

Alternative Afterlives

Secular Expeditions to the Undiscovered Country

by
Jaco Hennig Adriaanse

*Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master
of Arts in English Studies at the University of Stellenbosch*



Supervisor: Dr. Louise Green
Co-supervisor: Dr. Mathilda Slabbert
Faculty of Arts
Department of English Studies

March 2012

Declaration

By submitting this thesis/dissertation electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

March 2012

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

"

Eqr { tki j vÍ "4234"Ugmgpdquej "Wpkxgtuk{

Cm'tki j w'tgugtxgf "

Abstract

This thesis investigates texts which are argued to construct secular imaginings of the afterlife. As such my argument is built around the way in which these texts engage with death, while simultaneously engaging with the religious concepts which have come to give shape to the afterlife in an increasingly secular West. The texts included are: *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven* (1907), Mark Twain's unfinished reimagining of Christian salvation; *Kneller's Happy Campers* (1998) by Etgar Keret, its filmic adaptation *Wristcutters: A Love Story* (2006), as well as the Norwegian film *A Bothered Man* (2006), which all strip the afterlife of its traditional furnishings; Philip Pullman's acclaimed *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995, 1997, 2000) in which he wages a fictional war with the foundations of Western religious tradition; and finally William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Feersum Endjinn* (1994) by Iain M. Banks, two science fiction texts which speculate on the afterlife of the future.

These texts are so chosen and arranged to create a logical progression of secular projects, each subsequent afterlife reflecting a more extensive and substantial distanciation from religious tradition. Twain's text utilises a secularising satire of heaven, and draws attention to the irrational notions which pervade this concept. In the process, however, it embarks on the utopian endeavour of reconstructing and improving the Christian afterlife of salvation. In Chapter 3, the narratives under investigation discard the surface details of religious afterlives, and reimagine the hereafter against a contemporary backdrop. I argue that they conform, in several significant ways, to the mode of magical realism. Furthermore, despite their disinclination for evident religiosity, these texts nevertheless find problematic encounters when they break this mode and invoke higher authorities to intervene in the unfolding narratives. Chapter 4 focuses on Philip Pullman's high fantasy trilogy, which enacts open war between the secular and religious and uses the afterlife as an integral part of the secularising agenda. With the literal battle lines drawn, this text depicts a clear distinction between what is included as secular, or renounced as religious. Finally, I turn to science fiction, where the notion of the virtual afterlife of the future has come to be depicted, with its foundations in human technologies instead of divine agencies. They rely on the ideology of posthumanism in a reimagining of the afterlife which constitutes a new apocalyptic tradition, a virtual kingdom of heaven populated by the virtual dead.

Ultimately, I identify three broad, delineating aspects of secularity which become evident in these narratives and the meaningful distinctions they draw between religious and secular ideologies. I find further significance in the way in which these texts engage with the very foundations on which fictions of the afterlife have been constructed. Throughout these texts, I then find a secular approach to death as a developing alternative to that which has traditionally been propagated by religion.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek tekste wat alternatiewe uitbeeldings van die hiernamaals bevat, wat dan geargumenteer word dien as voorbeelde van sekulêre konsepsies van die nadoodse toestand. My argument berus op die manier waarop hierdie tekste met die dood omgaan, asook die verskeie maniere waarop hul tot die religieë van die Westerse wêreld spreek. Die tekste wat ondersoek word sluit in: Mark Twain se *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven* (1907), sy onvoltooide satire van die Christelike hemel; *Kneller's Happy Campers* deur Etgar Keret (1998), die verfilmde weergawe daarvan, *Wristcutters: A Love Story* (2006), asook die Noorweegse film *A Botheresome Man* (2006), waarin die hiernamaals uitgebeeld word as 'n leweloze weergawe van kontemporêre samelewing; Philip Pullman se fantasie trilogie *His Dark Materials* (1995, 1998, 2000) waarin hy 'n sekulêre oorlog teen die onderdrukkende magte van religie uitbeeld; en laastens die wetenskap-fiksie verhale *Neuromancer* (1984), deur William Gibson, en *Feersum Endjinn* (1994), deur Iain M. Banks, waarin die sekulêre, virtuele hiernamaals van die toekoms vervat word.

Hierdie tekste is gekies en ook so gerangskik om 'n duidelike sekulêre progressie te toon, met elke opeenvolgende teks wat in 'n meer omvattende wyse die tradisioneel religieuse konvensies herdink of vervang met sekulêre alternatiewe. Twain se teks dryf die spot met die Christelike idee van die hemel en om aandag te trek na die irrasionele ideologieë wat daarin vervat is. In die proses poog Twain egter om te verbeter op die model en gevolglik ondervind die teks probleme wat met die utopiese literatuur gepaard gaan. In hoofstuk 3 word die hiernamaals gestroop van alle ooglopend religieuse verwysings en vervang met die ewigheid as 'n kontemporêre landskap deurtrek met morbiede leweloosheid. Ek argumenteer dat hulle op verskeie belangrike manier ooreenstem met die genre van magiese realisme en dat, ten spyte van die pogings om religie te vermy, die tekste steeds probleme teëkom wanneer hoër outoriteite by die verhale betrokke raak. Hoofstuk 4 draai om Pullman se sekulêre oorlog wat daarop gemik is om die wêreld te sekulariseer. Die duidelikheid waarmee die tekste onderskeid tref tussen die magte van religie en die weerstand vanaf sekulariteit, maak dit insiggewend om te bepaal wat Pullman in 'n sekulêre wêreldbeeld in-of uitsluit. Laastens ondersoek ek wetenskap-fiksie, waarin die hiernamaals

omskep is in 'n toestand wat bereik word deur menslike tegnologiese vooruitgang, in stede van religieuse toedoen. Hier word daar gesteun op die idees van posthumanisme, wat beteken dat hierdie uitbeeldings van die ewigheid 'n oorspronklike verwerking van religieuse apokaliptiese verhale is, waar 'n virtuele hemelse koninkryk geskep word vir die virtuele afgestorwenes.

Uiteindelik identifiseer ek drie breë ideologiese trekke wat deurgaans in al die tekste opduik, en waarvolgens betekenisvolle onderskeid getref kan word om definisie te gee aan die begrip van sekulariteit. Verder vind ek dat die sekulêre hiernamaals in 'n unieke wyse met die dood omgaan, en dat dit 'n alternatiewe uitkyk gee op die fondasies waarop verhale van die hiernamaals oorspronklik geskep is. Derhalwe argumenteer ek dat 'n sekulêre wêreldbeeld 'n alternatiewe uitkyk op die dood ontwikkel, een wat die tradisies van religie terselfdertyd inkorporeer en verwerp.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are owed to my supervisor Dr. Louise Green and co-supervisor Dr. Mathilda Slabbert for their kind and insightful assistance throughout the process of turning vague ideas and a slapdash approach into anything resembling a thesis. They countered my growing desperation with calm lucidity, and their unwavering help in the face of a deadline which often and ominously threatened to overtake me, has been greatly appreciated.

Additional gratitude is owed to Catherine, a close friend and snappy dresser who has been slipping me sage wisdom on the intricacies of the task at hand.

I owe much to the department in which I found myself for the past two years, for saving me from the cold embrace of the law degree I nearly sold myself to. But mostly I am forever indebted to them for showing me that there exists a profession which pays one to read and write interesting things about literature and life. And death.

Finally, then, my most sincere gratitude and appreciation goes to those near and dear to me, who continue to treat me with undeserved affection.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	9
Chapter 2: Captain Stormfield Satirises Heaven	22
Chapter 3: When Higher Authorities Intervene	46
Chapter 4: His Dark Materials and the War on God	68
Chapter 5: The Secular Afterlife of the Future	92
Chapter 6: Conclusion	115
Works Cited	124

Chapter 1

Introduction

“The inescapable conclusion is that cultural theory must start thinking ambitiously once again – not so that it can hand the West its legitimation, but so that it can seek to make sense of the grand narratives in which it is now embroiled.”

(Eagleton 73)

“He who pretends to look on death without fear lies. All men are afraid of dying, this is the great law of sentient beings, without which the entire human species would soon be destroyed.”

(Rousseau 22)

As Jean-Jacques Rousseau maintains, the fear, and accompanying uncertainty, of death, is a concern which must by necessity be contemplated by every sentient being somewhere throughout life, no matter how briefly or unenthusiastically. This contemplation presumably led, at some early stage in human pre-history, to the construction of narratives of the unknowable post mortem experience, often designed to assist in placating the fear Rousseau speaks of. These narratives, in time, were assimilated into greater institutions of religion and spirituality, institutions whose existences are firmly dependant on those fictions. But at the same time, religion has come to be regarded by some as an inefficient and questionable institution, prompting the necessity for alternative ideologies. This left those sceptics with the prevailing fear of death and the need to create alternative narratives to placate it. In light of this broad and brief overview, this thesis then proposes to lodge an investigation into how the non-religious, or secularly disposed, engage with death, and how those inevitably faced with the defining condition of mortality try to address it through fiction. More specifically, this thesis will investigate how there has emerged within the western secular tradition a small number of narratives of the afterlife which run, in several revealing ways, counter to those advanced by the religious.

As it is, I have found and selected a substantial and respectable corpus of texts on which to focus my analysis, and they cover a wide, though certainly not exhaustive, range of approaches to secularisation, all of these in some central way situated in the post mortem condition. The afterlife being a truly unknowable concern, it is unsurprising that all of the texts fall within the larger genre of speculative fiction, mostly due to the subject matter being set outside of the boundaries of conventional, lived reality. The texts included are: *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven* (1907)¹, Mark Twain's unfinished reimagining of Christian salvation; *Kneller's Happy Campers* (1998) by Etgar Keret, its filmic adaptation *Wristcutters: A Love Story* (2006), as well as the Norwegian film *A Bothered Man* (2006), which all strip the afterlife of its traditional furnishings; Philip Pullman's acclaimed *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995, 1997, 2000) in which he wages a fictional war with the foundations of Western religious tradition; and finally William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Feersum Endjinn* (1994) by Iain M. Banks, two science fiction texts which speculate on the afterlife of the future.

Yet it is necessary to explain that the first and fundamental assumption of this thesis, is that despite humanity's concerted efforts, religious, scientific or philosophical, death remains its unifying uncertainty. As a species we have never seen clearly beyond the grave. Any individual or organization which claims unique insight into this (possible) phenomenon is treated with suspicion, if not outright incredulity. The stupendous volume of speculation and experimentation on the subject notwithstanding, no definitive answer has been advanced with sufficient evidence to substantiate it. Perhaps it is exactly the nature of the end of life that it remains indefinable to those still within life's embrace. The religious and spiritual speak of further dimensions of existence, conventionally fantastical in their perfection or horror, to which some semblance of the self is transported. They have no evidence for this, but entitle themselves to need none, mostly relying on texts of ancient and apparently divine origins.² Those of a less spiritual inclination proclaim it to be an absolute end, a void of the self which accompanies the natural decomposition of the flesh. Though all perceivable evidence seems to point to this second possible outcome, a part of the self rails at the idea of returning to nothingness. As Terry

¹ The intricacies of its publication history are explained in Chapter 2.

² A fictional religion, "Bokononism", created by Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963) offers an interesting alternative. Bokononism is built around a set of "foma" which are the "harmless untruths" which lie at its centre. Adherents believe that all religions and their texts, The Book of Bokonon included, are lies, but that choosing good lies can at least yield useful results.

Eagleton explains; “[n]othing more graphically illustrates how unnecessary we are than our mortality” (Eagleton 210). Understandably then, it is difficult to let go of consciousness. It remains a daunting problem to ponder, which brings me to the opening quote by Eagleton, in that this thesis proposes to investigate one of the oldest lingering grand narratives of human life: its end.

For better or worse, this end has sparked the creation and propagation of several beliefs about the afterlife. The institutions of the religious have historically assumed the title of indisputable expert on the subject. It appears fundamental to the nature of religion that it lays claim to the conceptual ownership of the hereafter. This hinges, in no small way, on its need to be regarded by its enthusiasts as the last say in the matter. Religions must assume and advocate their own unshakeable purchase on the afterlife, for it is difficult to entrust the immortal soul, if such a thing exists, to an institution which admits uncertainty about its ultimate fate. As a result a certain amount of rigidity has been ingrained into the major religious organizations of the world, a rigidity which has certainly been instrumental in the turbulent histories of these organizations. Yet historical weight and age-old advocacy does not necessarily translate to accuracy, as the passage of time has so often proven. Instead they usually mean an imbalance, manifested here as a conceptual monopoly on the afterlife. The afterlife has become steeped in religious and spiritual tradition, with few attempts being made to conceive of it in secular terms. Furthermore the narratives advanced by these institutions, often violently, about a diverse plethora of heavens, hells and everything in between, often chalked up to divine authority and incontrovertibility, have failed to convince universally despite literally thousands of years of active promulgation. As Daniel Dennett explains,³ “[w]hichever religion is yours, there are more people in the world who don’t share it than who do, and it falls to you – to all of us, really – to explain why so many have gotten it wrong, and to explain how those who know (if there are any) have managed to get it right” (Dennett 92).

So until this happens, or more proof is found, these religious narratives must be regarded as fictions, with no more claim to accuracy than any others we can conceive of. Nevertheless, these fictions have held conceptual dominance for quite some time, and have massively influenced perspectives on death. This thesis must, however, assume that one guess is as good as another,

³ Daniel Dennet. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon*. 2006.

and will therefore investigate some advanced by secularism. As Derrida states about the general strategy for deconstruction; “[i]n a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms [read also “concepts”] but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (Derrida cited in Culler 85). Though not strictly speaking a deconstruction, this thesis still aims to diminish this hierarchy which places religious thought superior to the secular in light of its questionable foundations, and to investigate certain alternative concepts which have not received their due attention.

The afterlife then remains a wholly speculative landscape, truly the undiscovered country, imagined and shaped from a multitude of doctrines, beliefs and theories. Imaginatively it has become an amorphous conglomeration of opinions, guesswork, and most importantly, fiction, often treated with extreme seriousness and subjectivity. As fictions go, those of the afterlife, intimately entwined with religion as they are, have been taken with an unprecedented amount of earnestness. So it is perhaps necessary here to explain why I direct this investigation at works of creative literature and film, seeing as it seems more a dialogue for a serious philosophical discussion. It is exactly the imaginative nature of the afterlife which makes imaginative depictions thereof significant, in that they offer elaborate conceptualisations of this conceptual possibility. Should the afterlife be imaginable, it only makes sense to closely consider significant attempts to imagine it. Narratives with essentially human agents, who populate and inhabit alternative afterlives, reveal the possibilities and pitfalls of post mortem continuation, and how attempts have been made to conceptualise it in a secular framework.

In his work *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell and Purgatory* (2009), John Casey assumes the role of a scholarly Virgil, guiding readers through the long history of the ways in which religious thought and thinkers have constructed the afterlife.⁴ In it he states that “[b]elief in the afterlife may go back as far as we have knowledge of human beings”, pointing to archaeological evidence from prehistory which illustrates the preparations made for the end of life (Casey 13). The focus of his book stretches then from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, through ancient Rome and

⁴ As such his book will be referred to again throughout the thesis, to assist in identifying religious nuances which reappear in the secular endeavours.

