Speculative Ontologies and Cautionary Horrors:
The Literary Zombie's Answer to What We Are and Where We're Going

A Dissertation

Presented to the

Graduate Faculty of the

University of Louisiana at Lafayette

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Summer 2014

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Epigraph

I think that people of my generation are more comfortable making the foray into genre . . . because of macabre books, Stephen King, and probably cable. Culture changed in the '70s and '80s . . . Look at the phenomenon of the blockbuster, whether it's an adventure like Indiana Jones*, or something like* Star Wars *and* Star Trek*. You're exposed to that pretty early. And you're supposed to walk away because you start reading Ernest Hemingway? It's just one of many influences that makes you into the writer you are today.*

—Colson Whitehead
qtd. in "How Zombies and Superheroes Conquered Highbrow Fiction"

*Of course, a great deal of supernatural fiction is and has always been hackwork, but as I have tried to show, a significant portion of it offers a critique (*not *a repudiation) of science. The message is not always what we skeptics want to hear but we would do well to actively engage in a deeper reading of the themes and symbols present in supernatural fiction . . .*

—Jason Colavito,"Oh the Horror!
Why Skeptics Should Embrace the Supernatural in Fiction"

*The next morning Nita did what she usually did when she was confused—
the thing that had made her a wizard in the first place. She went to the library.*

—Diane Duane, *A Wizard Abroad*

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Introduction: The Presence in the Absence

The nineteenth century was the century of the death of God,
the twentieth is that of the death of man.

—Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*

After the Renaissance, the fantastic moves from an external world which existed in the supernatural order of creation, independent of an individual's imagination, and comes instead to find a new, paradoxically modern and wholly unstable habitation in the single mind of a person, for good or ill; it becomes one with the subject or writer or artist's vision. The grotesque, which nests within the larger field of fantasy, likewise travels from an imagined world of more-than-natural phenomena into an inner landscape that represents the human mind and its phantasmagorias.

—Marina Warner, *Monsters of Our Own Making*

Daniel Drezner's 2011 political science primer, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, is a slim volume, carefully styled to give the impression that the real weight belongs to its subject matter. Its somber white background neatly displays the austere type of the first four words for maximum emphasis of only the title's principal element, "Theories of International Politics." Lower on the cover slants the volume's only discordant note: irregular red lettering spelling out the corollary "and Zombies." The visual contrast between the terms implies something daring in their juxtaposition, a splash of difference for interest and to catch the eye. The back cover, as if to compensate, primly displays five endorsements of the scholarly gravity of Drezner's work, each of which carries its own miniature endorsement in the form of a professional or formal title.[1] The overall effect is that of a conservative professor who wonders if his tie isn't really too colorful for his dignity but hoping nonetheless to attract a little attention.

Drezner's subsequent essay in *Chronicle of Higher Education,* "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Zombies," confirms what the visual aesthetic of his book hints: Drezner believes that fantastic figures really might belong only in the genre ghetto, so that

his inclusion of the zombie as a piece of writing that broaches "real" concerns becomes something that he feels needs to be addressed. He prefaces his explanation by letting the reader know that he's really not the zombie kind of guy, assuming that his reader would agree that books about zombies are only good "for a chuckle" as joke gifts at Christmas. "Most of my colleagues assumed that I wrote this book to make political scientists laugh a little," a motivation he seem comfortable with and admits to be initially true. "And yet a funny thing happened": the blog post that he intended to "make a few colleagues giggle" turned into something useful, something that he incorporated into his professional pedagogy. In so framing his critical methodology, Professor Drezner demonstrates little more than awareness of the critical and academic climate that remains overridingly wary of fantastic tropes, despite a steady growth of serious and compelling scholarship in that field.[2]

While the figure of the zombie has only recently begun to garner critical regard, the modern monster has certainly received a lot of attention. Beyond the mass endorsement reflected by the success of media stars like *Zombieland* and *The Walking Dead*, the zombie's recent prominence in the popular imagination has been well-documented by cultural critics and prominent news organs, as evident by even a cursory search of the term "zombie" in *The New York Times*'s online archive. However, the predominant tone of such articles tends to reinforce the zombie's marginalization. A 2006 segment in *The Atlantic*, for example, "Market for Zombies? It's Undead (Aaahhh!)," trivializes the zombie even while heralding its ascendance and citing several intelligent theories that would justify the figure's resilience and popularity. "The undead are once again on the march," the article proclaims, "elbowing past werewolves, vampires, swamp things and mummies to become the post-millennial ghoul of the moment"; only the final qualification ("of the moment") survives in the sentence that

follows: “and while you may yet be unaware of the zombielike proliferation of zombie stuff, horror fans speak of the zombie craze as a fact of life, the way the rest of us talk about $3 gasoline.” The amiable tone of the latter remark doesn’t elide its characterization of zombie fans as a fringe group (not like “us”) whose members may be estranged from reality, since they are thinking about fictional constructs rather than personal finance. Those subjects are not mutually exclusive in a *Forbes* item technology feature headlined “Capitalist Ghouls,”[3] which also understands the zombie as a passing interest, albeit an exploitable one. The 2011 technology feature advises readers, “a hit zombie game can lead to riches,” but fails to discover a basis for the zombie’s value, as foreshadowed by the tag line in the magazine’s print edition: “When—but, more important, why—did zombies take over iTunes App Store?” (Caulfield 48).

Popular attention to the fantastic figure’s recent cultural ubiquity as well as scholarly explorations of the zombie, of which there have been a tentative but marked increase over the last five years,[4] tend to be dominated by two questions: why zombies and why now? As to the latter, the briefest answer is probably expressed by the very first sentence of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), “we live in a time of monsters.” The essay collection’s cultural and temporal scope demonstrates the monster’s ubiquity: *Monster Theory* begins with *Beowulf*, ends with *Jurassic Park*, and includes chapters on such diverse intervening subjects as sixteenth-century French hermaphrodites and early-medieval proto-zombies in Icelandic folklore collection.[5] Further, Cohen’s introductory essay, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” explains the monster’s persistent presence in culture in his first thesis, which articulates a fundamental tenet of Monster Studies: “the monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read” as a

reflective and reflexive "cultural discourse" (4; viii). Sampling a bricolage of contemporary culture in the volume's preface, Cohen describes a vaguely defined but omnipresent anxiety in postmodern American culture, which creates the impulse behind the recent monster zeitgeist.[6] As to the particularly notable popularity of zombies, there are already a variety of credible hypotheses published that explore the twenty-first-century's zombie zeitgeist, a remarkable circumstance in an area of interest so young that it has only very recently become visible and coherent enough to gain a title, "Zombie Studies," the mention of which is still likely to encounter humorous disbelief and/or challenges to the legitimacy of the field it indicates (Phillips).[7] The recency of the zombie's visibility, in a broader historical context, is due to the figure's origin in Haitian folklore coupled with the American attention to Haitian culture that resulted from the U. S. government's first occupation of the island nation in 1915.

Despite popular belief, "the Voodoo zombie" is not simply a body robbed of its soul. The Voodoo religion envisions a much more complex human makeup than Western dualism. In the former, a person consists of a *z'étoile*, the personal destiny transcendentally located in the cosmos; a *n'âme*, the God-given energy that allows the components of the body to function as one; a *corps cadavre*, the body itself; as well as a *gros bon ange* and a *ti bon ange*, the two components of the soul. It is the division of these last two elements that creates a zombie. The *gros bon ange*, or "big good angel," is the universal life force of which all individuals take part, given by God at conception and returned to Him at death. The *ti bon ange*, or "little good angel," is the individualized spirit, the locus of all that makes each person unique: "one's aura, and the source of all personality, character, and willpower." Wade Davis explains:

> as the essence of one's individuality, the ti bon ange is the logical target of sorcery, a danger that is compounded by the ease and frequency with which it dissociates from the body. It is the ti bon ange, for example, that travels during sleep to experience dreams. Similarly, the brief sensation of emptiness that immediately follows a sudden scare is due to its temporary flight. (219)

To create a zombie, according to Haitian folklore, a *bokor* (one who exploits the Voodoo religion) extracts the *ti bon ange* in order to use the eminently tractable creature that results as a servant. Thus, although the *bokor*'s victim retains part of the human soul, the Haitian zombie lacks personality and, consequently, personal will.[8] This is the zombie that first entered the American imagination, through such non-fiction texts as W.B. Seabrook's 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island* and Zora Neal Hurston's 1938 anthropological account *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. Both define the zombie as a corpse without a soul. Seabrook relates, "the *zombie*, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive" (original emphasis, 93); Hurston writes, "this is the way Zombies are spoken of: They are the bodies without souls. The living dead" (179). The discrepancy between these descriptions and the traditional Haitian conception of the zombie, the difference between the Western soul as a unit that comprises half of a human and the entirety of the human spiritual nature and the Haitian soul as a harmony of several components that each serve a particular function, is a reflection of the former definition's translation into Cartesian dualism.

The characteristic that survives this translation is *lack*, i. e. the zombie as reification of absence. Throughout a hundred years of appropriation and reimagining by every form of

American culture—comics, movies, T.V. shows, literature (prose, poetry, and drama[9]), and even, in the early decades, radio programs[10]—the zombie's inner emptiness persisted, arguably the figure's defining characteristic. Discussing the monster's varied genealogy in American popular culture, Kevin Boon notes, "zombies do all share a common characteristic: the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves. This may be the soul, the mind, the will, or, in some cases, the personality. But every zombie experiences a loss of something essential that previous to zombification defined it as human" ("And the Dead" 7). Boon's list of elements that zombies may lack in their various incarnations is not exhaustive, particularly as many zombie creators and critics understand some combination of those terms to be synonymous. "In several variations," Sarah Juliet Lauro and Deborah Christie note in the introduction to *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, zombies "are learning, adapting to their altered circumstances with frightening rapidity, and evolving into a rather perplexing ontological problem for humans. As the demarcating line between us and them, subject and object, recedes, confusion arises. We must ask ourselves: Are zombies becoming more human, or are humans becoming more like zombies?" (4). In a word, both—at least in the version of the zombie that is the subject of this study. In the words of a 2011 article that also summarizes several other zombie tropes (e. g. "the consumer, the mob, the Other, the proletariat, the weight of life, the dead soul"), "sometimes a zombie is just a zombie" (Parker)—but a zombie can also be a negative definition of the human being. Rather than closing the metaphoric significance of the zombie, it is more productive and more accurate to understand the zombie as a sort of formula, by which the figure of the zombie can indicate an element crucial to the human make-up by demonstrating what results in the absence of that element.

The most basic definition of the zombie embodies the contradiction indicated by the popular appellation 'living dead': a figure in which both life and death are self-evident. As such, the monster's disturbing effect is due to the Freudian phenomenon of the uncanny. As Kyle William Bishop explains in *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, "if the '*Heimlich Unheimlich*' represents the most terrifying combination (the monster that is both extremely familiar in its human-like appearance yet extremely unfamiliar in every other way), then the zombie represents an ideal manifestation of Freud's configuration" of the uncanny effect (111). Freud's discussion of death in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny" invites this sort of reading of the zombie, beginning, "to many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts" (148).[11] Bishop's explanation reflects the most obvious way in which the zombie is uncanny, as a familiar/*heimlich* container (the "human-like appearance") for an abstract concept, death, which is unfamiliar/*unheimlich* in its opaqueness to modern science. Yet it is equally possible to interchange the terms' alignment, taking death for granted and focusing on the equally abstract nature of life, particularly in context with twentieth and twenty-first-century science's interest in defining human nature, or the nature of human life. Freud's emphasis on the *unheimlich* as hidden enables the latter realization. For instance, his citations of the contradictory encapsulation of the *Unheimlich* in the definition of the term '*heimlich*' include

> p. 878: 6. *heimlich* as used of knowledge, mystical, allegorical: *heimlich bedeutung* ('secret meaning'), *mysticus, divinus, occultus, figuratus*.
>
> p. 878: in the following *heimlich* is used differently for what is withdrawn from knowledge, unconscious . . .

but then *heimlich* also means 'locked away, inscrutable' (133)

In this context, death, while a state undefinable by modern science, is too pat a quality to qualify as *unheimlich*. "Freud's essay demonstrates . . . that the uncanny is destined to elude mastery," Nicholas Royle writes in his 2003 study of the concept. "It is what cannot be pinned down or controlled. The uncanny is never simply a question of a statement, description or definition, but always engages a performative dimension, a maddening supplement, something unpredictable and additionally strange happening in and to what is being stated, described or defined" (15-16). The examples of the zombie trope in this study have been brought together because they point to the fundamentally uncanny nature of human experience, the condition of being human while also being unable to define "human." The zombie fiction discussed herein effects this ontological anxiety by problematizing specifically the human consciousness, an aspect that continues to confound biologists, social scientists, and phenomenologists (to name a few) and has garnered its own academic discipline within cognitive science.[12]

Even the original Haitian zombies participate in Cartesian dualism, a philosophical framework that envisions the human subject as a unity of two fundamental and fundamentally different essences: body and mind.[13] Whereas most earlier monsters proclaimed their monstrous status through physical dysmorphia, the zombie's defining disfigurement is internal.[14] Characterizing the zombie as "an antisubject" in which "no trace of the individual remains," Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry identify the two-fold terror of the undead menace as that of being eaten and that of being assimilated. "Both of these fears," they write, "reflect recognition of one's own mortality and ultimately reveal the primal fear of losing the 'self,'; however, in the figure of the zombie, the body and the mind

are separated antinomies. The zombie is different from other monsters because the body is resurrected and retained: only consciousness is permanently lost" (89). To use Jane Caputi's characterization in an early example of Zombie Studies, "Films of the Nuclear Age" (1988), many critics define the figure of the zombie as "a monstrosity of consciousness" (103). In a more recent study of the cinematic undead, for example, "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety" (2008), Peter Dendle writes, "the essence of the 'zombie' at the most abstract level is supplanted, stolen, or effaced consciousness" (47). He explains,

> zombification is the logical conclusion of human reductionism: it is to reduce a person to body, to reduce behavior to basic motor functions, and to reduce social utility to raw labour. Whether zombies are created by a vodun master or by a mad scientist, the process represents a psychic imperialism: the displacement of one person's right to experience life, spirit, passion, autonomy, and creativity for another person's exploitive gain. (48)

Notice how many qualities Dendle tacitly folds into consciousness: will, life, spirit, passion, autonomy, and creativity. As this usage demonstrates, 'consciousness,' is a fuzzy umbrella-term for any number of abstract qualities, and it can be evoked by the introduction of its subsidiary qualities. "Ultimately, modern zombie stories reflect our fear of loss of identity," Margo Collins and Elson Bond propose in "'Off the page and into your brains!': New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses" (204); 'identity' is a concept that belongs to the self-consciousness, as Kevin Boon notes in "The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age." He summarizes "the transformation that the mythological zombie came to represent" as "an absence of conscious self, a person for whom identity, self, personhood, and so on are absent from the body. In lacking

consciousness, the zombie is incapable of examining self" (54). Like Dendle, Boon's explanation of the zombie as a formulation of the human elides the complexity of the immaterial human attributes that the consciousness exemplifies. Boon argues that "the zombie came to represent a loss of internal reliability, a loss of being, which results in a human shell occupied by nothingness" (55). However, the zombie's loss doesn't necessarily have to be total. The figure of the zombie is more versatile and valuable as a fictional trope if it can help define not only the human but also the human consciousness, an ability that cognitive philosophy has attributed to the figure of the zombie for decades.

Consciousness studies adopted the zombie in the '70s as a thought experiment intended to provide a philosophical argument for the possibility (or, equally often, the impossibility) of the intangible dimension excluded by scientific materialism, a theory which denies anything but a material, biological cause for all the abilities attributed to the human subject. As Robert Kirk explains in *Zombies and Consciousness* (2005),

> if zombies are so much as a bare possibility, the world is a very paradoxical place. That possibility doesn't just imply that there is more to us than the behavioural or other physical facts can provide for. It implies that our part of the world involves something non-physical, on top of the molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles that compose our bodies and those of other sentient creatures. If on the other hand zombies are not possible, then if we can make clear why that is so, we shall have solved the hardest part of the mind-body problem. (4)

The 'philosophical zombie' first emerged as such in Kirk's 1974 article, "Sentience and Behaviour," in the form of Dan, whose excruciatingly slow zombification allows him to

describe the process in terms of 'qualia,' cognitive science's term for the subjective nature of human experience. While a detailed explanation of the phenomenological philosophy entailed is unnecessary to this discussion, the salient point is that philosophical zombies lack qualia, although they are in every other way indistinguishable from humans. In "Sniffing the Camembert: On the Conceivability of Zombies," Allin Cottrell summarizes the philosophical zombie's stake in the existence of qualia as a thought experiment:

> The 'real' issue concerns the status of qualia, that is, the subjective sensory states into which we are thrown when (say) looking at a yellow leaf, hearing a musical chord, sniffing a camembert, or running our fingers over a piece of sandpaper. Is it possible to provide a satisfactory account of such states using only the resources of a materialist functionalism? Or is it the case . . . that once we have said all there is to say about the physical basis of, and the functional role of, such states, there remains an uneliminable residue: the brute qualitative matter of 'what it is like' to sniff the camembert? (4-5)

Reviewed in this context, the use of the term 'consciousness' in Zombie Studies' has been synonymous with 'qualia'; therein lies the overlap between the philosophical and the literal/figurative zombie in fiction. Philosophical zombies embody 'absent qualia,' a feature Kirk first characterized as a mental state within which "all is silent and dark" (*Zombies* 3).[15] The fictional figure of the zombie likewise embodies absent qualia. In her discussion of the zombie in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, Marina Warner notes the overlap, commenting, "'absent qualia' seems to me a good way of describing what used to be called spirit possession or soul theft, when the bundle of faculties that make a person recognizable—mind, volition, expressiveness, feelings—have been reduced, if not

extinguished" (124). Since the present study explores the ability of the zombie to figuratively define discrete components of the human consciousness, the component indicated by each of the zombie fictions examined herein will be referred to as the 'absent quale.'

As an empty subject, a subject that is no longer human because it has been emptied of some fundamentally human essence, or absent quale, the zombie's presence paradoxically performs absence. Robin Becker captures this quality in her novel, *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*, as two (living) witnesses to an apocalyptic plague of zombies discuss why death, in the regular course of human affairs, is so relatively normal, despite its tragic and disruptive emotional consequences for those who survive:

> "Death is not anything. Death is not . . . " Ros said.
>
> "Life?"
>
> "Death is the absence of a presence. But living death is . . ."
>
> "The presence of absence?" (71)

In this casual play of binary terms, Robin Becker, a scholar of postmodern literature as well as a postmodern author, aligns the dissolution of the former paradigm of death (in which the dead subject is merely 'absent') into the newer incarnation presented by the zombie (the dead subject as still absent but additionally 'present') with the critical move from structuralism to deconstruction. In structuralist semiotics, language functions by 'standing in' for that to which it refers; "the sign marks an absent presence," but its signified is implicitly present, as the signifier attests to its ontological existence, however transcendent (Leitch 44). In the analogy suggested by Becker's dialogue, the structuralist affirmation of being is mirrored by the traditional conception of death (i.e. pre-zombie), in which even the subject's absence from the mortal coil continues his presence in the world—e. g. as a corpse, as an occupant of

a grave-site, as a memory—continuing as an absent presence. In contrast, the zombie is literally present but figuratively absent, the putrefying-but-persistent presence of an essential absence (of life, at the very least). Analogously, deconstruction redefines language as the presence of an absence by virtue of its supplementary nature, by which the sign is merely a trace of all that it purports to exclude. Derrida describes this as "the presence-absence of the trace" (*On Grammatology* 71).[16]

Metaphorically speaking, Derrida's theories zombify the subject as traditionally conceived in Western metaphysics. In other words, Derrida decenters and destabilizes the Western conception of the self. For instance, in *Writing and Difference*, Derrida writes,

> pure perception does not exist: we are written only as we write, by the agency within us which always already keeps watch over perception, be it internal or external. The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the writer. The subject of writing is a system of relations between strata: the [Freudian] Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world. Within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found. (226-7)

The comparison between Derrida's poststructuralist critique of the subject and that performed by the figure of the zombie brings to light an important implication of the latter: while the zombie is literally post-human, a state that evolves from the passing of the subject's humanity, the trope of the zombie explored in this study is a fundamentally humanist figure. That is to say, the figure of the zombie under consideration participates in the humanist project of defining the essential essence of humanity, as in, for example, the "Factor X" that Francis Fukuyama posits in *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology*

Revolution.[17] Not only does Derridian theory deny the possibility of defining the human subject, it denies that the subject exists as such. Thus,

> the future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue. (*On Grammatology* 5)

In this sense, Derrida's posthumanist theory can be read as an explanation for the zombie's negative demonstration of the human subject, i. e. the absence of the zombie's absent quale, that leads back to the fundamental tenet of Monster Studies: monsters demonstrate a disruption of the 'normal,' as popularly conceived. Citing Derrida's theories, Cohen writes, "the horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world" (7). If this study limits the zombie's scope to the realm of human consciousness, it is a reflection of the necessary strictures of the critical project rather than any narrowness of the zombie's possibilities as a fantastic figure. The most ideal version of this project can only restate Kirk's conclusion in his original fusion of the monster with philosophy, "perhaps I have said enough to show that if it is valid, the idea of Zombies, fantastic as it is, has useful work to do" ("Sentience" 60).

Notes to Introduction

1. Kyle William Bishop's 2010 text, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, features similar legitimizing paratexts, describing Bishop's academic status on the back cover and beginning with a foreword by a member on the committee that approved the dissertation that became the book. The foreword concludes with an explicit exhortation to take the figure of the zombie seriously: "the following pages provide remarkable illuminations in all of these areas, so much so that you, the reader once having finished this, like me after I first perused what now follows, will never look at a zombie film or a Gothic-monster story or any kind of aesthetic horror in the same way again" (Hogle 4). Note that the statement functions as a testimonial as well as a legitimization.

2. Fantastic literature in particular has a long history of being dismissed as having no significant relation to reality. For a genealogy of this attitude, refer to Kathryn Hume's foundational exploration and defense of the fantastic mode, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*.

3. Humorously, the Associated Press re-used the phrase "capitalist ghoul" to describe the magazine's creator, Michael Forbes, in an article noting the magazine mogul's provisions for Forbes employees in his will (Hampson).

4. Drezner's *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* offers broader overviews of the zombie's popularity in the form of three charts: "Popular and Scholarly Interest in Zombies," (2); "Interest in Zombies Since 2000," (3); and "Media Mentions of Zombies" (4).

