicitly circumscribes divine power as the possession of a centralized and omnipotent patriarchal God alone. With this factor of masculine discourse as constitutive of a Protestant sensibility—especially an American one—in mind, though Barnes’ upbringing was not religious, her incorporation of the figure of the Madonna here may be read as more than a mere snafu. It is just as readily a representation of the incursion of feminine divine power into a domain ruled by the masculine, usurping the seat of power at the center of patriarchal order. The aforementioned significance of Nora’s character as representative of this Protestant sensibility, namely the patriarchal hegemony undergirding it, is central here. That it is her property which Robin overtakes—as well as the divine feminine that Robin instantiates—indicates the breakdown of the epistemological mode of mastery to which Nora adheres, informed by heteropatriarchy.

Such is not to say, however, that the scene is an affirmation of the religious institution of Catholicism over that of Protestantism, even in spite of the former’s engagements with feminine divinity. Rather, its queering of the heteronormative function of Marian veneration in the institutional Catholic Church makes it a dual critique of both religious hegemonies as they underpin predominating power structures. Considering the text’s description of the church as “a decaying chapel in which stood in tens and tens mouldering psalm books,”⁶³⁴ the language of

⁶³³ Ibid., 178.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 55.

degeneration may be read as a reflection not only of the abject condition of the novel's characters, but even more so of the state of modern civilization. As Warren writes, "the chapel seems symbolically to have escaped the control of organised religion. The building creates a liminal space, on the boundaries between culture and nature,"⁶³⁵ indicating the undoing of the categorical formations on which the collective social body is constituted. The altar and ritual that Robin arranges within this crumbling edifice as well further confounds the central ordering principles of sociality: "Before the image [of the Madonna] lay flowers and toys. Standing before them in her boy's trousers was Robin. [...] Sliding down she went; down, her hair swinging, her arms held out, and the dog stood there, rearing back, his forelegs slanting; [...] And down she went, until her head swung against his; on all fours now, dragging her knees."⁶³⁶ A beloved moment among critics, the passage is acclaimed as an ultimate representation of the dissolution of the human versus animal, nature versus civilization boundaries recurrent in her character. Indeed, with the rising popularity of animal studies in recent years, analyses continue to emerge that center the novel's engagements with animality and the nonhuman—for instance, Rachel Potter's analysis in the newly published essay collection *Shattered Objects*, which forwards a reading of how its reversal of "animal-human power relations" indicates "an engagement with the limits of humanism."⁶³⁷ Evident in this moment as well is a confounding of the dichotomy of masculine and feminine, as Robin's ritual garb of "boy's trousers" signals to her characteristic androgyny that rejects norms of gender.

Most vital for my purposes here, moreover, is the moment's undoing of heteronormative sociality through its creation of a sapphic Virgin Mary. Though the image of the Madonna is not

⁶³⁵ Warren, 136.

⁶³⁶ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 178-9.

⁶³⁷ Potter, 63.

a direct representation of heterosexual union, the discursive work that it has historically effected is deeply enmeshed in heteronormative predominance. The paradoxical figure of the virgin mother is after all the supreme embodiment of a heteropatriarchal notion of femininity, representative at once of sexual chastity and a notion of maternity as vessel to facilitate the bond between Father and Son—both in obedience to the trafficking of female bodies that undergirds patriarchy. In *Nightwood*, however, Barnes displaces the heteronormative function of the Madonna by figuring it as a representation of the lesbian relationship between Robin and Nora, a meditative image in the novel’s explorations of queer desire. As Lee remarks, the “relationship between Nora and Robin is repeatedly compared to that shared by mother and child.”⁶³⁸ Indeed, Robin’s affinity for children’s toys and clothes is evidenced not only in “The Possessed,” but also in the well-known scene in which she destroys a doll out of anger at Nora’s absence,⁶³⁹ a gesture which imparts her struggles with maternity and monogamous domesticity according to heteronormative kinship formations. Nora in turn is repeatedly associated with the figure of the Holy Mother; as O’Connor remarks to her, “You almost caught hold of [Robin], but she put you cleverly away by making you the Madonna.”⁶⁴⁰ Nora in turn echoes O’Connor’s assessment, recalling her encounter with an image of the Madonna in the slums of Naples: “I knew the image, to her, was what I had been to Robin, [...] a fixed dismay, the space between the human and the holy head, the arena of the ‘indecent’ eternal.”⁶⁴¹ These excerpts may be read to support an understanding of Nora as embodiment of the normative discourses that Robin rejects, a “fixed dismay” that mediates “between the human and the holy head,” the latter plausibly suggestive of institutional heteropatriarchy. Lee in fact reads this “mother-child bond” as “an ironic version of

⁶³⁸ Lee, 212.

⁶³⁹ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 156-7.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

the Mother-Son heurosis that is the central Christian image for redemption,” in which Robin resignifies religious iconography and teleology as a means to grapple with the “difference between self as Subject and self as Object, a difference inherent in the bond between women,” that “by idealizing Nora, Robin reifies her, and by making her thus inaccessible, she allows her own, self-defined (narcissistic) identity to remain inviolable.”⁶⁴² In other words, this representation of Nora “provides a boundary for Robin against the ‘non-Being’ she would face were she to acknowledge the difference within herself between her identity as Subject and her identity as Other—between, that is, the self she can create and the self she must be.”⁶⁴³ This lesbian Madonna is thus a means through which Robin attempts to negotiate her desires and refuse her abject status as sacred impure in the church of the heteronormative, creating on the altar of the chapel an alternate sociological paradigm in which she is not merely “Other.”

Of course, the novel leaves the ultimate outcome of these endeavors as indeterminate at best—however, I do not find that a utopian horizon of possibility is requisite to justify the importance of Robin’s queer resignification of Catholic iconography. As Pinkerton notes in this closing scene a clever inversion of “God” and “dog,”⁶⁴⁴ if Robin’s gesture is not a total erasure of the “Word” that mandates hegemony, it is at least an interruption in its teleological progression, an act of vandalism that disorients the reproduction of heteronormative discourse by the letter, so to speak. Indeed, to take the “O” at the center of “God” and “dog” as the bounded and differentiated community that *Nightwood*’s characters inhabit, Robin’s reversal constitutes an intervention that brings the peripheral third letter—the space of the expelled sacred impure—to occupy the space of the first letter, the realm of the sacred pure to which the social body is

⁶⁴² Lee, 214, 213.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁶⁴⁴ Pinkerton, 115.

subordinate. It is also worth noting, moreover, that while it is common for images of the Madonna to also contain an infant Christ, it is not requisite; and whether the Madonna in “The Possessed” is one of mother and child, or simply a woman alone, goes unspecified. As such, though Robin here does not supplant the prevailing regime with an alternate programme for social regeneration and queer futurity—a move that I find would be counterintuitive to the spirit of a novel that eschews order and coherence—she does challenge the integrity of that regime by demonstrating the vulnerability of its infrastructure, its amenability to reinterpretation, and its susceptibility to intrusion from that which it attempts to keep outside its boundaries.

On the subject of queer acts of vandalism that disrupt the progression of heteronormative discursive operations as figured through Catholicism, then, I want to close this study on *Nightwood* with an examination of its other major intrusion into sacred space: Dr. Matthew O’Connor’s appropriation of the site of the confessional booth, and with it the queer resignification of the Sacrament of Reconciliation that takes place within it. As O’Connor is also a socially abject figure who confounds the logics of sex and gender according to heteropatriarchal norm—put differently, a representation of the sacred impure—the recurrent connection Barnes makes between this character and the sacred ritual of confession likewise constitutes a reterritorialization of a key site for the maintenance of the prevailing hegemonic order. Through occupying the seat of the confessional, therein reformulating and repurposing both the ritual processes and the sociological function of the penitential act, O’Connor as both confessor and penitent intervenes in the reproduction of heteronormative discourse, mobilizing its processes as a means to instead articulate her own experiences of transgender womanhood. That said, reading the character of O’Connor not as a transvestite man, but rather as a transgender woman, this study is influenced by the ongoing scholarly efforts to recuperate under-

acknowledged representations and narratives of trans femininity in modernism. As the work of Emma Heaney demonstrates, to read engagements with transness in the literature of the modern period in mind is by no means to impose a presentist framework on an era that pre-existed it. Indeed, her study of not just representations of transgender women in the works of cisgender modernist writers, but also the contemporaneous narratives of trans feminine authors, speak to the historical reality that transgender identities “were legible and understood in the period. Fairies and girl-boys were not only viewed as ‘crossing’ from man and woman, but as trans feminine people,” who “were vocal and visible and increasingly presented with the promise of bodily transformation.”⁶⁴⁵

It is withal important to note that Barnes’ representation of trans femininity in the figure of O’Connor is not invulnerable to critique. Scholars have for instance found O’Connor’s conceptualization of womanhood to be rooted in normative, even patriarchal notions of femininity as domesticity and gynocentricity, manifest in her oft-quoted expressions of yearning for “a womb as big as the king’s kettle,” a “wish for children and knitting” and “to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar.”⁶⁴⁶ Considering the centrality of maternity in O’Connor’s ideal feminine, Marcus thus describes this viewpoint as “a matriarchal phallogocentrism, a gynologos, not a cliterologos.”⁶⁴⁷ As well, Harris foregrounds an ambiguity in Barnes’ representation of O’Connor, which on the one hand “render[s] undecidable the truth of gender, or the simple binary scheme upon which gender is based” yet on the other reinscribes a discourse of biological essentialism, describing the doctor as “a regressive figure, for [she] sees [herself] as a woman trapped in a man’s body.”⁶⁴⁸ Heaney’s

⁶⁴⁵ Heaney, 15-6, 134.

⁶⁴⁶ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 97, 98.

⁶⁴⁷ Marcus, 230.

⁶⁴⁸ Harris, 65, 85.

assessment of the critical implications of this complex character is similarly balanced. At one level, Barnes' engagement with trans femininity articulates a compelling critique that "disrupts Freud's account of how women come into being in the maturational narrative of psychoanalysis" through a "female who lacks lack" and "aspires to the castrated condition that every person longs to escape" according to Freudian thought.⁶⁴⁹ Furthermore, in a move "to think physical sex beyond assigned sex," the dynamic between the cisgender Nora and transgender O'Connor, namely "the similarity between the female experience of being recognized in the degraded term of the male/female binary and the trans female experience of being unable to be recognized as the degraded term in this binary," generates a conceptualization of womanhood that is not gynocentric, but rather "experienced as a dispossession of the body, a loss of control over the meanings attached and treatment afforded to bodily structures, that defines female experience."⁶⁵⁰ On another level, however, the study importantly notes that the figure of O'Connor also indicates Barnes' entanglement in what Heaney terms the "trans feminine allegory," or the tendency among cisgender modernist writers to use transgender women characters as metaphorical embodiments to reckon with the radical shifts in understanding gender and sexuality that occur in the modern era.⁶⁵¹

As such, the multifaceted O'Connor is situated in a complex network of numerous discursive articulations of power, both authoritative and antinomian, regarding expressions and norms of both gender and sex—a network in which, I attest, the ideological underpinnings of the religious rite of penance, specifically in the Catholic context, plays a vital role. Within this network, as O'Connor reinscribes certain hegemonic views while disrupting others, she also

⁶⁴⁹ Heaney, 100.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 131, 141.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5-13.

appropriates the style and structure of dominant discursive formations on which heteronormative order relies to contest it from within the framework of its own logic. There are two central figures of epistemological authority whose personas she takes on for such disruptive purposes—two figures who, in their heteropatriarchal sociological functions, are moreover thoroughly intertwined: the scientific authority of the medical professional—sexologist, psychoanalyst, gynecologist—as well as the religious authority of the priest. Numerous studies have read O'Connor's intricate monologues as a subversive parody of psychoanalytic and sexological discourses that maintain heteronormative order through the pathologization of both feminine and queer identities. Heaney's above-mentioned study is a recent instance of this critical tradition that goes back to the formation of Barnes studies as a field, foremost among them Marcus' reading of the novel as "feminist critique of Freudian psychoanalysis and a parody of the discourse of diagnosis of female hysteria."⁶⁵² Harris likewise discusses how the theorizing quality of O'Connor's speech "creates a biting parody of the figure of the sexologist whose aim is to define the nature of female inversion."⁶⁵³

Although often in passing remarks, critics have also frequently gestured to the priestly, prophetic, and even messianic qualities of O'Connor's character and dialogue, principally in relation to their subversive functions. Taking up the closing scene of the penultimate chapter, Lee's analysis reads O'Connor as a messiah figure who actualizes a vision of fatalism rather than hope for resurrection: "sprawled across a table in an unmistakable image of the crucified Christ," her "final incoherent speech echoes Christ's last words on the cross, although ironically this 'messiah' gives into the temptation to despair and dismisses [her] followers with a curse."⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵² Marcus, 221.

⁶⁵³ Harris, 63.

⁶⁵⁴ Lee, 217.