Greece and the origins and evolution of the Abrahamic religions, right on to the birth of Spiritualism, among a multitude of intermediate nuances. It is a thorough and useful account of the hereafter as it has been imagined for millennia by an diverse accumulation of spiritual approaches, and in this strange conglomeration Casey discovers that “it is impossible to find, by philosophical reflection, a common thread in all the ideas that human beings have entertained about the afterlife” (Casey 14). The only correlation he finds is that the origins of notions of the afterlife could perhaps be found in the dual concerns of the fear of death (and the dead), and the desire for retribution of earthly wrongs in the hereafter. Though he is hesitant to claim that these are the only origins, he does appear to venture that conceptions of the afterlife “derive from fear of extinction; or alternatively from a hope that a future world might compensate for the evils of this one” (Casey 14). This is an important point, and as the clearest foundations of the afterlife I will by necessity return to them throughout the thesis, to explain how they are addressed by these alternative afterlives. If these are (some of) the reasons for the creation of fictions of the afterlife, it is imperative to determine in what way a secular reimagining engages with these concerns. As I have posited, the fear of death has not been hitherto sufficiently allayed, and earthly evils still go largely unpunished, so there is significance in discovering how the secular narratives partake in the discourse.

With dissatisfaction for the religiously informed narratives of death, David Martin, in his *On Secularization*⁵ feels that “[i]t is time now finally to jettison these theological residues and to enter a stage of realism, facing the reality of our true status as animals who are not going anywhere” (126). This possibly forms the foundation for an entirely different attitude regarding the uncertainty of mortal finitude. As Terry Eagleton states; “to accept death would be to live more abundantly. By acknowledging that our lives are provisional, we can slacken our neurotic grip on them and thus come to relish them all the more” (210). In the secularizing endeavour under investigation, exactly this acceptance of death is propagated through various narrative methods. Interestingly, they all do away with the strict binary which has hitherto been the stock in trade of the afterlife, that of eternal reward or punishment. Some of them consider the afterlife without any of solemnity it can come to have in religious terms, while others ironically utilise the afterlife in ways which subvert its existence. Furthermore, throughout all of the texts included,

⁵ David Martin. *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*. (2005).

the theological residues Martin speaks of are being reappropriated along more secular avenues, creating alternative afterlives which question, contradict and reinvent it in an attempt to address death without traditional prescriptions.

To look then for secular conceptions of the afterlife, I must invoke the discourse which surrounds secularity. And the discourse is still very much under construction. As has been continually argued and contested for the largest part of five decades, there has been an increasing secularization of (broadly speaking) global Western culture. The strange flipside of this situation is that there has also been a marked increase of religiosity in the same broad sphere, both in public and private space. Commenting on this “current renaissance,” Daniel Weidner explains that religion, which had “quite disappeared from the academic agenda” since some time in the 1960s, is undergoing an interdisciplinary revival, perhaps at its most apparent in cultural studies (133). In an article which discusses this seemingly contradictory situation,⁶ Simon Glendinning states that “many *non-believers* today are increasingly anxious about what the future might hold when it becomes clear that (whether temporarily or permanently they do not know) religious belief really is not going away, or even seems somehow to have revived. And, with the same misleading idea in place, many *believers* are increasingly anxious about what the future might hold when it becomes clear that (whether temporarily or permanently they do not know) the default position for understanding the world and the significance of our lives is *not* going to be religious” (421, original emphasis). It becomes clear then that the so-called secularization of the West is no clear matter, and that the very notion of what it means to be secular is still undetermined. “The secular character of Western societies is showing itself to be surprisingly unstable, destabilizable, and finite”, thus requiring further investigation to find out what is meant by secularity and what secularization can come to entail (Glendinning 410).

The work of Michael W. Kaufmann proves invaluable in understanding the interesting phenomena of secularization and religious revivalism. In his article “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession” (2007), he explains that the religious and the secular are inextricably entwined and that to consider the one is to consider the other. He utilises two foundational sets of assertions which aid

⁶ Simon Glendinning. “Japheth’s World: The Rise of Secularism and the Revival of Religion Today”. (2009).

him to uncover how secularity, and by the same token, religiosity, can be constructed, specifically in the sphere of literary studies:

(IA) There is no idea, person, experience, text, institution, or historical period that could be categorized as essentially, inherently, or exclusively secular or religious; (IB) Despite this first claim, we nevertheless act as if there is a meaningful difference between the secular and the religious; (IIA) Following the claims of (I), varying discursive contexts construct functionally meaningful differences between the two terms with differing motivations and consequences; what counts as “religious” at one time and place may count as “secular” in another; (IIB) Not only does the context help to define the two terms, but the difference between the two terms also helps to establish acceptable boundaries of a given discursive context. (Kaufmann 608)

These assertions then entail that on the one hand it is impossible to investigate the secular without investigating the religious, that as a binary opposition each concept relies on the existence of the companion term, “because each term is meaningless in isolation” (Kaufmann 610). As Martin also confirms, “[t]he frames which govern our understanding of secularization are the frames which govern our understanding of religion” (127). On the other hand, though the distinction between these terms is ambiguous and fluid at best, “that the meaning of each term changes as the relationship *between* them shifts”, it is nevertheless useful to investigate and advance distinctions which can hold meaning within certain discursive contexts (Kaufmann 610, original emphasis). As Tracy Fessenden emphasises in support of Kaufmann’s article, it is important to investigate secularism to discover how, “far from being universal and disinterested, it picks up certain strands and conspicuously drops others from the religions it aims to emancipate or displace. The usefulness of speaking of secularism in the singular may come to seem limited, in the same way that speaking of the religious in the singular only gets us so far” (634). Kaufmann’s assertions, and Fessenden’s reiteration, that secularity and religiosity are not fixed or separable, has important implications for this thesis. Chief among these is that it essentially informs my line of investigation and determines the way in which I will read the texts. As Kaufmann asks, “if you cannot definitively differentiate the secular from the religious to begin with, how can you tell when one has replaced or disguised the other?” (Kaufmann 610).

In light of Kaufmann's question, this thesis will determine how these notions are constructed throughout these narratives of the alternative afterlife, and what these constructions reveal about the ideological boundaries of the discourse. I thus rely on his second set of assertions; that investigating the various distinctions that have been advanced can form a useful point of departure in the complicated process of determining the secular as well as the religious. The aim is then to identify the distinguishing characteristics advanced by these texts, which allow insight into the formation of a secular counterpoint for religiosity, not only a secular view of the afterlife, but also secularist delineations of secularity. Importantly, I find these distinctions in depictions of the afterlife, due to the importance it has for religiosity and for humanity in general. As an ideological lynchpin, death is an important concern to address. It is fundamental to religion, but by no means their sole mandate, and has an equally fundamental role to all those who are mortal and conscious of it. These narratives of secular afterlives then effectively become alternative arguments on how death is to be considered, and how distinctions which are meaningful for the discourse between religion and secularity are entrenched throughout these narratives.

But despite the still porous and nebulous distinction, I need working definitions of religiosity and secularity, and find a sufficiently broad yet meaningful template for the former in the work of Wouter J. Hanegraaff.⁷ He defines religion as “any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning” (Hanegraaff 295). Religion then offers a context for an engagement with an ideological system concerned with things of a higher order and therefore not entirely of this time or this place. Secularity, on the other hand, has as foundation the Latin “saecularis”, which denotes belonging to an age or generation. As originally coined and advanced by George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh, “[s]ecular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience in this life” (Bradlaugh 74). Tom Flynn of the Council for Secular Humanism proposes the following definition of this ideological system: “Secular humanism emerges, then, as a comprehensive nonreligious life stance that incorporates a naturalistic philosophy, a cosmic

⁷ Wouter J. Hanegraaff. “New Age Religion and Secularization”. (2000).

outlook rooted in science, and a consequentialist ethical system” (Flynn n.p.). The notion of secularity and the ideology of secular humanism are thus rooted in temporality and corporeality, and the tenets of naturalistic philosophy. The secular, it seems, is more concerned with the human condition as one which belongs solely in a worldly setting, not one which must achieve dubious transcendence.⁸ Flynn’s explanations of secular humanism as an ideological system and ethical model are important, and I will return to him in the concluding chapter. For now, however, due to the fluctuating nature of the religious symbolic system, secularity engages with it in different capacities and to different effect. These interdependent definitions will then have to suffice for an investigation on further defining their interdependence.

Ironically, the act of selecting texts for inclusion, based as the choices are on depictions of a secular afterlife, entails that I too make certain assumptions about what exactly accounts for secularity. It would appear that I find myself in the troubling chicken/egg situation in which it is unclear whether the choice of texts or the specific merits of and arguments about each actually form the foundation for a secular investigation. To this I must point out that each chapter will specifically explain why each text is chosen and initially considered as a variation on secularity and its afterlife, before moving on to question what that assumed secularity entails. In general, though, none of them conform to any specific religious depiction of the afterlife, and when conventional tropes or concepts are utilised, it is done in an interesting and often discursively significant manner. If religious notions surface, they do so in unique conceptual manners, or manners which I argue purposefully disrupt tradition.⁹ I must point out that truly alternative and

⁸ Charles Taylor, in his influential *A Secular Age* (2007), disputes secularity, and argues for a return to the optimistic religiosity proposed by thinkers like Durkheim. He denounces secularity as somewhat pessimistic, and lacking a greater understanding of true spiritual life, but seems to disregard the deep ethical considerations of secular humanism as worldview. Instead he advocates a return to religion, though admittedly in a more individual capacity. As I am more concerned here with discovering what exactly is meant by secularity, and how secularism engages with the narratives of death, this thesis does not actively engage with Taylor’s work.

⁹ As such there are several other works which were considered for inclusion here, as they advance unconventional depictions of the afterlife: Any number of the works of Terry Pratchett include an afterlife which meets the expectations of each individual (if you think you deserve to go to hell, you do), but this is never explored sufficiently throughout any of the narratives; *The Lovely Bones* (2002) by Alice Sebold depicts the afterlife as a dreamscape which overlaps in some ways with life, and again it is manifested uniquely for each individual. It is interesting in that it enacts the post mortem righting of earthly wrongs, but the rather paranormal murder mystery does not allow such an effective analysis in search of secularising efforts; *Death at Intervals* (2005) by José Saramago does not really include an afterlife as such, which essentially excludes it from the thesis, but death (the lady death specifically insists that her name is not capitalized) is the central protagonist, and the novel questions her role and that of the afterlife in society when she one day stops claiming those whose life comes to an end; *Au Piano* (2003) by Jean Echenoz contains variations on heaven and hell, the former being a pristine “parc”, the latter a rundown version of Paris, both rendered in shades of boredom and banality, but this text is primarily considered

secular afterlives are not easy to come by, which ties in with my implicit argument about the conceptual bankruptcy on the side of the secular. The afterlife has been reimagined in a myriad of ways, but for the most part these reimaginings coincide too closely with religion to be useful here, and the range of texts which constitute an arguably secular afterlife are scarce. Those included are then those that depict an interesting, albeit marginal, reinvention of the afterlife, which ultimately reveal several similarities with, but mostly departures from, convention.¹⁰

I turn to Mark Twain in Chapter 2, who engages in an important aspect of the discourse, in his *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*. In it he uses celestial satire to realign the popular Christian conception of the afterlife with which he was acquainted, to something more to his liking. The text creates a version of heaven which at once points out the irrational nature of the biblical heaven being promulgated by the dominant culture of his time (which often resonates with our own), and tries to improve it in light of its failings. His jests are aimed mostly at “man’s imposition of his customs and mores on those of wiser beings” (Browne 17). This is all done in a time when the popularity of the Spiritualist movement was gaining impetus, and a wider population turned to pseudo-scientific methods of engaging with the hereafter. The turn to Spiritualism was seated in a desire by the faithful for “empirical confirmation of faith, comfort in bereavement, and also the assurance that they were giving their allegiance to something intellectually, morally, and even theologically respectable” (Casey 363). This attitude necessitated a firmer rationalization of the afterlife, and several of its conventions were hotly debated in acts of rationalization. Twain seems to join the fray, and as Casey explains, he “brings a refreshing sense of detail entirely lacking in the works of the believers” (379). The text contains an afterlife which is more liberal in its lack of exclusivity, and secular in its disregard for religious convention. As such the text is essentially concerned with finding a more satisfying eternal reward, one which is not prone to the shortcomings of Christian convention. As the oldest text under investigation, which additionally has the most intimate connection to religious tradition, it acts as a helpful springboard into this discussion. To secularise the afterlife Twain relies on the Christian template of salvation, and alters it to include more secular ideas.

with metafictional devices and designs; The highly acclaimed *Sandman* series of graphic novels by Neil Gaiman also dabbles extensively in death, in the guise of a young girl, and her domain, but is excluded due to the graphic novel format, which does not allow such an extensive investigation of narrative constructions as I wish to include here.

¹⁰ Though the texts themselves are not marginal, and have for the most part received favourable critical attention, the project that they are essentially involved in, is situated in the margins.

Reconstructing heaven proves to be problematic, however, as the text encounters certain restrictive prescriptions which this heavenly concept requires, the origins of which is found in utopian fiction. This will hopefully also explain how troubled the religious notion of the afterlife has become, revealing the conceptual monopoly, and hierarchy, to be contentious and problematic.

In Chapter 3 I discuss a novella and two recent films which all depict an afterlife largely stripped of all religious notions, but which nevertheless enact confrontational encounters with higher, seemingly religious, authorities. The novella is *Kneller's Happy Campers*, by Etgar Keret, and one of the films is its adaptation, *Wristcutters: A Love Story*.¹¹ The story tells of a suicide who traverses the land of the dead in order to find a lost girlfriend. The second is the Norwegian film, *A Bothered Man*, which details a dead man's failed attempts to become accustomed to the shallow afterlife he finds himself in. The novella and both films go out of their way to largely avoid any specific religious concepts and references, and depict afterlives which closely resemble and strangely alter contemporary western life. In their contemporary afterlives, however, I find significant similarities to and interesting divergences from the Christian concept of purgatory. As such, these texts largely circumvent the obstacles encountered by Twain, only to encounter several others. My argument will show that these afterlives constitute an essentially novel subcategory of magical realism, and utilise several of its foundational characteristics. But as is found in Twain's narrative, these texts encounter problems which arise when they eventually break the magical realist mode and have a disruptive encounter with notions of post mortem order and authority.

Considering the narrative obstacles encountered by the texts in Chapters 2 and 3, the text in Chapter 4 takes a different approach. As focal point, Chapter 4 investigates the critically acclaimed *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman, the high fantasy epic which details the downfall of religion at the hands of the secular. Spanning three volumes, the narrative takes its cue from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but reimagines the Fall as the liberation of the world from the yoke of religion, and the triumph of secularity over God and his agents. The narrative cleans house, so to speak, enacting the overthrow of the religious obstacles which stand in the way of a secular dispensation, thereby evincing a more lucid and comprehensive secularising project.

¹¹ This will be clearly explained in the chapter, but I discuss these two texts in conjunction.

Throughout the trilogy Pullman literarily draws the battle lines, and the interest is found in where he lets those lines fall. In this arrangement a clear idea is given of where he distinguishes between unwanted religious personages and paraphernalia and those aspects and elements he incorporates into a secular worldview. I will show that in effect, Pullman is essentially waging this war against organized religious doctrine, its agents, promulgators and deities, but finds allies in an individualized spirituality which assists in the fights behind the banner of thoughtful consciousness. The pivotal point of the narrative is found in a bleak underworld where the forces of the secular go on a mission of salvation to rescue the dead from their eternal confines. The relevance of this quest to the secular cause will form a crucial aspect of the analysis, but what makes this text so striking is that there are clearly delineated battle formations, which allows unhindered insight into what Pullman considers to be the dividing line between religion and secularity.