5. The monster's cultural and historical ubiquity is widely acknowledged in academic theorizations of monstrosity, a subgenre of fantastic studies in its own right, which has flourished since the horror boom of the 1980s.

A few other examples of Monster Studies should be noted here—not only because of their excellence as examples of their critical genre, but also because I am indebted to these specific texts for my own understanding of the monster function in culture: Marina Warner's *Monsters of Our Own Making: The Peculiar Pleasures of Fear* (2007); David Gilmore's *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (2003); W. Scott Poole's *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (2011).

6. Many theorists of the zombie's popularity offer a similar rational. For example, Bishop notes in the introduction to *American Zombie Gothic*, comparing the recent zombie "renaissance" to the proliferation of zombie cinema in the wake of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, "zombie narratives have been reconditioned to satisfy a new aesthetic, but they have returned to prominence because the social and cultural conditions of a post-9/11 world have come to match so closely those experienced by viewers during the civil unrest of the 1960s and '70s" (25).

7. I offer the same *Wall-Street Journal* article, "Zombie Studies Gain Ground on College Campuses" (2014), to both support my assertion that serious studies of the zombie have actually coalesced into an academic field and to provide documentation, likely unnecessary for a contemporary reader, of doubt as to that field's worth.

Additionally, I would be remiss as a scholar if I did not remark that I write these lines in the same month as the article's publication, so that I might point out that this very

dissertation, as an example of Zombie Studies, rather serendipitously adds credence to the article's assertion.

For another indication of the shift in critical opinion and a discussion of possible reasons for the shift, see Joe Fassler's 2011 essay in *The Atlantic*, "How Zombies and Superheroes Conquered Highbrow Fiction."

8. For more extensive examinations of the Haitian zombie, see Kette Thomas's "Haitian Zombie, Myth, and Modern Identity," Hans-W. Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier's "The Ways and Nature of the Zombi," and Ann Kordas's "New South, New Immigrants, New Women, New Zombies: The Historical Development of the Zombie in American Popular Culture" in *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition.*

9. The zombie didn't wait for the postmodern appreciation of kitch, appearing in a New York play, entitled *Zombie*, in 1932 (Kee 14).

10. See Richard Hand's "Undead Radio: Zombies and Living Dead in 1930s and 1940s Radio Drama," in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, and Chris Vials's "The Origin of the Zombie in American Radio and Film: B-Horror, U.S. Empire, and the Politics of Disavowal," in G*eneration Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture.*

11. For an explanation of the undead's uncanniness in statistical terms, as measured by its psychological effect on an audience, see Stephen Bates's 2008 study "Prenates, Postmorts, and Bell-Curve Dignity."

12. David Chalmers's 2002 anthology, *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, affords a broad perspective on the persistence and cultural significance of the problematic nature of human consciousness.

13. For background on Western dualism, see *History of the Mind-Body Problem*, edited by Tim Crane and Sarah Patterson.

14. For discussions of the monster's long history of physical deformity, see Noel Carroll's section "Fantastic Biologies and the Structures of Horrific Imagery" from *The Philosophy of Horror: or, Paradoxes of the Heart* and Marina Warner's "In the Genre of the Monstrous" from *Monsters of Our Own Making: The Peculiar Pleasures of Fear*.

15. See, for example, Tim Crane's essay "The Origins of Qualia," and Ned Block's article, "Are Absent Qualia Impossible?"

16. Language has always been supplementary, according to Derrida, from the moment

> in which language invaded the universal problematic; . . . in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse . . . that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendent signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum. ("Structure, Sign, and Play" 879)

In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida extends this logic to the transcendental subject (226-7).

17. See Fukuyama's delineation of Factor X in "Human Dignity," from *Our Posthuman Future*, pages 148-177; in *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama summarizes the Western tradition of human essentialism:

> The radicalness of Hegel's historicism is evident in his very concept of man. With one important exception [Rousseau], virtually every philosopher writing before Hegel believed that there was such a thing as "human nature," that is, a more or less permanent set of traits—passions, desires, abilities, virtues, and so forth—that characterized man. . . . While individual men could obviously vary, the essential nature of man did not change over time, whether he or she was a Chinese peasant or a modern European trade unionist. This philosophical view is reflected in the common cliché that "human nature never changes," used most often in the context of one of the less attractive human characteristics like greed, lust, or cruelty. Hegel, by contrast, did not deny that man had a natural side arising from needs of the body like food or sleep, but believed that in his most essential characteristics man was undetermined and therefore free to create his own nature. (original emphasis, 63)

Chapter One: The Soul in H. P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West—Reanimator"

Now our science tells our faith that she is shameful, and our Hopes that they are dupes;
our Reverence for truth leads to conclusions that make all reverence a falsehood.

–William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality"

I don't know but I been told.
Fuckin' zombies ain't got no soul.

–Robin Becker, *Brains: A Memoir*

H. P. Lovecraft's most profound legacies to fantastic literature are his theorizations of weird fiction, particularly his conception of the "literature of cosmic fear" (also called by critics and Lovecraft himself 'cosmic terror' and 'cosmic horror') (15). Weird fiction earns its classification as a subgenre of horror because it denotes a type of literature that upsets readers' sense of complacency about their understanding of the world, creating the impression of uncharted and unsuspected dimensions of reality—"spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part," in Lovecraft's words (*Supernatural Horror* 13). In "Naturalizing the Supernatural: H. P. Lovecraft and the Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror," Matolcsy Kálmán summarizes, "the fundamental macabre effect of Lovecraft's terror . . . is the specific Lovecraftian method of re-establishing the realistic ground rules—extending them by a new, alien but verified, supernatural content . . . The reader feels that his reality has been transcended, that he stepped up to a next level of terrifying fact (88). Lovecraft often fosters this sense by filtering his tales through scientist-narrators who, as Kálmán notes, give pseudo-scientific explanations of the supernatural phenomena (or, as Richard Matheson's scientists would insist, "supernormal" phenomena).[1] Although Lovecraft argues that weird fiction is as old as literature itself, his many scientist characters are one

indication of how much his apprehension of the genre reflects the contemporary fascination with science and astronomy that had so recently given birth to science fiction (*Supernatural Horror* 15). Another sign is his notion of cosmic horror, in which the "next level of terrifying fact" is the insignificance of humanity in relation to the rest of the universe.[2]

The effect of Lovecraft's cosmic horror depends on orienting humanity to what lies beyond its everyday purview, usually located in outer space.[3] In his prescriptive essay "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction," Lovecraft confesses that he writes weird fiction because it fulfills his desire "to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis." His own fascination with the "infinite reservoir of mystery [that] still engulfs most of the outer cosmos" possibly causes him to over-emphasize in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* the role that outer space plays in the horror genre. "The true weird tale," he dictates, requires that

> a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of *outer, unknown forces* must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and *the daemons of unplumbed space*. (emphasis added; 15)

Far off modes of existence and those strange beings that rule them dominate Lovecraft's fiction oeuvre as much as his theoretical writing. For example, "The Color Out of Space" describes the infusion of an incomprehensibly alien substance into rural New England,

causing the withering death of the land and its hapless inhabitants. Another devastating intrusion takes place in "The Dunwich Horror," involving a conscious entity summoned through the assistance of ancient and forbidden texts. After a violent struggle to expel it, one of its dispatchers explains, "it was mostly a kind of force that doesn't belong in our part of space; a kind of force that acts and grows and shapes itself by other laws than those of our sort of nature" (173). The same lore that conjures the monster in Dunwich facilitates body snatching in "The Thing on the Doorstep," in which the alien character of that knowledge is given a greater emphasis. As the narrator of the story watches it in action, for instance, he instinctively senses its otherworldly origin:

> Just where the supreme horror lay, I could not for my life tell; yet there swept over me such a swamping wave of sickness and repulsion—such a freezing, petrifying sense of utter alienage and abnormality—that my grasp of the wheel grew feeble and uncertain. The figure beside me seemed less like a lifelong friend than like some monstrous intrusion from outer space—some damnable, utterly accursed focus of unknown and malign cosmic forces. (667)

Perhaps Lovecraft's most famous "monstrous intrusion from outer space" is the catalogue of alien gods that comprise the Cthulhu mythos, peopled by awesome beings far older than our local stars who lie in wait to emerge from their cosmic dreaming and retake the Earth. In all of these stories, as in the majority of Lovecraft's fiction, the constant thread is a threat originating beyond the human world. As Carl Sederholm observes in "What Screams Are Made Of: Representing Cosmic Fear in H. P. Lovecraft's 'Pickman's Model,'" "Lovecraft wants his readers to forever pay attention to things outside of themselves" (339). The

neologism Lovecraft creates for his genre, "cosmic horror," indicates just how far outside our mundane, human existence Lovecraft's fiction usually reaches.

The unnamed narrator of Lovecraft's early story "Herbert West—Reanimator" nods to cosmic horror as he recounts the scientific endeavors of himself and his eponymous partner, restoring life to various corpses. The narrator's descriptions of death often employ the same figurative concepts as Lovecraft's descriptions of cosmic horror, envisioning death as a dimension separate from life: inaccessible but coexistent. For instance, he speculates upon a reanimated subject's possible "revelation of hideous secrets from gulfs and caverns beyond death's barrier" (54). Imagining death as a space located "beyond" the precincts of life mimics the spatial relationship of Earth ('here') to the cosmos ('out there'). He describes death as "the unfathomable abyss" and "inaccessible spheres," language that would also describe the condition of outer space before the advent of space exploration (54; 32). At one point, the narrator describes West's experiments as an effort "to find something which would start man's vital motions anew after they had been stopped by the thing we call death" (45). The narrator's diction indicates that death, as an unknown realm, serves the same function as the cosmos in cosmic fear. However, while death is certainly an unknown element in "Reanimator," it is the mysterious composition of *life* around which the story revolves; we are informed that the "essence of Herbert West's existence was a quest amid black and forbidden realms of the unknown, in which he hoped to uncover the secret of life" (43). The narrator's allusions to cosmic horror emphasize the story's uniqueness in Lovecraft's oeuvre: "Reanimator" locates the unknown within the human condition, prefiguring a major theme in subsequent zombie literature.

The serial nature of the story, which was published in six installments of *Home Brew* between 1921 and '22, offers an opportunity to observe the intended themes of the budding writer as Lovecraft recreates the atmosphere conducive to the story's effect at the beginning of each installment.[4] Summarizing their quest to discover a chemical solution to restore dead bodies to life, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes life as a mysterious and unfathomable state, foreshadowing West's failure to scientifically dissect it. West believes that "a corpse fully equipped with organs may with suitable measures be set going again in *the peculiar fashion known as life*" and "bodies with every cell intact and capable of receiving again the impulse toward *that mode of motion called life*" (emphasis added; 28; 50-51). Even while he assists West's attempts to translate life force into a chemical formula, the narrator's language belies his implicit belief that his friend can hope for success. As West works on the decapitated body of a former friend and student, the narrator proclaims, "in one triumphant demonstration West was about to relegate the mystery of life to the category of myth" (62). The narrative ultimately proves the irony of this statement: while West obtains a limited success in 'reanimating' the corpses upon which he experiments, his shambling monsters only reinforce the mythic implications of life's composition, making a mockery of West's assertion that human life can be exhaustively comprehended by science.

The zombies that West creates are monstrous because they are missing essential qualia that cannot survive the scientist's reanimation process. In his brief discussion of the story in *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*, S. T. Joshi calls it "a long meditation on the nature of humanity." He writes,

> What is it that makes one a human being? If West, echoing Haeckel, is correct in thinking that "all life is a chemical and physical process" . . . why should the creatures reanimated by West be so loathsome? Jocular and possibly self-parodic as they are, the monstrosities West engenders are perhaps Lovecraft's way of saying that human beings are something more than the sum of their parts, as he says in another context, "There is, most decidedly, something missing from a body dead half an hour or even much less" . . . That something may not be the soul, and may indeed not be anything than cannot be incorporated within a flexible materialistic scheme, but it is something that makes us more than smoothly running machines. (125)[5]

Joshi seems to overlook the story's overt indications that the absent quale in "Reanimator" is precisely the soul—"the soul," in Lovecraft's own terminology, in that of the story's narrator, and that of Herbert West himself; one example is the quote that Joshi references in the above-quoted excerpt. The phrase that Joshi repeats belongs to a sentence that explicitly identifies the elusive quale as "the so-called 'soul'":

> holding with Haeckel that all life is a chemical and physical process, and that the so-called 'soul' is a myth, my friend believed that artificial reanimation of the dead can depend only on the condition of the tissues; and that unless actual decomposition has set in, a corpse fully equipped with organs may with suitable measures be set going again in the peculiar fashion known as life. (27-8)

In this and other repetitions of this information, Lovecraft sets up the basic premise of the story: if West succeeds in restoring a cadaver to its state before death, then his materialism is

vindicated; if he fails, then life encompasses something beyond a chemical and physical process, something which is, in the terms laid out in the above quote, the so-called 'soul.' The events of the story bear out the latter case, positing it as an immaterial "organ" without which each human is not "fully equipped." Moreover, the story characterizes the soul as the organ of human morality. Predating George Romero's zombies—which many credit with transforming the somnambulant, servant-zombie of Haitian folklore and early films like *White Zombie* (1932) into the violent predator-zombies of the modern day—West's reanimated corpses are vicious, murderous, and even cannibalistic. Their behavior demonstrates that a man's soul is what separates him from the other animals. Discussing the theme of the loss of personal will in horror fiction, Peter Straub writes,

> to feel our character, our personality, and our personal, hard-won history fade from being is to be exposed to whatever lies beneath these comforting operational conveniences. What remains when the conscious and functioning self has been erased is mankind's fundamental condition—irrational, violent, guilt-wracked, despairing, and mad. (xiv-xv)

This is the condition of Herbert West's zombies. Stripped of their immaterial souls by death, West's zombies exhibit the human animal at the most fundamental level. Denying the existence of anything beyond base physicality, Herbert West can only exercise control over the meanest level of the human being. His inability to restore the soul in the reanimation process demonstrates that there is a dimension of reality beyond the realm of science, a mythic dimension akin to that described in the Christian religion. The horror of "Reanimator"—it's 'weirdness'—is the horror of a narrow-minded scientist discovering the existence of forces beyond his ability to comprehend, let alone affect.

West's confidence that he can solve the mystery of life springs from his fervent scientific materialism, a trait he shares with his author. A quick comparison of "Reanimator" with S. T. Joshi's gloss of Lovecraft's materialistic philosophy demonstrates that Lovecraft ascribed to his protagonist his own beliefs. Personally, Lovecraft believed that "the universe is a 'mechanism' governed by fixed laws (although these may not all be known to human beings) where all entity is inextricably connected causally" (Joshi, *A Subtler Magick* 29). The first description of West's theories summarizes this philosophy and embeds it as the central characteristic of Lovecraft's doomed protagonist: West holds faith in his belief of. "the essentially mechanistic nature of life" in which man is so much "organic machinery" (Lovecraft 26-7). As indicated by the language of this passage, West views a corpse as nothing more than a defective mechanism, capable of being repaired if given the appropriate knowledge and tools. The allusion to Haeckel in this passage refers to Ernst Haeckel, a scientist and philosopher whose treatise *The Riddle of the Universe* (1899) Lovecraft admired and incorporated into his own philosophical system (Joshi, *A Subtler Magick* 30-3). Haeckel also shares the second tenet of Lovecraft's materialism, Joshi writes that "all entity is material, and there can be no other essence, whether it be 'soul' or 'spirit' or any other non-material substance," as does Herbert West, who is "a materialist, believing in no soul and attributing all the working of consciousness to bodily phenomena" (Joshi 29; Lovecraft 54). The second tenet of materialism reinforces the first by guaranteeing that there is nothing outside the ken of the physical sciences. Lovecraft's friend and frequent correspondent Clark Ashton Smith captures this aspect of materialism in his 1933 story "Genius Loci": concerning the mysterious atmosphere infusing a small rural spring, a character remarks, "the place has an entity of its own—an indwelling personality. It's there, like the soul in a human

body, but I can't pin it down or touch it. You know that I'm not superstitious—but, on the other hand, I'm not a bigoted materialist, either; and I've run across some odd phenomena in my time" (685). This passage could be a friendly jibe at Lovecraft, given the authors' relationship and the fact that Lovecraft was "keen" on repudiating the idea of an immaterial soul, according to Joshi (31). Essentially, materialism proposes a schema of the human being, dictating what is and isn't encompassed by the human condition; it is that schema that "Reanimator" is founded upon and, as a weird tale, ultimately upsets.

In the materialist schema, consciousness is merely a curious property of a particular arrangement of the body's atoms, and it is only this particular arrangement that separates living tissue from dead matter. Lovecraft describes the transition between these two states in an essay published in the collection *In Defense of Dagon*:

> The tissues and cells which produced the motions of consciousness and personality—the "soul"—finally break down and dissociate, turning to liquid and gaseous decomposition-products and leaving nothing to mark their former temporary assemblage and motions. Can we imagine a continuance of motion when the moving particles are gone? Can we imagine a "soul" in existence after its parent body is dispersed—a candle flame still burning after its energy and incandescent particles are dispersed? (qtd. in Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft* 24)

When Herbert West reverses this process with his science-fictional chemical solution, he expects to see his success demonstrated in the reawakening of "normal mental attributes," resulting in "a rekindled spark of reason and perhaps a normal, living creature" (Lovecraft, "Herbert West" 36; 53).[6] The above passage of Lovecraft's essay is interesting to consider alongside "Reanimator" because it proposes a secular model of the soul that his fictional

protagonist shares: the so-called soul is merely a label applied to what makes each person unique among other persons, his consciousness and all that enables: reason, personality, and morality. In the penultimate installment of the story, West extends his materialist theories to hypothesize that that not only is consciousness a physical phenomenon, it is one that each and every one of the body's cells are capable of, giving rise to "his increasingly strong opinion that consciousness, reason, and personality can exist independently of the brain" (62). The similarity between Lovecraft's listed attributes of the soul and West's desired result of reanimation invites us to understand that West, like his author, supposes that what has been labeled 'soul' is a function of material causes. Therefore, when the narrator tells us that West believes "the so-called 'soul' is a myth" (28), he means more precisely that the soul is not an immaterial entity.

Herbert West may deny the existence of the soul, but "Reanimator" insists upon it. Before the cumulative argument for the soul is made by the consistently monstrous results of West's experiments, the language of the story foreshadows its moral. For instance, when West and the narrator hear unusual sounds at their back door, they investigate "with a fear partly justified and partly that which comes only from the soul of the weird small hours" (49). When one of their zombies terrorizes the town during a typhoid outbreak, some residents speak of the monster as "the embodied daemon-soul of the plague itself" (42). While these mentions of the soul are clearly metaphoric, others might be more literal: the opinionated members of the university faculty are "high-souled characters" (37); one of the zombies, upon reanimation, utters a cry of "soul-petrifying horror" (40); the murder of Herbert West by a crowd of zombies is "the final soul-shattering catastrophe" (63). Since the narrator hints at some reservations about West's materialism at the beginning of the first

installment, remarking that he shares it "for the most part" but "still held some curious notions about the traditional 'soul' of man," it is possible that his repetition of the term "soul" indicates that the narrator's experiences with Dr. West have convinced him of the soul's existence (32). This implication is interesting, but ultimately not necessary for the wider significance of the repeated occurrence of 'soul' in the story's descriptive vocabulary. Because the central issue of "Reanimator" is the question of the soul's existence, the mere repetition of the term in metaphor foreshadows an affirmative answer.

The story's language is also haunted by mythic and religious language.[7] Christianity forms the backdrop of "Reanimator," most notably in the story's conflict over the existence of the soul. When he writes that he harbors lingering questions about "the traditional 'soul' of man," it seems reasonable to understand "traditional" as "Christian." A typhoid epidemic is "that satanic scourge" (35) during which "devils danced on the roofs of Arkham" (41); a Great War battlefield is "that babel of the damned" (60); a convenient corpse for West's experiments is a "heaven-sent gift" (53). Additionally, there are multiple references to the Christian nature of the society among which the stories events take place. Boxing, we are informed, is illegal due to "the prevailing spirit of Puritanism" (46). Most significantly, West's experiments are thwarted by "the tradition-bound elders" of his New England university, who are "the product of generations of pathetic Puritanism; kindly, conscientious, and sometimes gentle and amiable, yet always narrow, intolerant, custom-ridden, and lacking in perspective" (37). Presumably, the perspective that the narrator accuses the university faculty of lacking is scientific materialism. The narrator compares West's theories to Darwinism and the Copernican revolution, both of which were initially resisted because they defied a previously accepted model of existence offered by a prevalent interpretation of

Christianity (38). The comparison is apt, if misguided, since West's materialistic understanding of man denies the immaterial dimension of life posited by the Puritan vein of Christianity that the narrator ascribes to the university administration. What the narrator and Herbert West refuse to consider is the possibility that something similar to the traditional Christian soul does, indeed, exist. Believing that the characteristics of the soul are physically generated, West and the narrator attribute the monstrous behavior of their reanimated corpses to the deterioration of the body's cells following death; the narrator explains, "we could not get bodies fresh enough to show any trace of reason when reanimated, so had perforce created nameless horrors" (51). However, the story suggests that the problem with West's zombies is that they do not return with their souls, and that the soul is the seat of a quality that informs the consciousness, but also transcends it.

The zombies that West's experiments produce do not entirely lack the elements he attributes to the conventionally understood soul. The personality does not survive reanimation, as demonstrated most forcefully the case of Dr. Halsey, the highly intelligent and articulate Dean of Miskatonic University, who becomes after death a howling, gibbering asylum patient. Certainly none of the reanimated people demonstrate behavior that would be acceptable in any civilized society. The presence of consciousness in the zombies, on the other hand, is a more uncertain issue. All seem conscious enough, in so far as one must be conscious of a door in order to attempt entry through it, or conscious of a body in order to cannibalize it (49; 42). The first reanimated subject, originally taken from its place in the cemetery, attempts to return to its grave, which demonstrates a skewed sort of reason. West's final subject, Sir Eric Moreland Clapham-Lee, arguably demonstrates all three of West's desired outcomes. He is conscious and rational enough to remember his former teacher,

Herbert West, and to engineer his gruesome murder. His former identity as a major in the Canadian military might explain his ability to muster a small company of zombies to help him. Possibly these phenomena attest to West's increasingly skillful formulation of his reanimation serum. However, what West never manages to revive—even in Major Clapham-Lee—is the moral dimension of consciousness, engendered by the additional dimension of self-consciousness.