This moment speaks to Lee's broader reading on O'Connor as foregrounding the significance of speech as discursive intervention: "As a would-be doctor, priest, magician, and alchemist, Matthew is a representation of the Word [...] Through language, Matthew tries and fails to heal, to absolve, to entertain, and to transform experience."⁶⁵⁵ Similarly attuned to this element of language and power, Pinkerton registers in O'Connor an "oracular role" in conversation with "the biblical prophetic tradition," a position as "*Nightwood's* resident father-confessor as well as its prophet of inversion" who through acts of blasphemy "turn[s] inside out the regnant sexual logics" of the time "as they acquire fully apocalyptic and eschatological dimensions."⁶⁵⁶ With this discursive link between scientific and religious authorities in mind, I find that an exploration of the novel's engagements with the rite of confession through O'Connor brings further depth and dimension to the critical understanding of *Nightwood* as an interruption in systems of heteronormative order. Indeed, the hallmark Foucauldian genealogy of *scientia sexualis* traces the emergence of sexology—what he describes as a "confessional science," no less—out of the long-standing history of the confessional as authoritative and normative "general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex."⁶⁵⁷

I aver, then, that the framework of Catholic confession implicitly interwoven in O'Connor's monologic dialogues constitutes an overwriting of the discursive forms that generate and reinscribe sexual hegemony, confounding their truth claims and positions of authority. In these famous scenes, O'Connor dissolves the boundary between confessor and penitent, and the power differential therein, resignifying the repressive function of the rite through queer exegesis of scripture and redefining notions of penance. In doing so, she not only interrupts the normative

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁶⁵⁶ Pinkerton, 123, 114.

⁶⁵⁷ Foucault, 64, 63.

function of the sacrament, but retools it as a means to articulate the experiences of the socially abject and sacred impure. It is worth highlighting here that, as in the case of Robin Vote, O'Connor's rewriting of Catholic doctrine does not necessarily constitute the erasure of spiritual impulses, or even their disavowal, but rather their reconfiguration according to an alternate social paradigm. Indeed, the text foregrounds in her character a distinct spiritual sensibility, one that is paradoxically informed by and in conflict with the experiences of an Irish Catholic upbringing. Like Robin, she frequents the grounds of Catholic churches, even appearing to attend services regularly: "seen coming at a smart pace down the left side of the church to go in to Mass, bathing in the holy water stoup as if he were its single and beholden bird," and "observed staring up at the huge towers of the church which rose into the sky, unlovely but reassuring, running a thick warm finger around his throat, where, in spite of its custom, his hair surprised him, lifting along his back and creeping up over his collar."⁶⁵⁸ As the passage draws a connecting line between an experience of bodily dysmorphia with an experience of spiritual yearning—the porosity between body and spirit a recurrent motif in Catholic theology—it also presents a refusal to be relegated to the margins of society, the act of "bathing in the holy water stoup" indicating a will to participate in its rites despite a relegation to the realm of sacred impure. Transgressing the social boundaries drawn by the prevailing order, she infringes upon and occupies the hallowed domain of sacred space, claiming access to the ablutionary power from which she has been forbidden.

Reclaiming multiple rites of purification for herself, as O'Connor takes residence in the vessel of holy water, so too does she overtake the space of the confessional. And yet she does so not to be a subjugated object of hegemonic systems of authoritative knowledge production, as in the Foucauldian formation, but to undermine those systems' governing logics, to articulate her

⁶⁵⁸ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 33.

trans feminine subjectivity, and even to find some sense of “absolution,” albeit fatalistic, from the oppressive forces that plague her. In fact, since O’Connor’s first appearance in Barnes’ debut novel *Ryder*, she has been closely associated with the act of confession retooled for subversive purposes. We encounter this interplay namely in the chapter containing her major monologue in *Ryder*, “The Soliloquy of Dr. Matthew O’Connor [...] on the Way to and from the Confessional of Father Lucas,” written in the first person from O’Connor’s perspective.⁶⁵⁹ Interestingly, this facet of the narration marks a discernible shift from the novel’s predominantly third person point-of-view, therein presenting a direct and unmediated articulation of O’Connor’s testimony as a speaking subject. The passage is a compelling one for Barnes scholars, as within it is the genesis of O’Connor’s role as Tiresian prophet of the abject social underworld, as well as of her antinomian testimonial function as queer trans feminine figure: “And the forbidden fruit still suave in my mouth, for, I says, I love the upright father, though I say it with tears in my drawers, and it is anathema. Go, my daughter, [Father Lucas] says, and love thy fellowmen. And me beating my breast and lamenting the ways of my extras.”⁶⁶⁰ Here already, evocations of “forbidden fruit” gesture to the fallen states and bleak wisdom of O’Connor’s prophesying, as the “anathema” of her love for the “upright father” while “lamenting the ways of [her] extras” prefigure her monologues of despair at misrecognition and marginalization in *Nightwood*. The famous scene of her baring her genitals in the space of a church especially comes to mind here—an act which at once transgresses the discursively constituted boundaries of the sacred, yet retools the Catholic sensibility of body and spirit as intertwined for her own trans feminine staging of the Passion of the Christ. It is interesting to note, moreover, that while O’Connor does make her confession here, Barnes situates this chapter not quite within the space of a

⁶⁵⁹ Barnes, *Ryder*, 171.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

confessional booth, but outside of it, in the moments before and after she performs this rite of penance. Considering antinomian ruptures in the infrastructure of ecclesiastical discursive authority, the implications of this framing are noteworthy. Exceeding the boundaries of the institution's reach, the substance of her confession that would be used to control—e.g., her liaison with “Fat Liz,” a bar owner whose mustachioed face and feminine attire likewise confound the categorical formations of cisgender heteronormativity—is not the exclusive knowledge of the church, on which it alone may impose judgment, but rather of whoever might happen to be listening. Rendering permeable the boundaries between public and private knowledge—as well as the production of that knowledge—her open confession undercuts the systemic power configurations of the prevailing heteronormative regime.

In *Nightwood*, then, O'Connor's ties to the rite of confession work to similar effect, yet they approach this task from an entirely different direction: not only from within the space of the confessional rather than outside of it, but also via the role reversal of O'Connor as Nora's confessor—a reconstitution of power relations in which the penitent now wields the ability to judge and absolve. And yet, O'Connor uses this position of authority not to impose hegemonic order or produce and reinscribe oppressive knowledge formations—the “hermeneutic function” of the confessor as “master of truth,”⁶⁶¹ to evoke the language of Foucault's analysis—but to confound the integrity of their truth claims. In “Watchman, What of the Night?” one may fairly read the exchange between Nora and O'Connor through the confessional framework. As the theological function of the sacrament of confession is to reconcile the wayward penitent's relationship with God and the church, so too does Nora in a state of alienation and misery seek resolution, absolution, and the remission of her anguish through O'Connor's counsel. The

⁶⁶¹ Foucault, 67.

content of Nora's sparse dialogue here is after all largely constituted by an almost incantatory string of supplicating inquiries, e.g. the phrase "What am I to do?" that appears multiple times in the chapter.⁶⁶² As well, the setting of O'Connor's cramped and isolated domicile, a "room was so small that it was just possible to walk sideways up to the bed;" fairly invokes the site of the confession booth.⁶⁶³ The flannel nightgown in which the doctor is outfitted moreover gestures to the role of the priest that she inhabits—and such vestments are indeed multiply resonant in terms of the critical work that they enact. Immediately legible is certainly a reading that avers the performativity of gender more broadly, as O'Connor here is also famously presented as a practitioner of cosmetology as well as gynecology: her face "framed in the golden semicircle of a wig with long pendant curls [...] heavily rouged" with "lashes painted."⁶⁶⁴ Additionally, as these habiliments at once undercut the parochial authority of the priest through the parodic art of burlesque, so too are they a manifestation of her trans feminine identity which that authority would disacknowledge as sacred impure. In this case, discernible are the particular affordances of usurping and resignifying dominant discourses as mode of critique, especially in contrast with a strategy of outright erasure: to both undermine order and articulate alternate categorical social formations in the same gesture.

Indeed, considering the associative link across the sacred impure, the abject, and the symbology of human waste in terms of their sociological function, as O'Connor proclaims that her "only fireside is the outhouse," she lays claim to the sites that reproduce heteronormative order by making an "outhouse" of the "fireside," bringing into the space of the confessional a heap of excrement: "A swill-pail stood at the head of the bed, brimming with abominations."⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶² Barnes, *Nightwood*, 91, 99.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Considering Heaney's aforementioned reading of O'Connor as a means for Barnes to articulate a broader, non-gynocentric theorization of womanhood "experienced as a dispossession of the body, a loss of control over the meanings attached and treatment afforded to bodily structures," that the doctor applies this motif of the latrine confessional as subversion of heteropatriarchal order to the experiences of other marginalized women speaks further to its disruptive capacity. Here I am speaking of her prophetic vision of the multitudinous suffering women of the underworld "who turn the day into night, the young, the drug addict, the profligate, the drunken and that most miserable, the lover who watches all night long in fear and anguish."⁶⁶⁶ As O'Connor's monologue bears down on their debased and abject condition, "upon the floor, face down, [...] lost lower than burial, utterly blotted out and erased so that no stain of her could ache upon the wood,"⁶⁶⁷ it is through the latrine confessional that she reconfigures this posture of subjugation: "Look for the girls also in the toilets at night, and you will find them kneeling in that great secret confessional crying between tongues, the terrible excommunication: 'May you be damned to hell! May you die standing upright! May you be damned upward!'"⁶⁶⁸ Herein, as O'Connor recasts the sacred impure space of the latrines of the bohemian demi-monde as a "secret confessional," she also reconfigures the relations of power within it. Though these penitential, abject figures kneel in a gesture of submission, the content of their confession is not an expression of repentance and subjugation to authority. Rather, it is an articulation of dissent that not only denounces the agents of their oppression as corrupt beings, but also reverses the order of systemic configurations of authority; instead of capitulating to the disciplinary process of being judged, they instead pass their own severe judgment: "May you be damned upward!"

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 101-2.

With this representative image of *Nightwood*'s rewriting the script of confession—as well as the discursive order which that script underpins—in mind, O'Connor likewise radically alters the conventions of the rite to therein undermine its ideological programme. If one is to understand O'Connor as occupying the authoritative role of confessor, these questions then arise: what sort of knowledge does she produce through this ritual, and what sort of penance does she offer her “penitent,” that being Nora, to reconcile her with the divine? To recall Smith's analysis on the morally virtuous qualities of O'Connor's character according to Catholic theology, central is her acceptance and embrace of divine mystery—the ultimate unknowability of the order of the universe, the limitations of the human intellect's capacity to master through reason, and therefore “the impossibility of explaining the inexplicable” as figured in the motif of the night.⁶⁶⁹

Considering the aforementioned reading of Nora's character as embodiment of a patriarchal American Protestant ethos of mastery and progress, that these competing discourses of order versus disorder, knowledge versus mystery meet in the confessional space stages a drama in which the latter supersedes the former as the prevailing paradigm. Though Robin seeks O'Connor's counsel to comprehend and master the obscure forces of the night—and therein to comprehend and master the obscure Robin, who in turn represents social disorder, the confounding of categorical formations and hegemonic norms—her expectations are thwarted, as the doctor proclaims these efforts to be misguided: “There is no truth, and you have set it between you; you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known.”⁶⁷⁰ Being that this compulsion to “make a formula” and dress “the unknowable in the garments of the known” is what has led Robin astray, that O'Connor frames them as acts of wrongdoing carries powerful implications: the virtuousness of

⁶⁶⁹ Smith, 141.

⁶⁷⁰ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 145.

the prevailing moral order becomes sin. As the priest-sexologist-psychoanalyst composite figure “make[s] a formula” to produce hegemonic knowledge through stigmatizing constructs of moral virtue, O’Connor’s rewriting this impulse as unvirtuous is a reversal that strips the dominant discourse of its authority, replacing it with an avowal of the indeterminacy of categorical formations as the preeminent viewpoint. In this way, the fatalist overtones of O’Connor’s speech take on an additional dimension of significance beyond mere nihilism, containing as well a valorization of alternate paradigms of understanding that account for unknowability. Consider what one may read as the act of penance—or the proscribed actions through which the penitent may be healed and reconciled—that the doctor gives to Nora, the abjuration of her quest for knowledge and mastery: “Can’t you be done now, can’t you give it up? Now be still, now that you know what the world is about, knowing it’s about nothing?”⁶⁷¹ Such a “nothing” becomes not only the absence of meaning, but also a reckoning with the pursuit of hegemonic truth claims as a process which ultimately yields no definite findings.