Finally in Chapter 5 I turn to science fiction, as a genre which specialises in speculating on possible futures by looking at the here and the now, and which picks up where Pullman's secularising efforts leave off. The notion of posthumanism is essential here, and specifically the possibilities which are enabled by the progressive mechanisation of society at large and humanity more specifically. The construction of a virtual afterlife displaces this concept beyond the scope of religion and constitutes an entirely alternative approach to conceptions of the post mortem condition. I look at William Gibson's cyberpunk masterpiece *Neuromancer*, which also serves as one of the foundational texts of the genre. Additionally I include *Feersum Endjinn* by Iain M. Banks, which elaborates quite substantially on the implications and applications of extensive virtualization. Both texts offer insights into what the afterlife of the future could entail, when humanity ventures past the limits of biological life and become the digital dead who inhabit an artificial land. They depict an afterlife which poses as the most comprehensive substitute for those propagated by religion, but I also discuss how these texts, and those who give serious consideration to this posthuman condition, must temper the optimistic possibilities of virtuality with its potentially crippling drawbacks. Ultimately I show that these texts form part of a new apocalyptic tradition which poses as a relatively effective alternative to the conventional end of the world at the hands of divine interveners.

All of the afterlives in question offer interesting alternatives to the conceptual landscape of the hereafter, and do so in ways which reveal ideological constructions within this discourse. In my readings of the texts, my focus will be threefold: Firstly I will identify the lay of the land of the dead, how each text imagines the actual post mortem environment. Then I will explain in what capacity the dead are free to engage therein, how the characters are incarnated outside of corporeality and what capacities and capabilities they retain, discard or gain. Finally, I elucidate on the defining lines each text then draws to distinguish its secular conceptualisation from that of religion. These elements of the analysis lead to clear conclusions on how these narratives contribute to the discursive field, how they imagine alternative afterlives which offer meaningful distinctions for the fluid boundary they tread. In addition, however, considering that each chapter deals with different genres within the larger scope of speculative fiction, I will investigate how each genre engages with the afterlife, as during the first two chapters it threatens crisis, while in the latter two, it lends great strength.

Considering the relatively recent re-emergence of spirituality and religiosity,¹² but also the greater measure of open opposition from the unconverted, approaches to the defining feature of mortality is a discourse which requires greater attention by those who do not believe that it has been effectively attended to. The discourse of death and the afterlife, with its uniquely imbalanced participation and troubling historical conceptual monopoly, is here given over to those attempting to redress this imbalance. The investigation into the nature of secularism which is lodged in conjunction, also allows insight into the meaningful distinctions advanced which determine the fluctuating boundary between religion and secularity. Ultimately, then, the secular afterlife as an alternative ideology is illuminated, revealing a secular approach to the end of life. All that remains now is to turn to the hardy and able explorer Captain Stormfield, who takes us to the undiscovered country.

¹² This will be explained in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2

Captain Stormfield Satirises Heaven

Indicative of its author's lengthy conflict with religion and its deities, *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven* (1907) remained unfinished after roughly forty years of broken work, and ultimately Mark Twain's own venture into the afterlife. Being nervous about the content of the text, which he considered blasphemous, he nearly consigned it to his autobiography, which was not to be published until fifty years after his death (Browne 29). Portions of the text were, however, published in *Harper's Magazine* (a secular publication) in 1907, the publishers having less reservations than Twain, the rest being assembled from his notebooks and published years after his death (Browne 28). The son of an agnostic father and a Presbyterian mother, it is perhaps unsurprising that "[t]he question of the hereafter worried Mark Twain throughout life" (Browne 11). His notes appear to be littered with musings, questions and ultimately condemnations of the notions of religion. He would eventually come to despise the teachings of the church, and his hatred for the Christian notion of God was "absolute and all-pervading" (Browne 12). Yet he was never secure in his convictions and appears to have struggled with the uncertainty which lingered, the possibility that he would be proven wrong.

Among his notes Twain penned a critique of God, in the form of godly attributes he would have had changed. It is a scathing list and it raises some legitimate concerns, but of specific interest to this thesis is two annotations, speaking specifically of the afterlife he did not find appealing. He states:

"There would not be any hell – except the one we live in from the cradle to the grave.

There would not be any heavens – of the kind described in the world's Bibles."

(Twain in Browne 13)

It is clear then that Twain found no merit in the notion of the binary afterlife advanced by Christianity, or any other religious strains for that matter. The lake of fire held as little appeal as the streets of gold. Not only then was his ire directed at the notion of God and the Devil, but at

their respective domains as well. However, he was also “immensely interested in his destination after death” (Hill xvii). His uncertainty on the matter was perhaps instrumental in the unfinished nature of his satirizing of these concepts. Though unconvinced, he was loath to underestimate these fictions, and was hesitant to advance his own in their stead. Thus, his most substantive text on the subject remains incomplete and unpolished, despite decades of work and active interest.

There has been much speculation about the religious convictions of Twain, but though he has been described as everything from a “here[itic]” (Plotkin 1) to a “positive” - or even “Christian” atheist (Plotkin 3), the implicit consensus seems to be that he was plagued by uncertainty. It is then important to understand Twain’s own lifelong struggle with religiosity to clarify how he goes about deconstructing the popular Christian version of the afterlife he was acquainted with. His major indictment of religious notions is clearly explained when he states that “Bibles diminish the grandeur of the real God by straightening “him” to the narrow confines of parochial imaginations” (Twain in Plotkin 3). In this it does appear that he subscribes to some notion of spirituality, but that he finds religious conceptions to be too human in their limitations. A reinvention of heaven would thus be necessary.

Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven is perhaps best described by Ray Browne as a “free-wheeling satire of the conventional concept of the holy destination of souls and man’s behaviour when he gets there” (14). As a work of satire, it incorporates “a playfully critical distortion of the familiar”, Christian salvation as it has never been depicted before (Feinberg 19). The text portrays a heaven which is aware of its Biblical portrayal and humanity’s conceptions of it, but which realizes that in order for it to operate effectively, humanity’s input must be disregarded. Thus Twain is able to interestingly contradict popular heavenly conception with a more practical and rational version of heaven. Casey first identifies this phenomenon in seventeenth century England, where “[s]cripture is never challenged, but is robustly pressed to fit the available facts of contemporary science”, although it has roots in the renaissance and Reformation, and even ancient Greek tradition (322). From the end of the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries, western religious thinkers worked to align conventional notions of heaven with the scientific principles they were discovering. Twain echoes this tradition, but does not shy away from outright contestation of convention in doing so. This is precisely where the text draws a lot of its strength from, religious tradition is shown to be so ridiculous that continued adherence to

that convention, as seen in the protagonist, proves to be the greatest source of humour throughout.

Leonard Feinberg's overview of satire as a narrative form is significant here,¹³ since it allows insight into the nature and aims of Twain's satirical critique. Feinberg explains that "[l]ike other arts, the best satire is concerned with the nature of reality. Unlike other arts, which emphasize what *is* real, satire emphasizes what *seems* to be real but is not" (3). Twain's satire then hinges on what was popularly advocated to be the "real" condition of heaven, showing it to be entirely irrational should it prove to be real. But Feinberg also point to another important aspect of satire which is evident in Twain's text, stating that "[e]ven the most vehement satirists have usually attacked not Christ but Christianity" (38). "Only rarely do satirists attack the spiritual concepts of the major religions", and though Twain does mock several fundamental spiritual notions found in Christianity, as will become clear he shies away from overly explicit attacks on Christ or God (*Ibid*).

The text then follows the exploits of Captain Eli Stormfield, from his dying moments, through his interstellar travels to his allotted destination, and on to his lengthy tenure in the heaven not widely propagated by Christian fictions. Twain's characters remain ultimately human despite the newly "spiritualized" nature of their existence, and in their behaviour it becomes clear exactly how unfit a place the conventional heaven is for any kind of person to actually inhabit, especially if the tenure is eternal. In his reworking of the afterlife then, Twain seems to rely more on "Reason and Logic", a call for a moments honest and rational consideration which could help serve as "[antidote] to ignorance, superstition and humbuggery" (Sloan in Plotkin 3). A parallel is drawn by Harold K. Bush, between Twain's own conflicted convictions and what he calls the "spiritual crisis of his age",¹⁴ which hinged on increasing rationalisation, even of subjects like spirituality which defy it. This spiritual crisis then plays an important part in the construction of Twain's own version of heaven, for it shows the doubts which arise from growing disillusionment in religion and an increasing turn to rationality as personal compass.

Twain's alternative afterlife is then actually heaven reimagined, paradise found anew after doing away with many of the heavenly attributes he finds to be unsatisfactory or nonsensical. As

¹³ Leonard Feinberg. *Introduction to Satire*. 1967.

¹⁴ Harold K. Bush Jr. *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age*. 2007.

Feinberg explains, “satire relies on norms. The moment one criticizes and says that something has been done in the wrong way, he is implying that there is a right way to do it” (11). Kumar also reiterates that “[s]atire holds together both negative (anti-utopian) and positive (utopian) elements”, in that it criticises on the one hand while implying more sensible or appropriate alternatives on the other (104). Twain’s satire is effective in that it humorously identifies some legitimately troublesome, perhaps also unanswerable, questions about Christian dogma.

Throughout the narrative Stormfield’s exploits reveal that the traditional conception of heaven would indeed be dystopian. However, Twain’s project stumbles when the focus shifts perceptibly from satirising what he deems to be foolish, to advocating what he deems to be an improvement thereon. In the alternative system which Twain’s heaven advances, he explicitly attempts to propose improving alterations to heaven, and deconstructing efforts then subtly turn into reconstructing efforts, in so doing becoming exposed to the same dilemmas of the utopian discourse. It perhaps then makes more sense to describe Twain’s heaven not as a construction of a secular afterlife, but rather as a religious afterlife under secular reconstruction, an attempt to find “the right way to do it”. But as will become clear, there is no easy way to do utopia in the right way.

What is also of specific note, however, is the way in which this text engages with notions borrowed from religion, and uses them in what can only be an attempt to subvert them. This subversion is by no means aggressive or overly explicit, but it is there nonetheless. The tone of the text seems to be clearly captured by Michel Clasquin, who describes it as a “commercial, popular-culture [work], written with a close attention to what the (mainly American) reading or viewing public of the time would accept, or, to be more precise, with a view to how radical a deviation from the normative view of heaven contemporary audiences would accept” (2). The text thus remains largely influenced by religious conceptions of heaven, in a consequently troubled attempt to deconstruct them. This is arguably what accounts for the obstacles this project encounters.

Coupled with Twain’s own conflicted convictions, the satirizing of heaven in the text seems uncertain in itself. Undoubtedly fun is being had at the expense of certain Christian beliefs; however the jester seems to be uneasy. The humour seems to be misdirection, while the text also attempts to reformulate a more passable notion of heaven. This duality in the text does reflect an

interesting, and perhaps also widespread, attitude towards the afterlife. With such a hellish punishment for the apparent crime of disbelief or misbelief, it becomes an understandably nervous decision to discard heaven entirely. The text thus gives an informative view on the uncertain initial attempts of the deconstruction of a very large and firmly established concept. Like its author, this deconstruction is tentative, uncertainly inching along what Twain perceived as a very precarious ledge, over what just might be the biggest fall of them all.

To explain further, the inconsistency found within the unfinished text, creates a noticeable narrative shift roughly halfway through. The nature of the text changes from personal account, to personal conversation. This will be explained fully when the analysis reaches that point, but importantly this narrative shift entails also a shift in the direction of the text. Where the text initially attempts to become a liberal and rational satire of heaven, it ultimately falls into a reformulation of paradise, the author's own version of utopia. Similar to his list of God's shortcomings, this latter part of the text seems to abandon the methods of satire and rather reimagines what the afterlife should be, for anyone to find it a satisfactory eternal reward. Unfortunately, the narrative pitfalls inherent in the fictionalization of utopia are not avoided. What will hopefully be shown is that Twain is breaking down one dysfunctional utopia, to replace it with another, although not necessarily more functional, variation. The narrative thus grows increasingly inconsistent, as will any utopian fiction, as it runs out of "precisely those elements which make for [...] fictional development" (Elliot 104).

The text opens with the gripping thoughts of the terminal Captain Stormfield, who "was dying, and knew it" (Twain 41). Aboard his ship, adrift in the middle of the ocean, he is quickly slipping out of life, and in the conversation of the shipmates around his deathbed it becomes clear that Stormfield had little uncertainty as to where his soul was headed, that he "always judged he was booked for [hell]" (Twain 41). His last living action is to faintly hear the attending doctor declare him deceased, "[j]ust at 12:14" (Twain 42). But Stormfield does not open his eyes to find himself standing at the gates of heaven, and neither does he follow a long tunnel to a beckoning light. Before the deconstruction of heaven can start, Stormfield has to get there first. His journey commences and his soul, which still retains the exact dimensions of his physical self, albeit as a "spiritualized" duplication, flies into the galaxy. After plunging through a "whole universe of blinding fire" which he realizes was the sun, Stormfield calculates that he is

going at “exactly the speed of light, 186,000 miles a second”, “[n]inety-three million miles in eight minutes by the watch” (Twain 42). He goes on to note the diameter of the sun, and after a night’s sleep (also spent in transit) he again computes that he had travelled about “eleven or twelve hundred million miles” (Twain 46). As Stormfield travels, he picks up other straggling souls, diverse in origin and denomination, at which point he sets his speed at “200 000 miles a second” to accommodate everyone (Twain 50).

A hint of Twain’s own interest in astronomy can be found in Stormfield’s manifold and fastidious comments on astrological speeds and interstellar distances. In Twain’s notebooks some mention is made of the wonders that the cosmos held and in his aforementioned list, he even states that God “[should] spend some of His eternities [...] in studying astronomy” (Twain in Browne 13). Being “one of the topics which intrigued him in his later years”, it is reflected in the text through a conceptual conflict between the rational and the spiritual (Browne 15). In Stormfield’s passage to heaven, a strange amalgamation is created of the spiritual on the one hand, and the rational (or what can loosely be called the scientific) on the other. The text shows a keen understanding of some fundamental scientific principles, and perhaps an above average knowledge of astronomy, but then uses this as a backdrop for the spiritual exploits of Stormfield. Throughout the text these scientific measurements crop up in different contexts, and although admittedly they are not always accurate (as when the number of “Indjuns and Aztecs” who predated the colonization of America becomes apparent in the “few hundred thousand billions of red angels” who now inhabit heaven (Twain 90)), they remain an attempt at inserting factual underpinnings to a purely speculative concept. By then having a spiritual being fly through the vast reaches of the universe, described scientifically, the text attempts a combination of two traditionally exclusive fields.