While personality, consciousness, and reason may be tied to the soul in some way, as suggested by the deterioration of these characteristics when the soul is lost during the process of death, the story also proposes that the best and most noble attributes of humanity are a function of the soul, without which man is merely a savage beast. A comment Lovecraft makes in a discussion of Lord Dunsany's work, written the same year Lovecraft finished "Reanimator," provides an unexpected gloss to the story:[8]

> Modern science has, in the end, proved an enemy to art and pleasure; for by revealing to us the whole sordid and prosaic basis of our thoughts, motives, and acts, it has stripped the world of glamour, wonder, and all those illusions of heroism, nobility, and sacrifice which used to sound so impressive when romantically treated. Indeed, it is not too much to say that psychological discovery, and chemical, physical, and physiological research have largely destroyed the element of emotion among informed and sophisticated people by resolving it into its component parts—intellectual idea and animal impulse. The so-called "soul" with all its hectic and mawkish attributes of sentimentality, veneration, earnestness, devotion, and the like, has perished on analysis. ("Foreword" xv)

Here we have another passage that describes Herbert West's viewpoint equally as well as Lovecraft's, and in which their mutual materialism is extended into another formula of humanity: intellect added to animal impulse. Herbert West is able to stimulate the latter with his chemical solution, and his final experiment on Major Clapham-Lee suggests that the former is also within the reach of science to revive. And yet the self-same subject also demonstrates that science cannot touch the soul that informs these operations of consciousness and self-consciousness.

In life, the Major was a good man; his last words attempt to warn and aid his copilot: "jump, Ronald, for God's sake, jump!" (Lovecraft, "Herbert West" 63). Upon his death and subsequent reanimation at the hands of his friend and colleague West, the Major becomes "a menacing military figure" who supervises his zombie minions' violence. While stealing away the zombie formerly known as Dr. Halsey (the Miskatonic Dean who forbade West's experiments at the university) from his padded cell in Arkham Asylum, the Major's gruesome troupe "had beaten, trampled, and bitten every attendant who did not flee; killing four and finally succeeding in the liberation of the monster," zombie-Halsey. The newspaper article describing the orchestrated violence notes, "those victims who could recall the event without hysteria swore that the creatures had acted less like men than like unthinkable automata guided by the wax-faced leader" (68). Having been decapitated in his fatal accident, the Major sports a wax head, carrying the original, fleshy member in a trunk, from which his voice issues commands. Literally and figuratively the head of the murderous zombie troupe, the Major ends West's career and Lovecraft's story by dismembering his former compatriot in an extremely gruesome manner. The narrator recounts,

> they all sprang at him and tore him to pieces before my eyes, bearing the fragments away into that subterranean vault of fabulous abominations. West's head was carried off by the wax-headed leader, who wore a Canadian officer's uniform. As it disappeared I saw that the blue eyes behind the spectacles were hideously blazing with their first touch of frantic, visible emotion. (69)

Far from the altruistic soul whose dying thought was for another's danger, the Major is now a vengeful, bloodthirsty monster fit to rival the mad scientist himself. Having met on the same battlefield during the war, West and the Major are both surgeons, materialists,[9] and, ultimately, decapitated—they are figurative doubles. The doubling suggests that Herbert West too has somehow lost his own soul.

The six installments of "Herbert West: Reanimator" trace the increase in the eponymous scientist's madness and obsession with the reanimation process. The narrator's first description of his friend is mild, and almost angelic: "West was *then* a small, slender, spectacled youth with delicate features, yellow hair, pale blue eyes, and a soft voice" (emphasis added; 28). As he immediately makes clear, the narrator recounts his tales from a much later point of time,[10] which alerts us that the qualifier "then" signifies a subsequent change. Eventually his friend confesses,

> gradually I came to find Herbert West himself more horrible than anything he did—that was when it dawned on me that this once normal scientific zeal for prolonging life had subtly degenerated into a mere morbid and ghoulish curiosity and a secret sense of charnel picturesqueness. His interest became a hellish and perverse addiction to the repellently and fiendishly abnormal. (59)

The repetitions of West's physical features increasingly foreshadow the scientist's ultimate madness: the same characteristics that initially tended toward angelic "gave no hint of the supernormal—almost diabolical—power of the cold brain within," rendering them uncannily sinister in this reiteration (36). Such menacing connotations recur throughout the story's installments: West is "a calm, blond, blue-eyed scientific automaton" and "an ice-cold intellectual machine" (46; 57). Note that the term "automaton" in the former sketch foreshadows the asylum attendants' description of the zombies as "automata," and the term "machine" in the latter echoes West's own description of "the organic machinery of mankind" (68; 27). These portrayals of West hint that he becomes a zombie himself, figuratively speaking. As the story demonstrates that a zombie is a human without a soul, West's figurative zombie-status implies that he too loses his soul. His friend details this process:

> This need for very fresh corpses had been West's moral undoing. They were hard to get, and one awful day he had secured his specimen while it was still alive and vigorous. A struggle, a needle, and a powerful alkaloid had transformed it to a very fresh corpse, and the experiment had succeeded for a brief and memorable moment; but West had emerged with a soul calloused and seared, and a hardened eye which sometimes glanced with a kind of hideous and calculating appraisal at men of especially sensitive brain and especially vigorous physique. (64)

Completely in the grip of his obsession, West begins to prey upon his fellow men, mentally evaluating them for their fitness as reanimation subjects. The first completion of his murderous strategy is his "moral undoing," from which his "soul [is] calloused and seared."

Lovecraft's metaphoric doubling of Herbert West in West's zombies prefigures a major theme in zombie literature: the zombie is a warning about humanity in its contemporary iteration, as a metaphor for an immanent degradation or decay of human nature.

Notes to Chapter One

1. In a 2007 interview, Richard Matheson was asked, “in your estimation, what does the supernatural genre tell us about ourselves as human beings?" He replied, “I think we’re yearning for something beyond the every day. And I will tell you that I don’t believe in the ‘supernatural,’ I believe in the ‘supernormal.’ To me there is nothing that goes against nature. If it seems incomprehensible, it’s because we haven’t been able to understand it yet” (Chappell).

2. For a more detailed discussion of the connection between contemporary scientific discoveries and Lovecraft’s theory of cosmic horror, see part four of Jason Colavito’s *Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge and the Development of the Horror Genre*, “Terror from Outside: Cosmic Horror (c. 1895-c.1945),” especially pages 170-2 and 185-192.

3. For my understanding of Lovecraft’s cosmic horror, I am additionally indebted to Mack Knopf’s “Things We Were Not Meant to Know: H. P. Lovecraft and Cosmic Fear,” Vivian Ralickas’s “Art, Cosmic Horror, and the Fetishizing Gaze in the Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft,” Carl Sederholm’s “What Screams are Made of: Representing Cosmic Fear in H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘Pickman’s Model,’” and T. S. Miller’s “From Bodily Fear to Cosmic Horror (and Back Again): The Tentacle Monster from Primordial Chaos to Hello Cthulhu.”

4. In a note to “Reanimator” in *More Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*, S. T. Joshi mentions that Lovecraft wrote the story “between the autumn of 1921 and the summer of 1922” (25). Because it was published in sections, which each make sense as a discrete story to a reader who misses the other issues of *Home Brew*, one might consider “Herbert West: Reanimator” as a story cycle. However, I will treat it as a single story, albeit in individually titled installments.

5. Joshi's citations, which I've omitted in my quotation, reference first page 27-8 in the edition of "Reanimator" that I refer to in this chapter, and second page 36 of *In Defense of Dagon*.

6. West does anticipate some possible depletion of intellect, due to the decomposition of the tissues in the delay between death and reanimation: "that the psychic or intellectual life might be impaired by the slight deterioration of sensitive brain-cells which even a short period of death would be apt to cause, West fully realized" (28); this accounts for West's obsession with obtaining fresher corpses. However, it is clear that the bestiality of West's zombies is outside these 'acceptable' or expected limits.

7. Other examples of the narrator's supernatural, mythic, and/or Christian language include: "fate had been kind" (52); "and then had come the scourge, grinning and lethal, from the nightmare caverns of Tartarus" (39); "like a noxious afrite from the halls of Eblis" (34); "a nameless titan claw had seemed to reach down through sixteen years" (67); "while he was with me, the wonder and diabolism of his experiments fascinated me . . . Now that he is gone . . . the spell is broken" (26); "ever since our first daemoniac session" (45); "fiendishly disgusting" (65); "like ghouls" (30); "a ghoulish discovery" (33); "not more unutterable could have been the chaos of hellish sound if the pit itself had opened to release the agony of the damned, for in one inconceivable cacophony was centered all the supernal terror and unnatural despair of animate nature" (33).

8. The essay is dated December 14th, 1922 (xviii); the version of Lovecraft's essay I refer to was published as a foreword to an edition of Lord Dunsany's *Tales of Three Hemispheres*.

9. We can assume that the Major is a materialist because he too believes in West's quest to reanimate corpses (Lovecraft, "Herbert West" 61).

10. The opening lines of the first installment situate the narrator's voice at a point after all the events he describes: "of Herbert West, who was my friend in college and in after life, I can speak only with extreme terror. This terror is not due altogether to the sinister manner of his recent disappearance . . ." the details of which constitute the final installment of the story (25-6).

Chapter Two: The Consciousness in Robert Heinlein's "All You Zombies—"

Let us consider self-deception. How is it possible for a self to deceive its self? It would appear to be a logical impossibility, but only if we believe that a self is a single thing. . . . The idea of self-deception suggests that the one way to understand the self is to assume the position that there are multiple aspects to the self, which may mean that the self is a modular system . . . It is clear that whatever the self may be, it is a complex multi-aspect sort of 'thing' or 'process'.

–Michael Lewis, "The Development of Self-Consciousness"

It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.

–Søren Kierkagaard, "Berlin, May 17, 1843"

The question of the zombie's potential as a metaphor is broached nowhere more directly than in Robert Heinlein's 1959 story "All You Zombies—." Despite its title, the story contains no zombies that a contemporary audience would recognize from the last three decades of zombies that had stumbled through popular movies. The precedent for the zombie's mid-century presence in film had been set by the Halperin brothers' 1932 *White Zombie*, which cannibalized the somnambulant, Haitian slave-zombies of *The Magic Island* and pulp magazine items. Until the '60s and the guiding hand of George Romero, "the only scary element of the zombie is the prospect of becoming one," David Flint notes in *Zombie Holocaust: How the Living Dead Devoured Pop Culture* (16). These zombies were more victims than monsters, vessels emptied by Voodoo sorcerers; they were less than men because something vital had been stolen from them. "They're *not* men," the Haitian driver tells the doomed couple in *White Zombie*, "they're dead bodies!" Even when the rise of science fiction in the cinema of the '50s began to replace the sorcerers with mind-controlling

aliens and mad scientists, these antagonists continued to reduce their victims in some crucial way in order to control them (23).[1] Heinlein himself casually used the term "zombie" in his personal correspondence to denote a state of being less than present, not quite alive to the world; a 1957 letter refers to "neurotic cases of retired officers who could not or would [not] accept the change emotionally and who became mere zombies, living in the past" (qtd. in Patterson 170). The obvious dearth of vacant-eyed, shambling characters in Heinlein's early short story "All You Zombies—," particularly in the scene involving the striking final line from which Heinlein takes the title of the story, indicates that the narrator intends the term metaphorically.

A horror-genre zombie would certainly have struck readers as out of place in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, where "Zombies" debuted in the March 1959 edition (Gifford 44). Now recognized as a classic of time travel fiction and its temporal paradox subgenre, the story is narrated by a "temporal agent" as he recruits a man he refers to as "the Unmarried Mother" because of the latter's profession writing fiction for a female audience (37). At the agent's prompting, the Unmarried Mother confesses that his professional perspective is born out of his earlier identity as a female. He/she narrates his/her life history: after growing up as the female orphan named Jane, she indulges in a brief love affair with a strange man who mysteriously disappears afterward, leaving her pregnant. Jane gives birth to a baby girl, but there is a complication with the delivery that leads a surgeon to discover that Jane is a hermaphrodite. Because the birth damages her female organs, the surgeon manipulates the male organs into expression. The newborn infant is kidnapped by an unknown older man. When the Unmarried Mother finishes recounting these incidents, the

time agent offers to help him track down the man who left the Unmarried Mother both a mother and unmarried. He transports the Unmarried Mother through time, introduces him to Jane, and leaves him to unwittingly seduce his younger, female self. Meanwhile, the time agent travels through time again and moves Jane's baby from the hospital to an orphanage. Belatedly, the reader discovers that every principal character in "All You Zombies—" is actually the same character at different points in time. After the temporal agent drops his younger self off at the recruiting station, he returns to his quarters and muses on his peculiar situation. The enigmatic last lines, in which the narrator suddenly addresses a previously unmentioned audience, contain the only mention of zombies in the phrase that Heinlein emphasized by taking it for the story's title:

> Then I glanced at the ring on my finger.
>
> The Snake that Eats Its Own Tail, Forever and Ever . . . I *know* where *I* came from—but *where did all you zombies come from?*
>
> I felt a headache coming on, but a headache powder is one thing I do not take.
>
> I did once—and you all went away.
>
> So I crawled into bed and whistled out the light.
>
> *You* aren't really there at all. There isn't anybody but me—Jane—here alone in the dark.
>
> I miss you dreadfully! (46)

The story's ending leaves the reader with several puzzles: to whom is the agent speaking? If these figures are imaginary, how can the reader recognize them? And, most profoundly, in what way are they "zombies"?

Few academic discussions of "Zombies" interrogate the meaning of the enigmatic term in the title. In *A Reader's Companion* to Heinlein, James Gifford tantalizingly suggests that the word is secretly an acronym, despite not being overtly labeled as such like the others that appear in the story. Discussing a list of potential titles for the story in Heinlein's personal notes—a list that concludes with "All You Zombies—" Gifford reasons,

> the final title clearly came as an inspiration as he wrote the final paragraph . . . and may be one of Heinlein's best.
>
> It's a clever acronym (as are they all—especially the unwritten one), but just what does the S in A.N.G.E.L.S. stand for? (46)

Unfortunately, Gifford leaves us to guess at what Z.O.M.B.I.E.S. might stand for, and to wonder what suggests to him that the word is intended to be an acronym. The other acronyms that Gifford refers to in the story—all that are clearly marked as such by the text—are the military alphabet-soup of several agencies listed by the Unmarried Mother in his personal narrative to the time agent. Ironically, Gifford's final two comments about the story call attention to the oversight in his claim: the formal characteristics of the other acronyms present in the story set a precedent that is neither applied to the title of the story nor to the sentence of the time agent's monologue from which the title is taken. Gifford's question about the final letter in "A.N.G.E.L.S." refers to the inconsistence of the acronym and the gloss provided for it, "Auxiliary Nursing Group, Extraterrestrial Legions" (Heinlein, "All You Zombies—" 39; 38); apparently, Heinlein (or his editor) erred by capitalizing and providing a period for the "s" that reflects, in the context of the surrounding sentence, the plural nature of the word. The "unwritten" acronym that Gifford mentions refers to capitalized words of the title that only suggests its acronym by its proximity to

"W.E.N.C.H.E.S." and its contextual definition, "Women's Emergency National Corps, Hospitality & Entertainment Section" (38; 39), which the narrator notes is an earlier version of the "Women's Hospitality Order Refortifying & Encouraging Spacemen"—but W.H.O.R.E.S. is too bawdy for a '50s audience. The word "zombies," in contrast, occurs several pages after the story's acronym play. Additionally, as Gifford's comments highlight, the story either "writes" its acronyms by interspersing periods between capital letters (e. g. "A.N.G.E.L.S."), or suggests them by capitalizing the first letter of each word when the phrase is spelled out in its long form (e.g. "Women's Hospitality Order Refortifying & Encouraging Spacemen"), or both; neither marks the word "zombies" in either the story's title or the narrator's monologue. Gifford's incomplete interpretation of the story's title is as provocative as the title itself.

Russell Letson and David Wittenberg offer interpretations founded on diverse readings of the identity of "you" in the phrase "all you zombies." Like many other critics, Letson briefly includes the story in a longer discussion of solipsism in Heinlein's oeuvre, "The Returns of Lazarus Long."[2] He argues that the term "zombies" refers to the other people in the time agent's world, who are represented in the story by his assistant barkeeper, the barfly who plays the jukebox, and the duty sergeant who processes the recruitment paperwork for the Unmarried Mother. Other people are zombies, according to Letson, because they lack the ability to create themselves in the manner of the time agent, who arranges his own past so as to ensure his present and his future. Letson writes, "by totally closing the loop, making the Unmarried Mother his/her own begetter—alone in a universe of 'zombies,' metaphysically and biologically if not emotionally self-sufficient—the story develops . . . a convincing portrait of the self-created, solitary being" (205). However, if the

narrator is addressing the rest of the population in absentia, what would be the meaning of his comment, "a headache powder is one thing I do not take. I did once—and you all went away"? How could an analgesic affect the character's perception of other people?

Wittenberg's explanation of the "zombies" appellation in *Time Travel: A Popular Philosophy of Narrative* contributes to his reading of the story as an allegory of subjectivity. As the narrator/time agent recruits himself, he both reviews his past by listening to it retold by the Unmarried Mother and by physically encountering all three of his previous editions, however briefly. Therefore, Wittenberg argues, he is fully and literally in contact with his sense of self as it exists throughout the dimension of time, but the reader, at whom the narrator's second person is addressed, is missing that engagement: "are 'zombies' those of us who, unlike the time traveler, emerge uncannily out of our own lost or immemorial pasts, essentially defined by the irrecoverability of our own histories?" According to this theory, Wittenberg argues that "the 'zombie' is a subject both tied to and cut off from its own origins, fallen into belated self-alienation" (208). His argument relies on reading the "you" in "*where did all you zombies come from?*" as an address to the reader. However, if the unexpected and unusually belated breakdown of the fourth wall does not seem sufficiently out of place, consider that Wittenberg's reading requires that the final "you" in "I miss you dreadfully," must also be addressed to the reader, implying an improbable familiarity between the character of the time agent and the reader of the story. Wittenberg may lean toward an acknowledgement of the reader because of his study's focus on the narratological implications of time travel fiction, but it would also be appropriate in a narratological study to consider the precedent for storytelling that is set by the plot itself. Within the context of the story, the appropriate audience for this sort of narrative is an another edition of the

narrator; first, the Unmarried Mother tells their communal story to the agent pretending to be his bartender, then the agent retells it, from another perspective, to the Unmarried Mother before dropping him off at the recruiting station.

There is more evidence for reading "you" as the narrator's reference to hallucinations of the time agent's other selves. If the ambiguous pronoun refers to baby Jane, adult Jane, the Unmarried Mother, and/or any other version(s) of the narrator, including his younger self's experience with the time-travelling iteration of himself, the sentiment makes more sense. It's important to remember that the story's narrative is keyed to only the 'latest version,' the time agent. At this point in the time agent's personal chronology, he has 'met' with his other selves twice now: first as the spectator (the Unmarried Mother/ recruit) and again as the guide (the time agent/ recruiter). As Wittenberg points out, each stage of the narrator's personal history is vividly present to him in a way impossible for us time-bound readers, who can rely only on memory to cast an uncertain reflection of our past selves back to us. Moreover, the text implies that the time agent regularly experiences hallucinations of people as a result of his perpetual semi-drunken state. He refers to the cheap bottle of alcohol with which he ends the long day as "better than nothing," explaining, "I don't like to be cold sober, I think too much. But I don't really hit the bottle either; other people have snakes—I have people"; i. e. other drunks might hallucinate snakes, but the time agent hallucinates people (46). There is precedent for this phenomenon, and for much else in "Zombies," in an earlier Heinlein story about the paradoxes of time travel, "By His Bootstraps," published in 1941 under the pen name Anson MacDonald (Gifford 64). The inebriated protagonist of "Bootstraps," Bob Wilson, accuses another character of being a hallucination produced by the booze he's been guzzling in order to finish his Master's thesis. Prefiguring "Zombies,"

this other person is a future version of himself. This future version tries to persuade his earlier self to follow him through a "Time Gate," but he refuses:

> "No, my dear fellow," he stated, "I'm not going to climb on your merry-go-round. You know why?"
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Because I'm drunk, that's why. You're not there at all. That ain't there." He gestured widely at the circle [of the Time Gate]. "There ain't anybody here but me, and I'm drunk." (885)

The similarity between Wilson's protest in "Bootstraps" and the time agent's lament in "Zombies" is striking. Wilson's drunken ejaculation ("You're not there at all. . . . There ain't anybody here but me . . .") is so close to the penultimate lines of "Zombies" ("You aren't really there at all. There isn't anybody but me . . .") that it's as tempting to end the time agent's words with Wilson's coda, "and I'm drunk"—it would be equally accurate. The vocabulary overlap signals the broader symmetry of these scenes: in both, the protagonist addresses alternate versions of himself, while in the earlier story, Wilson addresses the real figure of his alternate version as a hallucination; in the later story, the time agent addresses the hallucinations of his alternate versions as if they were real. If the "you" addressed in "All You Zombies—" refers to hallucination of the time agent's past selves, the pronoun's subsequent repetitions also fall into place: they "aren't really there at all," being products of an alcoholic delusion, and they "all went away" when the time agent took headache powder because the medicine countered the alcohol's effect (46).

Both Letson and Wittenberg's theories explained the term 'zombies' as an acknowledgement of an absent quale. In the former theory, the zombie-others lack the

ontological self-sufficiency of the narrator. In the latter, the zombie-readers lack the narrator's engagement with his personal narrative. Reading "zombies" as a reference to alternate versions of the narrator also implies that the term metaphorically indicates an absent quale. What the other versions of the narrator lack are what he can never share: his consciousness. In his earlier time travel narrative, "By His Bootstraps," Heinlein defines consciousness as an on-going process. The earlier versions of the narrator in "All You Zombies—" are zombies because they are not yet complete, at least from the point of view of the time agent. While time travel may be able to put several different versions of the same person in a room with each other, time will still separate them in a less material but no less literal manner, a unique form of self-estrangement.