Even further, O’Connor intervenes in the discursive operations of penitential sexual discipline not just as confessor, but also as confessant. By rendering indeterminate the dividing line between these two roles, she not only further confounds hierarchies of sexual authority, but also reconstitutes the primary function of the confessional act, shifting it away from its use as a disciplinary technology and towards its retooling as a mode of articulating trans feminine subjectivity. To return to the Foucauldian reading of the confessional, the power differentials are typically arranged such that “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know.”⁶⁷² In other

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁷² Foucault, 62.

words, while confession is “a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship” in which the penitent is at once vocal yet subdued—subdued precisely through giving voice, in fact. This penitent is moreover at the mercy of the priest who operates as “the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile;” even in spite of his externally recalcitrant demeanor as an instrument of divine will.⁶⁷³ Such is the extent to which mechanisms of domination permeate the social fabric: even in gestures of self-expression such as the speech act, the confessant is not a self-actualized subject, but rather a subjugated being. In *Nightwood*, however, O’Connor’s monologues work to reclaim the act of confession as a means for the speaker to constitute their own subjectivity rather than submit to having it be produced. While Nora’s role as penitent is consistent throughout, in the dialogue of the novel’s confessional scenes, O’Connor’s role is in fact quite changeable, containing aspects of both confessor and penitent commingled in a single figure. Though she clearly operates in the capacity of confessor, as she is the bearer of wisdom and provides counsel accordingly, she is by no means a silent authority. Indeed, considering her voluminous amount of dialogue in these moments, especially relative to Nora’s comparatively sparse inquiries and interjections, there is a definitive air of the confessant role in it, evocative of the aforementioned monologue in *Ryder*. However, these utterances indicate not so much that she accepts the rule of authority, but that she decries it. The hallmark scene of her memory of uncovering her genitals in church is illustrative here, in which she gives voice to the sense of alienation and anguish she suffers due to the misrecognition of her womanhood under heteronormative regimes of power: “So then I whispered, ‘What is this thing, Lord?’ And I began to cry; [...] I said, ‘I have tried to

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 61-2.

seek, and I only find.’ I said, ‘It is I, my Lord, who know there’s beauty in any permanent mistake like me. Haven’t I said it so? [...] So tell me, what is permanent of me, me or him?’”⁶⁷⁴

In her analysis on *Nightwood*’s redefinition of femininity as bodily dispossession, in which suffering from the violence of heteropatriarchy “detaches the female from her body and forces her to encounter that body as a thing apart from herself”, Heaney reads this scene as a “particular *transsexual female* iteration of the *universal female* experience of bodily dispossession” which therefore “consider[s] the trans feminine as part of Barnes’s universalized feminine.”⁶⁷⁵

Considering this moment as a fraught yet poignant endeavor of O’Connor’s to articulate her trans feminine identity in the face of heteropatriarchal authority, in her confession is a will to affirm the integrity of a sexual identity formation which the dogma of that authority marks as aberrant and sacred impure.

In her role as confessant, then, O’Connor reconfigures and repurposes the hermeneutic function of the confessional to not only contest its imposition of heteropatriarchal categorical formations, but also to produce a new discursive paradigm that accounts for marginalized identities of gender and sex. Here it is important to clarify that, with her simultaneous profession of mystery in mind, it is not so much that she makes another “formula” to overtake and subsume the prevailing one; rather, I want to suggest that she highlights the limitations of the prevailing formula and its ideological authority through appropriating and refashioning its methods. This act of undermining authority comes into fuller focus when considering the ambiguity of exactly who is the confessor to O’Connor’s confession. One could suggest Nora, yet in these confessional moments she bears no authority and provides no counsel. In O’Connor’s declamation to God in the previous paragraph, moreover, though she is in a church, she faces no

⁶⁷⁴ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 140-1.

⁶⁷⁵ Heaney, 101. Emphases in original.

representative statue or effigy. Even in the novel's final confessional moment in the closing scene of "Go Down, Matthew" in which she reprises the confessant role, the priest she engages in dialogue with is notably "unfrocked," indicating that he has been stripped of his power and authority as minister of divine will. As the discursive authority to pass judgment on O'Connor's confession is indeterminate, in a sense, her self-articulation elides subsumption into the prevailing hegemonic order.

Indeed, she sustains this refusal of heteropatriarchy through subversion of the confessional's hermeneutic function up to her last appearance in the text, and in her capacity as both confessor and confessant. For the latter, the deauthorizing implications of the unfrocked priest as confessor have already been mentioned, yet the dialogue between this figure and O'Connor is also a noteworthy articulation of dissent. While the disrobed priest poses only one question to O'Connor, it is one redolent of a will to subsume his confessant into the hierarchical framework and categorical formations of heteropatriarchal order: "I've always wanted to know whether you were ever *really* married or not.' [...] I like to know what is what."⁶⁷⁶ O'Connor's response, however, is one of outright refusal and unwillingness to have her experiences be forced into alignment with conventional paradigms of the institutionally legitimated father-son kinship bond: "'Should I know that?' [...] 'What if the girl *was* the wife of my brother and the children my brother's children?' [...] 'Who says she might not have been mine, and the children also?'"⁶⁷⁷ This interruption in the system of penitential discipline likewise manifests in the location of this confession. Being that the scene takes place at the *Café de la Mairie du VI^e*—and in front of a host of patrons, no less—as in her *Ryder* monologue, O'Connor fractures the structural integrity of the ideological jurisdiction that the confessional booth circumscribes by making her

⁶⁷⁶ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 169, 170. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

confession in public rather than in private. As well, this making of the café into a confessional—with the Parisian café’s function as a locus for bohemian society in mind—identifies her as one of the aforementioned wayward women of the night who make the toilets of the metropolitan underworld into a “secret confessional” in which to condemn the agents of their oppression, reorienting proscribed arrangements of sacred pure and impure: “May you be damned to hell!” And here, O’Connor’s own pronouncements of damnation reinforce this connection that affirms her femininity as one of many suffering, alienated, and disembodied women: “May they all be damned!”⁶⁷⁸ As the dividing line between confessor and confessant is ever fluid with this character, moreover, in the fevered culmination of this scene is a last reprisal of the confessor role to ultimately divest it of all discursive authority—even the authority that she herself bears. The well-known final lines of this chapter are vital here: “‘Now,’ [...] ‘the end—mark my words—now *nothing, but wrath and weeping!*’”⁶⁷⁹ To be sure, the declaration heralds an apocalyptic vision of suffering and misery, presaging a grim fate for the inhabitants of *Nightwood*. At one and the same time, to return to the above discussion on O’Connor’s avowal of mystery, or the embrace of unknowability and the contingency of hegemonic truth claims, the return of the word “nothing” simultaneously gestures to the epistemological intervention she makes through appropriating the confessor position. True, wrath and weeping succeed nothing, with the distending effect of the comma in this famous line further underscoring the evocation of despair. The “but,” however, is fairly a multivalent one—perhaps in the sense that there is nothing else but wrath and weeping, or perhaps in the sense that wrath and weeping still persist even in the wake of nothing. The line also begs the question—whose wrath and whose weeping?

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 171.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 175. Emphasis in original.

And, if wrath as deadly sin typically arises from a will to vengeance, then who is taking vengeance against whom?

Even as O'Connor is overcome with despair, then, woven in her articulation is the suggestion of an incitement to opposition against authority. Indeed, not even her own epistemological authority through the confessional apparatus is invulnerable, as in this moment she renounces her own discursive power through breaking the seal of confession. While this confessional seal is a lesser known aspect of the sacrament, its implications are powerful for the conversation at hand. In brief, the seal imposes on the confessor, under threat of excommunication, an absolute commitment to secrecy on what penitents reveal during the sacrament. Should the confessor break this seal and disclose the content of the confession, they thereby forfeit their role as divine minister, and with it the powers and privileges the role entails. This excommunication is moreover *latae sententiae*, meaning that the penalty is automatic; no judgment by an ecclesiastical authority is necessary, nor can one intervene to overturn it. In other words, in the very moment that a confessor breaks the seal, their ministerial powers are from that instant relinquished. To look at O'Connor's final dialogues, then, one observes her break the confessional seal in the *Café de la Mairie*, disclosing by name the content of what the novel's characters have confessed to O'Connor in confidence: "Talking to me—all of them—sitting on me as heavy as a truck horse—talking! [...] That fool Nora, holding on by her teeth, going back to find Robin! And Felix—eternity is only just long enough for a Jew!"⁶⁸⁰ From this moment, whatever claims to power or authority O'Connor possessed as confessor, she wilfully surrenders—the finishing gesture of her interruption in heteropatriarchal order from within and through its own methods, breaking the staff that she has plundered.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

I close this analysis of *Nightwood*'s latrine confessional and sapphic Mariology that subvert paradigms of sacred pure and impure undergirding hegemonies of gender and sex—as well as the broader discussion on Barnes' antinomian retoolings of Catholic iconography and ritual as queer intervention in heteropatriarchal regimes of power—with a final and pivotal illustration. It is an illustration that moreover circles back to the contemporary queer exegesis of Scripture in this chapter's introduction, in which the Psalms are reinterpreted as erotic expressions of lesbian desire. As I foreground this gesture as a present-day manifestation of a long-standing subversive queer Catholic creative tradition—of which Barnes' work is representative—the queer exegesis of *Nightwood* is a significant precursor, which reinterprets the language of the Bible as an articulation of dissent against heteronormative order. I speak here of a key motif that Barnes takes from a recurrent phrase in Scripture: “beasts of the field.” It is noteworthy that the text introduces this leitmotif as an instance of exegesis' discursive function to undergird patriarchal authority. In one of the confessional scenes in “Go Down, Matthew,” in fact, O'Connor recounts to Nora: ““And once Father Lucas said to me, ‘Be simple, Matthew, life is a simple book, and an open book, read and be simple as the beasts in the field; just being miserable isn't enough—you have got to know how.’”⁶⁸¹ As the figure of a Catholic priest is the mouthpiece, manifest in this line is the mobilization of the Word as technology of obeisance to God the Father, in which being a “beast in the field” entails submission to a state of docility and complacency in accordance with divine will. To turn to the recurrent images of beastliness in *Nightwood*, however, though characters such as Robin and O'Connor carry out this injunction to become beasts—e.g., Robin's animal transformation in “The Possessed,” O'Connor being referred to as a “Squatting Beast, coming out at night” in “Go Down, Matthew” by one of the

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 139.

cafe's patrons⁶⁸²—the discursive effects of these beastly transformations are in fact the total inverse of those in Father Lucas' sermonizing. As discussed above, Robin's animality constitutes not a submission to order, but rather its confounding through the rupture and deconstruction of its constitutive categorical formations. For O'Connor, likewise, that she is a beast who comes out "at night" gestures to her aforementioned avowal of unknowability, as well as her disavowal of the hegemonic truth claims that seek to master that which inhabits the metaphorical dark. In all, Barnes makes of the authoritative Word and its various rites and symbols—the cult of saints, the Madonna, the sacrament of confession, and so on—a powerful artistic medium to defang heteropatriarchal discourses, and from them craft biting narratives that feed the creation of queer literary expression. As such, while Barnes' Catholic engagements indicate that this religious culture is by no means something to be revered, they likewise demonstrate that this culture is not something to be ignored—as both a site of oppression, as well as a subversive site of possibility.

Radical Obedience: Queer Catholic Negotiations in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*

As the antinomian function of Barnes' Catholic engagements are now clear, I want to pivot to another instance of queer Catholic modernism with an altogether different positionality on the discursive authority of the church. This positionality is divergent in that it is deeply entrenched within the normative frameworks of the religious institution rather than without—its prerogative not to infiltrate and confound the logic of the hegemonic power structures that be, but to reconcile queerness with the mandates of the prevailing order and stand as a constitutive part of its body. I am speaking here of Radclyffe Hall's infamous novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), that maddening tome and site of great altercation and controversy since its initial publication. The first known work of literature in English to directly represent lesbian characters

⁶⁸² Ibid., 172-3.

and partnerships for a public readership, it is indeed a novel as much talked about as it is actually read, if not more so—the hallmark obscenity trials in which it was embroiled proving as fertile a ground for scholarly inquiry as the content of the narrative itself.⁶⁸³ Considering the import of these affairs in British legal history, one cannot fail to mention them. However, this study focuses not on the momentous events and paratexts surrounding the book and its reception, but on the content of the book itself. Though this content admittedly does not make for very scintillating reading material among the other well-known publications of its time, it is indispensable for the present study due to the considerable role that Catholicism plays in the story of its iconic protagonist Stephen Gordon, whose queer artistic becoming pilots the narrative. Indeed, this analysis takes up *The Well* as a religious, specifically Catholic, text—informed by the devout Catholicism of Radclyffe Hall herself—and ultimately proposes a reading of the novel as a representation of the often complicated condition of being at once queer and a religious believer, at least in its early twentieth-century Anglo-European cultural context. It is after all Stephen's embrace of the Passion of Christ—as conceptualized according to a Catholic theological viewpoint in particular, moreover—that provides her with a framework to make meaning of her suffering under the violence of heteronormative society, and it is as well through the act of prayer that she gives voice to her grand call for the social acceptance of queer beings. Decisive to the narrative's trajectory, the weight of these religious elements in Stephen's reckoning of her marginalized condition raises a troubling yet under-considered question for readers to inhabit, albeit uncomfortably: what are the pathways for negotiating one's queerness under the confines of heteronormative regimes, when matters of belief render the rejection of the dominant discourses that undergird those regimes unavailable? There are certainly dangers to

⁶⁸³ See, for instance, Laura Doan's *Fashioning Sapphism* (2001) and Jodie Medd's *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism* (2012), which contain in-depth studies on the trials and its contemporaneous paratexts.

navigate in posing such a question, making it easy for instance to fall back on a defeatist or relativist attitude that forecloses on the possibility of liberation—or, worse yet, a reactionary mindset that artlessly espouses these discourses in such a way as to minimize or outright dismiss the violence they enact. Here, I strive to avoid ensnarement in such mentalities. Dwelling in my own discomfort as a liberal subject, I am motivated to engage with the especially challenging predicaments that emerge from questioning the retreat of the spiritual with the advent of modernity, as well as the view of modern civilization as inherently secular—even when these arguments lead to fraught manifestations of the spiritual in the modern that trouble liberal values. While undertaking such a study is risky business, it is worthwhile in order to contemplate the difficult yet still deeply present complexities inherent in the multifaceted tapestry of modern queer literary expression—to acknowledge rather than obfuscate these actualities.