When Stormfield “had been dead about thirty years”, still travelling at what he gauges to be “about a million miles a minute”, he spots a particularly large comet (Twain 52). Those he encountered previously, “like Encke’s and Halley’s comets”, posed no real competition for his speed (Twain 52), but this one is different and Stormfield deviates from his course to race with it. And here again the spiritual and the scientific are merged. The comet is not merely an astronomical phenomenon, it is also a cargo ship, many hundred million miles in size, hauling a gargantuan consignment of brimstone to Hell. When Stormfield draws abreast the comet, he sees

the “officer of the deck come to the side and hoist his glass in [Stormfield’s] direction” (Twain 53). The officer immediately rouses his crew of “[u]pwards of a hundred billion” to unfurl all available sails and to feed “a hundred million billion tons of brimstone” to its furnaces (Twain 53 – 54). So begins a breakneck cosmic race, which Stormfield eventually loses after the officer, in a last ditch effort not to be bested, commands that all of the “cargo for Satan” be dropped overboard, “wip[ing] out a considerable raft of stars” (Twain 55).

In an alteration of the age old encroachment by science on what was deemed religious territory, Twain is combining these fields in an interesting fashion. By superimposing the spiritual over the scientific, the text shows a duality which critics have linked to the aforementioned “spiritual crisis”, characterised by attempts to rationalise concepts not always open to clear rational expression. In fact, in Stormfield’s lengthy travel through space, another interesting view of heaven is expressed. Twain’s “[h]eaven is not a spiritualized realm, but firmly part of the physical universe” (Clasquin 2). It would appear that heaven is somewhat over thirty light years from earth, and not in some indefinable spiritual dimension. The text seems to give a measure of corporeality to notions which have remained traditionally ethereal, by staging it against a rational and scientific backdrop. But though “[t]he satirist does not concern himself with the question of whether he has the right to apply human logic to suprahuman levels”, rationalising heaven proves a difficult task (Feinberg 40).

Attempting to give rational or believable scientific foundations to purely spiritual notions, could be a dangerous conceptual door to open. It invites a questioning of the rational, for which no answers exist. It would be simply impossible to provide a strong enough rational underpinning for heaven to become a truly rational concept. The subject has proven to be unscientific, or it lies beyond humanity’s (current) scientific abilities, and irrational, or it lies beyond humanity’s (current) rational frame of reference. Additionally, to accurately and fully rationalise heaven would be to destroy faith entirely, as proof of something implies that faith is no longer a factor, thus also destroying the need for the earthly institutions of religion. As of yet, however, the proof for heaven is still lacking, faith is still necessary, and the institutions of religion stand, for better or worse.

Finally, then, Stormfield arrives at what he assumes to be the gates of Hell, but upon closer inspection he suspects that somewhere he has gone astray. What he took for towering furnaces,

are the palisades enclosing a “beautiful, bewitching country”, certainly no Hell (Twain 56). He has arrived at heaven, but because he altered his path to race with the comet, has widely missed the mark, and finds himself at the entrance to an extraterrestrial suburb of heaven. Those entering these gates were “sky blue ... with seven heads and only one leg” (Twain 58). Along with the other souls he met on his flight, among them a Jew and two suicides (both being examples of traditional *persona non grata*, excluded from a Christian God’s domain), this extraterrestrial paradise entails “that not only aliens, but all kinds of human believers are allowed” into heaven (Clasquin 3). In this one scene, a minor comedy of errors, Twain rejects a lot of the rigidity present in church doctrine. Being even halfway decent seems to be enough virtue to grant access to salvation, be you Jew or gentile, *homo sapiens* or extraterrestrial. The exclusivity of salvation, which is perhaps one of the most troubling foundations of religion, is subverted quickly and humorously, by opening heaven’s gates much wider than is widely preached. This lack of exclusivity will later be shown to bring its own, rather overwhelming, challenges to Twain’s heaven.

For now, in Stormfield’s “bureaucratic muddling” with the officials at this gate, the text shows its unease with shying too far away from convention (Clasquin 3). Upon being asked where he is from, Stormfield has trouble naming the appropriate solar system. When asked which world, he responds that he is from “the one the Saviour saved”, to which the clerk replies: “The worlds He has saved are like to the gates of Heaven in number – none can count them” (Twain 58). Here Twain undoes some of the effect that the massive diversity of his heaven has, by expanding the role of “the Saviour” to include more worlds than our own. The questions raised are still interesting (did the Saviour appear to those entering this gate as a sky-blue, seven-headed, one-legged being?; does their salvific story, or Bible, resemble ours?), but it is tempered by the application of the notion of the Christian saviour to a universal context. True to dogma then, in Twain’s version of the afterlife, wherever in all of creation salvation is required, it can only be had through the intervention of the one Saviour. This concession made to religious notions, though seemingly offhand and small, reveals the aforementioned hesitancy to contradict or satirise Christ as a foundational figurehead of Christianity.

Twain, however, does follow this passage with a humorous condemnation of the religious hubris evident in the proclaimed importance of humanity in the greater scheme of things. The clerks

start an extensive search of a gigantic star map, and after using a microscope to find the right planet, finally discern that the good captain is from one hilariously called “The Wart” (Twain 60). Stormfield is obviously vexed by this nomenclature, which reflects the misguided sense of greater significance attached to human existence in the universe. To have all of terrestrial history and human endeavour described as nothing more than a microscopic blemish in the unfathomable vastness of the infinite, is certainly a sobering thought, and one the church was loath to admit. Unsatisfied with an alien heaven then, Stormfield soon realizes that “a man’s got to be in his own heaven to be happy”, and is sent to the appropriate gate (Twain 62).

Finding himself at the “right kind of heaven at last”, Stormfield is greeted with the words: “A harp and a hymn-book, pair of wings and a halo, size 13, for Cap’n Eli Stormfield” (Twain 62-63). Thrilled at his expectations being met so fully and armed with the standard heavenly paraphernalia every Christian could ever need in heaven, Stormfield plays into another religious cliché and asks to be pointed to the nearest cloud. This is perhaps the strongest example of the text’s denunciation of popular conceptions of heaven as the text follows Stormfield’s entrance into heaven, showing how all of his preconceptions about the afterlife are ridiculous.

On his way to the cloudbank along with a throng of other souls, to commence their eternal bout of praise and worship to the accompaniment of a host of harps, Stormfield mentions how “[m]ost of [them] tried to fly, but some got crippled and nobody made a success of it” (Twain 63). Flying, of course, does not come naturally to ground dwelling mammals, detachable wings notwithstanding, so they decide to walk “until [they] had had some wing practice” (Ibid). Before reaching the cloudbank, Stormfield also notices a crowd of souls heading in the opposite direction, all missing items from their heavenly apparel. He does not fathom the reason for this, until after he found himself “perched on a cloud with a million other people” (Twain 64). In an explicit affirmation of his heavenly expectations, Stormfield admits that he had “been having [his] doubts, but now [he was] in heaven, sure enough” (Ibid). Having heaven live up to his preconceived ideas, confirms to his mind the fact that he finds himself there. So, thus satisfied, Stormfield “tautened up [his] harp-strings and struck in” (Ibid). Almost immediately Stormfield is disillusioned by his idea of heaven, saying that “you can’t imagine anything like the row [they] made” (Ibid). The sheer number of the assembled praise-and-worshippers, their varying degrees of musical proficiency, and the wide array of conflicting hymnals each soul decides to perform,

causes a truly unearthly cacophony, “grand to listen to”, but ultimately nothing more than a racket (Ibid). Not a day goes by before the spirit of Captain Stormfield becomes “low-spirited”, confoundedly stating that this is not “as near [his] idea of bliss, as [he] thought it was going to be, when [he] used to go to church” (Twain 65). Understandably he decides to also discard his paraphernalia and leave the cloud of those still “happy and hosannahing” (Ibid).

Soon after in an encounter with Sam Bartlett, a man he knew on Earth, Stormfield, out of frustration with this heaven, asks: “[I]s this to go on forever? Ain’t there anything else for a change?” (Twain 65). The response I include here in full, because it seems to very accurately describe the core of Twain’s discontent with the notion of the Christian afterlife:

People take the figurative language of the Bible and the allegories for literal, and the first thing they ask for when they get here is a halo and a harp, and so on. Nothing that’s harmless and reasonable is refused a body here, if he asks it in the right spirit. So they are outfitted with these things without a word. They go and sing and play just about one day, and that’s the last you’ll ever see them in the choir. They don’t need anybody to tell them that that sort of thing wouldn’t make a heaven – at least not a heaven that a sane man could stand a week and remain sane. That cloud-bank is placed where the noise can’t disturb the old inhabitants, and so there ain’t any harm in letting everybody get up there and cure himself as soon as he comes.

(Twain 66)

The irrationalities of human expectation are thus quickly discarded in heaven, as they have clearly not been well thought through. I would argue that this constitutes a more effective rationalisation of heaven, as it has human behaviour, instead of dubious science, as its foundation. We cannot vouch for the measurements and dimensions of something we have yet, or never, to perceive, but the irrationalities in human behaviour are firmer foundations for satire. Sweeping though his statement is, I cannot help but agree that *no sane person* can find this an appealing way to spend eternity. This point will be made many more times throughout the text, applied to different, yet equally irrational, preconceived ideas about what constitutes heaven. These irrationalities form the focus of the rest of this analysis, however, where the analysis of

this text has remained chronological up to this point, this cannot be maintained further if a clear argument is to be built.

From this point the narrative becomes fractured, and the unfinished nature of the text becomes more apparent. Soon after the abovementioned passage, Stormfield befriends Sandy McWilliams, “an old bald-headed angel ... from somewhere in New Jersey” (Twain 68), and the larger part of what we learn about Twain’s heaven is explained in conversation with him, for the remainder of the text. Stormfield’s exploits do not end here, but McWilliams is always present, and the focus of each chapter remains on informative expositions from him, as prompted by Stormfield’s ignorance. Clasquin describes McWilliams as “Twain’s alter ego”, in that this character does seem to clearly and explicitly express Twain’s particulars about how heaven should function, leaving Stormfield to merely act as audience (Clasquin 4). Their conversation touches upon many different facets of this afterlife, but from here the “somewhat discontinuous and repetitious” nature of the text becomes clear (Browne 14). As I will argue, I find it important to point out the conceptual troubles which befall the rest of the narrative, as they point to the contradictory nature of Twain’s attempt to secularise heaven, while simultaneously tying in to the utopian pitfalls which befall effective narration.

After this point the balance starts to shift from a rationalisation of heaven as satire of convention, towards a larger reimagining of heaven, an attempt to create a more ideal afterlife than convention allows. To piece together the fragments of this reimagined heaven, this analysis will identify larger conceptual alterations made to heaven, as well as the problems posed to the narrative by the conventions and prescriptions of heaven. These aspects of the text contribute to the deconstruction of one heaven, but also the problematic construction of another, wherein Twain enters the utopian discourse. The physical condition of heaven must then form the initial foundation, from which to launch this mapping, as this aspect of the text shows at once a self-defeating rationalisation, and a failed reconceptualising, of heaven.

The geographical magnitude of this heaven becomes clear when Stormfield tries without success to master flying with his new angelic wings. After many crash landings and with his ego becoming increasingly bruised he gives up, hiding his wings. McWilliams, having gone through the same spiritual crisis, consoles Stormfield with the simple statement: “You ain’t built for wings – no man is” (Twain 76). He explains that they are purely decorative, part of the official

uniform, unfolded only for important ceremonial occasions. Their inadequacy is then expanded on in light of the sheer distances to be travelled in heaven. He points out that Stormfield had taken years to get to heaven, going at or over light speed, and “wouldn’t eternity have been over before [he] got [there]” by flapping his wings (Twain 76). To drive the point home he explains that “the distances in heaven are billions of times greater”, and that angels would never get anywhere using their wings. This heaven is thus supremely expansive, untold billions of light years from end to end.

This concretisation of the proportions of heaven is again indicative of Twain’s attempt to rationalise the unfathomable. By ascribing these measurements to heaven, his text literally tries to give measure to a place which is entirely unknown and therefore remains purely conceptual. No wonder then that this venture struggles with its own internal complications. Because of the difficulties involved in travelling such vast distances, Stormfield learns that he can circumvent this and simply “travel any distance in an instant by *wishing*” (Twain 77). Apparently resembling the principles of the “wishing-carpet of the Arabian Nights” (Ibid), Stormfield can wish himself anywhere in heaven, and in most subsequent travels with McWilliams, they “[travel] by thought” (Twain 98). However, the textual emphasis on size and measurement, coupled with its understanding of the scientific principles involved, clearly cause a rather large problem for Twain. Again trouble is encountered in trying to reconcile the scientific with the spiritual, and the text uses something very akin to *deus ex machina* to overcome this. Arguably heaven would be the one place where this is not considered bad form, but it nevertheless seems that Twain’s logic flounders here. Lacking a sufficiently rational method for covering these distances, the text relies on an equally irrational or unscientific plot device. Twain shows the idea of winged angels to be nonsensical, but in its stead he offers something even less concrete; apparently divine wish-granting. As soon as reason starts to falter, as it undoubtedly must, it can be overcome by introducing divine plot ploys. The handy failsafe created by almighty intervention, seems to completely defeat the purpose of any attempted rationalisation.

How all of this space is used, however, is where a rather large shortcoming of this heaven becomes apparent. The greater part of the heavenly expanse is for future use, as the “redeemed will still be coming for billions [...] of years, but there’ll always be room” (Twain 100). Those parts thereof that are inhabited are divided, proportionately, between the redeemed from the

different planets and galaxies strewn throughout the universe. The layout of each particular territory also mirrors the appropriate world of its denizens, only greatly expanded according to the heavenly scale. “All the States and Territories of the Union, and all the kingdoms of the earth and the islands of the sea are laid out [there] just as they are on the globe”, their proportions just stretched out substantially (Twain 89). Within these territories, lies the jumbled assembly of the redeemed.

As has previously been mentioned, the criteria for admittance into this heaven is sufficiently pliable for even someone like Stormfield, convinced as he was that he was “pointed for a warmer climate”, to enter (Twain 88). As a result those corners of heaven reserved for earthlings are populated by a very diverse conglomeration of peoples. Irrespective of personal belief, any person deserving of this generously applied salvation is welcomed. Specific mention is made of “Yanks and Mexicans and English and A-rabs” (Twain 63), “Astecs”, “Indjuns” (Twain 90), “Russian[s]”, “German[s]”, “Italian[s]”, “French” and “billions and billions of pure savages” from prehistory (Twain 92). Apparently, “[t]hat’s the main charm of Heaven – there’s all kinds [there] – which wouldn’t be the case if you let the preacher’s tell it” (Twain 79). Not only then is heaven culturally diverse, but it has an interesting historical diversity as well. As the dead from every age of the world find themselves in heaven, the place effectively contains the entire backlog of human history. The result is that large swathes of heaven are populated by foreigners, culturally but also historically, to form a very confusing “mongrel business” (Twain 92). Having ventured to the European territory, McWilliams explains that “the minute you get back of Elizabeth’s time, the language fog’s up, and the further back you go, the foggier it gets”, and the fog gets thicker all the way back to the aforementioned savages (Twain 92). The older the dead, the less a contemporary soul can hope to have in common with them, and the less sense it makes to visit these regions.

Interesting, and welcome, as this notion of inclusivity is, this state of affairs is explicitly rued by both Stormfield and McWilliams. Here it appears that Twain became aware of the inadequacies of his own paradise and found no way to circumvent it. Somewhere in the midst of this overwhelming diversity is created an immense loneliness for those who find themselves in heaven. As McWilliams states: “Even when you are travelling by thought it takes you days and days and days to cover the territory of any Christian State, and days and days and days to cover

the uninhabited stretch between that State and the next one” (Twain 98). Even then covering these distances it seems to be an overwhelming task to wade through the “different kinds of people and the different sorts of languages” to find one person to relate to (Twain 92). Eternity seems too short a time to search across billions of miles, encounter countless strangers, sift through aeons of historicity and sort through the totality of cultural inclinations, to find a friendly face.