"All You Zombies—" signals the importance of the temporal dimension of its settings by beginning each section with a military-style heading that lists the scene's year, time zone, and date before the location. In the first paragraph, this heading is repeated in long form by the narrator, which further emphasizes its importance to the narrator: "2217 TIME ZONE V (EST) 7 Nov 1970 NYC—'Pop's Place': I was polishing a brandy snifter when the Unmarried Mother came in. I noted the time—10:17 p.m. zone five, or eastern time, November 7th, 1970. Temporal agents always notice the time & date; we must" (36-7). In case the repetition of the setting statistics doesn't get the message across clearly enough, the narrator's doubly redundant comment about the importance of time to 'temporal agents' alerts the reader to pay special attention to the chronology of the story—the narrator must pay attention to the time and date, but not more so than the reader. Periodically the narrator's musings recall attention to the significance of temporal context. He comments, for instance, that vocabulary is always relevant to a specific time as he slyly implies a bawdy future

meaning for a "service station" (38). As this example implies, social mores are also tied to a particular time as well as place, a point that the narrator touches upon when he tells the Unmarried Mother that the expression "a ruined woman," applicable when Jane was pregnant in 1963, "doesn't mean much today," just six years later (41). And in a situation toward the close of the story that could only occur in time travel fiction, the narrator speculates that a lower-ranking member of his organization might be biding his time because "the next time we met he might be the colonel and I the sergeant" (45). In this improbable event, as in every other facet of "Zombies," one's situation in the temporal dimension greatly determines one's identity. Just as a "service station" in the 1940s is not what it would be Heinlein's futuristic, '50s imagining of the 1990s, the identity of the central character in "Zombies" changes radically along his personal time line. The broader implications of the time traveler's shifting identities for human nature in general are particularly suited to a story exploring the paradoxes of time travel.

Heinlein's proposed introduction to "All You Zombies—" downplays the theoretical complexities explored by the story: "Mark Twain invented the time travel story; six years later H.G. Wells perfected it and revealed its paradoxes. Between them they left little for latecomers to do" (*Grumbles* 112). In a 1973 interview, Heinlein admires these authors again, saying of *The Time Machine* and *The Sleeper Awakes*, "in both cases he [Wells] was using a time-travel device in order to permit him to speculate about the human condition" (*The Robert Heinlein Interview* 82). Heinlein evidently aspired to the same *topos*, despite his modesty in the introduction to "Zombies." The story is as much a meditation on the meaning of identity and causation as "By His Bootstraps." Like "Zombies," every character in "Bootstraps," beside a few background 'extras,' is the same person, a version of Bob Wilson.

Anticipating the temporal agent's efforts to ensure his own ouroboros-like causal loop, an older Wilson uses a "time gate" to influence his former self to make the time jump that paradoxically initiates a time loop. In one of the many scenes bordering on the burlesque as various versions of the same man argue with each other, an earlier version ridicules a later version's explanation, exclaiming, "that's impossible! You are telling me that I did something because I was going to do something. . . . It denies all reasonable theories of causation. You would have me believe that causation can be completely circular" (902). As he ponders the causation paradox he's caught up in, the protagonist of "Bootstraps" wonders, "where had it started? Which comes first, the hen or the egg?" (930). Forced finally to give up the consideration, unable to unravel the temporal paradox, "he felt the intellectual desperation of any honest philosopher. He knew that he had about as much chance of understanding such problems as a collie has of understanding how dog food gets into cans" (931). Eighteen years later, Heinlein doesn't have any more of an answer with which to supply the temporal agent in "Zombies." "Where did all you zombies come from?" the time agent asks, rephrasing Wilson's question, "where had it started?" Reading the later story as a revision of Heinlein's first time travel paradox, the time agent's question refers to the puzzling circular causality—if his time line is a circle, how does one pinpoint the circle's beginning? How does one pull one's self up by one's own bootstraps? Both beginning with the interrogative, "where," the questions in "Bootstraps" and "Zombies" both focus on origin, but the audience for each question is different. Wilson asks only himself, in internal monologue, but the time agent addresses the question to all his various selves (in imaginary representation), thereby recognizing a division among his personal sense of identity. Further, the time agent characterizes these selves as "zombies." If to be a zombie is to have lost

something of one's self, then the reader must ponder what absent quale the time agent thinks that the other versions of himself demonstrate. Heinlein's first time-paradox story provides the answer.

"By His Bootstraps" is also self-consciously a speculation on the nature of personal identity, or "the problem of the ego," as Wilson names it to himself. The problem is right up his alley, since we first discover him attempting to write a Master's thesis (in one night!) entitled "An Investigation into Certain Mathematical Aspects of a Rigor of Metaphysics" (882). The story's opening tableau portrays an older Bob Wilson peering over his younger self's shoulder as he types a section that employs the proposition of time travel to demonstrate that the conceivability of a situation does not guarantee its practicality in real circumstances. On his typewriter, Wilson writes "time travel may be imagined . . . [to] resolve the paradoxes of each theory. Nevertheless, we know certain things about the empirical nature of time which preclude the possibility of the conceivable proposition. Duration is an attribute of consciousness and not of the plenum. It has no *ding an sicht*" (883). The density of Wilson's language may be part of the story's running satire of the university system, or it may be attempting to obscure with the impossibility of presenting a clear solution to the paradoxes of time travel. However, it does introduce subjectivity into the discussion. Metaphysics student Bob Wilson uses the word 'plenum' not to denote an assembly of people, as in the usual meaning, but as a scientific term referring to the theory that space is actually full of matter (rather than being a vacuum). Alfred Korzybski expands on this theory in *Science and Sanity* (1933). Heinlein was vociferous in his praise of Korzybski and his work, most notably in a 1941 convention presentation about science fiction's unique potential, "The Discovery of the Future."[3] Published the same year, "By His

Bootstraps" employs 'plenum' in Korzybski's 'expanded' meaning. In a chapter titled "'Matter', 'Space', 'Time,'" Korzybski reminds the reader of the scientific meaning of plenum, "what we know positively about 'space' is that it is not 'emptiness', but 'fulness'" and then considers it in relationship to the temporal dimension. "When we have a plenum or fulness," he points out, "it must be a plenum of 'something', 'somewhere', at 'sometime', and so the *term implies*, at least, *all three of our former elementalistic terms*," matter, space, and time (original emphasis, 229). Understanding 'plenum' as a fabric woven of matter, space, and time—the fabric of the universe—clarifies the significance of Wilson's theory ("duration is an attribute of consciousness and not of the plenum") by making it impossible for us to read "duration" as a synonym for time. Rather, "duration" expresses the subject's perception of a self-identity that endures in and across the dimension of time. What Wilson proposes, and what both "Bootstraps" and "Zombies" bear out, is that the apparently self-evident perception of continuity is illusory.

Later, Wilson speaks of "the line of memory duration," in one of his ruminations about the phenomenon that makes "Bootstraps" a milestone in time travel fiction. Personal memories are a part of the consciousness; memory has no *ding an sicht*, to borrow Wilson's allusion to Kant, but is solely an attribute of the consciousness. As he contemplates the metaphysics of his experience, Wilson assigns a vital role to memory in forming his "ego," or his experience of self:

> there were two problems he was forced to deal with which were decidedly not clear in his mind: the problem of the ego and the problem of the free will. When there had been three of them in the room, which one was the ego—was himself? And how was it that he had been unable to change the course of

> events? An absurdly obvious answer to the first question occurred to him at once. The ego was himself. Self is self, an unproved and improvable first statement, directly experienced. What, then, of the other two? Surely they had been equally sure of ego-being—he remembered it. He thought of a way to state it: Ego is the point of consciousness, the latest term in a continuously expanding series along the line of memory duration. (910)

The editors of the landmark science fiction anthology, *Adventures in Time and Space*, preface "Bootstraps" with the following summary of the question Wilson ponders: "this is literally a 'whodunit.' There are four or five characters in this story (or puzzle) and most of them are the same man! The question is who is who—and when. Or, when is a man not himself—yesterday, today or tomorrow?" (882). Wilson's answer would be "today"; in his earliest rumination about the philosophy of time travel Wilson recognizes consciousness as one point in a series—not just any point, but the latest point. In other words, he presents a way of differentiating between his various selves by quantifying the memory contained in each point of consciousness in the series, and a way to create a hierarchy that crowns only the ego with the 'longest' memory *the* ego, the most genuine ego. In a later rumination, Wilson calls this quale "length of time," pointing out that its variation among his various selves makes each self "an absolute individual":

> by sheer necessity he was forced to expand the principle of non-identity—"Nothing is identical with anything else, not even with itself"—to include the ego. In a four-dimensional continuum each event is an absolute individual, it has its space co-ordinates and its date. The Bob Wilson he was right now was *not* the Bob Wilson he had been ten minutes ago. Each was a discrete section

> of a four-dimensional process. One resembled the other in many particulars, as one slice of bread resembles the slice next to it. But they were not the same Bob Wilson—they differed by length of time. When he had doubled back on himself, the difference had become apparent, for the separation was now in space rather than in time, and he happened to be so equipped as to be able to see a space length, whereas he could only remember a time difference. Thinking back he could remember a great many different Bob Wilsons, baby, small child, adolescent, young man. They were all different—he knew that. The only thing that bound them together into a feeling of identity was continuity of memory. (925-6)

This definition of 'self' permits only a kinship between the various 'editions' of Heinlein's characters. It also neatly and simply explains the distance and the conflict born of estrangement that is characteristic of the various selves' encounters in both time-paradox stories.

These stories can easily be read as meditations on William James's conception of the consciousness in his famous study, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), wherein James coins the phrase "stream of consciousness" to describe how the consciousness experiences itself—the absent quale alluded to by the central metaphor in "All You Zombies—." The consciousness appears continuous to itself, James explains, and "even where there is a time-gap" imposed by unconsciousness, like a period of sleep, "the consciousness after it [the time-gap] feels as if it belonged together with the consciousness before it, as another part of the same self" (158). It is important to remember that in James's account, this regard of the self by the self happens only in one's consciousness through the experience of memory. In this sense, the

self feels continuous in time, although James recognizes a separation between various editions of the self in speaking of one that is "before" and one that is "after." Memories are experienced by the consciousness with the same "warmth and intimacy" as its present experience, James explains, creating a feeling of "community of self" between the representations of the self reflected by the memory and the consciousness that experiences the memory:

> remembrance is like direct feeling; its object is suffused with a warmth and intimacy to which no object of mere conception ever attains. . . . So sure as this present is me, is mine, it says so sure is anything else that comes with the same warmth and intimacy and immediacy, me and mine. . . . whatever past states appear with those qualities must be admitted to receive the greeting of the present mental state, to be owned by it, and accepted as belonging together with it in a common self. This community of self is what the time-gap cannot break in twain, and is why a present thought, although not ignorant of the time-gap, can still regard itself as continuous with certain chosen portions of the past. Consciousness, then, does not appear *to itself* chopped up in bits. (emphasis added; 158-9)

But this quale, the experience of consciousness as a unifying stream, is a subjective product of the memory. In James's first proposal of the term "stream of consciousness," he offers the synonym, "subjective life" (159). In other words, in Bob Wilson's words, duration is an attribute of consciousness and not an objective fact of the space/time continuum. From an objective perspective, which is ontologically impossible but represented fictionally as the

reader's perspective, the self is "chopped up in bits" that differ from one another, like Wilson's slices of bread, each one being an "absolute individual" among others.

Heinlein's time paradox stories dramatize the objective perspective, and "Zombies" in particular focuses on the differences between the self's iterations along the time line. "Consciousness is in constant change," James writes, and "no state [of mind] once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before" (154). To borrow a turn of phrase from Heraclitus, one can never step in the same stream of consciousness twice. James describes a mild sense of uncanniness as the consciousness contemplates its history, commenting, "often we are ourselves struck at the strange differences in our successive views of the same thing. We wonder how we ever could have opined as we did last month about a certain matter" (156). "All You Zombies—" expands on this self-estrangement. The story describes a literal "community of self," a collective of different selves, each representing a distinct moment in time, whose behavior belies any sense of community spirit. When represented in the memory, James writes, "whatever past states appear . . . must be admitted to receive the greeting of the present mental state, to be owned by it, and accepted as belonging together with the common self." When the time agent's past state literally appears to him in "All You Zombies—" he receives a more critical reception.

In a parody of poor self-esteem, the time agent's first description of the Unmarried Mother is overtly critical. He speaks of the man's "childish features and . . . touchy temper," commenting, "I didn't like his looks—I never had . . ." Since the Unmarried Mother is an earlier version of himself, a fact of which the time agent is well aware, these comments reflect a self-critique, the kind of critical self-reflexivity that James describes, enacted in space as well as time (i. e. literally). But while these remarks encompass the physical and

personal traits that unite the Unmarried Mother and the time agent, traits that might persist in many different versions of himself, the time agent also remarks upon what separates them. "I wondered why I had ever liked Old Underwear," the time agent remarks, referring to the brand of liquor the Unmarried Mother favored (46). While he is acknowledging the now-incomprehensible trait as belonging to himself, the time agent's comment stresses a feeling of distance between himself in his present identity and his past identity as the Unmarried Mother. In the most extreme instance of contrast, Jane thinks that her infant daughter, which is also her infant self, "looked like an orange monkey" (41). The characters in "Zombies" are constantly looking at each other and failing to recognize themselves, and with good reason: the degree of physical change between each iteration of identity is remarkable. But the physical alteration, the sex-change in particular, is only a physical manifestation of the internal shift, the constantly changing consciousness.

Only the time agent is able to recognize each of his past selves for what and who they are. In comparison with the other selves he comes into contact with during the course of the story, he is the most complete, the edition with the longest memory. If, as Wilson reasons, "ego is the point of consciousness, the latest term in a continuously expanding series along the line of memory duration" ("Bootstraps" 910), then the time agent is the ego in "All You Zombies—." The other editions of himself are not only separate from him, they fall short of him. When the time agent demonstrates his familiarity with the Unmarried Mother's past, the latter asks, "how do you know so much?" The time agent replies, "all in good time" (42). The pun emphasizes that precisely the matter of time separates the two; eventually, the Unmarried Mother will not only be acquainted with that piece of information but with all that the time agent knows. But until that time, he will be incomplete from the perspective of the time

agent. To him, the other selves that he manipulates in the course of his job are incomplete versions of the man that he has become. Thus he calls them "zombies," because they lack the experience and the length of memory duration that compose his own consciousness. And like the zombies of contemporary cinema, they go on about their business unaware of their own absent quale.

Notes to Chapter Two

1. These trends are also described and documented in Jovanka Vuckovic and Jennifer Eiss's 2011 *Zombies: An Illustrated History of the Undead*, but it's unclear how closely they rely on Flint's 2009 publication.

2. Alexei Panshin's early work on Heinlein's fiction, *Heinlein in Dimension* (1968), may have started this trend (175). Gifford states authoritatively in his *Companion* that "All You Zombies—," "along with 'They,' is one of Heinlein's most naked goes at solipsism" (44). For a more recent review of this theme in Heinlein's work, see George Slusser's article, "Structures of Apprehension: Lem, Heinlein, and the Strugatskys."

3. For a description of Heinlein's experience with Korzybski's *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, see volume one of William H. Patterson, Jr.'s authorized biography, *Robert A. Heinlein: In Dialogue with His Century*, especially pages 224-226. For Heinlein's opinions of Korzybski, see pages 154-157 of *The Robert Heinlein Interview.*

Chapter Three: The Aura in "The Song the Zombie Sang"

Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

—Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

I find myself regarding existence as though from beyond the tomb, from another world; all is strange to me; I am, as it were, outside my own body . . .

—Henri Frédéric Amiel

In 1979, Darko Suvin called attention to science fiction as a genre particularly invested in examining its cultural context and calling attention to problematic issues, which describes a ground fertile for the trope of the zombie that embodies an absent, human quale. Suvin writes, "in the twentieth century SF has moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives" (12). Presaging the apocalyptic futures of recent zombie fiction, Harlan Ellison and Robert Silberberg's 1970 short story "The Song the Zombie Sang" described for *Cosmopolitan* readers a future society so devoted to artifice that it can no longer recognize authenticity. To a contemporary, the story might have been considered as part of the prominent and wide-spread protests over the spread of technology that had appeared since the radio became ubiquitous in American homes. For example, a solemn essay entitled "On American Leisure" appeared in a 1928 issue of *The Harper's Monthly* politely acknowledging the possibilities for radio and film and "the new mechanical perfections of the phonograph":

> there is no question but that these are at their best mechanical. They turn our leisure into a passive receptivity of standard mediocre amusement. They provide almost nothing of that spontaneous sense of individual living which is part of the repose and stimulation of leisure. . . . The most serious spiritual danger of the Industrial Revolution is that it has come to mechanize and industrialize not merely things but the spirit as well. (Edman 83)

Walter Benjamin's influential 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" casts the same anxiety in Marxist terms. "The Song the Zombie Sang" extrapolates that fear into a dystopian future society, a science fiction projection of the mechanization of art and culture that results in the widespread loss of something vital to human experience. A few years after Ellison and Silverberg's story, Jean Baudrillard decries the "contemporary disappearance of 'the real'" and praises science fiction that examines that emptiness (Hollinger 241); in "Simulacra and Science Fiction," Baudrillard writes that the genre is committed to extrapolating from contemporary reality, and is "often nothing other than an unbounded projection of the real world of production" (122). "The Song the Zombie Sang" fulfills both functions, imagining the degeneration of a vital human quale as the result of modern art's mechanical production.

The plight of the larger society is reflected in Nils Bekh, the eponymous zombie, a musician whose artificial resurrection by mechanical technology has not managed to reproduce quite all of what was Bekh's in life. As he is not quite alive, he is also not quite whole; both states symbolized by his zombie status. While his patrons understand his techno-zombie status as a normal feature of their cultural milieu, they cannot recognize that his

music has become as dead as he is. The exception is Rhoda, a student-musician who perceives the hollowness of Bekh's music as he himself does, and naively decides to confront him after the concert. The omniscient narrative switches between Rhoda and Bekh, through which the authors reveal hints of a dystopian system of rigid social control, what Edward James calls "the tyranny of the 'perfect' system over the will of the individual," characteristic of classic dystopian fiction (220). The story resonates with earlier dystopian narratives, demonstrating the willingness to appropriate past tropes of the genre that critic Veronica Hollinger attributes to "SF postmodernization" (244). The few details given about the society in which the story takes place sketch an outline of a carefully regulated social structure. Confronting Nils Bekh backstage, Rhoda dares him, "report me," disdaining arrest by what we must assume is a government organization. Certainly someone is organizing the public's experience, as there are several references to a weather-control system, Weatherex. "Weatherex had programmed mist" to surround the futuristic "glass landscape" of the Music Center. At the beginning of the story, the eerie, gray atmosphere suits Rhoda's mood (449). But after her confrontation with Bekh, in which she rejects his dead form of art, Rhoda also rejects social programming via a metonym, the weather control: "it did not matter what Weatherex said was the proper time for mist or rain or fog. Night, the stars, the songs were forever" (453). The story closes on these lines, with hope for the continuation of a live vein of art, symbolized by the natural imagery of the night and the stars.

Rhoda's personal commitment to embrace life, resulting from her interaction with Bekh, motivates her to accept the young man who has been courting her. As the future couple banter before Bekh's concert, we discover that "he had sought an official liaison with her for months," but Rhoda had resisted, considering him "simply not for long-term liaison" (446).

The reference to an official regulation of personal relationships reveals a future society headed toward the kind of rigid regulation of classic dystopian fiction; the story's romantic sub-plot, requiring the government-mandated disclosure of personal relationships, alludes to the ultra-totalitarian nightmare of Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopian classic, *We*, in which sexual liaisons are assigned by the OneState government. In Zamyatin's version of the future, personal relationships are rigidly controlled because the tyrannical state apparatus regards emotion as illogical, and thus extremely dangerous. Relationships are so far regulated as to be confined to scheduled "sex days" (Zamyatin 10). The society Ellison and Silverberg sketch in "The Song the Zombie Sang" may be heading in this direction, already required to make relationships "official," but there is still an element of personal choice about the matter, since Rhoda is able to decide for herself that she does not want a "long-term liaison" with her suitor. Certainly her suitor seems ardent about her, regardless of state regulations, and encourages her to embrace her emotional side. He tells her, "Rhoda, art doesn't mean a damn thing if it's just craft, if it's just rote and technique and formulas. It doesn't mean anything if there isn't love behind it, and caring, and commitment to life" (449). Destroying the apparatus that renders Bekh's art mere "rote and technique and formulas" apparently awakens her to the truth of this plea, and she leaves the Music Center to meet him, "with songs yet to be sung" (453). Emotion is vital to art in "The Song the Zombie Sang," as demonstrated by the music that Rhoda plays for Bekh backstage toward the story's conclusion. The link between emotion and music is the reason that the musical arts have been banned in *We*'s OneState and replaced by something that resembles an audible mathematical formula. Similarly reduced to the bare form of technical precision, Bekh's music

demonstrates the absent quale that "The Song the Zombie Sang" posits—the particular quale effected in the human consciousness by authentic music.

Authentic art and mechanically reproduced art are contrasted in *We* when D-503 attends a presentation on 'ancient' and 'modern' music, featuring the seductive I-33 demonstrating the former by playing a piano: on a smaller version of the stage in Ellison and Silverberg's Music Center, there is a "black box (a curtain was pulled aside on the stage, and there stood one of their ancient instruments), this black box was called a 'grand piano'" (Zamyatin 18). The stirring, freely formed music that I-33 creates strongly affects D-503. After I-33 performs, there is a demonstration of the currently sanctioned, mechanized music. The lecturer boasts: "simply by turning this handle, any one of you can produce up to three sonatas per hour." D-503 reflects: "it suddenly struck me that everything was empty, an empty shell" (17). Similar in sentiment and scene, Nils Bekh plays a high-tech version of a piano in "The Song the Zombie Sang," an "ultracembalo" whose "input console" has to be rolled on the stage of the Music Center and is controlled with "filament gloves" worn by the musician (Ellison and Silverberg 447). The difference between zombiefied Bekh and vivacious I-33 is the difference between OneState's music and what I-33 plays on the piano during the presentation, what Rhoda played on the ultracembalo backstage for Bekh before she destroys him. This sort of authentic music is strongly connected to life, to emotion. OneState's music is empty because it is predicated on mathematical formula that precludes emotion; Bekh's music is equally empty because he is not alive, and can experience emotion for only a few moments vicariously through Rhoda's music.