The present study, then, is an effort to contribute a nuanced conversation on how queer modernist writers and texts relate to religious culture and discourse—that while the antinomian pathway which Barnes exemplifies is a vital component of queer modernist religious engagements, it is not the single and definitive perspective that modern works of queer literature took on the matter of religion. That being said, the following analysis endeavors to unthink the not uncommon subconscious assumptions that, firstly, the conditions of being openly queer and being a religious believer are mutually exclusive categories; and, secondly, that the recognition of queer identities necessitates processes of disenchantment, and must ineluctably be a secularizing force. For the many spiritual cultures in which there are no prohibitions against homosexuality or gender fluidity, or in which gender and sexual fluidities are constitutive, one's spirituality and one's sexuality and/or mode of gender expression are readily reconcilable. For religious institutions such as Catholicism, however, whose doctrines strictly uphold conformity

to heteronormative value systems, such negotiations are enormously fraught. To be sure, considering the queer modernist literary project to confound prevailing hegemonic assumptions on gender and sexuality, the total rejection and devaluation of these doctrines is the most conducive practice. Indeed, what could be a more overt challenge to heteronormative order than confounding that order, as in Barnes? And without such an element of antinomian rupture, could a text that does not directly challenge this order even be considered queer modernist? And yet, these seeming certainties become complicated when matters of religious belief factor in—and I do stress belief in particular, specifically belief in an enchanted world that spiritualities such as Catholicism necessitate, in which their various deities and rituals manifest not as metaphors or cultural performances, but as actual forces which hold sway in the world and its happenings. It is here that an assumed metric of queer intervention as antinomian rupture could result in a double bind of sorts. If the rejection and subversion of the heteronormative discourses that one engages with are requisite for one's articulations to qualify as an expression of queer sovereignty, this expectation could call for an implicit devaluation of certain epistemologies, in which particular belief systems—as violent and problematic as they may be—are pronounced to be backwards, vestigial affronts to modern civilization that must be abandoned if society is to progress. And, similarly, if the conditions for liberation necessitate the disavowal of heteronormative ideological systems, then the issue of queer believers in such spiritualities results in an impasse—one in which, for such individuals, the realization of sexual freedom is predicated on the denial of their religious worldviews.

Such a scenario, of course, is one that I think few would actually call for or feel held to in practice, as the complexities of lived experiences entail negotiation across various identity formations that do not dovetail neatly into a coherent programme. It is an interest in such

complexities that brings me to *The Well of Loneliness*, a text that so notoriously does not align with the overarching sensibilities of the familiar sociocultural and political rubrics that prevailing historiographies of the modern era have generated. Indeed, its representation of queer religiosity is a testament to the multifariousness and irreducibility of queer identities and experiences in the modern era—and, moreover, of what may constitute an expression of queer modernism. In this I am greatly indebted to the work of Laura Doan, namely her contribution to the *Sapphic Modernities* collection, in which she engages with the overt social conservatism that Hall and Vita Sackville-West expressed in their mass media appearances. Here, Doan enumerates what she terms a “conservative sapphic modernity,” or acts of ideological “complicity and appropriation” in which these iconic figures of queer history deployed conservative discourses on femininity as a “negotiated settlement with a postwar world undergoing radical change.”⁶⁸⁴ Her “examination of the sapphic turn toward conservatism within modernity” in England thereby demonstrates “that our reading strategies of transgression have been extremely limiting, in terms of foreclosing the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities, by ignoring the ways that sexual radicalism may coexist with a certain class-based conservatism.”⁶⁸⁵

To consider the “multiplicity of interpretive possibilities,” then, I read *The Well*’s religious dimension as an instance of Doan’s conservative sapphic modernity, in which the negotiations its queer religious characters make within the hegemonic discourses of Catholicism signal to another form of queer modernism, one that nuances the binary between modern as radical/antinomian and unmodern as conservative/normative. In Stephen Gordon’s narrative, as both liberal and reactionary value systems are partially compromised in her journey to artistic and sexual self-actualization through a religious framework, the modern and unmodern are

⁶⁸⁴ Doan, 95, 102.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

thereby unsettled and reconstituted from mutually exclusive categories to, in certain cases, potentially mutually constitutive categories. In other words, just as the reactionary can be radical, the normative can still prove to be a discursive space for the exploration of modernist possibilities. As such, my reading of *The Well* aims to illustrate how normative texts may still constructively speak to modern pursuits beyond the total disavowal of these narratives, yet in a way that does not belie their undeniable conservatism. To be sure, *The Well* does not give to us the queer modernist narrative that we want to see, nor does it give us the queer modernist narrative that we necessarily even need. From there, while it is not untrue to say that *The Well* is an undeniable dimension of the queer modernist literature that we have, providing a less desirable but nonetheless fuller picture of that literature, I find it more generative to propose that *The Well* gives us a queer modernist narrative which opens up avenues of possibility in what meaning we can derive from narratives of queer complicity in the heteronormative. In the introductory remarks for this chapter, I reference Janet Jakobsen's work on the normative as "site of frequently overlooked complexities." Here, the "regime of the normal" is "not a coherent thing" but rather "a matrix of multiple, contradictory norms [...] in complicated relation to various norms and to the power structure of normativity."⁶⁸⁶ I consider the figure of the queer religious believer in *The Well* to be one such site, in which the church proves to be a multitudinous and contradictory matrix of various power relations. In this novel, the heterosexist secular world and the religious world are not as closely unified a fellowship as one would expect, despite their overlapping institutional commitments to maintain a heteronormative status quo. Instead, though Stephen—as well as Hall—is deeply entrenched in multiple, overlapping normative discourses, it is ironically one of those discursive strands—namely that of the

⁶⁸⁶ Jakobsen, 513.

church—that provides a pathway for her to not only ascribe some sort of generative meaning out of the violence she suffers in a heterosexist world, but also to find some sort of justification and pronouncement of dignity for her sexuality. Of all the things, her religious proclivities end up functioning as the most amenable—or least un-amenable—discourse to articulate her own politics of queer sovereignty and acceptance.

I call this move to constructively utilize the normative discourse of Catholic theology, to which both Stephen as character and Hall as author ascribe by virtue of their theism, a queer modernism of radical obedience. Like its antinomian counterparts, this queer modernist radical obedience fuels the paradigm shifts on gender and sexuality in the modern era, going against the grain of heterosexual hegemony and disavowing the second-class citizen status of queer individuals and communities—hence its radicalness. However, unlike the antinomian, rather than confounding and overturning the discursive authority of the normative, queer modernist radical obedience articulates its intervention precisely *through* its credence to the normative, utilizing the normative as its foundational premise and justificatory framework—hence obedience. In other words, it selectively amends rather than repudiates the norm, reprogramming the formula of the pre-existing regime for modern purposes. This reformulation is what motivates my use of the phrase “radical obedience,” a Christian theological term that describes an especially immediate, automatic, and fervent obeisance to the authority of divine will. It is “radical” not in the subversive, anti-authoritarian sense of the word, but rather in its extremist and fundamentalist sense. That being said, as I here resignify the notion of “radical obedience” from fanatical obedience to acts of obedience that serve progressive ends, the seeming paradox that results from this resignification is not as contradictory as it may appear. Rather, as in *The Well*, a pathway emerges within the purview of obedience to contest the judgments of the prevailing regime

through its own regulatory logic. Indeed, Hall's own devout Catholicism is itself a prime manifestation of these radical obedient negotiations. In 1912, over a decade before *The Well's* publication, she famously converted to Catholicism at the age of thirty-two, having been introduced to the faith through her partner of several years, the singer Mabel "Ladye" Batten.⁶⁸⁷ As Joanne Glasgow argues, though Hall's conversion—as well as that of numerous lesbian creatives and thinkers of the era—may to contemporary readers appear unthinkable in light of her sexuality, lesbianism was not overtly proclaimed as an act of sexual transgression in Catholic teaching through a remarkable loophole: the church's "erasure of women as agents of sexuality," due to its prevailing "misogyny in which male sexuality is privileged and invested with agency, while female sexuality exists only as a function of male activity."⁶⁸⁸ Due to the institution's denial of women as autonomous sexual subjects, its popular texts of moral instruction made little to no mention of lesbianism, as "sex is always by definition, almost *a priori*, heterosexual in nature and requires penetration by the penis."⁶⁸⁹ It was therefore precisely the "phallogocentric blindness" of Catholicism that "made asexual beings of lesbians and created for some of them a refuge from the virulent homophobia and misogyny of the secular world."⁶⁹⁰ Put differently, the anti-modern politics of the Catholic institution were so extreme that its overt disavowal ironically opened a fissure to allow for its very undermining—and, as Glasgow writes, modern Catholic lesbians such as Hall found in their faith many generative, self-affirming aesthetic and philosophical possibilities: "small pieties, combined with their enthusiasm for the larger, more public religion of magnificent ritual, and their appreciation of the richness of visual and sensory expression—that is, the art, literature, and music of Catholicism—answered a lifelong need for

⁶⁸⁷ Cline, 81.

⁶⁸⁸ Glasgow, 248-9.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

spiritual wholeness and connectedness.”⁶⁹¹ Hall’s ethic of acceptance was in fact rooted in Catholic thought on the inherent good of human nature, “the great harmony that God’s love promised to all” such that to “plead for understanding for inverts, even to insist that they are made by God as they are and so are not to be condemned, [was] not for Hall a radical or subversive stance.”⁶⁹² In other words, in a roundabout fashion, Catholic doctrine cohered with her mission, indeed helped to constitute that mission, more than it contradicted her—and, interestingly, was for her more amenable to her politics than the secular doctrine of the modern law proved to be.

This act of making the reactionary institution of the church an unlikely home for the promulgation of modern ideas, then, is what I consider *The Well*’s modernism to be. Stylistically speaking, this novel is by no means a work of literary experimentation; its realist approach, as well as its chosen genres of classical *bildungsroman* and sentimental romance, practically belie the innovations in prose writing occurring in its moment. Although there are studies that forward a self-reflexive use of traditional genres and forms on Hall’s part, its stylistics are not what I principally hinge its modernism on. As I am reading the novel as a Catholic text, this move allows for considering how it is “modernist” in the Catholic sense of the word. In the context of Roman Catholic history, as the *Encyclopedia of Christianity* relates, the term “modernism” refers not to an aesthetic or philosophical movement, but to a church movement “around the turn of the 20th century that sought to reconcile Catholic teaching and practice with modern science and the modern world.”⁶⁹³ Such an initiative to modernize Catholicism was indeed held as a challenge to ecumenical authority, resulting in Pope Pius X’s notorious 1907 encyclical in condemnation of

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 246.

⁶⁹² Ibid., 247.

⁶⁹³ Weinzierl, Erika. “Modernism.” In *Encyclopedia of Christianity Online*. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2211-2685_eco_M703.

“the modernists,” filled with lines quite risible for modernist literary critics: “to show superabundantly by how many roads Modernism leads to the annihilation of all religion. The first step in this direction was taken by Protestantism; the second is made by Modernism; the next will plunge headlong into atheism.” Of course, it is not Joyce or Pound that Pius X here refers to, but the proponents of modernization *within* the church—priests, theologians, seminarians, and the like. And while I do not wish to read the content of Pius X’s encyclical out of context, there is something to be said on the degree to which these two modernisms overlap—in both cases, movements that sought to transform pre-existing paradigms of thought and expression in response to the challenges posed by the arrival of modernity. As Catholic modernists reformed their religious tradition to speak to modern life—as they ultimately did in the long term, their efforts a precursor to the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s and its widespread reform—so too did modernist writers reform literary traditions to do likewise. As a Catholic and literary modernist, then, Hall reforms both religious and literary tradition through her narrative of an unambiguously queer protagonist finding meaning and recognition through the church—specifically through that protagonist’s devotion to the Catholic image of the Sacred Heart, namely its signification of an ethic of divine love for all humanity realized through pain and sacrifice. To clarify, the implication is not that one needs religion in order to affirm their queerness. I do not suggest that the path to queer liberation is in the arms of Jesus Christ. Rather, the implication is that, in the inevitable circumstances in which one must inhabit conflicting identities and value systems, these situations necessitate alternate ways of reckoning the conservative v.s. progressive, normative v.s. antinomian, reactionary v.s. modern relations beyond the framework of the zero sum game. In this regard, Pius X need not have been so alarmed, as his contention that modernism leads to atheism and away from religion overlooks the

complexities in how one may negotiate across modernity and faith—not just the role that faith can play in modernity, but also the role that modernity can play in faith.