Casey also explains this when discussing the rationalising endeavours previously mentioned. The increasing awareness of diversity in the natural world and human society lead these rationalising proponents of religion to the conclusion that “heaven will reflect the variety of the human world”, only more so (Casey 325). But the diversity on earth is arguably fundamental to its decidedly un-utopian nature, so should heaven reflect this diversity greatly compounded, the diversity included starts to become troublesome. Understandably then, “*what a man mostly misses, in heaven, is company – company of his own sort*” (Twain 91). But Stormfield’s express desire for likeminded company is also directly connected to the capacity in which he remains unchanged by the transition from life to death.

Throughout all of Stormfield’s interactions, his behaviour and attitudes are entirely human and his corporeal urges are so strong that he even takes some tobacco from a soul he encountered on his way to heaven. It is explained that “[theirs] are spiritual bodies and spiritual clothes and things”, and as such the same rules of corporeality do not apply (Twain 50). Yet despite the fact that they are spiritualized, “dead people are people, just the same, and they bring their habits with them, which is natural” (Twain 49). Stormfield and his spiritualised acquaintances seem to be in no perceivable way different to corporeal humans. Though it is expressly stated that their “intellects are a good deal sharpened up, [there]”, this is never significantly evident in any of Stormfield or McWilliams’ interactions (Twain 89). But allowing the dead to inhabit heaven unchanged poses problems for the perfect society.

The most troubling aspect of this is that Stormfield’s, and presumably every soul’s, dispositions and prejudices remain largely intact in heaven. This becomes clear where Stormfield and McWilliams express their distress at finding so few “white angel[s]” in their travels through heaven (Twain 89). Though this conversation is based on Twain’s gross miscalculation of the amount of deceased Native Americans which predates the continents colonisation (the

aforementioned “few hundred thousand billions of red angels”), it still shows a degree of intolerance by its characters. Along with his loneliness in a heaven too diversely populated, Stormfield is also vexed in being so surrounded by those he cannot relate to, the “people that can’t speak English” (Twain 90). McWilliams, commenting on this outnumbering by the red angels even states that those from other realms of heaven think the “whites and the occasional nigger” in this corner are “Indjuns” suffering from some disease (Twain 90 - 91).

Of all aspects of human behaviour, prejudice is especially difficult to include in paradise, as it invites greater misunderstandings and conflict. Understandably, for the narrative to remain effective the characters must be relatively closely modelled on recognisable human characteristics, without which the satire would miss its mark. Giving his characters too great a degree of spiritual transcendence would entail alienation from all too human readers. On the one hand then, Twain is satirising racial and societal prejudices, aware that to some believers heaven does not include all races and denominations. But in Stormfield’s and McWilliams’ prejudices, relatively mild though these characters’ vexation seems in this case, the question is raised of the degree to which heaven can allow the dead to remain unaltered. Leaving the minds of the saved so unchanged does cause some concern, as clearly the same minds which cause earth not to be a paradise, could do the same for heaven. Subjective cultural values have historically proved to be an exceedingly volatile thing, with conflict of one sort or another being the order of seemingly any day. These prejudices are then indicative of larger detrimental qualities in human nature and human society and points at humanity’s complete inability to imagine, let alone create, utopia, especially an eternal one. It is difficult to see how heaven can allow humans to continue being humans if it was to be run as a society anywhere near perfection.

Another questioned is begged with another example of Stormfield’s prejudice, which becomes apparent when they discuss a preacher named Talmage, a man preaching how his first action in heaven “will be to fling his arms around Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and kiss them and weep on them” (Twain 78). Talmage was an actual preacher who “had been a target of Twain’s barbs since 1870 when the preacher had avowed that the smell of workingmen in his congregation offended refined nostrils” (Browne 17). As such, this passage could be overlooked as not truly having much to do with Twain’s conception of heaven, but rather to be another in a long line of assaults on one of the author’s adversaries. However, Stormfield asks McWilliams if Talmage

will really make it into heaven, to which he replies in the affirmative, but he softens the blow by saying that Talmage “will run with his own kind, and there’s plenty of them” (Twain 79).

Along with the abovementioned difficulty in finding your own kind to run with, as well as the conflict inherent to human nature, this begs the question whether an all-inclusive heaven is really what it proclaims to be. Though it is certainly preferable that as few as possible receive damnation, the question of access to salvation is proving to be a lot thornier than imagined. Though this broad and indiscriminate inclusivity speaks of greater tolerance, it is questionable if heaven would remain functional as such with its gates so widely open. Allowing just as worldly a jumble of characters into heaven, could problematically lead to similar worldly scenarios, which makes for a less than perfect heaven. Heterogeneity is not conducive to the smooth and efficient operation of the utopian state.¹⁵ Certainly I will not attempt to define the criteria for salvation, but too large a degree of inclusivity entails that heaven is no longer a reward for the “elect”, but rather the mostly standard afterlife. What is more, this afterlife may well resemble what preceded it too closely to prove an improvement upon it.

The rationalising endeavour encounters another obstacle in an aspect of these souls, this one physical rather than mental, which lies in their ability to determine and alter the age of their “bodies” at will. Stormfield broaches the topic by saying that “[d]own below, [he] always had an idea that in heaven [they] would all be young, and bright, and spry” (Twain 68). This proves not to be the case, as McWilliams explains that a soul may decide to adjust his or her outward appearance to reflect any age desired. Having died at age seventy two, he has experimented with altering his age, but says that he “couldn’t take any interest in it” (Twain 69). Despite finding himself in a younger and more handsome state, the boredom he “suffered whilst [he] was young” proved too much (Twain 69). Having grown comfortably old and wise, he failed to be intellectually stimulated by the company of the young, and decided to return to his natural age.

The norm seems to be that a soul “sticks at the place where his mind was last at its best, for there’s where his enjoyment is best, and his ways most set and established” (Twain 70).

Alteration of that age is, if not frowned upon scornfully, at least laughed at knowingly. The only exceptions to the unofficial rule are the souls of those who died mentally infirm, or at a very

¹⁵ This idea will be revisited in Chapter 3, where Andreas’ inability to conform makes him bothersome to the functioning of the false utopian afterlife he finds.

young age. The former are compensated by being able to revert to this “best” state of mind, but the latter must be given the chance to attain maturity after death. Damning the “asses [they] used to be, on earth, about these things”, McWilliams interestingly, and in light of their unease with the diversity of heaven, contradictorily, states: “Think of the dull sameness of a society made up of people all of one age and one set of looks, habits tastes and feelings. Think how superior to it earth would be, with its variety of types and faces and ages, and the enlivening attrition of the myriad interests that come into pleasant collision in such a variegated society” (Twain 70 – 71).

This alteration to heaven illustrates again, superficially at least, a rationalisation of the state of the soul after death. Rationally, God cannot allow the unsound or the infantile to remain as such in heaven, and Twain remedies this with this seemingly rational scheme. However, despite the remedy being found again in divine intervention, as well as explicitly inviting “pleasant collision” between souls, it also opens the door to the text’s most explicit display of suffering and discontent in heaven. While pondering this state of affairs, Stormfield is shown a woman “walking slow, and her head was bent down, and her wings hanging limp and droopy; and she looked ever so tired, and was crying” (Twain 71). On earth she was “blooming and lovely and sweet”, with a child of two, but when the child died, “she went wild with grief” (Twain 72). The only solace the woman found was in knowing that they would be reunited in heaven, “never more to part” (Ibid). However, arriving in heaven twenty seven years later she is distraught to find her child now grown up, and knowledgeable from “learning [...] and discussing gigantic problems with people like herself” in her absence (Ibid). They have little in common and even less to talk about, which accounts for the woman’s evident misery.

This clear depiction of grief, situated as it is in heaven, is actually quite a startling thing to find, at first glance. It explicitly cracks the facade of perfection that heaven usually upholds. Stormfield also shows his sympathy, and exclaims that he expected heaven to allow “no more pain, no more suffering” within its walls (Twain 67). The wise Bartlett again explains the situation, saying “there’s plenty of pain here – but it don’t kill. There’s plenty of suffering here, but it don’t last” (Ibid). The saving grace is then in the fact that the stay in heaven is eternal, but that any situation which is not ideal, would only seem fleeting in comparison. However, it still invites imperfection into the one concept proclaimed to have none. The satirical barbs of the narrative may here be aimed at humanity’s “preference for believing what is consoling”, showing

that all is not necessarily well in the state of heaven (Feinberg 23). But simultaneously it shows Twain's failure to conceptualise a utopian society.

It is then necessary to expand on the discussion of the utopian discourse, as it speaks to the text as a whole and to the nature of heaven more specifically. But it is also important to explain how Twain's narrative takes part in this discourse only when it loses its footing in satire. Throughout the text, and I suspect that this is entirely unintentional if also inevitable, there appears to be a growing awareness of the impossibility of conceptualising the afterlife in the specific guise of heaven. I contend that this is because heaven is conceptually the archetypal utopian society, and as many critics have made abundantly clear, utopia is an elusive place. What then started as a satire of the traditional Christian heaven turns into another failed construction of a utopian system. Twain's portrait of a new heaven, one less draconian in values than convention allows, cannot conceal its shortcomings, and I suspect the narratological pitfalls encountered may have played a significant part in Twain's continued difficulty in satisfactorily completing the text.

As a genre of fiction, the utopian narrative has become literarily extinct, due to its inherently "unnovelistic" nature (Elliot 104). Krishnan Kumar, in his appraisal of the utopian discourse, states that "utopia is dead – and dead beyond hope of resurrection" (380).¹⁶ Utopian fiction, according to Robert C. Elliot, "systematically attempts to eliminate social conflict, accident, tragedy – precisely those elements which make for [...] fictional development" (104).¹⁷ The construction of a perfect society, even a fictional one, entails an outright exclusion of conflict of any kind. All deviation, all idiosyncrasy, must be ironed out, which understandably would leave such a narrative "stupefyingly boring" (Elliot 119). This leaves heaven without the substance necessary for effective narration. This lack of substance is also linked to the inability to conceive of an effective heaven. Depicting "untested goodness [and] unthreatened happiness" will not constitute a conceptually engaging narrative, therefore that "the *longueurs* of heaven have baffled the greatest writers" (Elliot 117; original emphasis). This certainly proved the case for Twain. As the character Bartlett also explained, "happiness ain't a thing in itself – it's only a contrast with something that ain't pleasant" (Twain 67). In Bartlett's words Twain seems to admit his own humbling before the elusive nature of perfection.

¹⁶ Krishnan Kumar. *Utopia and ante-utopia in modern times*. 1987.

¹⁷ Robert C Elliot. *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre*. 1970.

For Stormfield's allotted destination to be perceived as heaven then, it has to be constructed in such a way that it encapsulates not only a society better than those on earth, but due to the nature of Twain's satire, also one which is an improvement upon its conventional predecessors. Anything less would be a step backwards and could therefore no longer be regarded as a divine reward. Twain's attempt to circumvent the boredom of heaven by allowing some degree of suffering and conflict, a move which shows an understanding of the fundamentally subjective nature of happiness and contentment, proves ultimately fruitless. There is a definite yet imperceptible limit to the amount of conflict, toil or strife which can be included before the heavenly society starts resembling its worldly or fiery counterpart. As the text progresses, its growing expositional tone reflects how depictions of an idyllic state of existence becomes locked in stasis. Though the text makes a valiant effort to remain fascinating, there is no true point in expanding Stormfield's adventures. In utopia, nothing interesting will befall him, and thus to construct heaven is to animate a lifeless thing.

Another aspect of the text then points out how either "utopias often seek to identify themselves negatively" or how they tend to conceal dystopias within themselves (Elliot 117). What I will call divine justice is a foundational principle of Twain's heaven, which stipulates that "[t]he man who didn't get his reward on earth, needn't bother – he will get it here" (Twain 85). A person with potential of any kind, even if it remained unrealised during life, will receive all the credit they are due in heaven. Those who died in obscurity, never having achieved anything on earth, but capable of greatness nonetheless, will be treated with all the respect that they *should* have received were they given the opportunity. So it comes that a tailor named Billings, who's poetry was largely ignored on earth, is hailed as a prophet in heaven, and "Shakespeare walked backwards before [him], and scattered flowers for him to walk on, and Homer stood behind his chair and waited on him at the banquet" (Twain 87). By the same token though, those undeserving of the favour they enjoyed on earth, will not be given any special treatment in heaven. Every soul in heaven seems to be given the exact niche they require to make the most of their natural capabilities. The result is that the "greatest military genius our world ever produced", a bricklayer from Boston, commanded the armies of heaven with "Caesar, and Hannibal, and Alexander, and Napoleon [...] all on his staff", while King Charles the Second became "one of the most popular comedians in the English section", and "Henry the Sixth [kept] a religious book stand" (Twain 93 – 94).

This idea seems to be incredibly noble, and it could perhaps be one of the strongest additions to heaven the text advances. However, “it is a condition of bringing utopias to pass that they shall be deformed in the process” (Elliot 90). Great as this divine justice may be, it does entail the construction of a vast and imposing, strictly hierarchical, power structure in heaven. The notion of equality then becomes nonsensical, as the ranks of heaven consists of “viceroys, princes, governors, sub-governors, sub-sub-governors, and a hundred orders of nobility, grading along down from grand-ducal archangels, stage by stage, till the general populations is struck, where there ain’t any titles” (Twain 83). The nature of this nobility’s power is unclear, and it does not appear as if they have any true function besides making the odd appearance at welcoming ceremonies. However, even if the content of this power structure proves to be nothing more than pomp, what is problematic is the one sitting at its very top.

In what is probably the text’s most vocal critique of religiosity, whether intentional or not, the politics of heaven are explained in a passage which reveals the truly disturbing dystopia at the heart of heaven. In conversation about Stormfield’s chances of ever meeting one of the biblical patriarchs, of course held in very high regard in heaven, the imbalance of power in heaven is discussed. McWilliams explains that Stormfield is wrong in assuming that he found himself in a divine republic, because

[h]ow are you going to have a republic at all, where the head of the government is absolute, holds his place forever, and has no parliament, no council to meddle or make in his affairs, nobody voted for, nobody elected, nobody in the whole universe with a voice in the government, nobody asked to take a hand in matters, and nobody allowed to do it?

(Twain 82).

This seems to be as close a description of absolute power as can be formulated (and one can only ponder the oft quoted corrupting effects thereof). Gone is the perceptive gaze of Orwell’s Big Brother and his illusions of omnipotence, replaced with truly all-seeing eye of the almighty. No other dystopia can have such an effective tyrant. Under God’s rule heaven also ironically becomes the most oppressive dystopia open to the imagination, and utopia’s “malevolent and grimacing *doppelgänger*” bares its teeth (Kumar 99). This ominous authoritarianism is then

perhaps why God is never explicitly portrayed in the narrative, and instead is marked by his absence from the day to day workings of heaven. An encounter with such a force appears too troublesome to include in an improved version of heaven.