When Rhoda plays before her now-fallen idol Bekh, he recognizes the power of her art and is able to experience the raw, personal quale that his death-in-life denies him, which

the narrative attributes to the human soul, as in Lovecraft's zombie story, "Herbert West."[1] As Rhoda plays a selection from a composer and friend of Bekh's, Timijian, the zombie reflects:

> He would not have played it that way, but yes, just so. Timi's notes filtered through *her* soul. A striking interpretation. Perhaps she falters a little, but why not? The wrong gloves, no preparation, strange circumstances. And how beautifully she plays. The hall fills with sound. He ceases to listen as a critic might: he becomes part of the music. . . . Oh yes! He is in the music. It engulfs him. (original emphasis)

He wonders if he can still cry in his post-mortem state, appreciating the unique quality of Rhoda's music: born of the particular circumstances of the moment as an impromptu private performance with borrowed equipment. But the greatest testament to Rhoda's music is its ability to momentarily wake the dead, to revive the zombie to a momentary state of life. Bekh begins to imagine playing the music through Rhoda's playing:

> He has forgotten, in all these years. . . . Out of the tomb. Bound up in his own meaningless performances. And now this. The rebirth of music. It was once like this all the time, the union of composer and instrument and performer, *soul-wrenching*, all encompassing. For him. No longer. Eyes closed, he plays the movement through to its close by way of her body, her hands, *her soul*. When the sound dies away, he feels the good exhaustion that comes from total submission to the art. (emphasis added 453)

Bekh recalls the influence music used to have over him, metaphorically described as power over his soul, but now, because he is dead, he must access, if only momentarily, Rhoda's soul

as displayed through her music—such is the effect of authentic art. Bekh's undead soullessness is hinted at in an oblique reference to the old truism about the eyes being the windows to the soul: Bekh's eyes are "an empty sky" (451).

Formerly a great musician passionately dedicated to his work, Nils Bekh now characterizes his work as empty, a quality he attributes to his post-mortem state. He has "the dryness of the tomb" on his skin, where "once there was life" (449). He ironically observes the audience's effusive reaction to his performance, smiling "with satisfaction at his own effects," although he will call his audience as "hollow" as he is, unable to recognize the absent quale that characterizes the zombie's music (449; 451). "Timi would have known, he thought," and imagines his old friend ripping him away from the instrument for the mockery the zombie's playing makes out of Timi's composition (447). Bekh reminisces about his life, which he describes as passionately spent in pursuit of his his art (451). As a zombie, Bekh retains the knowledge of his art, his skill with the complicated instrument, the ultracembalo,[2] but this lingering genius only makes him more painfully aware of the crucial dearth in the music that he's produced after death, as technically perfect as it is. He describes his performance ambiguously as perfect in tempo but lacking in the quickening quality that used to be the great musician's element. It is "so dreadful. A sluggish performance, note-perfect, the tempi flawless, and yet sluggish, empty, shallow" (451). The zombiefied death-in-life state is agony for Nils Bekh; even as he is carried away for a moment by his own mechanical reproduction of the music, a lapse that includes an equally momentary gratification from the audience's response to his performance, he describes "the sense of emptiness" in his music, which is merely "sound for its own sake." He wonders, rhetorically it seems, "is this what music means? Is this a master-piece? I know nothing any more. How tired I am of playing for

them. . . . And what do they know? What do I know. I am dead. I am nothing. I am nothing." He contemplates his own lack, the undead farce that is his music, and "with a demonic two-handed plunge he hammered out the final fugal screams of the first movement" (449). Bekh has become a mere tool, like the hammer he figuratively embodies in this passage. In order to resurrect him, the corporation that owns him has made him into a machine.

Referred to openly as a zombie by the gossipy audience members, Bekh physically resembles the technology of his instrument, the ultracembalo. He is described as a union of man and machine, a cyborg figure. In him, the classic zombie shuffle becomes the deliberate mechanical care of the early robots, "the perambulating dead" propelled by "tubes of glittering fluids [that] ran through his calves and thighs, and if he walked too fast the hydrostatic balance was disturbed and the nutrients didn't get to his brain" (447). There are "tiny pipes in his neck," and his body is described as "reconstructed" by the advanced technology of Ellison and Silverberg's future society (451). Although Bekh operates the ultracembalo in the same manner—if not to the same effect—as Rhoda, Bekh's undead state reduces him to the status of a mechanical instrument, making him the double of his ultracembalo. As if to reference *We*'s piano performance by I-33, which was followed by a demonstration of OneState's sanctioned music, audible examples of "rational mechanics" (Zamyatin 18), Rhoda compares Bekh to an automated player piano, with "slick formulas" like those that control Zamyatin's dystopian society but "no real insight." She accuses him of being "like a machine sitting at the console. A player piano. You know what player pianos were, Bekh. That's what you are" (Ellison and Silverberg 451). He also thinks of himself as a mechanical instrument. As he gives the concert Rhoda later criticizes, "an image sprang into his mind: a glistening sonic cube sitting at the console in place of a man. Why do they need

me, when they could put a cube in the slot and have the same thing at less expense?" Another of Ellison and Silverberg's futuristic novums, a sonic cube seems to be a recording and a player for that recording in one. Bekh views himself as a more novel form of the same machine, an organic machine (zombie) playing an inorganic machine (ultracembalo), a novelty act that attracts the large crowds that fill the music center. As he critiques his own performance he curses the self-awareness that is the only quality that separates him from a machine, wondering, "does the sonic cube comprehend the B Minor Mass that is recorded within itself? Does the amplifier understand the symphony it amplifies?" He sardonically characterizes his adoring fans as "necrophiliacs," but his status as a corpse is less emphasized than his literal and figurative likeness to a machine (449).

Bekh's reminiscences of his life as a thing of the past and his obvious corporality identify him as a walking corpse, a zombie, "the perambulating dead." As he comes out of "the gray fog of resurrection" before the concert, he demonstrates the retention of his character even after death by recalling his personal history with the composer of the music both he and Rhoda play in the story, and his sentience by producing an inner monologue, the narrative document of his consciousness, marked by the authors in italics: "but Timijian was dead. *Died in '20*, Bekh told himself. *Five years before me*" (original emphasis). Yet even as he reflects on these memories, he speaks of himself as a machine, as charged for the concert and wheeled into place on the correct side of the stage, just as the stage grip will later wheel in the instrument. He contemplates playing possum. "*And they'll think I'm malfunctioning*," he thinks, "*that the zombianic response wasn't triggered this time. That I'm still dead, really dead, not—*" undead, presumably (original emphasis, 447). Being dead, he has turned into a

machine, which is also, as an inert object, dead; only machines malfunction, and only machines have triggers installed with built-in responses.

Bekh's paradoxical hybrid state as a zombie, neither entirely dead nor entirely alive, or both at once, overlays another life/death dichotomy: he is essentially an organic machine, particularly in the materialistic language used to describe his status by the gossipy patrons at the concert. His paradoxical status links him to the protagonist of another classic dystopian novel, Alex of Anthony Burgess's 1962 *Clockwork Orange*. F. Alexander, the author of the novel-in-the-novel of the same title, explains that an oppressive state apparatus has conditioned Alex into "a little machine capable only of good" by programing him to respond to art as if to painful stimuli (Burgess 156). Alex explains, "all the lewdies nowadays were being turned into machines," into clockwork oranges (159). F. Alexander and his revolutionary cronies want to use Alex as a tool in their movement. They discuss exhibiting him at their lectures, much as Bekh is exhibited by the corporation that owns him, to illustrate the terrible effects of the oppressive government. Alex describes the scene:

> They all had a real horror-show look at me and seemed overjoyed with what they viddied. Z. Dolan said: 'All right, all right, eh? What a superb device he can be, this boy. If anything, of course, he could for preference look even iller and more zombyish than he does. Anything for the cause. No doubt we can think of something.' I did not like that crack about zombyish, brothers . . . (163)

While Alex is only figuratively a machine, a "device," and a zombie, Bekh's condition literalizes those metaphors of social control. Though Nils Bekh is a literal zombie, he has a more fortunate appearance than Alex. "Of course he doesn't look like a zombie," a garrulous

audience member comments to his wife in "The Song the Zombie Sang," explaining the process of resurrection in vaguely technical, vaguely electrical terms. "They kept him in cold till they had the techniques. Then they wired him and juiced him and brought him back" (Ellison and Silverberg 448). Until Rhoda enacts her mercy killing, following Bekh's plea to "break the machinery," to kill him at the end of the story, he is "fully operable" (452; 451). Until Rhoda's radical decommissioning, Bekh is more conveniently controlled with an on and off switch (452).

While the medical technology and advanced scientific knowledge that enables the corporation of the future society in "The Song the Zombie Sang" to resurrect Nils Bekh with mechanical means (as conjured by the audience member's amateur reference to wires and electrical current) are no doubt greatly advanced, as remote to present technology as it was to Ellison and Silverberg's 1970 America and to medical science at the moment that H. P. Lovecraft wrote of reviving corpses in 1921, Ellison and Silverberg's technology is merely a mastery of the body as envisioned in scientific materialism. The audience members' conversation about Bekh's zombie status, including his physical make-up, describe the body as a machine for generating the electric impulse that constitutes the personality, the functions of reasoning and speech that Bekh's inner monologue and few moments of idle banter with the stage hand demonstrate. The electrical impulse that is Bekh seems to be confined to the brain; when Bekh sits down to his instrument console to play, "old habit" kicks in, a conditioned response as a result of a life time of training, "superfluous, inescapable" (448). If his naturally programmed habit would have been inescapable for him in life, it is now superfluous to him in death because he is not truly generating the sort of authentic music that Rhoda and I-33 can. As in Lovecraft's materialistic weird tale, "Herbert West: Reanimator,"

the zombiefied Bekh has lost that intangible quality, figured as the soul, to which scientific materialism denies existence.[3] If Herbert West ultimately failed in Lovecraft's 1921 pulp tale to completely master the scientific manipulation of the body's mechanical impulses, though as West practiced he produced zombies with more mental abilities for rational thought and speech, the corporations in "The Song the Zombie Sang" have mastered West's goal and managed to revitalize all of the material machinery of the body—the corporations presumably by proxy, funding the research of the mysterious "they" the audience members reference performing experiments on animal nervous systems and operating on the famous musician. Like Herbert West, who is obsessed with finding corpses fresh enough to not be contaminated by the process of decomposition that begins instantly upon death, "they" have discovered a method to halt cellular degeneration in the brain, the neural center of the body. "The brain's intact. They don't let it decay," an audience member explains to another. The brain presumably preserves the neural pathways (impossible for Lovecraft to have written about in the '20s) that store Bekh's personality, his memories, and his manual skill with the instruments upon which he trained all his life. Admittedly the terms in which the audience member describes the technical side of Bekh's zombie state are "blurred inaccuracies," fortuitously saving the authors the need to reference connections to contemporary scientific and medical research, but the understanding of the body as a sort of organic, mechanical apparatus run by electricity and chemistry is fundamentally the same as Lovecraft's explanation of scientific materialism in "Herbert West." Before the concert begins, the audience member fumblingly explains to his wife "about the residual electric charge of the brain cells, the persistence of the motor responses after death, the lingering mechanical vitality on which they had seized. In vague and rambling terms he would speak of the built-in

life-support system that keeps the brain flushed with necessary fluids. The surrogate hormones, the chemicals that take the place of the blood" (448). The technology Ellison and Silverberg imagine, however sketchily alluded to, could be considered a futuristic extrapolation of Herbert West's chemical solutions; the success with which "they" preserve "the lingering mechanical vitality" in Bekh's corpse is the apotheosis of West's quest in Lovecraft's "Reanimator." In "The Song that the Zombie Sang," Bekh has less become a machine than been reduced to one; some vital part of Bekh is dead, and yet "they" have appropriated his bodily machinery.

The quality that Nils Bekh loses when he is resurrected into a corporately owned zombie is frustratingly elusive, as the weird effect of "The Song the Zombie Sang" depends on Bekh's sense the absent quale, translated into his reiterated sense of emptiness that defines its absence. Neither he nor Rhoda what they both know is absent from him and from his art. Rhoda's suitor comes close, defining art in negative terms, when he tells her that "art doesn't mean a damn thing if it's just craft, if it's just rote and technique and formulas" (449). The narrative as a whole mimics this technique, describing Bekh largely in terms of what's been left to him in his zombie existence: the machine of his physical body, controlled by the electrical and chemical stimulation that the corporation uses to summon him for performances. In between time, Bekh seems to be kept in a fugue state, unconscious due to his body's reduction to minimum life support. Thus his brain, though dead, in not suffered to decay because

> they use every part of the body for its mechanical function—the heart's a pump, the lungs are bellows—and they wire in a bunch of contacts and leads, and then there's a kind of twitch, and artificial burst of life—of course, they

> can keep it going only five, six hours . . . but that's long enough for a concert, anyway (448)

The concert that Rhoda attends at the Music Center actually features two instruments, both technologically complicated: the ultracembalo and Nils Bekh himself, zombie. The ominously unaddressed question of Bekh's consent to being made into a zombie, peculiarly visible in absentia due to Bekh's evident agony, and the apparent legality of Bekh's ownership by the corporation give "The Song the Zombie Sang" a disquieting dystopian tone. Bekh's zombiefied objectification, considered the property of a corporation, harkens back to the earlier toiling mobs of zombie laborers described in the early wave of pulp fiction zombies,[4] which tended to reproduce Seabrook's "Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields" from *The Magic Island* (1929), like August Derleth and Mark Schorer's "The House in the Magnolias" (1932) and Thorp McClusky's "While Zombies Walked" (1939). While these troubling dystopian implications remain in the background of "The Song the Zombie Sang," Bekh has undeniably been reduced to an organic machine. The difference between the "rote and technique and formulas" of which a machine is capable and art is the difference between zombiefied Bekh and living Rhoda. A machine, after all, can only reproduce; in this case, Bekh's body is reproducing the pathways ingrained in his brain matter. One audience member explains the muscle spasms produced in a detached frog's leg when exposed to a wire, an activation of an impulse already contained in the body tissues. "Well," he says, "when that leg jerks, they call that a galvanic response. Now if you can get a whole man to jerk when you put a current through him—not really jerking, I mean that he walks around, he can play his instrument—" Comparing Bekh's playing with a post-mortem muscle spasm is a macabre but apt analogy. When Bekh sits down at the ultracembalo console to begin the

concert, he no longer needs his long-trained habits, the conditionings by which he disciplined his body during life, because in his death "they" have artificially stimulated his system. Having been switched on beside it moments before in the stage wings, "he sat down on the player's ledge in front of the console, and laid his hands along the metal fibers. A deep breath: old habit, superfluous, inescapable. The fingers already twitching. The pressors seeking the keys. Under the close-cropped gray hair, the synapses clicking like relays" (448). Bekh's body is described in mechanical terms—his fingers "twitching" recalling the jerk of the electrocuted frog leg—so that it is difficult to distinguish what detail describes the musical equipment and what describes Bekh. Adding to the ambiguity is the unknown quality of the authors' novum "pressors," which are perhaps components of the gloves Bekh wears "like a second skin" to operate the ultracembalo (447). Bekh's fingers might twitch when his brain clicks, as in the simile comparing neural synapses to mechanical relays. In essence, Nils Bekh has devolved into a program of himself, an organic repository for the actions he trained into his flesh during his life.

Like the player piano that Rhoda compares him to, and presumably the "sonic cube" that he compares himself to, Bekh can only reproduce a static copy of his past performances, recorded, as it were, in his grey matter. When Rhoda discovers his storage chamber backstage after the concert and switches him on, intending to confront him, he mentally prepares himself for the eminent performance that he anticipates: "tonight it would happen again. Shamble out on stage, don the gloves, go through the dreary routine of recreating the greatness of Nils Bekh" (451). During the concert that so infuriated Rhoda, Bekh is able to recall the exact performance he is duplicating: the first performance of his friend's final composition. That detail seems significant to Bekh's situation, since by the time of the

concert he now repeats his friend had already finished his career as a musician—we might say ended his life as a musician. Just as his friend's body of work became static, in becoming complete, Bekh's body is capable of producing only "frozen, unchanging music." As he performs, Bekh reflects on the "pattern of sounds emerging now as always, now as he had played it at the premiere in '19. Timijian's last work. Decibel by decibel, a reconstruction of my own performance" (449). The music is also technically "flawless," due to the great musician's expertise, but his lifeless mechanical accuracy only serves as a foil for Rhoda's more tentative but vibrant performance after the concert. Like his corpse, Bekh's music is held in a perpetual state of artificial animation. He reflects that his "performance differed from the last one no more than one playing of a recording differs from another" (448). The "precise ornamentation" that Rhoda's suitor attributes to a past performance of Bekh's, so much appreciated by his friend and possibly the reason for "a ten-minute standing ovation" by the adoring crowd, only betrays the mechanical nature of Bekh's music, as both he and Rhoda alone seem to recognize (447).

The mass society adores Nils Bekh, in the usual long-range adoration attracted by celebrity. Certainly they are not off-put by his zombie status, and the dialogue of the audience members demonstrates a general familiarity with the technological phenomenon. The futuristic setting of "The Song the Zombie Sang" is an era of mechanical reproduction, as predicted by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 classic of social criticism, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin notes that the "technical reproduction of sound was tackled at the end of the last century" (1107); Ellison and Silverberg imagine a future century that has accomplished the technical reproduction of the musician. Benjamin worries about film, particularly, having an irresponsible power to rewrite the originals in

mass produced forms, resulting in "the liquidation of traditional value of the cultural heritage"; he quotes a '20s film enthusiast in *L'Art Cinématographique* who proclaims, "Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religion, and the very religions . . . await their exposed resurrection" (1108). The metaphor is literalized in Nils Bekh's resurrection to zombie/cyborg/corporate performer in "The Song the Zombie Sang." Echoing Benjamin's reservations about the influence of mechanically reproduced art on mass audiences, Bekh's music is in great demand, as he's kept moving on a corporate version of the old fashioned, celebrity-musician tours, booked in super-sized venues like the Music Center, "that vast building, balcony upon balcony, thousands of blank faces . . . his audience, his adoring followers" (Ellison and Silverberg 451). Yet he longs to curse them for providing the motivation for his dreary zombie existence and for not recognizing the stench of death on his music, the lifeless emptiness that reproduces his diminished condition.

As Bekh's condition is mechanical, a man reduced to a machine for his own reproduction, it may be useful to consider Ellison and Silverberg's zombie as a science fiction-enhanced example of the sort of "mutual penetration of art and science" that Benjamin attributes to photography and film (1118). In Lovecraft's "Herbert West: Reanimator," West created his zombie creatures out of his assumption that science has dominion over the entire human, considering only the material as real, producing monsters because he is never able to admit that there is such an intangible quality as a soul that will not stay after death. "The Song the Zombie Sang" mentions the soul in the penultimate scene, indicating that Rhoda has a soul and uses it in her music. Bekh can briefly experience her music by borrowing her soul: "eyes closed, he plays the movement through to its close by

way of her body, her hands, her soul." In another obvious omission, silence on the status of Bekh's soul at this moment, the story leaves open to the traditional interpretation of a zombie without a soul; Bekh is figuratively, ineffably empty after death, leading an artificial existence depending on the mechanisms that he instructs Rhoda to break after she turns him off for the last time. He pleads with her: "I'm dead . . . but not dead enough. You won't be killing anything. Do you remember how my playing sounded to you? Do you remember why I came here? Is there life in me?" (453). What, precisely, Bekh is empty of—the emotionally charged quale quality unique to life that Bekh finds absent in himself and in his music—remains unlabeled, though casually connected in the narrative to the soul. Whatever this absent quale is, it is presumably independent of his bodily machinery, and thus outside the scope of the technology that zombiefied him. Even in this future society, with much more advanced technology than Walter Benjamin witnessed developing, science apparently cannot sustain every part of a human being.

It is additionally tempting to read "The Song the Zombie Sang" alongside "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" because Benjamin gives a handy name to the quale absent in the kind of mass art he describes, a sort of art-appropriate version of the human soul: aura. "The decay of the aura" is the effect of mass produced art, Benjamin warns, on the art (1109); this sort of art is ultimately dangerous because of its effects on the audience, which become passive receivers of commercial productions (1120). "The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one," Benjamin warns of the '30s consumers of the first wave of mass-produced art (1121). Likewise, Bekh's audience fawns over his art despite its lack of aura, praising its mechanical perfection and unable to distinguish, as they listen with "blank faces," that his music is empty (Ellison and Silverberg 451). Rhoda alone in the

audience seems to be able to appreciate the absence of aura in Bekh's music, denouncing its artificial hollowness and desiring to "destroy him. For the lie. For the lies, the many lies, the unending flow of lying notes, the lies of this life after death" (450). The aura has not been replicated in his performance, because the spiritual part of him that accesses that intangible quality of art has departed, as perhaps his soul has departed upon death. Thinking about what persists of himself, Bekh considers himself a partial being, depleted of something outside the compass of his mechanically reproduced human body; his old friends are dead, with "only he, Bekh, left behind, some of him left behind, old bones, dried meat. Breath as stale as Egypt, blood the color of pumice. Sounds devoid of tears and laughter. Just sounds" (452). As Bekh is a person without being a complete human, his music is sound without aura, that quality of art that Benjamin says "absorbs" its audience (1120), as Rhoda's performance "engulfs" Bekh at the end of "The Song the Zombie Sang" (Ellison and Silverberg 453).

The problem with the kind of art devoid of aura, mechanically reproduced art intended for mass consumption, is that it encourages its audiences to become passive receptacles for the media—Benjamin is worried about the potential for a Fascist regime to "organize the newly created proletarian masses" (1121).[5] While the hint of a rigid system of social control in "The Song the Zombie Sang" may not realize the political nightmares of Walter Benjamin, (or other dystopian fantasists, e.g. Aldous Huxley, Anthony Burgess, Yevgeny Zamyatin), the most sinister element of Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg's story is that it evokes these classic science fiction horrors, hinting in the vacuous inability of the audience members to distinguish the aura of true art at a widespread devolution that the classic dystopian governments encourage to control the population. Benjamin explains the difference in audience response to art that, like Bekh's music, is devoid of aura: "a man who

concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. . . . in contrast, the distracted mass [audience] absorbs the work of art" (1120). The audience's enthusiastic acceptance of Bekh's music makes them figures of disdain for both him and Rhoda. The narrative counterpoints the extravagant praise Bekh receives backstage immediately after the concert with the artificially stimulated deadness the musician experiences:

> "Maestro, you were exquisite tonight," the Pekinese woman said in the Green Room. "Golden," added the bullfrog sycophant. "A joy. I cried, really cried," trilled the birds. Nutrients bubbled in his chest. He could feel valves flapping. He dipped his head, moved his hands, whispered thankyous. Staleness settled grittily behind his forehead. "Superb." "Unforgettable." "Incredible." Then they went away and he was left, as always, with the keepers. (Ellison and Silverberg 450)

The audience members that crowd him in brief adoration are all reduced to animal caricatures: there is irony in a bullfrog, notorious for its rude, loud sounds, appraising a symphony, and the woman who calls it exquisite is identified as "Pekinese," a common breed of small, yappy lap-dogs for rich women. The "birds," presumably a group of women, paradoxically say together "I cried," a triplication that belies the sentiment's authenticity. It also foreshadows the penultimate moment of the story, when Bekh desires to cry with the emotion he feels from Rhoda's music, feeling "the world alive with her music. Fire and tears, joy, radiance" (450). As first Bekh plays his "lying" music, then Rhoda plays a genuine strain, so first the audience members counterfeit an emotional and physical reaction to music, which Bekh finally experiences, in truth, in his final moments. Though they may be deceiving themselves as to their experience of Bekh's music, the audience members are

clearly aware of his reduced status, leaving him backstage like a piece of equipment for the stage hands to clear away. Although Rhoda knows what he is, managing even to work his on-switch when she sneaks backstage, she seems to expect great art from the once-great musician. She believes that he is deceiving everybody, reading his participation as an endorsement of his performance—she seems naively unaware of the corporate side of show business—and she confronts him as fellow practitioner exposing a charlatan.