It is this central point of Catholic religious culture as a site of creative possibility in queer modernism on which my analyses of Barnes and Hall converge—and I acknowledge the peculiarity of this move on my part to consider the works of these two writers as concordant rather than discordant on any given issue. To be sure, as the above analysis on *Ladies Almanack* gestures to, Barnes there presents an excoriating caricature of Hall in the figure of Tilly Tweed-in-Blood, whose social conservatism and complicity in heteropatriarchal hegemony are thoroughly lambasted. As Tweed-in-Blood advocates for marriage between women in order to reinscribe the framework of paternalistic and heterosexist value systems in lesbian partnerships, so too does Hall in *The Well*. Indeed, the novel is infamous for its ultimate affirmation of heteronormative conjugal union as the golden standard which lesbian women must submit or aspire to. As Sally Munt writes, the idyllic relationship between Stephen's mother and father whose representation permeates the novel's first section establishes for their child a standard of "ideal gender conformity," a paradigmatic representation of the mutually constituting institutions of heterosexual marriage and the masculine-feminine binary.⁶⁹⁴ The subsequent narrative makes little effort to meaningfully challenge this heteronormative status quo beyond espousing it as a fitting and instructive model for lesbian partnerships, which are further represented as ineluctably deficient due to their exclusion from this very norm. As Rebecca O'Rourke remarks, though Stephen seeks to recreate her parents' dynamic with her partner Mary Llewelyn, the relationship fails due to an implied lack of "network of social obligation and custom to provide a focus for activity: there is nothing that bolsters self-identity."⁶⁹⁵ In point of fact, the narrative's

⁶⁹⁴ Munt, 201.

⁶⁹⁵ O'Rourke, 53.

ending is notorious for its capitulation to the pressures of heterosexual conformity. Stephen here famously surrenders Mary to the paternalistic affections of her childhood friend Martin Hallam, for the purpose of giving to Mary the supposed protection of a husband and maternal fulfillment of children—neither of which, the text presumes, Stephen can provide. On that note, it is not only the figure of Hall that Barnes lampoons, but *The Well* itself and its accompanying conservative politics. Being that *Almanack* was privately published in the same year as *The Well*, the former is understood to be a parody of the latter. Parsons for one highlights the similarities in their respective openings: as *The Well* begins with Stephen’s birth and coming-of-age, so too does *Almanack*’s preface focus on the birth and coming-of-age of Evangeline Musset. And as the relationship between Stephen and her father Sir Philip, who hopes for a son, is central to *The Well*’s beginning, in *Almanack*’s preface, the dynamic between Evangeline and her father is likewise central—yet “Dame Musset, unlike Stephen Gordon, is never confused or ashamed by her lesbianism,” highlighting Barnes’ critique of Hall’s representation of the tragic pathological invert.⁶⁹⁶ Indeed, as *The Well* is controversially known for its reliance on the scientific discourse of sexology as part of its rationale—as the prefatory remarks by sexologist Havelock Ellis immediately underscore for readers—both *Almanack* and *Nightwood* work against this pathologization through their critique of sexology, as the aforementioned studies on Barnes by Harris, Kaup, and Marcus show. Here *Almanack*’s appropriation of the cult of saints is especially striking, as it represents lesbianism not as a congenital abnormality, but “as a condition which women are variously born or converted to, or come to choose.”⁶⁹⁷ By “emphasizing the womanly body and pleasures of the lesbian” moreover, *Almanack* avers that it is not a condition to lament,

⁶⁹⁶ Parsons, 55-6.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

as *The Well* very often does.⁶⁹⁸ In this regard, and considering the prominent place of the sciences in the Catholic modernist movement, the novel's incorporation of sexology is antinomian in one regard, yet very much normative in another.

Such is not even to mention the other normative institutions in which *The Well* is thoroughly enmeshed: as Stephen Gordon is a veritable English aristocrat, the novel is accordingly punctuated by conservative sensibilities variously classist, imperialist, and nationalist in nature.⁶⁹⁹ Interrelatedly, it harbors scenes that betray an involvement in primitivist and exoticist tendencies in its representation of racial and cultural otherness—what Jean Walton describes as “the means by which the white subject, suffering from the fragmentation, industrialization, and depersonalization of modernity might experience a ‘return’ to an idealized, premodern state.”⁷⁰⁰ These various complications dwell uneasily with *The Well*'s undeniable challenge to the demonization of queer society. As the novel's conservatism, paternalism, colonialism, and racialism are widely understood, critics acknowledge the possibilities it contains in representing alternate, more flexible paradigms of gender and sex. Engaging with the sartorial in *The Well*, for instance, Halberstam forwards Stephen's masculine dress as an expression of feminine masculinity, one that “suggests a modern notion of sexual identity as not organically emanating from the flesh but as a complex act of self-creation in which the dressed body not the undressed body represents one's desire.”⁷⁰¹ In a different vein, yet also speaking to the novel's antinomian potential, Jay Prosser's study on *The Well* takes into account the

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁹⁹ For an analysis on *The Well*'s representation of British Empire, see Gay Watchman's chapter on Hall in *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* (2001).

⁷⁰⁰ Walton, 287. See Walton's “Race and Inversion in *The Well of Loneliness*” (2001) for a study on the novel's racialized representation of Black Spirituals. For an analysis on Orientalism in *The Well*'s Canary Islands episode, see Chinn, “Lesbian Sexuality and the Permission of the Exotic” (2001).

⁷⁰¹ Halberstam, 158.

contemporaneous emergence of transsexuality as a categorical identity formation, forwarding the novel as a watershed moment in “the interlinked literal and literary construction of the transsexual” through reading Stephen as in the process of reckoning with a “felt [masculine] gender belied by the body.”⁷⁰² Though in the denouement Stephen ultimately defers to the heteronormative status quo, the narrative at least gestures to the existence of alternatives. Such an acknowledgement harbors the potential to thereby open up a more generous reading of the novel’s tragic ending, in which it is not queer society that is inherently flawed, but rather the heterosexist system that obstructs its flourishing.

A challenge of a text to be sure, *The Well* is thus mired within a complicated network of various discourses—some contradictory, some overlapping. If the novel is not to be disavowed for its historical significance and politics of queer acceptance, yet if its enmeshment in multiple hegemonic power structures is not to be ignored, then it is worth considering how certain of those contradictions may at points intersect as much as clash. Within this network, I seek to trace the course of the discursive threads of queer sovereignty and Catholic devotion, with particular attention to how the factor of religious belief heightens the visibility of their overlapping points even amidst their largely conflicting logics. That *The Well*’s principle religious characters in fact perceive the world as enchanted—or, in Stephen’s case, re-enchanted—I maintain is an under-acknowledged yet vital aspect to consider for multiple reasons. For one, it illustrates the persistence of enchanted worldviews as constitutive forces in modernity that is a recurrent point in this project as a whole. Concerning *The Well* specifically, moreover, it provides clearer justification—on both Hall’s part and on the part of critics—for even bothering to work within the heteronormative institution of Catholicism to begin with. As the dogma of the church is so

⁷⁰² Prosser, 130, 134.

constitutionally homophobic, why the need to negotiate with it? Would it not be more conducive to deny and upend the authority of its inherently illiberal doctrine in the pursuit of liberal values of democratic tolerance? And yet, the rub is that this view implicitly presupposes a standard of buffered, differentiated, and secularized liberal subjecthood that may not apply to all concerned in the matter, for whom other frameworks on the interrelation of self and community—as well as of material and spiritual worlds—persist. Indeed, *The Well* ascribes to its key religious characters such alternate conceptualizations of the mutually constitutive forces of senses of self in relation to community and the material-spiritual dynamic. Its distinctively queer Catholic character, the painter Wanda, notably hails from a “little town in Poland, with its churches, its bells that were always chiming—the Mass bells beginning at early dawn, the Angelus bells, the Vesper bells—” a social formation that stands in clear contrast to metropolitan Paris.⁷⁰³ Her provenance is representative of localities even in continental Europe where processes of secularization have been uneven—places, in other words, still very much enchanted, as the church is still a predominant force in the formation of its sense of community and the order of its affairs. There, as the church bells that mark the hours illustrate, the very progression of time is still measured by the recurrent ritual practices of Catholic liturgy, at once cyclical and linear. For Stephen as well, whose theism I illustrate in-depth below, the process of deindividuation and subsumption into a collective consciousness is decisive to her messianic transfiguration as queer Christ figure—and, therein, to the promise of redemption for the sexually marginalized which this transfiguration inaugurates. In the aftermath of her ultimate act of self-sacrifice, in which she is called on to transcend the desires of her ego in a spirit of beneficent love, she becomes a focal point on which all of queer society’s articulations of anguish converge. As the realization of Christ’s Passion

⁷⁰³ Hall, 373.

engenders the formation of the Holy Church, Stephen's own Passion likewise engenders the formation of a Church of the sexually marginalized across all of time, the "quick, the dead, and the yet unborn" who speak through her as a unified body: "And now there was only one voice, one demand; her own voice into which those millions had entered. [...] 'God,' she gasped, 'we believe; we have told You we believe...we have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!'"⁷⁰⁴ That she articulates this call for redemption not only in the form of a petition to a divine entity, but also in the first person plural point of view, accentuates the significance of an unbuffered and enchanted sensibility in the text's realization of its political project—a vital contextual framework for its veritable bottom line, both literally and figuratively.

I highlight this element of belief to provide additional nuance to the preexisting criticism on the function of Christianity in *The Well*—a body of work that speaks to the importance of religion in reckoning with the text. On an allegorical level, the narrative's structure is understood to be modeled on that of the Bible. Munt's aforementioned study reads the novel's first sections as parallel to the Book of Genesis' creation myth, in which Stephen is expelled from her ancestral home of Morton, a country estate represented as a lush and paradisiacal Eden.⁷⁰⁵ That Stephen figures her queerness as a so-called "mark upon Cain," moreover—a mark later realized as a scar she bears from her time as an ambulance driver in the Great War—underscores the Old Testament motif of exile as an allegorical framework for the ostracization she faces due to her inversion.⁷⁰⁶ Considering *The Well*'s beginning as a queer rewriting of Genesis, its conclusion is befittingly imbued with apocalyptic overtones evocative of the Book of Revelation, as Richard

⁷⁰⁴ Hall, 437.

⁷⁰⁵ Munt, 201-6.

⁷⁰⁶ Hall, 205.

Dellamora illustrates: as in “the genre of apocalypse, past, present, and future time become simultaneous” in the reckoning of a grand “call for justice,” permeated with the requisite fearsome imagery of violent storms and demonic conflagrations.⁷⁰⁷ Nested within this biblical narrative is moreover the Christological narrative for which the text is famous—what Ed Madden describes as a “*gospel* of inversion featuring a lesbian messiah” in which Hall “reimagines both the life and parables of Christ to figure a spiritual and a social liberationist narrative of lesbianism.”⁷⁰⁸ Indeed, Hall draws clear connections throughout *The Well* between her protagonist and Jesus Christ: Stephen is born on Christmas, and from childhood is closely identified with the Passion through a propensity to self-mortification, an ingenuous act of divine supplication to heal the chronic pain of a household maid with whom she is infatuated. It is in her thirties, moreover, when her self-sacrificing mission is fully realized at the close of the text, as in the life of Christ. In Madden’s estimation, this retelling and retooling of New Testament narrative constitutes a subversive “liberation theology project” on Hall’s part, in which she appropriates the “biblical discourse [...] so often used to condemn homosexuality,” as well as the “language of a set of [homophobic] worldviews in an attempt to name and include an experience otherwise unnamed and excluded.”⁷⁰⁹ As the Judeo-Christian mythos’ allegorical function as vehicle for Hall’s political project in *The Well* is widely understood, what remains is to consider how the novel’s representation of its characters as religious subjects themselves—not only as allegorical embodiments of religious figures—along with the rites through which they actualize their faith as religious subjects, contributes to its task of queer affirmation. More specifically, I forward *The Well*’s representation of Catholic belief and some of its unique rituals—namely the

⁷⁰⁷ Dellamora, 182-5.

⁷⁰⁸ Madden, 161, 163. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 178, 162.

distinctively Catholic liturgical practices of Eucharistic adoration and devotion to the Sacred Heart—as a key site through which the text effectuates its modernist radical obedient practice in the formation of a queer liberation theology. If conditions of belief—e.g., the puzzling existence of devout Catholic lesbians—make the total erasure of hegemonic discourses an unrealizable scenario, then the devotional practices of *The Well*'s queer faithful suggest a latent potential in the hegemonic to transform itself as it reproduces itself through ritual—all-in-all, demonstrating an underlying porosity between forces normative and antinomian, modern and unmodern.