Though Twain's "heavenly King" does seem to use this power to benevolent ends (82), and the heaven depicted appears to be a mild and gentle place, with God as ruler it nevertheless becomes "a thorough-going tyranny, a denial of all freedom and of the value of personality" (Elliot 90). If every aspect of heavenly life is controlled and accounted for by God, the role of any others therein becomes void and superfluous. The individual ceases to exist, and autonomy is exchanged for automation. Ironically, then, the predicament arises that the divine intervention of God serves on one hand to improve upon a lot of earthly sorrows, but his divine presence is also utterly totalitarian on the other, making the cost of salvation far too steep. Despite Twain's best efforts then to create a more satisfactory idyllic afterlife, it is plagued by its "mocking contrary echo" (Kumar 100). "Anti-utopia draws its material from utopia and reassembles it in a manner that denies the affirmation of utopia", which is what causes the many conceptual discrepancies evident in heaven (Kumar 100).

This problem stems ultimately from Twain's break with the conventional satirical use of the utopian concept. Feinberg reveals how utopianism is effectively utilised by satirists, explaining that "[i]nstead of stating what is desirable, [the satirist] exaggerates the undesirable characteristics of society and pretends that they have produced a satisfying way of life" (56). Though the desirable alternatives are nearly always implicitly present in such satire, this narrative encounters its most profound difficulties when attempting to explicitly formulate these desirable alternatives. By attempting to improve the traditional heaven, Twain undermines the effect of the satire and opens the text to the various troubles which have laid low the genre of utopian fiction. In each seemingly sensible and secularising improvement Twain makes to the conventions of heaven, Stormfield finds himself in a utopia grown increasingly dystopian.

Reflecting once again on Twain's list mentioned at the start of this chapter, the irony of his final admonition becomes apparent here. He states that "[God] should spend some of His eternities in trying to forgive Himself for making man unhappy when He could have made him happy with the same effort" (Twain in Browne 13). Throughout this text, however, it becomes apparent just how problematic it is to conceive of happiness all-encompassing and eternal. Attempts to create

the perfect society entails that every fault is failure and every failure another step in the direction of dystopia. It is exceedingly easy to imagine an imperfect society, but we lack the cognitive frame of reference to accurately describe one of perfection. It seems all too clear that “[o]ur imagination of the good life is as barren as our imagination of the bad is rich” (Elliot 120). It is significant to note then, that “the word *Utopia* means ‘no-place’”, in that it has been reflected nowhere in human experience and even denies our efforts to conceive of it (Elliot 112).

Evidently, in light of this slew of troubles, unanswerable questions, failed rationalisations, and elusive improvements, Twain’s heaven is in no small amount of trouble. Granted, the text is initially very successful in its satire. Stormfield humorously reveals the warped preconceived notions attached to the Christian idea of the afterlife, and subsequently illustrates the conceptual inconsistencies propagated by its adherents. However, the deconstructive attempts made by the text are overshadowed by the failed reconstruction which accompanies it. Twain’s satirical take on heaven is troubled by the contradictory project of dispelling one irrational utopia only to then replace it with another. By turning away from satire and investing rather in an explicit formulation of a better heaven, the text veers towards utopianism, and the effect of this secularising project is diminished. Like all those who have tried before him, Twain does not succeed in portraying a convincing utopia.

Twain’s project of reconceptualising heaven then ultimately proves to be a utopian venture, one doomed to suffer the fate of utopian fiction. Stormfield subsequently finds himself in an equally irrational paradise, beset from all sides by the inconsistencies Twain wishes to overcome. No amount of angelic wisdom or divine intervention is able to construct a heaven which holds up to close scrutiny, and instead it rather contributes to the formulation of an equally tormented conceptual variation. Despite the proclamation that “[n]o man is allowed to be disappointed [there]”, it seems that those who find themselves saved will undoubtedly express disappointment at some aspect or another (Twain 77). Perhaps the bar has been set too high, in that unlike the case with the bad, no consensus can be reached about what constitutes the good. To strive for conceptual perfection, or even significant improvement, is then understandably still beyond human sensibilities.

The struggles of the text aside, as a secularisation of the preferred Christian afterlife, this text gives an idea of several foundational religious notions which Twain wants his brand of secularity

to go without. It seems that the most important secular alteration is the shift away from strictly subjective salvation, which is offered only to a clearly delineated group of the religious. Stormfield finds a multi-temporal, multicultural and multi-religious assembly of the dead, where even a man like himself, who has engaged in a fair share of sinful activities, is welcomed with a harp, a halo and a fresh pair of wings. The effect is that heaven does “not replicate what a particular generation or nation most values in our present world” (Casey 379), but rather that it is constructed to incorporate a diverse amalgamation of human cultures and creeds. For Twain then, secularisation entails a disregard for the religious propagation of subjective moral systems, and an acceptance of the diversity of human experiences into heaven. To go to hell, it seems, one would have to go rather far out of one’s way. Twain’s is a liberal afterlife, one in which the default allotment seems salvation instead of damnation, and one which dispels several problematically senseless conventions.

Further, this is also a heaven populated by human characters. They do not happily hosanna ad infinitum, or even ad nauseam, and instead continue to engage in meaningful human action and interaction. Twain finds no merit in the notion of an afterlife spent in transcendental praise, but rather advocates that each individual is given the chance to excel in what they do best. In all aspects of heaven, Twain seems to propagate a continuation of worldly concerns and conventions. He subscribes to the notion that secularity is rooted in worldliness, creating an enlarged version of life on earth, in which all manner of humanity is congregated. This also accounts for the fact that he makes a concerted effort to give concrete measurements of heaven, to strip it of its celestial indescribability. But though this vast heaven is filled with human interactions, Twain struggles in his attempts to significantly improve on the celestial template of heaven. Most of his notions are welcome, and he does not explicitly exclude hardship, but nevertheless, the conventions of utopia hobble this secular reimagining. Importantly, and I will return to this several more times throughout the following chapters, Stormfield seems ill at ease with the notion of eternity spent in such a place. He was already bored after thirty years in transit to heaven, what then will he do with himself for the duration of his salvation?

So for all that, it would appear that several traditional notions about heaven need to be rethought, if by no one else then at least by those who continue to propagate its existence. It also becomes clear that to secularise the afterlife, it may be necessary to steer entirely clear of the traditional

western binary of utopian reward and dystopian punishment. If the afterlife is to be developed conceptually, a reimagining of heaven, or hell for that matter, will not suffice. The binary afterlife superimposes too neatly onto the utopian binary, leaving it exposed to a myriad of still unsolved dilemmas. So to conceive of the afterlife in a truly unique way, would necessitate a further distancing from the age old conventions upheld by religion. Perhaps then it is not needed for the afterlife to be cast along this strict division, and in the following chapter I investigate texts which largely rid the afterlife of most of its religious trappings. The last word then belongs to Twain who in his final years predicted the discovery of his most elusive answer: “My life is fading to its close and someday I shall know” (Footnotes to Introduction 37). We can only continue speculating about what he has presumably found out.

Chapter 3

When Higher Authorities Intervene

The focal texts in this chapter are included into a discussion of the secular, because their narratives play out in afterlives which, at least superficially, have no ties to any perceivable religious convention. They portray the afterlife without outward concerns for spiritual questions, and rather use it as an imaginative landscape for essentially human dramas, in which elements of what I argue to be something akin to magical realism can be included, effectively causing a unique blend of fiction, social commentary and post mortem speculation. *Kneller's Happy Campers*, a 1998 novella by Israeli author Etgar Keret,¹⁸ and *Wristcutters: A Love Story*,¹⁹ its 2006 film adaptation, is the story of a young suicide who goes on a road trip through a land of the dead, inhabited solely by other suicides, to find an ex-girlfriend from his past life. *A Bothersome Man*,²⁰ a Norwegian film, directed by Jens Lien and released in 2006, follows the arrival of Andreas in a land of the dead after committing suicide, where he struggles to integrate into the seemingly perfect and efficient society he finds there. All three texts have received mostly favourable critical attention, despite the absence of widespread popular acclaim.²¹ In addition, I must point out that very little, if any, academic attention has been paid to them, which means that secondary sources on them are largely absent here. Instead then, my argument relies on their form, as I draw correlations between the conventions of the magical realist mode and the correlative I find in the religious concept of purgatory.

Though these texts are situated in the afterlife, they avoid explicit religious references, and replace them rather with human characters and interactions, in a context largely familiar to a contemporary western audience, yet also different in several revealing ways. I argue that all three texts abandon attempts to include explicit conventionally theistic and spiritual concepts,

¹⁸ Originally published in 1998 in Hebrew as *Hakaytana Shel Kneller*. First published in English translation in 2001.

¹⁹ The film is directed by Goran Dukic.

²⁰ *Den Brysomme Mannen*.

²¹ *Wristcutters* was nominated for several awards (Independent Spirit Award for screenplay and for first feature, as well as the Grand Jury Prize) at the Sundance film festival, and won several at other such ceremonies. *A Bothersome Man* won three Amandas, the Norwegian film industry's highest accolades, in addition to the Agence du Cinéma Indépendant pour sa Diffusion at the Cannes festival of 2006.

seemingly using the afterlife rather as a quasi-fantastical backdrop for the aims of the narrative. This being the case, I refer to them as secular afterlives by virtue of the fact that they cannot be comfortably situated within the existing binary afterlife of religion and neither do they make specific reference to any theist deity. The closest parallel in religion can, however, be found in purgatory. These texts all have suicides as protagonists, and as such they would be conventionally consigned to purgatory, “the middle state of souls between salvation and damnation” (Casey 226). As Casey explains, “the idea of purgatory was of a place or state where the soul is afforded the grace to repent”, a place where tribulations were faced which would purify the dead of unabsolved sin before being saved, or in failing to repent, being condemned to the fires of hell (Casey 231).²² But these texts alter the conventions of purgatory in one crucial way: they do not offer the possibility of repentance and subsequent salvation. The protagonists do not face tribulations which allow them to transcend from this middle state, but as will become clear, they may very well descend. I argue that this is a result of the loose connection these narratives have to this religious conception, and in this is I find important secular implications. The similarity, but not complete correlation, to religious notions is evident in all distinguishing characteristics of these afterlives, albeit always more implicit than explicit, and this is what ultimately leads to narrative disruption and an implied secular commentary.

So, though these texts show no clear superficial signs of religiosity, as will become clear, they do rely on implicit spiritual or religious conceptual elements. But the fact that these afterlives avoid explicit spiritual questions to such a large degree, discarding so much of what Twain struggled with in Chapter 1, and replacing it instead with a more grounded and human narrative, focuses the reading ultimately towards a specific concept. However, this concept poses what is perhaps one of the most crucial difficulties in conceptualising the secular afterlife. Of specific interest here is the way in which these texts deal with the notion of authority in the afterlife, and the systems of governance that are set in place to maintain this space. At the climax of each text, the protagonists confront figures who operate under the auspices of some largely unexplained organisation which constitutes the narrative powers that be. In these confrontations, which I argue closely resemble circumstances of *deus ex machina* despite the essentially godless nature

²² He locates the first ecclesiastical mention of purgatory in 1274 in Rome (Casey 226), and continues to explain that this notion is “hardly existent in scripture, shakily supported by tradition, productive of numerous abuses, responsible for a vast extension of clerical power”, but nevertheless concluding that it is one “Rome’s happiest inspirations” (Casey 228).

of the setting, the narratives attempt to answer the seemingly unanswerable. They attempt to explain the system of rules which regulates the workings of a space which exists outside the physical universe, and therein encounters difficulty. The afterlife essentially requires a post-human, post-corporeal condition, and it becomes exceedingly difficult to construct it from an ideological or narrative framework which renounces transcendental claims. When the narratives reach their climax, they also reach the inevitable illogical pitfall which they had skirted up to that point, and both texts then enact a sort of divine intervention to get to the other side. To explain how the narratives reach this seemingly unavoidable contradiction, I must initially explain the settings against which both play out, pointing out the various similarities which enable the simultaneous analysis, while explaining how they engage to a certain degree with the notion of purgatory. Also, as has been done throughout, I need to identify in what way the characters are free to engage in these afterlives, before ultimately showing how these narratives engage with the delineating line between religion and secularity.

Of initial note, though, is that *Kneller's Happy Campers* and *Wristcutters* are used in conjunction, however, to avoid confusion due to trivial differences between novella and film, like character names, I rely on the filmic adaptation of Keret's novella to fill in the background details.²³ I will also refer to them jointly as *Wristcutters*, to avoid confusion with the character name Kneller. Mainly, this expedites the process by limiting the analytic shift between film and textual narrative, however this also aids in fleshing out the minimalistic prose of the novella.²⁴ Also, convoluted as this sounds, the Americanised film of the English translation of the original does not differ significantly on matters concerning this analysis until their endings. The effect of this is thus relatively limited to the use of character names and descriptions of the filmic landscape and tone which is more concretely depicted in this mode. In their respective endings, however, the film diverges from the novella, after which point the film becomes less useful to my argument. The novella does nothing to ultimately alleviate the troubles of the protagonist,

²³ I do wish to avoid concerns of translation here, as admittedly the novella and the Norwegian film under scrutiny were originally penned in languages I am unfamiliar with. Should some nuances have gone missing in translation, I contend firstly that I regard these translations and adaptations as texts in their own rights, but also that due to the thematic focus of my investigation, the fact that they have been translated does not directly impact my argument.

²⁴ In a review of Keret's work for the Guardian, the critic Todd McEwan states that Keret is "not much of a stylist - you get the impression that he throws three or four of these stories off on the bus to work every morning" (McEwan online).

whereas the Americanised film, perhaps too aware of audience expectations, relies once more on *deus ex machina* to ensure a more optimistic end for the protagonist.²⁵

The gist of my analysis ultimately hinges on my contention that both these texts bear striking resemblances to the conventions of the magical realist style. Both incorporate a subtle mixture of realism and the fantastical, which at once grounds the text and displaces it beyond the realm of the living world. Admittedly, the magical realist narrative is conventionally located in the known world, though oftentimes in locales which appear to have fallen between the cracks and thus can be quite dissimilar to actual global spaces (I think of settings like Macondo, Gabriel Garcia Marquez' archetypal magical realist location,²⁶ or any of the familiar yet subtly altered Japanese backdrops to be found in the works of Haruki Murakami). The narratives in question, however, play out in their own distinct versions of the afterlife, which is obviously removed from any locale in the known world, but both rely on seemingly realistic landscapes, infused by elements which defy conventional logic. Narratively these fantastical elements distinguish the afterlife in certain key ways from life, but they also open a line of investigation into the boundary between religion and secularity. This is because the “magical” in the texts are argued to be idiosyncratic variations of religious norms, elements which would be considered religious were they not displaced to afterlives which avoid specific religious connotations.

Importantly, the magical realist form requires that “key events have no logical or psychological explanation”, and that the protagonists accepts that “the unreal seems to be part of reality” (Leal 122 – 123). This is allowed here by situating these narratives in the afterlife, the unknowable post-mortem experience, and thus also outside the confines of the known universe. The cognitive estrangement can be more easily explained by the fact that these narrative settings are specifically not of this world, but at the same time, these narratives depict strikingly recognisable contemporary landscapes. Like other works in this literary tradition, the uncanny infiltrates “normality”, but it goes largely unexplained and unquestioned. Against an otherwise familiar and even realistic backdrop, is found “an ‘irreducible element’ of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them” (Faris 167). An explanation of

²⁵ This same difference is also evident in the general tone of these texts. The film is composed to ultimately produce an feel-good road movie cum love story from a novella which shares much the same plot but much less of this optimism.