> Report me, go ahead. I don't care if I'm arrested. Someone had to say it. You're shameful! Walking around, pretending to make music—don't you see how awful it is? A performer is an interpretive artist, not just a machine for playing notes. I shouldn't have to tell you that. An interpretive artist. Artist. Where's your art now? (451-2)

Bekh freely admits to Rhoda's charges, echoing her invective by characterizing the music he creates in his zombiefied state as "just sounds," "sounds devoid of tears and laughter" (452). We might say—using Benjamin's concept—that Bekh's music is devoid of aura. Because it has no aura, it is, as Rhoda points out, not even art. And yet it is widely accepted as art, received enthusiastically by the masses of this future society, if not in quite the way Benjamin anticipates, still in large numbers. While Rhoda walks away from her encounter with Bekh enlightened about the connection between art and life, the rest of the society represented by the concert audience remains as shallow as the zombie's symphony.

Benjamin worries that consumers of mass-produced art will become, themselves, lessened. The Marxist nightmare-future that his essay may allude to requires the emptying out of the individual subject, a common trait of all the futuristic dystopias depicted in popular literature. Golden Age pulp science fiction, the tradition to which Harlan Ellison and Robert

Silverberg are heirs, shares a tendency to envision a vaguely sketched population as a mass society of integrated subjects, as Ursula K. Le Guin notes in "American SF and the Other." In the 1975 essay, Le Guin writes, "the people, in SF, are not people. They are masses, existing for one purpose: to be led by their superiors" (88). She is describing the kind of chauvinistic, space opera mode of science fiction that she and other science fiction writers of her generation are reconfiguring and reacting against, but the trope that Le Guin described in reference to "all those Galactic Empires" becomes menacing in "The Song the Zombie Sang," hinting at a future created by a vapid society, or the kind of vapid society created and taken advantage of by the totalitarian governments of Huxley, Zamyatin, and Burgess's dystopian futures.[7] Nils Bekh's zombie status is weirdly echoed in the audience; his own hollowness and the emptiness of his music seem reproduced in the audience members. In his dream state upon awakening the second time, Bekh imagines interrupting his next concert to "stand there in the full glare of lights and tell them what they were." Bekh is a zombie, but he charges his audience with being "ghouls. Selfish ghouls. As dead as he was, but in a different way. Unfeeling, hollow," Bekh thinks (Ellsion and Silverberg 451). Ghouls are legendary spirits who live in graveyards and feed on the dead (Boon, "Ontological Anxiety" 35). Both associated with death, ghouls and zombies are similar figures, crossed in George Romero's 1967 film *Night of the Living Dead* (35-36). In fact, Romero originally called the walking corpses he filmed "ghouls," but the public preferred to call them "zombies" (McIntosh 8). "The zombie ghoul," in Boon's classification, had predatory characteristics but is essentially as empty as the original Haitian zombie, "missing an essential self" ("The Zombie" 56). This seems to be the aspect Bekh intends to convey when he calls the audience members "dead," "unfeeling, hollow" (Ellison and Silverberg 451). Like Bekh, they are

lacking something crucial. Bekh is not what Boon would classify a "zombie ghoul," preying upon others, but his emptiness echoes theirs, pointing to the ways in which they are metaphorically zombiefied.

Rhoda's friend refers to a recent concert in which the audience stood for ten minutes applauding Bekh. The applause we witness at the beginning of Bekh's performance in the Music Center follows a cue similar to the electric impulses that drive Bekh's zombie body. Like Bekh, the audience seems programmed to respond to certain stimuli. The musician is lifted through the floor of the stage on a "grab-grav plate" and heralded by a fanfare of light and sound: "as he emerged, the chromatics keyed sympathetic vibrations in the audience, and they began to applaud" (447). Whereas authentic music in "The Song the Zombie Sang" produces emotions in its auditors, the audience of the concert experiences "vibrations." Rhoda also speaks of "the vibrations of the people down there" in the expensive seats next to the stage, "the vibrations of the rich" (446). Her thoughts seem whimsical, imagining the symphony's attendees as generating vibrations that might interfere with Rhoda's experience, and the metaphor of sound waves is suggested by her contextual discussion of the Music Center's acoustics. In the wider context of the story's emphasis on technological supplementation and machine culture, the image of the audience members vibrating to the stimuli on stage figures them as mechanized as well. Bekh's reflection on his function situates vibrations in the mechanical reproduction of sound. During the concert, Bekh "rang in the harmonics, got the sympathetic pipes vibrating" on his instrument. He is reproducing a long-ago concert, from which "he still heard the reverberations. And duplicated them exactly" (448). As Bekh plays his instrument, and as Bekh experiences his living-dead music, the audience members respond to Bekh's music. The famous musician can duplicate "the old

virtuoso swoop" that brings "the chill in their spines," but in this case, the chill seems less like an organic feeling than an electric shock.

> Bekh opened the topmost bank of outputs and heard the audience respond, everyone sitting up suddenly as the new smash of sound cracked across the air. . . . He smiled with satisfaction at his own effects. And then the sense of emptiness. Sound for its own sake. Is this what music means? . . . Will they applaud? Yes, and stamp their feet and congratulate one another on having been lucky enough to hear me tonight. And what do they know? (449)

As Benjamin feared, the audience has become a passive receiver of the music, receiving the reverberations of Bekh's hollow music and responding as mechanically as he produces it. The audience mirrors the musician; they too are on their way to becoming zombies, it seems. The connection between the human soul and the aura of art, established in the description of Rhoda's performance, traces backward to reflect on the audience members' conditions: they cannot detect the missing aura in Bekh's music because they are somehow deficient in soul, or the qualities of vitality and fullness of emotion that the soul pulls in its wake in "The Song the Zombie Sang." Rhoda seems to be an exception, but she too has been cold emotionally, apparently—if we believe her suitor, who accuses her of cutting herself off from the world by wrapping herself up in devotion to art. At the beginning of the story, she gives him "a faint, mechanical smile" (446). But he reminds her that emotion is vital to art, and "love . . . and caring, and commitment to life. You deny all that. You split yourself and smother the part that fires the art" (449). After her confrontation with Bekh, it seems that Rhoda agrees. She leaves the Music Center to find him, to talk to him about music and emotion. Rhoda embraces the qualities for which Bekh stands as a symbol of lack.

The essentially happy ending (happy for Rhoda and her young man at least) points to hope for an alternative to the sort of strictly controlled but bloodless dystopian society the story conjures. "The Song the Zombie Sang" is "a mapping of possible alternatives," as Darko Suvin describes science fiction, which calls attention to itself as such (12). Ellison and Silverberg describe a society hollowed out and cheapened by dedication to artifice, but also provide the instruction for a better way. Stephen King characterizes Harlan Ellison's fiction as "moral tales," citing a writing philosophy Ellison described to him in a 1979 letter (355). In the letter, reprinted in King's *Danse Macabre*, Ellison writes of his fiction as the sort of "call to understanding and action" that Suvin ascribes to twentieth century science fiction (12). "What I try to do in my stories," Ellison writes, is

> to alter everyday existence in a stretch of fiction. . . . And by the altering, by an insertion of a paradigmatic fantasy element, to permit the reader to perceive what she/he takes for granted in the surrounding precept in a slightly altered way. My hope is that the frisson, the tiny shock of new awareness, the little spark of seeing the accepted from an uncomfortable angle, will convince them [the readers] that there is room enough and time enough, if one only has courage enough, to alter one's existence. (King 345)

Rhoda certainly has the intention and the courage to alter her own existence at the end of "The Song the Zombie Sang" and embrace that vital quality in herself that Bekh had lost. In human terms, that quality is symbolized by the soul; in musical terms, it is an aura. In general terms, we might call that quality "the real," using Baudrillard's terminology. In "Simulacra and Science Fiction" he writes, "it is the real that has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream

of a lost object" (123). The dream still seems possible in "The Song the Zombie Sang." In Baudrillard's terms, Rhoda departs the house of artifice (the Music Center) and walks into the night in search of the "real." The society she symbolically turns her back on, however, remains crucially blind to what is authentically present, not even aware of its loss. This society is the predecessor of those in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* and Robin Becker's *Brains*, destined for zombification in one way or another.

Notes to Chapter Three

1. Robert Silverberg's 1971 novella, *Born with the Dead*, includes living-dead figures, also referred to as zombies, who have elected to artificially extend their life, although their deadness seriously impacts the way they experience the world. Particularly germane to "The Song the Zombie Sang" is the extreme sang-froid of the zombies in *Born with the Dead*; like Nils Bekh, they do not seem to experience emotion. They are extremely detached: "to the dead the whole universe is plastic, nothing's real, nothing matters a hell of a lot, it's all only a joke" (59). It's a less enjoyable joke for Bekh, who remembers and craves the real.

2. Bekh describes the ultracembalo as "this wonderful instrument!"; his apostrophe describes Ellison and Silverberg's novum: "What if Bach had known it? Beethoven? To hold a whole world in your fingertips. The entire spectrum of sound, and the colors, too, and more: hitting the audience in a dozen senses at once" (448). The ultracembalo's range of sensory effects recalls the "feelies" of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which feature sensory immersion in a film-type artifact, and that society's focus on sensory overload. In fact, Huxley's dystopia does contain mention of a "synthetic music plant" among the many amenities of the Reservation resort (100).

The most obvious predecessor of Ellison and Silverberg's ultracembalo is Samuel R. Delany's sensory-syrynx, played by the intergalactic troubadour Mouse in Delany's 1968 novel *Nova.* The sensory-syrynx is an instrument as technologically complicated as Bekh's console: "it might have been a harp, it might have been a computer. With inductance surfaces like a theremin, with frets like a guitar, down one side were short drones as on a sitar. On the other side were the extended base drones of a guitarina. Parts were carved from rosewood. Parts were cast from stainless steel. It had insets of black plastic, and was cushioned with

plush" (Delany 8). Like the ultracembalo, the sensory-syrynx produces music and color, but Delany's more versatile instrument also creates aromas and fully formed images.

3. See chapter one for a more detailed discussion of scientific materialism and its role in the zombies of H. P. Lovecraft's story, "Herbert West: Reanimator."

4. For a survey of the popular zombie's relationship to the capitalist worker of the thirties and forties, see Chera Kee's essay "'They are not men . . . they are dead bodies!': From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again," collected in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*. During the depression era that also bore witness to the rise of cheap, popular fiction, Kee writes, "zombies became an ideological critique of modernity in the form of capitalist exploitation" (14).

5. My comparison of "The Song the Zombie Sang" to Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is not meant to suggest that the former is a reading of the latter—only that Benjamin's concepts help codify the more abstract elements of Ellison and Silverberg's story. One obvious discrepancy between the essay and the fiction, for instance, is the social class of the art consumers in each. Benjamin's concern is for the proletariat, which he sees as the inevitable audience for mass-produced entertainment. The story's concert is attended by a select section of high society, and yet it is mass-produced music on a smaller scale than even the rapidly spreading movie screens Benjamin writes among. But Benjamin's predictions about mass art's influence on its audience are certainly germane to Bekh's criticism of the audience in "The Song the Zombie Sang," and Benjamin's diagnosis of the emptiness of mass art is helpful in discussing Bekh's music.

6. The connection between zombification and social control is also found in the foundations of the zombie legend in Haitian folklore. For a cultural-historical discussion of

"the zombie as ideological apparatus," see Kyle William Bishop's study *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. During the time of the first American occupation of Haiti, "the poor victim of a zombification ritual is a tragic figure, one who has had her identity and autonomy stripped from her, being converted to nothing more than an enslaved cipher." Because of this, Bishop writes, "the pervasive belief in zombification, and the fear resulting from that accepted potentiality, constitutes a powerful ideological force" (53).

Chapter Four: The Real in Robin Becker's *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*

From the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exaulted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers having been originally breathed by the creator into a few forms or into one . . . from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

—Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*

America is a place where people can be themselves. It is a human experience rather than a purely national or cultural experience. It is built upon fabulous differences—religion, race, culture, customs, political thinking. These differences, or pluralism, as the sociologists call it, are actually the mortar that holds the nation together.

—Norman Cousins, "They Love Us for the Wrong Reasons"

In a 2010 interview, Robin Becker relates that her novel *Brains: A Zombie Memoir* developed out of this seminal idea: "most zombie movies aren't about zombies. They're about humans." Specifically, Becker's realization concerns the humans who survive the zombie hoards, at least for the duration of the plotline, and whose struggles drive the narrative. Becker's own contribution to the zombie genre develops human interest in a more metaphysical direction, exploring the human factor. "What makes a person?" Becker writes, listing the questions that led her to write *Brains*. "Who deserves to 'live'? Is consciousness what makes us human?" To ponder these questions, the novel is narrated by former English professor and postmodern pop culture scholar Jack Barnes, a kind of über-zombie who retains consciousness (to some extent) and quite possibly a soul.[1] "I am not your trained monkey," Jack wants to shout at his personal mad scientist, who created the zombie pandemic in an attempt to engineer super soldiers, "I am a PhD!" (174). The novel is the record of Jack's posthumous experience. For instance, he transcribes a monologue by a radio D. J. broadcasting music and philosophical musings to accompany the apocalypse: "like it or not, those zombies are us, our true selves. The veil has been stripped away and underneath

we are all cannibals" (104).[2] He compares his recent experience to the classic '60s song "She's Not There" (sung by a group named *The Zombies*): "I guess Meagan's not there either. And neither is her mother. I mean, they are in that they exist, sorta, but they're not really there. Like their minds aren't there. Just like the girl in the song" (Bateman; Becker 75). The radio jockey's opinion echoes Jack's own, looking for cognition, i. e. evidence of consciousness, to indicate authentic being. A human's unique personhood seems implicitly included in the always complex term 'consciousness,' as perhaps are qualia, such as individuality, spiritual essence, or even reality.[3] Further, both understand a zombie as a human shell housing an absent quale.

The former professor confesses,

> in life, I would've written an article about the fool and his broadcast. Postapocalyptic stoned DJ waxes postmodern with songs that spit cynically in the face of his life-or-death situation. The title would be: "The Living Death of Irony: How Pop Culture Illuminates and Comments on the Current Zombie Crisis." (75)

Jack's title could serve handily for the novel's own. In fact, *Brains* argues that pop culture *is* the stuff of humanity, or at least what has come to substitute for humanity. When Jack and his rag-tag band of zombie followers encounter a roving detachment of soldiers for the first time, the über-zombie tries to communicate rationally with the humans. "Fighting for control" of his newly embraced desire to eat human brains, Jack believes, "this was my opportunity to show the real me, the man beneath the animal" (46). While there may be a man inside Jack's human animal body—Jack's hierarchical privileging here of animal instinct above human consciousness is revealing—there is nonetheless no 'real' beneath

Jack's 'me.' There is only pop culture. In Umberto Eco's critique of American culture, "Travels in Hyperreality"—one of the academic sources that Jack explicitly cites (151)—Eco describes the process by which

> the "completely real" becomes identified with the "completely fake." Absolute unreality is offered as real presence. The aim . . . is to supply a "sign" that will then be forgotten as such: The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing, but its plaster cast. Its double, in other words. Is this the taste of America? (7)

Yes, replies Robin Becker's zombie novel, and Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One*. In this context, a zombie might be said to replace the former, human self. The D. J. that Jack quotes laments the substitution, although the analogy falls apart if extrapolated toward evidence of mankind's awareness of the process. Jack demonstrates the blurred lines demarking the real from the hyperreal, noting how fake some elements of the real world are in his sensory perception. In one anecdote, "a zombie pressed her face against my window. She was chalk-white and covered with green and black bruises." Jack comments, "she didn't look real; she looked like someone dressed up for Halloween" (*Brains* 132). In the next scene, one of Jack's zombie companions grabs a victim's heart from his chest, "which looked fake, like an anatomical gummi heart—gelatinous, chewy, and chock-full of high-fructose corn syrup" (141). In the following passage, Jack oscillates between reporting the zombie group's actions and popular culture:

> after we were all patched up and dressed—praise Saint Joan, miracle worker—Ros and I hauled anchor and the boat headed west with the wind,

> chasing the sun and the Joads and the stars in Hollywood. Our own Manifest Destiny. . . . The sun was setting, turning the shifting clouds orange. It looked unreal, like an orange juice commercial or a glossy ad for a subdivision built around golf. . . . Ros spread his arms apart. 'I'm the king of the world!' he yelled. We all got the reference. *Titanic*. Gigantic. The future's so bright, we gotta eat brains. Over half-decayed and Ros was still a clever boy. Iceberg of America, here we come. (162-163)

The most natural detail of the scene Jack paints here, the sunset, is the least believable element to its narrator. The order of his syntax and his logic places the media version of the sunset, which is an advertising archetype in its own right, before the authentic sun. This order is also telling as to why the authentic phenomenon seems "unreal" to Jack.

Although Jack laments his supposed sui generis state, he nevertheless constantly refers to pop culture artifacts to explain and/or anticipate his zombie existence.[4] "Shambling," he snorts,

> that's what the deplorable Max Brooks calls our gait. His book *The Zombie Survival Guide* was once shelved in the humor section of your local bookstore. Now every redneck and zombie hunter from here to California has a copy in his glove compartment and uses it as an actual survival guide. Every word turned out to be true. How's that for postmodern irony.
>
> We exist in a season born of pulp fiction and video games, B movies and comic books. The word made flesh wound. (38)

Jack notes at a later point that a copy decorates the dashboard of a vehicle he commandeers (131). Published in 2003, but not widely popular until the 2006 debut of its sequel and now-

Hollywood-movie *World War Z*, Max Brooks's *Zombie Survival Guide* rode the crest of the recent zombie fascination. George Romero's seminal zombie films (*Night of the Living Dead,* 1967; *Dawn of the Dead,* 1978; *Day of the Dead,* 1985; etc.) also influence Jack's thought. A 2011 article in *The Atlantic*, "Our Zombies, Ourselves," argues that "Romero did not invent the zombie. But he cut him loose" (Parker). Cut loose from the social constraints of life, and reveling in the liberty afforded him in death, Jack seeks human prey. "Wal-Mart or the mall?" he speculates, explaining,

> that's the brilliance of *Dawn of the Dead*, the second movie in Romero's trilogy . . . the accumulation of material goods is a panacea, a substitute—*it can never fill the void at our spiritual center. It can never acquire the depth of real meaning.* It keeps us tethered to the material world, with zombies clawing at the double doors, greedy for more. And zombies are never satisfied. (emphasis added, 83)

Notice how Jack switches in this reflection, possibly unconsciously, from the human condition (seeking fulfillment in consumerism) to describing the zombie condition ("never satisfied"), making an implicit analogy between the two sides of death's divide. Describing humanity through his memory of life and enacting a hollow simulacrum of humanity as a zombie, Jack describes the human condition as fettered to a phenomenologically tangible existence: the circulation of pop culture inevitably and inextricably influences all. Although in Jack's metaphor from *Dawn of the Dead* one is merely trapped with the zombies, the total novel suggests that to be human in the postmodern era is to be saturated and even determined by popular culture, which is to be zombie. Over-reliance on pop culture results in a kind of

group consciousness in which all humans participate; pop culture is the human version of a hive consciousness.

Even the most elite (or pretentious) of social strata is not excluded from the masses; the academic canon is the Ivory Tower's popular culture. As Jack prepares to take his family underwater to preserve them for the duration of winter, he plagiarizes T. S. Eliot, wondering, "when frozen, would we be comatose or conscious? A patient etherized upon a table . . ." (135). The last line references the famous third line of Eliot's 1920 poem "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Jack also frequently appropriates the words of his pet professional author, Walt Whitman. He plans to write an undead manifesto to present to the leaders of the human free world, reasoning that "with my background and knowledge, I would write an argument as persuasive and historic as 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' or the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man,'" which he would boldly title "*A Vindication of the Rights of the Post-Living*" (78; 172). He delusionally projects his posthumous writings will be "as revolutionary as the Magna Carta, the Treaty of Versailles, and *The Feminine Mystique*. The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights," demanding "life, liberty, and the pursuit of brains'" (167; 178). He fails to anticipate that his document will undoubtedly be a pastiche of all these sources. Unquestionably, Jack remains aware of the original sources for the items he appropriates. For example, he lectures fellow zombies on "'bird' as a symbol of freedom . . . a preverbal Jungian archetype; it's ingrained in human consciousness" —and, presumably, zombie [un]consciousness, though at a later point in his narrative Jack forlornly notes, "only the birds remained, flying out of reach" (61; 113). Since Jack at least certainly has a firm handle on symbolism, perhaps the elusive avians represent the zombies' and the humans' inability to grasp, in Baudrillard's vocabulary, the real.