I turn now to a discussion of these illustrative figures in *The Well* by first taking up the character of Wanda, whose spiritual devotion plays an integral role in Stephen's formation as queer messiah. A painter and member of the Parisian coterie of creatives that Stephen befriends, she is also the text's *de jure* Catholic lesbian, a strange yet loyal adherent to the spirituality that her aforementioned Polish background would suggest. While this coterie is a many-peopled one, no character that Hall creates for it is superfluous—and though on the surface she appears to work largely as a source of dark comedy, this aspect of her character often overshadows the weight and intricacies Hall suffuses her with as a woman of great religious feeling, “more sinned against than sinning.”⁷¹⁰ True, she is a tragic and even pitiable figure, her tortuous struggle with alcoholism a consequence of her social ostracization. It is indeed strongly implied that she is expelled from Poland by the dogmatism of her staunchly devout family: “her parents had been very pious people,” along with her “three brothers, and all of them priests” whom she describes as “men of stone and iron [...] uncompromising, fierce and relentless, seeing only the straight and narrow path on each side of which yawned the fiery chasm.”⁷¹¹ Though the text presents her as a degenerate being perpetually in the throes of an uncouth, drunken stupor, it also imparts that her

⁷¹⁰ Hall, 372.

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, 374.

intemperance stems from a deeply entrenched sense of shame and self-loathing from persistent stigmatization: “Seeing she desired and desiring she drank, seeking to drown one lust in another.”⁷¹² And yet, in spite of the persecution she suffers under her religion, at no point does she disavow it. Rather, she remains a firm believer, avid practitioner, and staunch defender of the faith, at one point even entering into an altercation with a bar proprietor for blaspheming. Even more so, she conceives of her spirituality as a radical force, an expression of resilience in the face of violence and oppression in her native Poland: “Through the years of persecution and strife, of wars and the endless rumours of wars that had ravaged her most unhappy country, her people had clung to their ancient faith like true children of Mother Church, said Wanda.”⁷¹³

Her character is thus a site of major tensions and complexities inherent in the dynamic between homosexual Catholics and the church institution. Of course, it plainly indicates the violence that church doctrine on homosexuality effectuates as a key instrument of heteronormative order. This doctrine not only leads to the merciless expulsion of one of its own to maintain that order—illustrating the constitutive function of the social leper as sacred impure—but teaches the victim to vilify and turn against herself in acts of self-harm fueled by shame, a powerful regulating mechanism. The rub here is precisely that Wanda exemplifies a social subject who, in spite of her entry into a purportedly secular space, still perceives the world according to the sociality which has originally produced her. Put plainly, she does not, indeed perhaps cannot, think outside of that framework. While she is a denizen of bohemian, metropolitan Paris, her inauguration into modernity does not prompt in her a secular awakening, regardless of the clear presence of epistemological alternatives to the dictates of her faith—alternatives, moreover, which are far more accepting of her sexual identity. Rather, her

⁷¹² Ibid., 350.

⁷¹³ Ibid., 373-4.

consciousness still presumes an enchanted worldview in which, according to Catholic doctrine, the divine force underlying heteronormative order wields extensive power over the material plane for the purpose of maintaining that order. Considering the moment in which she abstains from consuming the host at Mass, Emily Hill writes that her “inability to participate in communion is significant because this ritual [...] represents the intimacy and connection of the believer with both God and fellow Christians. Although Wanda expresses extreme piety, she cannot partake in the body of Christ because she does not feel as if she is part of what that body represents.”⁷¹⁴ While her exclusion from the normative church body is true, I would also add that she recoils from the Eucharist due to an awareness of its potency as a substance imbued with divine properties. In conformity with the rule of transubstantiation to which members of her “ancient faith” ascribe, the host does not just symbolically represent the connection between its adherents and their deity. It quite literally constitutes that connection through the act of consumption, in which the practitioner is suffused with godliness. And yet, because of its sacred power, the substance is often held to be spiritually injurious for one to consume if one’s corruption is too extensive, as it would constitute a profaning gesture. Of course, the present study is not the most conducive venue to appropriately explore the complexities of Eucharistic theology. The point is that we may read this character as having an alternate vision of the world from that of her companions—that the paradigm of sacred and profane is still a significant force that influences her perceptions and actions.

With this notion of enchanted vision in mind, the novel imparts a veritable double-edged quality to Wanda’s religiosity—a force that masters her while suffusing her with a gift of sight for the unseen. There is about her an air of the holy fool, her frenzies of self-mortifying

⁷¹⁴ Hill, 364.

dissolution intertwined with a fearsome yet fervent sense of the spirit that imbues her with a compelling mystical energy. She is repeatedly described as having a burning temperament, possessing “wonderful eyes that held fire in their depths, hellfire at times, if she had been drinking; but at other times a more gentle flame,” which later similarly “glow with the fire of the born religious fanatic” when she is asked to speak on her spirituality.⁷¹⁵ Interestingly, this religious passion engenders in her a creative vitality and sense of aesthetic vision: “Wanda saw largely. All that she envisaged was immense, her pictures, her passions, her remorse. And then she would stand up before her tall easel, [...] start some gigantic and heartbroken daub, struggling to lose herself in her picture, struggling to ease the ache of her passion by smearing the placid white face of the canvas with ungainly yet strange forms [...] Wanda had genius.”⁷¹⁶ Manifest in this character portrait is the double-bind of her enchanted worldview as a Catholic lesbian artist—a sensibility that grants her an “immense” perception, even an artistic genius, yet one that simultaneously undercuts her ability to realize what it reveals to her. The reader is therein invited to consider what the obstacle here may be—and I find it an ungenerous reading to regard her religiosity as a whole to be that obstacle, especially as the text is so engaged with the religious impulse that persists among the members of queer Parisian society in spite of their institutional ostracization: “And what of that curious craving for religion which so often went hand in hand with inversion? Many such people were deeply religious, and this surely was one of their bitterest problems. [...] But the church’s blessing was not for them.”⁷¹⁷ It is therefore my contention that, contrary to a reading that forwards the novel’s religious subjects as inherently doomed based on their ensnarement in the heterosexist institution of the church, the business of

⁷¹⁵ Hall, 350, 374.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., 350.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., 450.

the text is rather to recuperate what it perceives as redeemable in “that curious craving for religion” by radically recentering the prerogative of church discourse. Through the narrative of Stephen’s spiritual awakening that Wanda’s religiosity precipitates, Hall shifts the church’s ideological orientation away from its function as a disciplinary regime rooted in an ethic of retribution, and towards an ethic of divine compassion and acceptance, figured in her representation of the Catholic devotions of Eucharistic adoration and the Sacred Heart.

Indeed, it is apparent that Wanda’s religiosity is deeply rooted in a sense of condemnation and shame, arising from an intense fear of God as wrathful arbiter of divine punishment: “she feared with a wellnigh intolerable terror—not the devil [...] but God in the person of Christ the Redeemer. Like a whipped cur she crawled to the foot of the Cross, without courage, without faith, without hope of mercy.”⁷¹⁸ Demonstrating an overt enmeshment in the disciplinary apparatus of religion that maintains order by meting violence on those who transgress it, her posture of crawling like a “whipped cur” underscores a hegemonic conceptualization of the divine as the enforcer of a strict power differential between supreme authority and subdued penitent. This habituation to the notion of a fundamentally angry God is so extensive as to occlude the deity’s other manifestation as a merciful God, a figure of unconditional, universal compassion and acceptance: “God in the person of Christ the Redeemer.” That it is her dread of divine retribution which keeps her from participating in the Eucharist, a rite which affirms the spirit of benevolent love motivating the Passion, is especially telling:

“her fear had suddenly laid hold upon her at the moment of approaching the altar rails, so that she had scuttled back to her seat, terrified of receiving the Christmas Communion. Even a painfully detailed confession [...] even the absolution accorded by a white-haired old priest who had spoken gently and pitifully to his penitent, directing her prayers to the

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., 350.

Sacred Heart from which his own heart had derived its compassion—even these things had failed to give Wanda courage when it came to the Christmas Communion.”⁷¹⁹

The above passage is especially noteworthy for its indication that, according to Catholic doctrine, Wanda has no reason to abstain from consuming the host. As she has recently confessed and received absolution from a minister of the church—not a formidable crusader of the faith, moreover, but a “white-haired old priest” who speaks “gently and pitifully” to her as a sincere penitent—she has expressly been forgiven of any trespasses. The issue here appears to be a matter of receptivity. Because she has historically been closed off from the church, her ability to register divine benevolence becomes muted. Hence her contrition is imperfect, meaning a sense of repentance motivated by the fear of damnation, rather than perfect, a sense of repentance motivated by love of the divine. Ironically, obedience to one doctrine interferes in obedience to another, which is a foundational tenet of Catholicism: the unconditional, universal compassion of God. That being said, here the preoccupation with homosexuality as mortal sin engenders a sin that is far greater: the sin of despair, or a conviction in absolute damnation due to a lack of faith in the all-saving forgiveness of Christ. Such is a view that Hall explicitly foregrounds in *The Well*: “there is surely no sin [...] so unpardonable as the sin of despair; yet as surely you and I can forgive...” the character Adolphe Blanc says to Stephen in the purgatorial gay bar known as Alec’s.⁷²⁰ Hence, while I am dipping into the language of Catholic theology in my commentary here, I do so not to conduct my own apologetic, but to illustrate the latent theological argument present in *The Well* that dovetails with the novel’s modern politics of queer acceptance. In fact, one could say that its politics is rooted in the theological argument—and a very daring argument at that—which it expounds. Hall’s utilization of Catholic doctrine as a

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., 372-3.

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 389.

founding principle for her modernist project thereby signals not only to the persistence of spiritual affairs as a constitutive force in modernity, but also to the possibility of transforming the un-modern, conservative, and heterosexist institution of the church into a site for the promulgation of radical ideals.

That the prerogative of *The Well* is indeed to modernize and queer the principle of divine grace—the notion of God as love, to put it brusquely—or rather, to even suggest that queer society has never been beyond the pale of that grace to begin with, is especially manifest in its preoccupation with the religious symbol of the Sacred Heart—or *Sacré-Coeur*, notably the name of the famed Parisian Basilica, a key location in the novel. In the above passage detailing Wanda's confession, that the priest instructs her to direct “her prayers to the Sacred Heart from which his own heart had derived its compassion” speaks powerfully to the centrality of divine love as queer liberation theology in *The Well*. Considering the confessional context, moreover, one may even read this injunction to be the act of penance that this priest gives to Wanda. If, as the previous analysis on the sacrament of confession in Barnes mentions, the purpose of an act of penance is to reconstitute the penitent's relationship with God which the act of sin has broken, the priest's exhortation to devotion to the Sacred Heart thereby implies that Wanda's error is at bottom her lessened ability to realize the comprehensive scope of an all-saving grace. A distinctively Catholic object of devotion, the image of the Sacred Heart—traditionally pictured as a flaming, bleeding heart encircled by a crown of thorns—is regarded as a manifestation of boundless divine love realized in the Passion of Christ. Stemming from the worship of the Five Holy Wounds incurred during the Crucifixion—namely the puncture wound of the Lance of Longinus in Christ's torso—it is in essence a meditative image that directs one to contemplate the universal benevolence motivating the sacrifice and suffering of the Passion. Befittingly for

The Well, it is also an image associated with reactionary politics, carrying implicit conservative undertones in the context of continental European history. As the work of Raymond Jonas illustrates, while devotion to the Sacred Heart first coheres in the Middle Ages, the image becomes in revolutionary France the “dominant symbol of royal and Catholic counter-revolution.”⁷²¹ Considering the icon’s royalist weaponization as an emblem of “bitter condemnation of the Revolution and the secular republican ideal and a promise of national redemption through the re-Christianization of public life,” sites consecrated to the Sacred Heart during this era were “centers of cultural production, generating and sustaining a counter-discourse that challenged a still-fragile republican hegemony.”⁷²² Indeed, the Basilica of Sacré Coeur in which Wanda worships—and to which she brings Stephen, thereby catalyzing the protagonist’s messianic awakening—is held as the paradigmatic example of this reactionary movement. As the initiation of its construction was borne out of national anxieties from the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, so too was its completion and consecration in the aftermath of the first World War—interestingly, a timespan contemporaneous with that of *The Well*, in which the Basilica would have been very recently built.⁷²³

While it would be difficult to substantiate the claim that Hall alludes to the Sacred Heart so frequently in *The Well* due to these reactionary connotations—though, fairly, its royalist trappings would have likely appealed to her conservative sensibilities—its recurrence is nonetheless extremely telling when it comes to the novel’s reorientation of the conservative religious discourses in which it is enmeshed. Through Stephen’s implicit participation in devotion to the Sacred Heart and the ideal it represents, the image is re-signified as an emblem of

⁷²¹ Jonas, 3.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 3, 5.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

a modern spiritual politic of acceptance rather than a reactionary one. Although Wanda's obedience to the divine is imperfect—motivated by a fear of damnation due to an overemphasis on the church as a hegemonic, heteronormative force—her faith plays a pivotal role in the politics of the text for two key, interrelated reasons. It not only illustrates *The Well's* theological argument that queer exclusion in fact distances one from God, but also introduces Stephen to Catholicism—in particular the spiritual ethic of universal compassion and the inherent goodness of human nature—which provides the protagonist with the framework to realize her mission as queer messiah. Though Stephen has met Catholics in the past—namely the French governess of her childhood, Mademoiselle Duphot—it is Wanda, a long-suffering queer artist like herself, whose faith prompts her interest in affairs of the spirit. The Polish woman is moreover the one who brings Stephen to Sacré Coeur Basilica, where the protagonist first encounters the Catholic devotions that forward her ethic of divine benevolence. As such, one may read Wanda, who at one point even wears a “straight-cut, simple black dress that somehow suggested a species of cassock” which ascribes to her a sense of priestliness,⁷²⁴ as an unlikely yet fitting spiritual guide to Stephen—a sapphic, womanly mystic who herself cannot realize the project of queer redemption, but who assists in the baptism, so to speak, of its messiah.