²⁶ Garcia Marquez. *One hundred Years of Solitude*. 1967.

the distinct narrative landscapes and the characters' interaction therein and therewith, will show how they coincide with this magical realist form, but also how they distort the form throughout, and ultimately break from it when they reach their aforementioned climactic confrontations. Importantly, at this breaking point, the extent to which these secularised afterlives engage problematically with notions of religion becomes clear and the secular implications become evident.

A Bothersome Man opens with the protagonist, Andreas, throwing himself in front of a subway train, and then arriving by bus at a lonely gas station in the middle of nowhere. On an interesting side note, and this is never explained further, when Andreas arrives he seems to be incredibly worn, a bushy beard, dirty cap and filthy clothes hinting at some arduous journey which had filled the interval between his death and arrival. From his demeanour, however, he is clearly puzzled about what exactly is happening to him. A one-man welcome party drives him into an unnamed but modern town, where he is shown to his new apartment, and told that he starts work in the morning at a respectable firm. The urban space he finds himself in is entirely nondescript and interchangeable, it could be a city from any contemporary western location, however this one is pristine and shows no signs of dilapidation, with neat buildings rising high into the bleak sky. Everything seems in order and efficiency and civility surrounds him in another ostensibly utopian afterlife. Everyone around him appears to be middle aged and relatively successful. But the muted colourlessness in which the city is portrayed, grey and beige seemingly in high fashion among the dead, is indicative of a deeper lifelessness which lies at its core. At work Andreas fastidiously crunches numbers, surrounded by a polite crowd with constant but empty smiles. Though it is never explained, it appears that the city is entirely inhabited by fellow suicides, the complete lack of children perhaps indicative of a suicidal disillusionment or dissatisfaction which takes time to cultivate.

Something very similar is found in *Wristcutters*, which opens with the protagonist Zia²⁷ slitting his wrists to find himself in the afterlife especially reserved for suicides. They all inhabit a nameless place which is entirely nondescript, and could be a relatively rundown part of any contemporary western town. In the opening chapter of the novella the protagonist explicitly states that “it mostly reminds [him] of Tel Aviv”, where he lived as one of the living, while his

²⁷ The protagonist is called “Mordy” in *Kneller's Happy Campers*.

German roommate says that “this place could just as well be Frankfurt” (Keret 3).²⁸ It is anywhere and nowhere, reminding of home, but not at all homey. The appearance of the place and the faded colouring of the cinematography contribute to create a feeling of bleakness, a gloomy desultoriness, and an appropriate sense of lifelessness. The streets are empty, the buildings are dilapidated, the vehicles are shabby, the very landscape washed and worn. Reflecting on the gloomy atmosphere, Zia wonders “[w]ho could think of a better punishment, really? Everything’s the same here, it’s just a little worse”. He even contemplates committing suicide again, but feared “end[ing] up in a bigger shithole than this one”. He spends most of his time either working at a fast food restaurant called Kamikaze Pizza or frequenting a bar named Stiff Drinks. Everywhere are small signs which indicate, to both characters and audience, that this is the afterlife, without which the setting could easily have been a particularly drab area in any living society. A tedious pointlessness pervades every aspect of Zia’s life, until he goes in search of his ex-girlfriend.

Both texts thus portray a modern version of the afterlife, one which has been adjusted to resemble contemporary, broadly western, landscapes. This is then what allows *A Bothersome Man* to act as effective commentary on the difficulties of engaging others in an increasingly materialistic society and *Wristcutters* to contain an unusual modern day love story. Gone are the pearly gates and fiery lakes, but what remains is not far from the lifeless wastes of limbo. Still, these purgatorial spaces come with all the amenities and trappings of contemporary life, variations, one dishevelled and one shallow, of the western world. Conceptualising the afterlife along contemporary avenues and specifically eliminating the spiritual paraphernalia and characters which conventionally decked its halls, allows for depictions thereof to reflect recognisable society and human behaviour more closely. Perhaps it is exactly the contemporary reimagining which would make the inclusion of explicit spiritual agents or attributes seem disingenuous. It does seem problematic to effectively superimpose archaic celestial tropes over contemporary western settings. So a great measure of what I consider to constitute the secularity inherent to these texts is bound to the fact that they have a contemporary setting.

On the other hand, however, conceiving of post-mortem existence in a clearly defined and tangible form, and one which resembles purgatory, requires some alterations to distinguish it

²⁸ Mordy in the novella is originally Israeli, while in the film Zia is American.

from the living world (or heaven or hell for that matter). In *A Bothersome Man* there is the shallowness encountered in all of Andreas's fellow inhabitants, a complete absorption in material concerns, mostly articulated in their single-minded devotion to the intricacies of proper interior decoration.²⁹ In *Wristcutters*, besides the forlorn atmosphere, there are additional indicators like the fact that the night sky is bereft of any stars, an explicit reminder that this place is outside the physical universe. These elements are narrative attributes which act to distinguish the afterlife from the corporeal world. They may seem mundane, but they pose legitimate concerns to the protagonists, who cannot help but compare them with experiences of the life before. The landscape is deceptively reminiscent of life and home, which is why the differences stand out all the more disconcertingly. But both these texts also rely on the evocation of a gloomy atmosphere, of a version of the world which is in some crucial way diminished. This contributes to the purgatorial imagery, in that it does not have the vibrancy of life, but neither is it as tortuous as hell nor as blissful as heaven. Along with several other aspects of these afterlives which follow, these elements then also act as magical markers, elements of the outlandish interspersed in an otherwise realistic setting.

One of the facets of magical realism, which has been identified among others by Jeanne Delbaere-Garant (1995)³⁰, is concerned with the intricate role the physical landscape plays in such works. He uses the term "mythic realism" to denote a "display [of] deep connectedness between character and place" (Delbaere-Garant 252). What distinguishes this is that "the interpenetration of the magic and the real is no longer metaphorical but literal; the landscape is no longer passive, but active" (*Ibid*). This mythic element is in evidence in both texts, where the protagonists have encounters with aspects of the landscape, and the very nature of their setting reveals a degree of agency, an ability to intervene in a unique way. When Andreas, in a bid to escape this place, attempts to follow the bus which had delivered him to the shores of the afterlife, his plan is thwarted by his surroundings. He drives after the bus, along a dusty and desolate road which stretches into the desert, only to fall quickly behind regardless of how fast he goes. It never seems like the bus drives particularly fast, but somehow he keeps losing

²⁹ This aspect of the film could also be read as specific commentary on the Scandinavian preoccupation with material and aesthetic perfection, and indeed Andreas is regularly asked to identify which pieces of furniture he finds most attractive from a catalogue which could comfortably wear the Ikea logo. For the purposes of the analysis, however, I will read this as broader criticism of materialistic drives in the contemporary West.

³⁰ Jeanne Delbaere-Garant. "Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English". 1995.

ground. Eventually he loses sight of the bus, as a strong wind buffets him with the barren sands. Getting out of his car he sees the tracks of the bus, they stop abruptly and only the desert stretches into the distance, endlessly. This forces him to give up and return to the unnamed city. Andreas is prohibited from escaping the afterlife by the landscape which surrounds him, a landscape which defies conventional logic and actively works against his attempted escape. The bus then seemingly acts like Charon's ferry, the only thing that can traverse the division between life and death.

Further, Andreas quickly becomes aware that his relationship with the pseudo-material nature of this post-mortem existence is an empty one. Food has no smell or taste, no amount of alcohol can intoxicate him, and even when injury befalls him, there is no lasting effect, a severed finger healing spontaneously. In the bathroom of a bar, realising that the alcohol has no effect on him, he hears someone bemoaning this state of affairs: "It's terrible...Nothing tastes any good...And it's all like that...It's not that it needs to be nice all the time. But once in a while...". In a variety of small ways the protagonist engages with his setting and his situation, and in small ways his experience of death runs counter to the rules which had governed his experiences during life. This ties in to the varied speculations that Casey identifies, in which religious thinkers pondered the bodily condition of the departed, as "[a] question that continued to exercise theologians was whether the risen body would be physically identical with that of the person who had died" (327). Superficially then, Andreas looks identical, but the way in which he interacts with his surroundings and those around him is restricted. "Many theologians had argued, for instance, that the risen body will not need to eat nor exercise other bodily functions" (Casey 329), which certainly seems the case here, as for Andreas all of these routine human functions appear to be mostly performance.

On the one hand, then, these experiences are elements of what is essentially the magical or fantastical, incorporated but never satisfactorily explained. On the other, however, these elements also exacerbate Andreas's growing unease in this afterlife. Though he finds himself embodied, no satisfaction seems to be available for the senses, which makes the pursuit of material pleasures seem even more pointless. This change seems to be rooted then rather in his surroundings than in his person. He has senses, as will become apparent, but nothing stimulates them, and his frustrated desires amass. In the aforementioned bathroom scene, despite Andreas's

clear inability to get drunk, a man lies slumped on the ground, vomit staining his chin and lapels. Presumably the alcohol has no more effect on him than it does on Andreas, yet he fakes it, pretending to be severely intoxicated despite the obvious fallacy behind his act. Everything Andreas encounters seem to be facade, a very thin veneer of presumably normal human interaction, but the cracks are starting to show, and the insubstantiality which lies beneath it is what disconcerts Andreas so dramatically.

Similar narrative quirks are found in *Wristcutters*. On the road with his friend Eugene, Zia discovers that the former's car has a kind of localised black hole beneath the passenger seat. The effect is that anything dropped beneath the seat is sucked in and lost, with everything from lighters and sunglasses to maps and cassettes falling into oblivion. No explanation is given by Eugene, who only tells Zia that there is a kind of "Bermuda triangle" under the seat and that "things just disappear down there". This is another small and seemingly insignificant break from conventional reality. The physical nature of this afterlife does not adhere strictly to the limitations imposed by physical existence, and is imbued with a certain degree of agency, thereby distinguishing it from life.

In addition, the girl they pick up hitchhiking, Mikal, also rues the fact that here they find themselves completely incapable of smiling. One of the scenes shows the characters trying hard to smile, even pulling on their lips to force the outward expression of mirth, yet they never convince themselves or the viewer. This may seem to be a mere physiological anomaly, yet it is indicative of the deeper sense of morbidity and loss which permeates the landscape. By including this small abnormality the narrative gives an explicit indication that there is no true happiness to be experienced in this afterlife, that in resembling purgatory it is a thoroughly joyless place.

Perhaps the most interesting depiction of the uncanny in the novella and film is seen when Zia, Eugene and Mikal, arrive at the compound where Kneller lives. While driving, their car's headlights, which had been irreparably broken, suddenly come to life, just in time to see a man sprawled in the middle of the road. They swerve wildly, crash their car and confront the man, who turns out to be Kneller. He takes them to his "camp", where they are soon distracted by more of these insignificant "miracles". Zia sees a man sitting on a chair, floating several feet off the ground; after lighting a cigarette, Mikal tosses away the burning match, which stops mid-air, and topples upwards, to become the only point of light in the blank night sky; Eugene catches a

fish, to see it change colour several times in his hands. It appears that the area Kneller inhabits is drenched in a strange kind of magic, which acts independently upon the characters. In an explicit nod towards another important convention of magical realism, Kneller tells the characters not to pay attention, that “they don’t mean a thing”. Continually unimpressed Kneller exclaims: “You wanna give it a name? Call it a miracle, but it’s not a significant one” (Keret 53). When Zia becomes frustrated at not being able to produce one of these miracles, Kneller explains that “as long as you want it so bad, it’s not going to happen”, and that “the only way it’s going to work, is if it doesn’t matter”.

This conversation is important for two reasons. Of initial note is the fact that, despite his reservations, Kneller calls these occurrences miracles. The use of this term specifically draws a correlation to divine agency. Yet through Kneller, the text shows a clear uneasiness in using such a loaded term, this phenomenon resembles a spiritual notion while not entirely being one, this place is purgatorial without being purgatory. Nevertheless, the superficial disregard for religious concepts seems to be disrupted by these insignificant miracles, literally bubbling to the surface, indications of the religious concepts which underlie the contemporary facade. This will become clearer as my argument advances and the problematic reliance on religious concepts is further revealed, so I will return to these miracles again later.

But for now, this conversation is also informative in explaining at once how the magical is incorporated into the mundane, while reinforcing the notion that this is a process which should not receive undue attention by the characters that experience it. As Luis Leal explains about the magical realist mode, “the author does not need to justify the mystery of events”, but rather hide it in plain sight, as if there is no mystery to begin with (Leal 123). In what amounts to the literary equivalent of quantum physics, the weird only happens when no one is paying attention. Kneller again reinforces the similarity to this magical realist convention, telling the quizzical Zia that it is “[s]trange [he] even noticed. Most people don’t” (Keret 53). To scrutinise these elements which do not make conventional sense is to attempt to understand them, which would strip them of their novelty. This seems to be quite an effective narrative and imaginative tool to utilise in the conceptualisation of the afterlife, as it allows idiosyncrasies which create a strong differentiation from the physical universe, while opening a virtually bottomless chest of wonders with which to furnish this landscape. But these fantastical alterations to reality are not limited to the landscape

and the dead characters are also imbued with some post-mortem attributes which defy conventional notions of reality.

Throughout *A Bothersome Man* Andreas becomes increasingly discomfited in his interactions with the other dead by his constant inability to find any semblance of humanity around him. His beautiful girlfriend, Anne-Britt, talks of nothing else than interior decorating and the renovations which can be made to the house they share. Despite her obvious physical allure, as a lover she is nearly inanimate, prompting Andreas to fornicate with growing desperation in a series of increasingly uncomfortable sexual encounters. Eventually, his desire to experience anything real, anything that makes him feel alive, turns him to infidelity, but his love affair reveals to be equally shallow when the lover in question turns out to share in the compulsive materialism. Horrified and disillusioned, Andreas throws himself on the subway tracks once again, perhaps hoping that death will confirm that there had ever been a life here. But in this he discovers the extent to which his strangely embodied self abandons the conventions of reality. He is crushed by the train, and dragged up and down the tracks for several hours, before the trains come to a halt.³¹ Andreas lies bloodied and broken on the tracks, but the dead cannot die again. Slowly and grotesquely he pulls himself together and stumbles back home.

Again the magical realist form is evident, as Andreas' indestructibility reveals how "[i]rreducible magic often means disruption of the ordinary logic of cause and effect" (Faris 168). The same action which killed him in the world of the living, does not repeat the favour in the land of the dead, thus breaking the chain of causality. Having died once, death is no longer an option, which gives the dead protagonist an unusual kind of immortality. This fantastical dimension to the narrative is also treated with the same nonchalance which seems so integral to the form. Anne-Britt's only response to seeing Andreas in gory tatters is to ask whether he would like to join some friends in go-carting. Similarly, when Andreas sees a man, who had presumably been similarly disaffected by this place, impaled on a spiked fence after jumping from an office window, no one else pays any attention. In the bright light of day, the man's entrails spill to the

³¹ There is some confusion among reviewers about whether this is in fact the same scene with which the film opens, which would mean that the film shows this, then flashes back and works its way back to this point. Interestingly, the scene is set in exactly the same station, Andreas is wearing the same clothes, and the same couple is seen kissing mechanically off to one side. I disagree, though, because in the opening scene he appears to be killed the moment he jumps onto the tracks. In this scene, however, the train comes to an unexpected stop inches from Andreas' prone figure. He believes himself to be saved, but moments later, the train pulls away and rolls over him.

sidewalk while several people walk by uncaringly. As the living do not question the mundane, neither do the dead question the morbidly unordinary.