Despite his stereotypical pretentions, Jack has always been deeply invested in pop culture. Jack recalls, "I believed that anything with mass appeal was inherently bad, not only [Stephen] King, but Michael Jackson, Harry Potter, and the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. In my view, popularity proved inferiority, not worth." He claims that in his zombie state he "had become mainstream, a plebian, the lowest common denominator, and I didn't care. In fact, it was liberating" (131). Jack's lifetime saturation in popular culture totally frames his experience, even in death. Before Jack's home is breached by hungry hoards of zombies, his wife reminds him to aim for the monsters' brainstems; Jack snaps, "you think I don't know that? It's a trope of the genre" (4). Becker chose her character's cultural background carefully, explaining, "I decided that the characters would be aware of zombie mythology. They've all seen the movies, and most have read the *Zombie Survival Guide*. In fact, the characters in *Brains* comment on the amazing fact that everything in the movies turns out to be true" ("The Big Idea"). Perhaps another way to say this is that cultural archetypes generate what Jack experiences as 'truth,' rather than his authentic experience. Certainly, cultural symbolism persists in both Jack's conscious reflection and, the text suggests, in his Freudian unconscious. Relating his near-death experience, Jack recalls,

> the guy from Munch's *The Scream* was there with his hands on the sides of his face. A child tattooed with the mark of the beast morphed into a stampede of wild horses running away from a gothic mansion that morphed into a laughing fat lady in pearls. The typical horror-movie shtick. Cliché, but true.
>
> And then I was reborn. . . .
>
> Not just zombie but archetype. (*Brains* 36)

This boast is disingenuous; at another moment Jack admits, "there's nothing new under the sun" (121). Jack betrays himself as derivative and undermines his former assertion by citing his references throughout his narrative: "bad movies with cheesy voice-overs"; "any cliché you can think of . . . every disaster movie or thriller, every horror and slasher flick" (62; 148).[5]

In a 1943 editorial section of the *Saturday Review*, entitled "The American Folly," Norman Cousins writes, "there is something curiously paradoxical today in the changed relationship between the book and film world and the everyday world in which Americans live. Once—and not many years ago at that—many of us picked up a book or went to the movies for an hour or two of escape." But America's folly is the national obsession with representations of reality that come to seem more vivid and desirable than everyday life. "Today we live in what is actually a world of escape and take a brief dip into reality every now and then in our diversions." On one hand, this comment is a back-handed compliment to American popular fiction (at least in the Realistic mode), which lifts the reader "out of the fantastic and unreal world that is America today and [he is] plumped into a world of substance and reality" (91).[6] The other hand points to what Jean Baudrillard describes as "a world completely catalogued and analyzed, then *artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real*, in a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real" (original emphasis, 8). Cousins's term "catalogued" recalls Walt Whitman's famous catalogues in *Leaves of Grass*, which Jack Barnes emulates. Cousins creates his own pop culture catalogue in his prescient critique of what theorists now call the globalization of American mass culture[7] in postwar Japan: "young girls wore tight sweaters, short skirts, and American-style shoes. They chewed gum, went dancing, liked hot music, preferred American

movies and Japanese vaudeville to the traditional Kabuki theater. . . . Gum, jive, jazz, tight sweaters, padded bras, yo-yos, comic books, neon lights, dance halls, and chromium trim . . ." ("They Love Us" 170-1). As Cousins goes on to note, American freedom to embrace cultural diversity is a fundamental national tenet, but the editorial emphasizes the troubling aspects of the mass-produced cultural conformity America exports on an international scale. In Baudrillard's terms, Cousins documents the dawn of the current "world of simulation." By the turn of the twenty-first-century, we are mired in "the vicious circle of its irresponsibility and of its fundamental nonexistence, of its already seen and of its already dead" (Baudrillard 19).[8] The world of "substance and reality" that Norman Cousins describes (or imagines) in American literature no longer exists in Baudrillard's estimation, nor in Robin Becker's *Zombie Memoir*.

The undead figure of the zombie embodies absent qualia so well because death traditionally robs its victim of a (literally) vital component. Jack frets that "some of the more aware zombies appeared to understand that our gestures meant liberty and escape. A dim light shone in their eyes. Others were so far gone, it was useless. Probably dullards as humans as well, they were now catatonic brain-eating machines with no semblance of their former selves" (61). These are examples of the "classic Romero zombie," whose essential vacancy echoes the archetypal zombies of Haitian folklore (122). As Jack looks for a mate, he is repeatedly disappointed to discover the prospective brides' deficiencies. One "looked at me in a way I read as coquettish, but it was probably brutish and blank" (54). Jack instantly canonizes "Saint" Joan when he peers into her eyes and finds "there was light in them, a positive glow, a corona of higher cognitive function. Brains! The woman had brains" (55). Encouraged,

> I searched the eyes of my companions as we shuffled along, looking for a glimmer of intelligence, recognition, memory. I saw nothing. Their eyes were soulless and flat, devoid of thought, empty of feeling, and hell-bent on finding loved ones and neighbors to eat. Instinct alone propelled them forward, one rank foot in front of the other. Programmed for one thing and one thing only, they wouldn't stop until they got it. (15)

In other words, death and the zombie virus (usually) reduces human beings to their innate instincts. "Trying to ignore the call of the wild," Jack himself must struggle to muster his "self-control. Mindful restraint. Denying my instincts, displaying the discipline of an ascetic monk . . ." (149; 26). It is "triumph-of-the-will time," Jack cheers himself. "Mind over matter. Brain over brains" (125). Death's enforced disconnection between the body and the soul, and the zombie's physical awkwardness, suggests that the soul drives the body in a manner similar to a human piloting a vehicle; when there is interference between the control and the engine, despite his general policy of grabbing his afterlife by the horns, such side effects as shambling necessarily ensue. Jack makes his frustration with his deteriorating condition clear. While actively seeking her zombie-version replacement, Jack reflects on his wife, "I'm glad I ate Lucy. I'd hate to see her dulled, reduced to an object, a thing. A rabid automaton" (52). If death can be understood to reduce a person to an object, then Jack is simultaneously object and subject, since he's retained his consciousness. This unusual circumstance might be compared to that of a science fiction soldier who is trapped inside his barely controllable waldo. Jack complains, "I was stuck in a body that would not obey me. A stroke victim, I was locked in. A rotting portable prison. A walking putrefying metaphor. I, Robot. I, Zombie" (24). These lines indicate that humans as well as zombies navigate an

inherent divide between their bodies and their minds/spirits/souls—which means that zombiehood as a literary trope is an exaggeration and exacerbation of the human condition. In his own words, Jack considers himself "a walking putrefying metaphor" for humanity.

Jack and the rest of Becker's zombies reify postmodern humanity's own absent quale. In many ways, *Brains* emblematizes the zombie's potential as a literary and cultural metaphor by defining a zombie as "the presence of an absence":

> "Death is not anything. Death is not . . . " Ros said.
>
> "Life?"
>
> "Death is the absence of a presence. But living death is . . ."
>
> "The presence of absence?" (71)

What is the absence that zombie Jack demonstrates? He exhorts us to "bear in mind, this is a zombie talking—a supernatural being. What do I know? I might not even be real. Oh, ontology" (36). Metaphorically speaking, neither Jack nor his zombie compatriots are at all real, alienated as they are from the authentically experienced real by death and by countless layers of simulacra and simulations that comprise contemporary mass culture. Even Jack apprehends that "ontologically, there was a chasm [between zombies and humans]: beating hearts, digestive tracts, and sexual reproduction; architecture, Hello Kitty, and barbecue pork rinds" (170). This is a deceptive dichotomy, because both lists describe the human condition. Or perhaps that is the point: zombiehood consists of the same stuff on a different side of the eternal divide, indicating an apocalyptic absence of the real.

"The real" has long since devolved into recirculated simulations, Jean Baudrillard postulates in "The Precession of Simulacra" (1980), resulting in "the characteristic hysteria of our times: that of the production and reproduction of the real. What every society looks for

in continuing to produce, and to over-produce, is to restore the real that escapes it . . .” (23). Former English professor Jack Barnes is doubtless aware of Baudrillard’s work; he recounts discussing Umberto Eco’s closely connected contribution, “Travels in Hyperreality,” and he alludes to Baudrillard when writing about his zombie family, “we could have been a group of actors pretending to be a normal American family on vacation” (*Brains* 110; 151). Significantly, Jack’s first thought is for the simulation, imagining a tableau of a postmodern family the type of which populates the landscape of Eco’s treatise on American popular culture. Jack qualifies, “or we could have actually been that family, no more simulations or acting, no layers of meaning and artifice sprinkled with postmodern allusion. The birth of the real” (151). It is unlikely, considering that Jack continues even through the final chapter of his memoir to filter humans, zombies, and his surroundings through a densely imbricated pop-culture lens. “Oh,” he quips, “gotta love those allusions” (72). And he certainly does, in a kind of conspicuous consumption of cultural symbols. The child-zombie that Jack affectionately names Guts effectively catfishes victims for the group because “his layers of reality were believable and complex—he ‘acted’ more zombielike than he actually was . . .” (63). How Jack can fathom the true nature of Guts despite the entirely fictional persona Jack has invented for the miniature eviscerated zombie remains a mystery. Crucially, Jack does not perceive these and other obvious inconsistencies.

Jack amply demonstrates his reliance on the “precession of simulacra” that Baudrillard describes, consciously and unconsciously. He interprets himself and others through pop culture-tinted glasses, perceiving Guts as “every black street urchin in every TV show, from Buckwheat to Arnold.” In a brief moment of perspicacity, Jack notes, “of course, for all I knew he was more middle-class *Cosby* than ghetto *Good Times* in ‘real’ life, but he

can't contradict me. And I'm the one writing history" (59). Note that Jack qualifies the term "'real' life" with quotation marks, a subtle acknowledgment of the simulation. An octogenarian set of human prey "were poster children for the old and fearful. A commercial for Celebrex" (85). Before he learns to hunt, Jack's remaining consciousness (and self-consciousness) threatens to be a hindrance in his zombie existence. Absurdly, Jack feels uncertain about how to go about the business of being undead. But as the compulsion to feed draws Jack to his human prey, he mentally summons a queue of cultural forbearers: "I felt a line of monsters behind me as I advanced on Dr. Welk," he rejoices. "My ancestors: Count Dracula, the Wolfman, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, the Red Death in his mask and vestments. Every party has a pooper; that's why we invited the Boogeyman" (20). Gaining his stride as a cannibalistic monster, Jack pays homage to his predecessors.[9] He imagines, for example, a member of *Friday the 13th*'s cast (1980): "Jason on my shoulder was better than an angel. A monster on a monster, the hockey mask confirmed that our historical moment was unprecedented; Legend had become reality, fiction was finally fact. Yes, Virginia, there really are zombies." This address is an allusion to a complex American archetype, Santa Claus, referencing the famous 1897 crisis-of-faith publicized in a New York *Sun* letter to the editor, who famously replied, "yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus."[10] Zombies, "like Jason Voorhees . . . rise from the dead" (*Brains* 57). The hockey mask that Jack mentions, taped onto him by Saint Joan in order to protect his shoulder, appears to him as a sign pointing him back to pop culture. Given Jack's particular background expertise in popular culture as a professor, it might seem strange that he is momentarily at a loss to access its guiding templates when he is remade by the zombie virus into a monster, but the lapse calls attention to the action of referring to simulacra and simulations for behavioral models.

"Oh, the signs that delineate our decades!" Jack exclaims. "Our cultural symbols and codes: . . . pop culture and fashion, the British Romantics and deconstruction—it was all I had in life and I clung to it like religion. It used to be enough, but it meant nothing to me now. Dust in the wind. Like Charlie Manson said: Now is the only thing that's real" (96). Jack is clearly mistaken about his rejection of human culture, as his enumeration of the annals of monsterhood demonstrates, and he has that last sentence backward, of course; 'the real' is the only quale absent in 'the now.'

If zombies can no longer produce or recognize authentic reality, neither can the humans, even before the apocalypse. The presence of the zombies is not the cause but the reification of the loss of the real. As Jack proclaims in his manifesto, which he apparently intends more for a human audience than an undead readership, "we exist in a season born of pulp fiction and video games, B movies and comic books. The word made flesh wound" (38). The ambiguous pronoun "we" could refer to a universal state encompassing both humans and zombies, not just to zombies as a subgroup. Touring his human abode for a last time, Jack describes

> a framed photo of Lucy smearing cake on my face. It's a scene replayed at a million wedding receptions: The bride shoving frosting at the groom, intentionally missing his mouth, her own mouth opened wide with laughter. The ritual is simultaneously playful and sadistic, combining food and sex, dominance and submission, consumption and power. (14)

It is also apparently a persistent and possibly involuntary behavioral meme, a ritual that summons actors to bring itself forth over and over again. In an unlikely conjunction of the mundane and the fantastic, Jack makes a similar comment about one of his acts of zombie

carnage, remarking to his projected audience, "you've seen this scene in a million movies" (160). If the Celebrex family is an indication of human behavior during the apocalypse, the living too are still relying on media culture to guide them.[11] The byproducts of such widely disseminated sources, such as stereotypes, are still reliable. When one of the commando-types who briefly captures the zombies tells his compatriot that he's been hunting the undead longer that the younger soldier has been alive, the latter points out that this is impossible, but his senior retorts, "if not zombies per se, the gooks, A-rabs. Same difference. Enemies. Insurgents" (67). The human population, post apocalypse, adheres to established patterns, while our zombie hero unconsciously reappropriates the same patterns, and much of the cultural content. All that is left is the layers of popular culture disguising a central absence of authentic reality.

As sterile shells their former human selves, zombies cannot generate new material. Jack explicitly confirms this as he watches a burning building:

> "any undead in there are toast," Ros said. It was just as well. What would they have done? Build cities? Design furniture? Form governments? Make pottery? Zombies are not creators. Zombies don't manipulate and control the environment. We don't organize day laborers or deplete the ozone layer. We don't build dams or run for city council. We don't play softball or pinball. We are Zen masters. Like a Venus flytrap, just give us meat and more meat. Feed me, Seymour! (143)

Another way to envision the zombie's status is as a body emptied of its original spiritual content. Like H. P. Lovecraft's short story "Herbert West: Reanimator," Becker's novel appropriates the distinction between body and soul that enables the traditional definition of

the zombie as a body artificially animated but deprived of its spiritual essence—so it may seem strange that Becker's zombie protagonist retains his soul. If we consider the original folkloric zombie as one of the precession in Jack's arsenal—the vacant-eyed slave created by depleting his or her soul—then what does Becker's zombie lose in his reanimation? It cannot be his reality, since the text makes it clear that humans have already lost their connection to the real, as Baudrillard describes. The zombie may be an ideal figure to demonstrate absence, but its value is in its metaphoric relation to the human. So while zombiehood is an apt metaphor for the human condition, that is not to say that there is no difference between a human and a zombie; the latter is dead, at the very least, and possibly additionally reduced in some way. Becker takes all of the guesswork out of this issue, giving us Jack's insight into his own loss: the living integration of body and soul. Jack announces, "the separation was complete: physical and spiritual; mind and body; thought and action. I was the living dead embodiment of Cartesian dualism: Though my soul was housed in my body, my body was divorced from my soul" (121). In Descartes's scheme, passion acts upon the two components unevenly, further complicating Jack's alienation. Descartes writes in the second article of *The Passions of the Soul*, "in order to understand the passions of the soul its functions must be distinguished from those of body. What in the soul is a passion is in the body commonly speaking an action" (362). In the Cartesian model, Becker's zombies have lost in death the type of intimate connection between body and soul that Descartes considers essential to living consciousness. Jack boasts, "we're beyond the body" (84) and enthusiastically expresses his appreciation that he no longer defecates—he also enjoys the postapocalyptic radio broadcast of "Comfortably Numb" and relies on the undead's usual insensitivity to pain even while the body disintegrates.

Meanwhile, Jack insists on the continued presence of his soul. From this spiritual essence, at least in Becker's narrative, a zombie derives its drive to devour human brains, every zombie's overriding impulse. When Jack awakes in his new zombie state, he is overcome with an undeniable desire for brains.

> The imperative seemed to come from outside of my body; it rang in my head like the voice of a god I had no choice but to obey. Brains: I heard it clearly, simply, plainly. Brains! And I immediately set out to procure some. Now that I have analyzed this hunger, this twisted form of cannibalism, I realize it does not reside in my stomach, the typical seat of appetite; it stems from a deeper place, my divine core, what some might call the soul. (2)

A similar soul-passion in a live human would be tempered by conscious control—Jack likens it to a human desire for hard drugs—but this is what even the über-zombie lacks. Nevertheless, Jack would like persuade his projected readership that his soul continues to expand in death. Possibly he is also trying to persuade himself.

Mingling Romanticism and Existentialism, Jack remarks,

> zombie John Keats called the physical world the valley of soul-making, and I finally understood what he meant. Because I was walking through that valley, I felt it in my brain stem, my cortex, my goddamn pineal gland. He meant transcendence; he meant immortality. I believe in you, my soul. Through my earthly trials I am creating you. (93)

However, the presence and operation of Jack's soul is open to question. Jack betrays an interesting inconsistency when he describes having "reduced" one victim "to his essence, a pile of bones and puddles of blood" (41). According to Jack at other points in his narrative, a

person's essence (human or zombie) is the soul, so his reference to the body as one's essence begs to be read as a Freudian slip. In a sort of mid-afterlife crisis, Jack institutes holistic care practices in his zombie family, attempting "an exercise routine at the Garden of Eden [their temporary home]. Mind, body, and spirit." His plan is foiled by his family members' "eyes and minds empty as seashells, heads banging against the chain saw-carved crosses. Tabula rasa. Tabbouleh for brains" (77). Even if Jack is a rare sport among zombies, and manages to retain much of his living qualities, consciousness is clearly not a part of the standard zombie package. In terms of his plan to found a future zombie society, Jack's obvious oversight of this glaring flaw does not bode well for the sequel to his narrative.

Notes to Chapter Four

1. Jack himself certainly believes he has retained his soul; see *Brains* pages 21, 99, and 159, for example, and my discussion later in this chapter of Jack's soul. Becker built a soul into her protagonist, we might say; in her interview, she recounts, "the question became this: What if the living dead have souls?" As interested as I am here in the author's deliberate crafting of *Brains*, I reserve judgment on the question of Jack's soul.

2. Recall Peter Straub's observation:

> to feel our character, our personality, and our personal, hard-won history fade from being is to be exposed to whatever lies beneath these comforting operational conveniences. What remains when the conscious and functioning self has been erased is mankind's fundamental condition—irrational, violent, guilt-wracked, despairing, and mad. (xiv-xv)

3. Many and various are the terms Jack appears to include in the human consciousness. Consider the cumulative effect of following quotations:

> I searched the eyes of my companions as we shuffled along, looking for a glimmer of intelligence, recognition, memory. I saw nothing. Their eyes were soulless and flat, devoid of thought, empty of feeling, and hell-bent on finding loved ones and neighbors to eat. Instinct alone propelled them forward, one rank foot in front of the other. Programmed for one thing and one thing only, they wouldn't stop until they got it. (15)

"Self-control. Mindful restraint. Denying my instincts, displaying the discipline of an ascetic monk . . ." (26).

"It was triumph-of-the-will time. Mind over matter. Brain over brains" (125).

In list form, Jack includes in consciousness: intelligence, recognition, memory, soul, thought, feeling, self-control, discipline, and "brain" (or mind). In contrast, and possibly opposition, Jack identifies instinct, matter, and "brains" (or bodily impulses).

4. See also Jack's spurious lament, "we were in uncharted territory, and without certainties, without a map . . ." (Becker 100). In truth, he (and the rest of Earth's population, human and zombie alike) inhabits a kind of full-scale pop culture representation of the American landscape. Robin Becker, and/or Jack Barnes's subconscious, may be thinking of Umberto Eco's satirical essay, "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1" (1982). In that context, we might say that mankind has indulged in creating a popular culture map of America (and other parts of the world, as Eco documents in "Travels in Hyperreality") on a 1:1 scale. This metaphor has the added serendipity of figuring the reason the map has become, to add in Jean Baudrillard's term, "the desert of the real itself": there is simply no more room for more reality to take the place of the existing hyperreality (1).

5. And many others. Notably, "the ape in the opening scene of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, I heard the movie's theme song swelling in the background as I swung the bone in a circle . . . The triumphant drums pounded. Thus Spake Zarathustra" (53); Joan is "a simulacrum of a nurse" (55); "like Count Chocula, it was a parody of villainous laughter, a simulacrum of evil mirth" (131); "Lover was wearing a Night of the Living Dead T-shirt, which I took in the spirit it was no doubt intended—satirical, cynical, detached. Youthful, knowing, and hip, like being a 9/11 victim for Halloween 2001. Which I was" (39); "he fired again and blew off Eve's ear. It flew past me, wavy and surreal, like van Gogh's ear. We're

not zombies, I thought, we're artists. We're not artists, we're paintings. *Cannibalistic Sunflowers. Whistler's Zombie. Zombie Descending Stairs. Moaning Lisa*" (39).

6. For a broader history of the precession of the type of real-life images that prepared the stage for the American horror genre, see Martin Tropp's 1990 study *Images of Fear: How Horror Helped Shape Modern Culture (1818-1918)*.

7. Several examples are collected in the International Views Longman Topics Reader, such as Mintz's essay "Simulated Tourism."

8. Baudrillard glosses this cyclic deferral of the real as inherent in simulacra, which are "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (6), and also as "a circular, Möbian compulsion" (18).

9. Many and much is missing from Jack's acknowledgments; for a more extensive and detailed genealogy, see W. Scott Poole's *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* and David Gilmore's "An American Monstruary," the sixth chapter of his book-length study *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors.*

10. The letter and the editor's reply is available on *Newseum*'s website; for further background on the layers of this American phenomenon, refer to *The New York Times*'s 2012 article, "Macy's Melds Past and Present in a Marketing Paean to a Christmas Movie Classic."

11. The granddaughter confidently reassures her elders, "the guy on the radio said this is the place and this is the way to get in. They'll help us, you'll see. It's all good" (85).

Chapter Five: The Future of Humanity in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

Those shortsighted fools. What good does it do now?
What is the function of art in the apocalypse?

—Robin Becker, *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*

The age demanded an image
of its accelerated grimace.

—Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"[1]

The zombies in Colson Whitehead's novel *Zone One* are similar to the "zombietariate" in *Brains* in being "mechanical entities" driven only by instinct (Becker 62; Whitehead 28). Specifically, Whitehead's zombies have been reduced to the habits ingrained in them during life. (They are also driven to eat human flesh, although they are less discriminating about the human corpus than Becker's undead.) Whereas Peter Straub conjectures that "mankind's fundamental condition" is "irrational, violent, guilt-wracked, despairing, and mad" (xiv-xv), *Zone One* posits that humanity's fundamental coding is comprised of habits mechanically stamped into the living tissues that faithfully performed those mundane routines. This is another way of being reduced to a body: without consciousness to complete the whole-person package, what's left is the ingrained routines akin to our body's automatic functions, e. g. respiration and digestion. Whitehead's (human) protagonist Mark Spitz[2] explains, "the dead could turn a doorknob, hit a light switch—the plague didn't erase muscle memory. Cognition was out, though, once it [the zombie virus] overwrote the data of self" (27-8). In the context of the recent apocalyptic pandemic, Mark Spitz often speaks metaphorically of humans as biological computers, a functional union of hardware (the body) and software (the mind and/or soul). In the above instance, Spitz extends the logic of his analogy: a computer virus cannot damage a computer's body, its hardware

casing, but targets the software, which Spitz terms "the data of self."[3] Without this crucial component, even as rabid cannibals, the zombies in *Zone One* are generally helpless. Mark Spitz highlights their pathetic situation as he describes sweeping out the remnants of the urban apartment landscape, into which inhabitants had retreated during the early wave of the plague, behind fortifications that later became their cages: "then the plague wiped and reformatted their brains and they were trapped in their abodes, the most pathetic kind of city shut-in, their hands eventually groping their way toward expensive security locks but incapable of reaching then for the passel of splendid contemporary furniture they'd piled against it" (33). The dramatic irony in our narrator's tone gestures to the poignant symbolism of American mass culture's trappings having literally trapped their owners. While the absent quale demonstrated by *Zone One*'s zombies seems to be a mélange of other components (mind, cognition, rationality, soul, personal essence of self), this familiar lack points to an ominous void in humanity as a whole, the same wholesale absence of the real explored in *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*.[4]

Whitehead's narrator makes it clear that the presence of the zombies signals a crucial failure in human society (and possibly in the human condition) beyond the literal, recent failure of organized American society. *Zone One*'s zombies reify a lack in their prior, human versions; the fundamental characteristic of that flaw is success in a Social Darwinian paradigm, as Mark Spitz attests:

> the dead had paid their mortgages on time, and placed the well-promoted breakfast cereals on the table when the offspring leaped out of bed in their fire-resistant jammies. The dead had graduated with admirable GPAs, configured monthly contributions to worthy causes, judiciously apportioned

> their 401(k)s across diverse sectors according to the wisdom of their dead licensed financial advisers, and superimposed the borders of the good school districts on mental maps of their neighborhoods, which were often included on the long list when magazines ranked cities with the Best Quality of Life. In short, they had been honed and trained so thoroughly by that extinguished world that they were doomed in this new one. (25)

The zombies that Mark Spitz and his crew clear out of Zone One have become undead because they failed to adapt to the apocalyptic conditions brought about by the zombie plague. After death and reanimation, they lead after-lives remarkably similar to their human existences—as if, like ancient Egyptian pharaohs, they have prepared their eternal households for themselves in anticipation of their own death. Mark Spitz comments sarcastically,

> they were safe in their houses. In front of the televisions, of course, a host of this type biding their time until the electricity came back on, the problem was solved, and the program resumed where it had stopped. All the time in the world. Their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment. (50)

The persistent and possibly fatal trait that the zombies demonstrate—utter reliance on a social system—is also the hallmark of the human faction that is attempting to rebuild society, whose members call themselves "pheenies." If humanity has somehow failed itself, in losing the ability to adapt to new environments, classic Darwinian theory seems proven a valid description of our world. Interestingly, Herbert Spencer's theory of Social Darwinism may have also prefigured our downfall in a different way: the fittest to survive in the social jungle

have so well integrated the strategies and paradigms of that competition that they perish in the new world-order.

When Charles Darwin published *Origin of the Species* in 1859, his work gave a new perspective on the human condition to more than just the scientific community. Cynthia Russett describes Darwinian theory's wide-spread effect in *Darwin in America*: "the *Origin of Species* . . . triggered a tremendously varied inquiry into every aspect of the human condition; learned as well as popular articles explored Darwinism and ethics, Darwinism and politics, Darwinism and religion . . ." (7). In brief, Darwin's idea of human progress through adaptation to the environment seemed to many to reveal the supreme power of the natural world over its human inhabitants. If a species must adapt to its environment in order to survive and prosper, as Darwin posits, then the environment could be said to determine the actions of man. As Cuddy and Roche explain in *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture*, "adaptation to environmental and hereditary forces challenged free will and the efficacy of prayer; scientific determinism supplemented (or even supplanted) God as the reason for all things" (11). Darwinian theory did not work alone to promote scientific determinism; Herbert Spencer gave rise to the term "Social Darwinism," explaining, "social changes take directions that are due to the joint actions of citizens, determined as are those of all other changes wrought by composition of forces" (220). *Zone One* illustrates the extreme consequences of Darwin's and Spencer's theories: by adapting to the social structures that shape contemporary American life, *Zone One*'s population has allowed itself to become a product of circumstance, reduced by its own behavior to an object upon which mass culture acts. This backwards relationship prefigures Whitehead's portrayal of the zombie as a human reduced to the body. Although the mind may be similarly

exercised, in the clear dearth of cognition that is fundamental to the zombie condition, the body retains only what it has "honed and trained" for in life in "that extinguished world," which seems unlikely to ever be rekindled despite the pheenies' best efforts (Whitehead 50).

Though the old world no longer exists, it still applies to the new one, if only to explain the zombies' behavior. And while Whitehead's zombies seem to be operating only in their bodily components, they may be more complicated than the simple equation expressed in H. P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West: Reanimator" (most simply expressed as 'body + soul = human').[5] Mark Spitz imagines human souls trapped in the decaying zombie flesh, a captive audience to the ruin they have collectively wrought:

> the plague stopped the heart, one's essence sloughed off the pathetic human meat and dog-paddled through the ectoplasm or whatever, and then the plague restarted the heart. What kind of cruel deity granted a glimpse of the angelic sphere, only to yank it away and condemn you to a monster's vantage? Sentenced you to observe the world through the sad aperture of the dead, suffer the gross parody of your existence. Outside Zone One, the souls sat trapped in the bleachers, spectators to the travesties committed by their alienated hands. (227)

This may serve as an apt description of Robin Becker's zombie protagonist, Jack Barnes, despite his optimism; although he retains the soul that he soon learns to value so much, the "monster's vantage" that he finds so freeing is merely a "gross parody of [his] existence." (In fact, it's hard to conceive of a zombie noted in this dissertation that would not fit the latter description of zombiehood, with the possible exception of Heinlein's zombies, due to their more abstract metaphoric nature.) Mark Spitz and all of the pheenies are also witnesses

to the post-apocalyptic wasteland that America has become, which most survivors would certainly characterize as a degenerated mocker of the former society; the novel's strongest dramatic irony is borne from Whitehead's ability to portray the pheenies' preference for the former, pre-pandemic world while simultaneously demonstrating the sterility and ultimately foredoomed nature of that culture.

Crawling through New York City, which popular tradition has designated America's most emblematic and cultured metropolis, Mark Spitz's team finds itself "in the same kind of places day after day. Keys for the communal bathrooms down the hall hung on His and Hers hooks in Reception, affixed to broad plastic tongues. . . . and the magazines in the waiting rooms described an exuberant age now remote and hard to reconcile" (10-11). Despite NYC's flagship reputation, the city's landscape recalls the classic Levittown template of the middle-American '50s. *Zone One*'s urban conformity symbolizes that of the culture's intangible structures—one of the earliest memories our narrator foreshadows his later critique by describing a social conformity—a cycle of Stepford wives in the urban Levittown. Recalling an encounter with one of his father's many girlfriends before the zombie plague, our narrator reflects,

> the reunions were terrific and rote, early tutelage in the recursive nature of human experience. "What are you watching?" the girlfriends asked as they padded in bearing boutique seltzer and chips, and he'd say "The buildings," feeling weird about the pull the skyline had on him. He was a mote cycling in the wheels of a giant clock. Millions of people tended to this magnificent contraption, they lived and sweated and toiled in it, serving the mechanism of metropolis and making it bigger, better, story by glorious story and idea by

> unlikely idea. How small he was, tumbling between the teeth. But the girlfriends were talking about the monster movies on TV . . . (4-5)

There is not a singular girlfriend but a paper doll-like string of girlfriends implicated in this multi-layered memory, which is really many memories, overlaying each other, in which many details overlap: the dialogues, the boy's stance and his inner monologue at the window, the girlfriends' snack choices, the type of horror movie on TV in the background of the scene. The déjà-vu-inducing repetition may have scarred the man that the boy would become, even before the apocalypse. In his adulthood, he recounts, he

> had a habit of making his girlfriend into things that were less than human. There was always a point, sooner or later, when they crossed a line and became creatures . . . Once it was only a look, a transit of anxiety across her eyes in which he glimpsed some irremediable flaw or future betrayal. And like that, the person he had fallen in love with was gone. They had been replaced by this familiar abomination, this thing that shared the same face, same voice, same familiar mannerisms that had once comforted him. To anyone else, the simulation was perfect. If he tried to make his case, as in his horror movies, the world would indulge his theory, even participate in a reasonable-sounding test, one that would not succeed in convincing them. But he would know. He knew where they failed in their humanity. . . . He suffered no appeal. There was no way they could convince him they were human. (194)

While these metamorphic moments are certainly tied to the girlfriends' dissatisfaction with him (see the list of examples I've omitted from this quotation), the fatal flaw that they betray is the girlfriends' common lack of individuality. Like his father's girlfriends, briefly but

periodically glimpsed throughout his childhood, Mark Spitz's companions are iterations of pop culture templates rather than individualized, unique beings. Upon this realization, he recalls, he would leave. It is telling that he replays these thoughts (in the latter quote above) while hauling a corpse in the wasteland zone outside NYC, "when he realized that the voice admonishing him to ditch the survivors he'd hooked up with, warning him away from others, was an echo of his relationship-snuffing voice. They are lost, they are the dead, it's time to leave" (195). And since Mark Spitz is indeed one of the very few who make it through the wasteland to any kind of relative safety, it seems the trait that had served him so ill pre-apocalypse has subsequently enabled him to survive past its first wave.

When Mark Spitz gazes at the same city skyline he marveled at as a boy, he interprets the window dressings, which "were open, half open, shut" as "voids in a punch card decipherable only by defunct mainframes lodged in the crust of unmarked landfills" (5). This first mention prefigures a recurrent theme in the novel, a void located inside humanity—or, at least, inside most humans, presumably those who have or will become zombies. The void results from adherence to a prescribed social formula, a life-long "checklist" of templates for winning friends and influencing people. In his own former life, our narrator

> never had trouble with the American checklist, having successfully executed all the hurdles of his life's stages, from preschool to junior high to college, with unwavering competence and nary a wobble into exceptionality or failure. He possessed a strange facility for the mandatory. Two days into kindergarten, for example, he attained the level of socialization deemed appropriate for those of his age and socioeconomic milieu (sharing, no biting, an almost soulful contemplation of instructions from people in authority) with a

> minimum of fuss. He nailed milestone after developmental milestone, as if every twitch were coached. Had they been aware of his location, child behaviorists would have cherished him, observing him through binoculars and scratching their ledgers as he confirmed their data and theories in his anonymous travails. He was their *typical*, he was their *most*, he was their *average*, receiving hearty thumbs-ups from the gents in the black van parked a discreet distance across the street. In this world, however, his reward was that void attending most human endeavor, with which all are well acquainted. (original emphasis, 9)

While it is ambiguous in the final sentence whether he means the past world or the apocalyptic setting that dominates the novel, it seems a moot point: all people are familiar with "that void attending most human endeavor," which appears to include endeavors both past and present—and, the novel as a whole suggests, the future as well. Perhaps Mark Spitz perceives the void in his girlfriends as they betray their mutual disappointment with him; couplehood is, as we all know, an extremely well-mapped territory, simulated and guided by everything from relationship manuals to various incarnations and illustrated abridgments of the *Kama Sutra*. It is possible that when Mark Spitz realizes that he and his girlfriend are following a checklist, he decides to check out. By his own admission, he is quite facile with "the American checklist" of life-events (recalling the colorful plastic signposts of the popular board game *Life*), but he doesn't seem to have incorporated them into his being to the same extent as those paper doll types who now constitute the undead. It is an automatic skill on which he relies during the last 'modern era (or 'post- or 'post-postmodern') but not one he can't shake off when society crumbles around him and he must flee through the zombie-

ridden wreckage. The zombies, at least in Mark Spitz's estimation, are concretizations of the voids that had always lain at the centers of their very human existences in life.

Robin Becker and Colson Whitehead likely share the same critical references, most notably Umberto Eco's "Travels in Hyperreality" and Jean Baudrillard's "The Precession of Simulacra." As Jack Barnes so thoroughly demonstrates, Becker's pre-apocalypse and present-day population has been eager witness to a long procession of pop culture simulacra. Similarly, Whitehead's protagonist wonders how many members of his society have been indoctrinated by that enervating glow [of the TV]. Infected by reruns." Speaking of a TV sitcom "about the high jinks of Margaret Halstead and her colorful roommates," he admits that he had "been hypnotized by the show himself, nestled inside the eighteen-to-thirty-four age demographic whose underdeveloped cultural immune systems rendered them susceptible to the series' shenanigans. The acquisitive debit-card swipers and the easily swayed. The obedient" (58-9). Many young and impressionable girls, Margaret Halstead simulations, moved to New York City as if in a game of pop culture follow-the-leader (58), a straightforward example of the precession of simulacra that Baudrillard describes. Presumably unprotected by a "cultural immune system," pheenie teammate Gary continues to imitate pop culture icons even in the absence of their media vehicles: "Gary had started employing the vocab of the polyglot city, as it had been transmitted through popular culture: the eponymous sitcoms of Jewish comedians; the pay-cable Dominican gangster show; the rat-a-tat verses of totemic hip-hop singles." Notice the careful distinction between an authentic urban vocabulary and the simulacra delivered by the once-regularly-scheduled programming. Unfortunately, something vital is lost in the replication. Gary "didn't always get the meaning right, but he had the delivery down, the correct intonations reinforced by

countless exposures" (22). Like the zombies that still stumble through *Zone One*, Gary goes through the motions of familiar patterns without comprehending the content, an ominous foreshadowing of his future. Baudrillard might term that replication "the real," which disappears even as its imitators attempt to duplicate it. Eco might point out that the simulacra become so completely convincing that one does not have to access the absent real, so the simulacra usurp the place of the real. In "Travels in Hyperreality" Eco writes,

> to speak of things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. The "completely real" becomes identified with the "completely fake." Absolute unreality is offered as real presence." The desire of the simulacrum "is to supply a 'sign' [of its real referent] that will then be forgotten as such: The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. (7)

Becker's zombie protagonist certainly buys into this cover-up, believing himself to be effecting authentic reality while merely affecting popular culture. It's tempting to project the same self-delusion to the Margaret Halsteads of Whitehead's social stratosphere.

A revealing portent of humankind's future, or lack thereof, is the persistence of pop culture icons in the apocalyptic landscape, albeit new icons for a more desolate and consequently nostalgic society. A cartoon armadillo brands a plethora of apocalyptic products, as elaborate as bygone cartoon celebrities: "the creation myth of the product line concerned the adventures of a clever, effeminate armadillo and his cohort of resourceful desert critters. Although the parent company was one of reconstruction's first official sponsors, until now Buffalo had found little use for their tie-in merchandise, apart from the well-branded adhesive bandages" (Whitehead 31). Alarmingly and yet inevitably, America's

apocalypse has "official sponsors," who manufacture "tie-in merchandise" for their various and competing brands (or recycle it—a significant and familiar strategy). A reconstruction-effort product-line icon, the armadillo is literally a reconstruction of past media icons for a new landscape: armored to the hilt and adapted to the bleak, desert landscape of the new-order wasteland, the armadillo serves as a more attractive character than, for instance, a cartoon rabbit who cannot lay his paws on his own brand of cereal.

The comparison evokes a possible predecessor for the apocalypse armadillo, Uncle Remus's infamous Brer Rabbit. Like Remus's rabbit, the armadillo persists in an actively hostile environment. Brer Rabbit outsmarts his powerful and persistent enemies by innovating novel strategies to evade them and even thrive. If the armadillo could emulate the rabbit's ever-evolving wit, which allows the Southern folk-hero to stay ahead of the others "in any racket that's on-hand," the newly created desert hero may actually be a promising figurehead for the remnants of humanity.

Other indications of humankind's survival are bleaker. As the phrase "reconstruction" signifies, the administrators of the new order are attempting to revive the former world. At times, the new New York City appears indistinguishable from the old, "expanses of formaldehyded territory" (65). Like its present zombie hoards, dead bodies who would traditionally be embalmed with formaldehyde, New York is unlikely to fully return to life, to "reboot" (35). But the reconstructionists are blind to that tragic flaw in their reanimation plan. When Mark Spitz remembers his last sight of his childhood home, which he fled during the first night of the local chaos, he says that

> it, too, had looked normal from the outside, in that new meaning of normal that signified resemblance to the time before the flood. Normal meant "the

> past." Normal was the unbroken idyll of life before. The present was a series of intervals differentiated from each other only by the degree of dread they contained. The future? The future was clay in their hands. (65)

Or so the pheenies imagine. As their name suggests, the pheenies hope to resurrect society anew from its own ashes, the fabled trick of the mythological phoenix. Mark Spitz characterizes this as a mistake, a false optimism that nearly gets him killed on his clean-up operations in Zone One. "The mistake lay in succumbing to the prevailing delusions. Giving in to that pandemic of pheenie optimism that was inescapable nowadays and made it hard to breathe, a contagion in its own right" (13). The pheenies' hubristic slogan proclaims "We Make Tomorrow!" (24), but in fact they only continue their "servitude to the obsolete directives of an obsolete world" (32). Like the early American pilgrims naming the new world such recycled-but-barely-updated appellations as "New England" and "New York," the pheenie civilization borrows its proper nouns from the prior incarnation of their society; the label "Zone One" temporarily designates New York City, but its new corporate sponsors intend to repurpose the latter name. As quoted above, NYC's "addresses remained the same and so did the flawed philosophies" (6). Modeled after the American military-industrial complex, the pheenie commanders basically declare martial law in the wasteland, falling back on "pre-plague regulations" (23). And as the reconstruction is also directed and funded by corporate sponsorship, it seems that the corporate world and the military machinery have finally merged.[6] The major problem with this is that those paradigms prevent the sort of innovation the human race needs to adapt to its new circumstances. The new human civilization is doomed to fail because it relies on "the signs and systems of straight life" in its dead iteration, which will inevitably lead it straight into the same apocalyptic fate.

All of these signposts indicate that the vital lack revealed in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* is the very future of humanity. At an atomic level, the novel's zombies demonstrate a collective lack of consciousness, cognition, and individual personality. At a global level, Whitehead's zombies indicate a crucial absence of the real in our current human hyperreality— to combine Baudrillard and Eco's terms—as in Becker's *Brains*, but *Zone One* extrapolates from that absence the death-knell of humanity as a species; the stubborn persistence of outdated paradigms will be the demise of mankind. "Now the world was muck," Mark Spitz philosophizes, "but systems die hard—they outlive their creators and unlike plagues do not require individual hosts—and thus it was a well-organized muck with a hierarchy, accountability, and, increasingly, paperwork" (162). This description echoes his portrayal of the "American checklist" that formatted the dead world (25). Those systems are visibly still potent, while the humanity that created them dissolves into waste debris. A pheenie entertainment appropriate to the cultural decay the novel describes rebrands the old game "Name That Tune," provides our narrator with a bleak presentiment for humanity's recovery and regeneration. "I can Name That Bloodstain!" Mark Spitz reflects, "in five seconds: It looks like the future," a pronouncement that serves equally well as a summary of the novel's moral and as an apt eulogy for a zombiefied culture (215).

Notes to Chapter Five

1. Whitehead quotes these two lines as the epigraph to the novel's Saturday section (105). They open the second stanza of Ezra Pound's poem "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (Pound 186).

2. I will use both first and surname to refer to Whitehead's protagonist, because it is useful for this discussion to remember that "Mark Spitz" is not the protagonist's given name but a sort of rechristening by fellow survivors, an appellation significantly referencing a cultural stereotype; see *Zone One* pages 21 and 147-8.

3. It's interesting to think of the relationship between a computer's hard and software, in terms of each component's relative vulnerability, as the reciprocal equation of a living human being; while a biological virus affects only the 'hardware casing,' the body, but leaves the 'software' fundamentally intact—leaving aside for the moment the relatively small percentage of cases such as neurological diseases with material causes—a 'digital virus' can only harm a computer's software. Mark Spitz's metaphoric contrast between humans and computers implies the similar paradigm of contrast between living beings and objects. Thus, when the zombie virus in Whitehead's novel affects what Mark Spitz calls "the data of the self," the person takes on properties of an object (in this metaphor, a computer).

4. See the previous chapter of this dissertation, "The Real in Robin Becker's *Brains: A Zombie Memoir.*"

5. See chapter one of this dissertation, "The Soul in H. P. Lovecraft's 'Herbert West: Reanimator.'"

6. See pages 37-8 of *Zone One* for a more elaborate description of the corporatization of the new world.

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Dissertation Director: Dr. Joseph Andriano
Pages in Dissertation: 144; Words in Abstract: 306

ABSTRACT

On a metaphoric level, the zombie is an extremely malleable and dynamic figure because it can act as a template for exploring the hazy definitions of humanity. The trope of the zombie I trace in this dissertation is the performance of an absence: the zombie as fragmented and incomplete human. I examine examples of the zombie in American literature across the last century that reify the absence of something crucial in the ontological makeup of a complete human, a component I term 'the absent quale.' In the first two chapters, I establish the trope of the zombie as a figure that lacks a particular quale essential to humanity. Chapter One examines H. P. Lovecraft's zombies in "Herbert West: Reanimator" (1921-22) in the context of scientific materialism, which denies the existence of the soul. By 1959, when Robert Heinlein wrote his time travel classic "All You Zombies—," the figure of the zombie as an embodied absence was so established in popular culture that Heinlein's narrator uses the word "zombies" as a metaphor; Chapter Two reads the figurative zombie as a characterization of the fragmented along the temporal dimension. In Chapter Three, I consider Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg's "The Song the Zombie Sang" (1970) alongside Walter Benjamin's influential essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," using the latter's concept of the aura to denote a sort of material analogue to the human soul. I argue in Chapter Four that the bricolage of popular culture motifs that

Robin Becker's zombie rehearses throughout *Brains: A Zombie Memoir* (2010) enacts the postmodern estrangement from an authentic dimension of being. Expanding on this theme, Chapter Five explores the ways in which popular culture dictates reality for the living and the undead members of the pre- and post-apocalyptic American society Colson Whitehead describes in *Zone One* (2011).

Biographical Sketch

A scholar of American literature, Tracy Stone's primary field of study is fantastic fiction. Her recent essay, "Practical Identity in Old Possum's Book: How T. S. Eliot's Cats Dare Disturb the Universe," can be found in the third issue of *Margins: A Journal of Literature and Culture*.