This reading of Stephen as undergoing a spiritual awakening does require justification, considering the importance of religious belief in what I am arguing is *The Well's* unique intervention in heterosexist church discourse. Unlike in *Nightwood*, Stephen is at no point described as “taking the Catholic vow,” making unsupportable a reading that a formal Catholic conversion takes place. What one can support, however, is that she goes through a process of religious enlightenment regarding the nature of God that is congruent with Catholic theology.

⁷²⁴ Hall, 372.

While Stephen's family is not demonstrably pious, Hall does give religious culture a discernible presence in her protagonist's upbringing. Genteel aristocrats that they are, the Gordons appear to attend local church services regularly—presumably an Anglican church—and the young Stephen is taught to pray and read biblical stories, as befitting the social instruction of a well-mannered Victorian child. Interestingly, though her father Sir Philip is “not a religious man by instinct,” he names his child Stephen after the Catholic saint of the same name, famously known as the first martyr of Christianity—an appellation that underscores her imminent martyrdom for the cause of queer acceptance.⁷²⁵ As her identification with Christ from childhood onward has already been mentioned, these early episodes also foreground an internal struggle over theological questions on the presence of the divine in the material world, the nature of God as a merciful or wrathful entity, as well as on the divine sanction of continued pain and evil—a theodicy, in other words—that likewise persists throughout the narrative. As a child, Stephen expresses a certain belief in Christ's benevolence: “she studied the picture of the Lord on His Cross, and she felt that she understood Him. She had often been rather puzzled about Him, since she herself was fearful of pain [...] and yet Jesus had chosen to bear pain for sinners, when He might have called up all those angels!”⁷²⁶ As such, her earliest notion of God is one of universal compassion: ““Oh, I'm sorry, Lord Jesus, 'cause I *do* know You love all miserable sinners!””⁷²⁷ As she grows in age, while her emerging sense of self brings her to doubt this notion, her spiritual longing persists: “God had grown so unreal, so hard to believe in since she had studied Comparative Religion [...] yet at this moment she was wanting a God and a tangible one, very kind and paternal; a God with

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁷²⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., 31. Emphasis in original.

a white flowing beard and wide forehead, a benevolent parent Who would lean out of Heaven and turn His face sideways the better to listen from His cloud, upheld by cherubs and angels.”⁷²⁸

As this over-idealized notion of a paternalistic God the Father becomes increasingly untenable, Stephen must in her maturity undergo a gradual process of nuancing her conceptualization of the divine—away from a patriarchal deity, and towards a self-sacrificing one in the figure of God the Son, as well as an unbounded, all-encompassing presence in the figure of God the Holy Spirit. To circle back to the novel as theodicy, then, ruminations on why God brings about the existence of inverts, who must lead lives of suffering, punctuate the text throughout. As she leaves childhood, Stephen is increasingly inclined to believe in an unmerciful God who dooms inverts to a fate of absolute damnation: “that this God, in a thoughtless moment, had created in His turn those pitiful thousands *who must stand for ever outside His blessing*,” and again the ““thousands of miserable, unwanted people, who have *no right to love, no right to compassion* because they’re maimed, hideously maimed, and ugly—God’s cruel; He let us get flawed in the making.””⁷²⁹ However, it is Stephen’s encounter with Christ’s Passion in the Sacré Coeur Basilica—namely in the devotions of the Sacred Heart and Eucharistic adoration that she there witnesses, each pointing to not only an all-saving grace of a benevolent God, but also a crucial porosity between earthly and divine which undergirds that grace—that brings about a total paradigm shift in her conceptualization of God. And, it is precisely through this paradigm shift that she inaugurates her queer liberation project of radical acceptance via a theological argument that those “pitiful thousands” are within the orbit of “His blessing” rather than outside of it, that they do possess a “right to love” and a “right to compassion.”

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁷²⁹ Ibid., 188, 204. My emphases.

Indeed, the very sight of Sacré Coeur catalyzes in the protagonist a return to the question of theodicy that has animated her since childhood: “something in that mighty temple of faith [...] would awaken a response in Stephen, so that she would seem to be brushing the hem of an age-old and rather terrible mystery—the eternal mystery of good and evil.”⁷³⁰ As her entrance into the Basilica opens up once again this conundrum of the persistence of suffering and evil on which she has seemingly been decided, her contemplation of the image of Christ within the church turns this certainty on the nature of God into an open question once more: “He looked very weary, this Christ Who must listen to so many supplications. Queer, unbidden thoughts came to her at such moments; this Man Who was God, [...] could He answer the riddle of Wanda’s existence, of her own existence? If she asked, could He answer?”⁷³¹ One of this scene’s most noteworthy aspects, furthermore, is the manifestation of Christ that Hall chooses. While it would be intuitive to turn to an image of the Crucifixion, here instead is an image of Christ whose affect distinctively underscores a sense of divine benevolence and acceptance: a “silver Christ with one hand on His heart, and the other held out in supplication.”⁷³² In this edifice dedicated to the *Sacré-Coeur*, that Christ here motions to that Sacred Heart—and the divine love for all humanity that it stands for—while reaching out to the socially abject Stephen and Wanda radically accentuates their inclusion in the orbit of an all-saving grace, perhaps even more effectively than an image of the Crucifixion would. There is moreover great significance to the description “this Man Who was God,” in that it emphasizes the theological concept of the incarnation—or the hypostatic union, as it is called—which describes the union of both divine and human natures in the figure of Christ. While a foundational concept in Catholic theology, the

⁷³⁰ Ibid., 376.

⁷³¹ Ibid., 377.

⁷³² Ibid.

hypostatic union bears powerful implications regarding the dynamic between divine and human, as well as that between spiritual and material worlds. As Christ manifests as an earthly being in order to reconstitute humanity's fractured connection to the divine through the Passion, such a theology implies that there is both a material quality to the divine—God as at once immanent and transcendent—as well as a divine quality to humanity. In other words, this doctrine of “the Word made flesh,” as they say, unsettles the notion of a rigid divide between divine and human, spiritual and material. This principle is moreover rooted in the foundational theological concept of *imago dei*, or the doctrine that espouses an inherent quality of the divine in humanity by virtue of God having “created man in his own image,” as it famously goes in the Book of Genesis, which thereby affirms the Catholic theological viewpoint that there is an intrinsic goodness to be found in each human being. As it is held that the doctrine of original sin is what alienates humanity from this inherent godliness and goodliness, the incarnation thus undoes this separation as an act of universal redemption that recuperates the divine in the human.

To apply these theological principles to understanding Hall's use of Catholic doctrine as rationale for a politics of queer acceptance, they are the very ethics that underpin all the holy images and devotions that Stephen encounters in the Sacré Coeur Basilica. These experiences thereafter transform her own sense of the nature of God, humanity, and the so-called inverted who are a constitutive part of that humanity—such that God is recast from vengeful to merciful, and the inverted are recast from inherently damned figures to inherent children of God, deserving of compassion by virtue of an intrinsic goodness. As the statue of the benevolent Christ, its Sacred Heart, and its theological implications of universal divine love have already been discussed, the other key Catholic devotion that Hall centers is likewise a prime manifestation of these principles: that of Eucharistic adoration, or the worship of the host—the “Blessed

Sacrament,” as it is also called—in contemplation of the divine benevolence inherent in the incarnation. In this devotion, the consecrated host is typically displayed in a monstrance, an ornate vessel in which the Blessed Sacrament is luxuriously and reverentially centered. In the Sacré Coeur Basilica, Hall casts a spotlight on such a display, which Wanda and Stephen together contemplate and thereby participate in the devotion, a “monstranced Host [that] would gleam curiously white in the light of the candles.”⁷³³ At one point, as they witness the clergy ceremonially transfer the host from the monstrance, Hall imbues the narration with commentary to highlight the ethic of all-saving grace central to her project of radical acceptance:

“The priest must lift his Lord from the monstrance and lay Him upon a silken cover, [...] the bell rang out its imperative warning; [...] And even as once very long ago, such a bell had been the herald of death in the putrefying hand of the leper: ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ [...] so now the bell rang out the approach of supreme purity, of the Healer of lepers, earth-bound through compassion; but compassion so vast, so urgent, that the small white disc of the Host must contain the whole suffering universe.”⁷³⁴

In this scene, as the ringing of the altar bell—in Catholic ritual, typically a means to call participants to witness the mystery of transubstantiation—gestures to the redemptive mission of the incarnation, so too does its inclusion of the image of the “putrefying hand of the leper.” As O’Rourke notes a parallel here between “the procession of the priest with the monstrance to the procession of lepers” who in medieval Europe would ring bells to signal their presence, the figures of Stephen and Wanda as devotees and “supplicants for compassion” are thus implicated in a web of signification on saving grace as liberation theology, a means to reconstitute social hierarchizations of included and excluded.⁷³⁵ Implicit in this passage are of course the symbolic underpinnings of leprosy as a sociological ordering principle through the mechanism of othering; Foucault’s reading of the lazar house as disciplinary force in *Madness and Civilization*, for

⁷³³ Ibid., 376.

⁷³⁴ Ibid., 377-8.

⁷³⁵ O’Rourke, 24.

instance, comes to mind. That Stephen and Wanda as social lepers are thereby connected to this body of outcasts, and as the person of Christ as “Healer of lepers,” who as intermediary between human and divine becomes “earth-bound through compassion” for “the whole suffering universe” via the incarnation, the two “inverted” artists are thus received into the orbit of that universal compassion. In its portrayal of Eucharistic adoration, then, the Catholic theological foundation of *The Well*’s politics of inclusion is manifest.

Through this devotion, it is Stephen’s encounter with the principle of universal compassion—and the inherent goodness of all humanity that motivates it—which results in the transformation of her notion of God and its implications for the fate of queer society. Between Wanda and Stephen, their divergent responses to viewing the host underscore the difference in their capacities to register this divine grace. As Wanda with “downcast eyes and trembling hands” falls to her knees and beats her chest at “the sight of her own salvation” in the Blessed Sacrament, her dread of an authoritarian God again undermines her ability to recognize the truth of godly omnibenevolence: “her fear was a bitter and most deadly insult.”⁷³⁶ By contrast, Stephen is described as standing “upright and curiously still,” a posture that is still reverential, yet imparts a sense of dignity commensurate with the godliness in herself through the doctrine of *imago dei*. On this difference between Wanda and Stephen’s responses to the host, O’Rourke remarks that while Stephen “embraces God and her duty towards him” in this scene, her posture is also “claiming an equality.”⁷³⁷ Here, Stephen is not so much equating herself with God, but more so making a claim to equality with the rest of humanity, by dint of the divinity inherent in herself and all others from a theological viewpoint. As such, considering the institutional understanding of obedience as believing and living in acknowledgement of divine truth, Stephen

⁷³⁶ Hall, 378.

⁷³⁷ O’Rourke, 24.

is fairly the more “obedient” devotee, even in spite of Wanda’s posture of total submission which on the surface would imply the opposite. Through this twist, Stephen’s socially radical obedience is here the most radically obedient even in a doctrinaire sense of the term.

Hall confirms this paradigm shift in her protagonist most explicitly in the ongoing dialogue between Stephen and Martin Hallam on the existence of God, which illustrates the trajectory of the former’s spiritual transformation. In adolescence, Stephen’s uncertainty as to whether God exists—or whether “God is dead,” even—indicates her prevailing sense of spiritual doubt throughout the narrative:

“Do you believe in God, Martin?
And he answered: ‘Yes, because of His trees. Don’t you?’
‘I’m not sure—’
‘Oh, my poor, blind Stephen! Look again, go on looking until you do believe.’”⁷³⁸

As Martin justifies his theism through an expressed belief in the natural world as divine creation, there is something suggestive of animism in this view—yet it is also not incompatible with perspectives on the visible, material world in Catholic theology. Such a perspective maintains that as the whole of the universe is God’s creation, there is an inherent beauty and goodness to every component of it, the trees as well as the people. Of course, there is a strict hierarchy of creation in place in this view—the “great chain of being,” as it is called—in which God and the angels outrank humanity, which in turn outranks the rest of nature owing to the principle of *imago dei*, yet there is simultaneously an idealist slant present in its affirmation of an inherently beautiful, good, and harmonious universe. Hall’s incorporation of the theological discourse on the great chain of being is thus another instance of her use of institutional church doctrine for modernist purposes. In the above dialogue, Stephen’s response is one of agnosticism, her uncertainty on the existence of God reinforced by the dash that amplifies this sense of

⁷³⁸ Hall, 95.

incertitude. In adulthood, however—towards the novel’s end and after Stephen’s encounter with Christ in the Basilica—as the two reprise this conversation, her response decidedly expresses a belief not only in the existence of God, but also in a benevolent God whose divinity is in all people, and whose goodness is in all of nature:

‘Lord,’ he muttered, ‘why need this have come upon you—this incomprehensible dispensation? It’s enough to make one deny God’s existence!’ [...] ‘There are still the trees. Don’t forget the trees, Martin—because of them you used to believe.’
 ‘Have you come to believe in a God then?’ he muttered.
 ‘Yes,’ she told him, [...] ‘I’m not really religious like some of the others, but I’ve got to acknowledge God’s existence, though at times I still think: “Can He really exist?” [...] But unless there’s a God, where do some of us find even the little courage we possess?’”⁷³⁹

In this reprisal, as the motif of theodicy returns in full force, the roles of believer and skeptic are wholly reversed. For Martin, now the skeptic, his witness to the suffering that Stephen and Mary undergo as a same-sex couple—the “incomprehensible dispensation” in the above passage—incites a clear crisis of faith. Stephen, on the other hand, is now the believer, “not really religious like some of the others,” but nonetheless providing direct confirmation of a belief in a divine presence, one moreover inherent in the visible world. In her dialogic response, Stephen articulates a theodicy in which the theological discourses of the great chain of being and *imago dei* are successively layered. As she opens with a gesture to the view of the beauty of the universe as divinely authored—that God is in the trees, as Martin initially expostulates—she follows up this point with an implicit affirmation of the goodness of humanity as a constitutive part of the natural segment of the chain of being, moreover made in the image of God: ““unless there’s a God, where do some of us find even the little courage we possess?”” In this use of the first person plural, one might take the “us” to be referring to the whole of humanity; one may just

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 420.

as well read it in reference to the queer society that *The Well* seeks to champion. With this reading in mind, Stephen's rhetorical question thereby implies that the courage this collective possesses, or their ability to weather the pain of stigmatization, is God-given. Therein, she provides justification of the goodness and godliness of these individuals according to the logic of a divine natural order, as well as their acceptance based on the rhetoric of omnibenevolence which that godliness undergirds.

From this affirmation—bold, yet firmly anchored in the logic of prevailing church discourse—Stephen is able to initiate the modernist political project of queer inclusion towards which she has been moving throughout the narrative. Armed with this theological justification, her consciousness is now fully attuned to the dignity inherent in each queer individual through this awareness of an omnipresent divine nature: “How long would God sit still and endure this insult offered to His creation? How long tolerate the preposterous statement that inversion was not a part of nature? For since it existed what else could it be? All things that existed were a part of nature!”⁷⁴⁰ As the language of natural versus unnatural, inversion as a “part of nature,” is of course indicative of *The Well*'s use of sexological discourse to “naturalize” inversion via its pathologization, the embeddedness of God in such passages—e.g., inversion as “His creation”—foregrounds that this conceptualization of nature is also informed by theology as much as sexology. As early as her adolescence at Morton, these theological underpinnings of the novel's notion of nature are interwoven in the text. In the scene in which Stephen's mother Anna becomes aware of her child's sexuality, Anna's denunciation is rife with the discourse of inherent damnation as the fate of inverts, due to the supposed challenge they pose to divine order: “It is you who are unnatural, not I. And this thing that you are is a sin against creation [...]

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 405.

against nature, against God who created nature.”⁷⁴¹ Even prior to her spiritual transformation, however, Stephen bears a sense of her nature’s inherent goodness, even its divinity:

“To her there seemed nothing strange or unholy in the love that she felt for [her lover] Angela Crosby. [...] it appeared transcendent of self, and she looked up and onward towards her love—for the eyes of the young are drawn to the stars, and the spirit of youth is seldom earth-bound. She loved deeply, far more deeply than many a one who could fearlessly proclaim himself a lover. Since this is a hard and sad truth for the telling; those whom nature has sacrificed to her ends [...] are sometimes endowed with a vast will to loving, with an endless capacity for suffering also, which must go hand in hand with their love.”⁷⁴²

In the above passage, Stephen’s capacity to love is a markedly spiritual experience—one that is not “earth-bound” but directs her consciousness “to the stars,” so to speak, into a state of self-transcendence. Moreover, the noble qualities that this passion actualizes in her person—qualities which the text implies are due to her inversion, being one of “those whom nature has sacrificed to her ends”—are distinctively Christ-like: “a vast will to loving,” “an endless capacity for suffering also,” not “strange or unholy” but rather indicative of her essential godliness according to the principle of *imago dei*. Due to this subconscious awareness that she has not yet found a framework for, she can still at this stage affirm her human dignity in protest of her mother’s damnation: as she writes in a letter to Anna, foreshadowing the significance of the justificatory theology on divine nature to come, ““You insulted what to me seemed both natural and sacred.””⁷⁴³

To circle back to the novel’s conclusion, now in possession of a discursive framework to articulate a queer apologetic in the language of the very institution that denounces her, Stephen in her grand transfigurative moment calls for recognition through an appeal to the divine figure whose authority is in fact what substantiates her vindication. This divine appeal is indeed the

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 200.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 146.

⁷⁴³ Ibid., 236.

closing paragraph of the entire text, its signature and parting message addressed not only to the institutional power of a supreme deity, but to that of its popular audience which holds sway over the institution of public opinion: “‘God,’ she gasped, ‘we believe; we have told You we believe... We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!’”⁷⁴⁴ As this final argument takes the form of a proclamation of faith, and a collective one at that, it is also a modernist confirmation of that collective’s inherent “right to [its] existence” according to the principle of omnibenevolence—a principle manifest across the great chain of being, *imago dei*, the Passion of Christ, the Eucharist, and the Sacred Heart—which is essential to adherence to that faith. Though Pope Pius X, whose 1907 encyclical condemned modernism as a pathway to atheism, left this mortal coil and entered his heaven in 1914, it would have been compelling food for thought for him to have read what is called the “bible of lesbian literature,” *The Well of Loneliness*.

With this proclamation of faith as Hall’s closing flourish in mind, considering the operation of religious belief as a working assumption of this analysis, I close my own project with some reflections on both its affordances and its limitations. As it is this condition of belief that makes this reading on the modernist dimensions of Hall’s Catholic engagements accessible, I also note that this reading is tenable if and only if that condition of belief in this particular spirituality is present. At the start of this section, I remark that the complex overlay of multiple value systems, political commitments, and epistemological frameworks—which the figure of the Catholic lesbian artist exemplifies—necessitates the consideration of alternate configurations of normative and antinomian, conservative and progressive, reactionary and modern. As

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 437.

conservative sapphic modernities such as Hall's show that these dynamics are more so networks rather than dualities—mutually contradictory in some respects, yet mutually constitutive in others—such is what a theological analysis of *The Well* affords: that while the novel is decidedly conservative, its conservatism does not entirely foreclose on the presence of modernist possibilities. The inverse, however, is just as much the case: that its modernist possibilities are too a site of reinscription of hegemonic norms. For instance, in this Catholic theology of omnibenevolence that I have been discussing—as much as the heartening ideals of universal love and an all-pervasive beauty come into play—its rhetoric of redemption still presumes in each individual an intrinsic corruption as much as it does an intrinsic goodness. In order to be saved, one must first have erred; and according to the Catholic moral framework in which *The Well* is enmeshed, the notion of original sin—in which all are tainted by evil from the moment of their birth—is what necessitates the incarnation of Christ to begin with. Such is a tension that I find *The Well* struggles to negotiate: as it seeks to show that there is nothing for Stephen, Wanda, Mary, and so on, to be ashamed about, its recourse to the rhetoric of an all-saving grace presupposes a universal postlapsarian state of shame due to the principal of original sin. All are redeemable, yet in need of redemption because all are sinners.

This matter of original sin makes for very tricky business in reckoning with the text. While it is tempting to say that the theological discourse of original sin is not one that Hall gives currency to in *The Well*, it is actually thoroughly implicated in the novel through its representation of inherent suffering. According to Christian theology, as pain and suffering become a constitutive part of the human condition due to the original sin of the Fall, sin fundamentally involves suffering, as it is the cause of all suffering. If sin is an intrinsic part of human life, then, so too is suffering. And in *The Well*, suffering is indeed the very substance of

the queer condition as Hall paints it. As Stephen and the collective she represents bear the “mark of Cain,” such an appellation presupposes culpability and a life of suffering as punishment for that culpability; accordingly, we find the key characters of *The Well* in various states of perpetual misery, endurers of a never-ending infliction of wounds. In response to the pervasive presence of suffering in the novel, it is common to attempt to read it generatively. Emily S. Hill, for instance, argues that *The Well*’s engagement with Christianity, especially the Passion of Christ and its constitutive agony for a greater good, becomes for Stephen a “discourse for understanding the suffering that she endures on account of her sexuality and allows her to transform that pain into revolutionary and generative love.”⁷⁴⁵ Indeed, the novel’s climactic final scene describes Stephen as taking on the pain of all the inverted and transmuting it into a call for their redemption: “burning rockets of pain—their pain, her pain, all welded together into one great consuming agony.”⁷⁴⁶ Thus, as Hill writes, “the Christian narrative of sacrifice is united with the queer experience of suffering through the common understanding that radical love, which inevitably involves a sacrificial moving beyond the self, is always painful.”⁷⁴⁷ While I find this reading to be true of what Hall does with pain in *The Well*, there is admittedly something discomfiting to its presupposition that “queer experience [...] is always painful.” For one, it is subtly implicated in the generality that queer narratives are inherently tragic, foreclosing on the possibility of alternate outcomes and futurities. As well, considering the Christian theological context, the notion of suffering as a consequence of corruption becomes ferreted in, a perspective counter-intuitive to the politics of inclusion at hand.

⁷⁴⁵ Hill, 360.

⁷⁴⁶ Hall, 437.

⁷⁴⁷ Hill, 360.

That being said, the interesting thing about the corrupting force of sin is that, as a regulatory mechanism for the maintenance of a given hegemonic social system, one must buy into it for it to have an effect. In other words, if the quote-on-quote “sinner” does not recognize a certain act as a sin—and, by extension, if the community in which they are enmeshed does not hold the act as social taboo—then there are no repercussions; the sin does not corrupt or damn. Hence, if Barnes in *Almanack* and *Nightwood* blasphemes against Catholic doctrine, as indeed she does, it bears no sizable effect on the state of her soul or the integrity of her position in bohemian society. If Hall, however, does the same, she runs a significant risk as a believing Catholic and member of her church. As such, readings of the novel will yield different upshots depending on whether they are secular or attendant to the influencing factor of a given belief system. From a secular viewpoint, *The Well*'s inability to imagine a queer experience not constituted by pain is a considerable failing; however, this reading is contingent on the secular view that a painless life is something imaginable. From a radically different Catholic viewpoint, *The Well* takes what is fundamentally understood as an inherent part of the human condition—on this mortal coil, at least—and makes it generative. This fundamental distinction comes into fuller focus when considering that perceptions of pain are both highly variable and discursively constituted. The work of Talal Asad on differing understandings of pain in both religious and secular contexts is especially useful here. On the secular understanding of pain, as Asad foregrounds the principle of personal agency according to a free-willed subjectivity as constitutive of secular ideology, suffering is both an obstacle and challenge over which the secular subject must triumph. As “pain is the symptom of an afflicted body,” it also “enables the secular idea that ‘history making’ and ‘self-empowerment’ can progressively replace pain by

pleasure—or at any rate, by the search for what pleases one.”⁷⁴⁸ Conversely, Asad foregrounds that in many religious contexts, the experience of pain is socially constitutive, a “part of what creates the conditions of actions and experience,” constructing “an imagined relationship” through which to “mediate sociality.”⁷⁴⁹

In the case of Catholicism, its views on suffering are an exemplary instance of Asad’s reading on the sociological function of pain as a means of structuring experience. Indeed, Catholic theology maintains not only that pain is an inevitable part of the human condition due to the notion of original sin; even more so, as the Catholic tenet of redemptive suffering affirms, pain is in fact a means of absolution that brings the sufferer closer to God, as one therein participates in the redeeming Passion of Christ. As such, for believing Catholics, pain is both a sociological framework that constructs a collective vision of a shared human experience, as well as a process of self-transcendence and sense-making. It is this Catholic sensibility on the experience of pain in which *The Well* is deeply rooted: suffering is the very condition through which Hall not only constructs a queer collective, but also reorders the perceived structure of the prevailing social hierarchy such that this collective is included rather than excluded from the fold, a constitutive part of a universal humanity. It is also the means through which her protagonist makes sense of the pain that she and others like her suffer, a process of making meaning out of the chaos of sensory experience. While there is a layer of truth to the view that Catholicism is obsessed with pain, its doctrine maintains that pain—at least, in theory—should never be suffering for its own sake; it must speak to some sort of ideal. To consider the spiritual dimensions of *The Well* is thus to arrive at an understanding of it which would be far less reachable or tenable through a secular lens. The goal here is of course not to devalue secular

⁷⁴⁸ Asad, 68.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 85, 84.

readings writ large, but to show that they are not a universal metric. It is not only to demonstrate the persistence of spirituality as a significant shaping force in key literary productions of queer modernism such as *The Well*, but also to reflect on how one's readings of these texts are potentially mediated by the structuring discourses of one's own belief systems. Such is what I aver to be the case not just in queer modernism, but, considering my project in its entirety, in modernism as a whole.

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