Wristcutters applies the same device, and the characters have physical attributes which fall well outside of normality. Here every person bears the marks of the way in which they “offed” themselves. Scarred wrists and bullet-holed heads act as grim reminders of fatal inflictions; in the novella there is even a conversation with an ex-suicide bomber who resembles a human jigsaw puzzle.³² On the one hand these signs of demise interestingly juxtapose human agents with the demeanour of death, relatively normal characters with the appearance of corpses. On the other, they act again as markers of differentiation, small instances of the strange which are accepted as commonplace. But though these scars are commonplace and mostly unremarked upon, it is considered taboo to enquire after the method of someone’s suicide. The source of the strange lies in personal tragedy, and is thus almost forcefully disregarded. Yet unlike the predicament Andreas faces, further death is possible here, as the misguided Messiah King will eventually reveal.

Though I do not argue that these texts are in effect works of magical realism, for the argument will certainly become forced, these attributes then all form the basis for the comparison to the magical realist form. The correlations I have drawn concerning the incorporation of “magical” elements, but also specifically the nonchalance with which they are treated in the narrative, are key to the continuation of my analysis. These texts use the same foundational reliance on settings which are essentially realistic. But additional to the realistic setting are the elements which fall well outside of conventional normality, the elements of what is arguably post mortem magic, or an uneasy sort of spirituality. Lastly, the similarity to the magical realist style lies in the way these magical elements form an integral part of the narrative, but go largely unquestioned and ultimately unexplained.

The cumulative effect of these similarities with the magical realist form is that they may perhaps be measured against this narrative mode. Considering the nature of the subject matter, it seems that the form fits the content, “where the principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances”

³² Eugene refers to girls who killed themselves in less traumatic ways as “Juliets”, because like Shakespeare’s tragic heroine, they died outwardly unscathed.

(Leal 122). The narratives are not interested in overly elaborate fantasies, but rather use smaller fantasies which enable an interesting insight into the way the human characters interact with their world, each other, and ultimately their own mortality. The most important correlation to magical realism, besides the incorporation of magical bric-a-brac, is that these occurrences are never explicitly investigated or pursued. It is precisely in the seemingly offhand manner with which they are treated that the form achieves much of its strength, allowing a “commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (Rushdie in Faris 174). What is important for this style of fiction is that the improbable should be accepted as is, and not queried or explained.

It is perhaps unsurprising that these texts share common traits with magical realism, because this narrative style has always had an intimate relationship with the afterlife, and frequently depicts “[f]luid boundaries between the world of the living and the dead” (Faris 172). It does not seem coincidental then that magical realist attributes can be found along this fluid boundary, in a purgatorial halfway home between the living and the dead. Yet the protagonists’ understandable quest for alleviation from this unsatisfying middle ground leads them to a direct contravention with the narrative form by scrutinizing what the form requires to go unchallenged. This problem arises when the protagonists, as a result of their own investigations, are subjected in different ways to a confrontation with the undefined organisations which seem to be in some form of control of these purgatorial places.

Throughout *A Bothersome Man* several shots show grey and unmarked utility vehicles which roam the streets. Some are street cleaning vehicles and others appear to be used primarily as transport for the afterlife’s equivalent of civil servants. Clad in unmarked grey overalls, they are the ones who remove the impaled body from the fence and wash the gore away, they are the ones who find Andreas wandering brokenly through the streets, after failing to die on the subway tracks, and who subsequently take him home. Along with these mysterious grey-collar workers, I include the bus driver and the man who welcomed Andreas upon his arrival at the station, who all hint at some form of governance for the afterlife. Their mandate is never explained and it remains uncertain to what ends they perform their duties. But their unexplained presence in the afterlife, and the fact that they seem to be the agents of some greater authority, is instrumental in the confrontation with that authority which disrupts the similarities to magical realism.

His second suicide having proved ineffectual, and still unable to engage anyone in deeper human interaction, Andreas stumbles upon a tiny tear in the fabric of the afterlife. This small crack again falls securely within the magical, being a literal depiction of a “curious fracture in the fabric of an otherwise entirely realistic [narrative]” (Delbaere-Garant 251). In a cellar below street level, he finds a small hole in a wall, through which a strange music comes. The tiny hole leads to the world of the living and the smells and sounds of life drift through it with excruciating allure.³³ His senses, which have been so wholly deprived, are suddenly awash in faint yet substantial sounds and scents. With growing urgency then, Andreas works to enlarge the hole, to dig his way out of the purposeless purgatory. Finally, sensing he is close, he forces himself into the narrow confine and tries to claw his way through. His hand breaks through the wall of a room, which in contrast to every shot before this one, is brightly coloured and warmly adorned, the sounds of emotive human interaction hanging in the air, and he has just enough time to grab a handful of cake which stands cooling within his reach, before the grey-clad men show up and drag him away, blissfully enraptured in devouring the sumptuous morsel. It is a literal taste of life, confirming all of Andreas’s suspicions that his afterlife is one bereft of any substance. But having thus apparently violated the regulations of the afterlife, Andreas is delivered to higher authorities, for the confrontation that disrupts the narrative form and breaks the magical realist mode.

This same confrontation is instigated by less interventional methods in *Wristcutters*, where the protagonist actively attempt to peek behind the curtains of this new reality. When Mikal joins the search for Zia’s girlfriend, she does so for her own reasons. As she explains, “I’m looking for the people in charge”. This statement is met with incredulity, and Eugene asks her if she ever went looking for God when she was still alive. Unfazed, she continues to make inquiries at every juncture in search of signs for a higher governing organisation, because she believes she has been wrongly allocated to this afterlife.³⁴ Her search for the authorities, as well as Zia’s interest in witnessing a “significant miracle”, leads them both to Messiah King. This is then an explicit attempt by the characters to discover what lies behind the curtain of this existence and also

³³ From the vividly idyllic stylistics of the room on the other side of the hole, which stands in such stark contrast to the Andreas’ own faded surroundings, it could be argued that this is possibly the contemporary equivalent of a heavenly afterlife. This possibility bears some further significance which will be touched upon, but it does not alter the analysis drastically.

³⁴ Mikal died of a heroin overdose, and did not act intentionally to end her own life, reason enough, she believes, to grant her return to life.

brings me back to a quote I mentioned earlier, wherein Zia implies that this afterlife is some form of “punishment”. If Zia is correct in assuming it to be a punishment, or rather a place where repentance is to be effected, it presupposes some system which governs the distribution of the dead. The fact that this afterlife is populated solely by suicides entails that there is at least one other afterlife, where “people who die normally” end up. As he explicitly ponders; “why only suicides anyway? Why not normal dead people too? Like somehow the whole thing doesn’t make any sense” (Keret 56). This inevitably leads to a questioning of the logic of this place, and the institutions or regulations which oversee its functioning. Eventually Zia and Mikal do find the People in Charge, the P.I.C, when they arrive at the fraudulent Messiah King’s attempt to perform a significant miracle.

This is then where these texts diverge from this convention of magical realism, in that they attempt to directly question the source of the uncanny elements they incorporate. But this is an uncomfortable divergence, as there are no easy answers to such a line of inquiry. The logic is supposed to escape those who are subject to it, and trying to discover the underlying principles is often explicitly discouraged within these narratives. Finding answers would negate the existence of the uncanny elements included, explaining the magical removes all of its magic. This is then the reason why both texts inevitably reach a gap in the narrative; when the protagonists actually find the logic of the magic, or at least those who are in the know, the narratives break with the magical realist style and can continue only through enacting a type of divine intervention.

After being forcefully restrained, Andreas is driven to a hitherto unvisited locale, a large and official looking building which several of the grey clad workers enter and exit. It seems that this would be the main office, the headquarters of the overseers of the afterlife. In the square a statue of some winged being rises high. Obviously Andreas’ attempted escape has been noted by the higher powers and they are not impressed. A group of neat and nondescript people come from the building and crowd close to the car wherein Andreas now sits lost and alone. One woman, her smile never leaving her face, approaches the car and taps on the window. Her dialogue is short and pointed, and Andreas never responds: “Most people are happy here Andreas. They think it’s a nice city. They have everything they need. People are happy,” she turns to see the group behind her nod as one, and concludes, “The majority of people are happy. And we’re proud of that”. They seem to be aware of the shortcomings of their afterlife, but take pride in its

efficiency. It appears that meaningful human activity and interaction is sacrificed to ensure that this afterlife runs smoothly, thus revealing dystopia to lie just beneath the surface of what initially seemed utopian. Andreas, who requires that more than his purely materialistic needs are met, remains stoically silent.

In Andreas' encounter with these nondescript authorities, we see the effect of trying to explain the system at work behind the afterlife and the forces in control of the magical. Even though this organisation remains mysterious and undefined, they are representatives of some higher order, who are in possession of knowledge which eludes the other inhabitants of this afterlife. In the end credits the members of the group are listed as "Forvalter" one through four. This term can be translated to mean "manager", or to imply an official of sorts. These managers of the afterlife then understand the workings of this place and are also agents of a certain degree of control and regulation. Despite the fact that this confrontation reveals nothing more than the existence of this organisation, leaving their actual authority and workings a mystery, the elements of magic are placed in a different light and the magicians are revealed. The problem stems from the fact that the text, perhaps unaware that it falls within the auspices of magical realism, attempts to include an explicit search for answers to the uncanny. But there can be no satisfactory answer to these questions, partly because that is the very nature of the uncanny, but also because the elements of magic are only effective as long as they remain unexplained. Inevitably then the narrative relies on *deus ex machina* to conceive of some viable answer, a heretofore unmentioned organisation is revealed, it intervenes in the plot and brings about the abrupt denouement of the narrative. But this narrative device is disruptive; on the one hand it does not reveal the true foundations of this magical landscape, only revealing those who have the answers but who are unwilling to share them. Simultaneously though, introducing such an unforeseen authority to intervene in the plot disrupts the narrative, as any divine intervention must do, and somewhat hobbles the denouement.

In *Wristcutters* the seemingly divine intervention is enacted even more directly than for Andreas. When Zia, Mikal and Kneller arrive at the compound where Messiah King is to perform his miracle, they find a large group of his followers, all clad in pseudo-military garb. It is revealed that the self-styled Messiah King had been some kind of cult leader in life, who had driven a knife into his heart so that he may return from the grave to reveal that there was a way to liberate

the soul from the confines of physical life. His presence in this afterlife is the obvious proof that his ambitious endeavour had failed. The significant miracle he promised to perform is a repetition of this trick, committing suicide once again only to return. But he too is unaware of the nature of the magic which permeates the landscape, and does not comprehend that it is not to be harnessed or understood, merely accepted. So again he stabs himself through the heart and again he dies, presumably off to an even “bigger shithole than this one”. It is uncertain where his second demise leads, but what is certain is that “the place for the ones who do it a second time is a thousand times more grim, ‘cause there aren’t that many people there and everybody’s totally fucked up” (Keret 85). The crowd then gets understandably upset, and suddenly Kneller is seen talking into a radio, calling for backup. In the sky there appear three parachutists, dressed all in white, the very image of the gods descending from the heavens to intervene in the unfolding of the plot. At the same time several white vans pull up and the agents of the People in Charge, of which Kneller is a member, start to disperse the crowd and regain order.

This narrative befalls the same fate as the other, the search for and discovery of the higher authorities, which constitutes a breaking of the form. The explanation the text ventures cannot hold up, because there is no way to make sense of the fantastical, and incorporating the vaguely defined P.I.C does not constitute an actual answer. Instead it is a stopgap, a way to pave over the otherwise unbridgeable pitfall the narrative has been working towards. Intervention from a higher order is invoked to explain away the strange, but it is in the interest of the narrative that the peculiar remains unexplained. The arrival of the P.I.C is then at once an act of *deus ex machina* and an explanation for the source behind the magical, which diminishes the effect that the fantastical has come to have throughout the narrative while bringing the novella to an abrupt and somewhat unsatisfying end. This seems then to be the unforeseen setback which accompanies the divergence from this narrative form; when an investigation is lodged into the nature of the magical the narrative runs into a dead end and higher powers are needed to sort out the mess. But the invocation of such powers too drastically disrupts the narrative flow, necessitating the stunted ending.

In the eventual denouement of these narratives, then, the effect of breaking magical realist convention can be seen. After the nondescript authorities deliberate for a few moments, Andreas is put in the same car which had brought him from the gas station at the beginning of the film.

He is driven back to the station and bunched into the storage compartment of the bus. The bus pulls away and starts rattling violently after a while. When the bus comes to a halt, Andreas climbs out into a cold and blasted landscape, amid what appears to be an icy blizzard. The camera remains inside the storage compartment as the bus pulls away, leaving the bothersome man to some new and presumably worse fate as the film ends. Having peered behind the veil and seen the magicians at work, Andreas can no longer live with the magic. The anonymous organisation in control cannot allow him to remain once he has confronted them. Seeing the system of governance behind this reality, Andreas is exiled and left to an uncertain, but undoubtedly worse, fate. Thus once the narrative mode is broken by this character, there is no way for him to stay within the narrative.

A similar situation is found in Keret's work and its adaptation. In the novella, the intervention of the P.I.C is incredibly abrupt and it is followed by one last chapter only three pages long. Significantly, this climactic penultimate chapter is entitled: "**chapter twenty five** – in which a white van arrives and everything comes undone" (Keret 82). The title does seem to reflect the effect of this intervention, and the abrupt ending it prompts. Divine intervention is a hard act to follow, especially since it so jarringly influences the narrative, and there is not much left for the denouement. During the uproar after Messiah King's death Mikal pleads her case to the P.I.C. They discover that she was mistakenly allocated to this afterlife, and she is consequently granted passage back to life, whisked away from the scene without a goodbye.³⁵ On Zia's fate, however, the novella and the film diverge, and the American film softens the blow that the novella deals. Zia is a true suicide, and no clerical error was made in his case, thus he remains behind in the novella. This narrative then ends with Zia heading back to the town he starts off in and the job at Kamikaze's, Mikal goes back to life, Kneller returns to P.I.C headquarters and Eugene stays behind at the camp. Even the old girlfriend Zia finally found at the scene of the failed miracle proves to have lost the characteristics he once loved her for and is not heard from again. The ending reinforces the notion that there is no joy to be had in this afterlife. A sense of despair is evoked in that several of the main characters up and disappear, leaving the protagonist alone, though he does express some faint hope that Mikal might again find her way to this place. So though Zia is not ejected from the landscape and narrative like Andreas, the denouement does

³⁵ It is never explained why, instead of being sent to the afterlife where those who died naturally go, she is sent back to life.

not bring a narratively satisfying conclusion to the quest of the protagonist. The intervention by the P.I.C forces the narrative to return to its start, leaving the protagonist friendless and loveless without prospects for improvement. The disrupting influence of the gods arriving on the scene is that every other narrative concern seems to be swiftly moved aside, and the narrative is jarringly brought back to its start.

In the film, however, escape is granted by Kneller, who having befriended Zia, takes pity on him for losing the girl he loves. On the lonely drive back home, Zia drops another cassette, which holds sentimental value, into the black hole under the passenger seat of the car. In a last instance of investigating the logic behind the magic, he tries to retrieve the cassette, but is sucked into the black hole as well. The scene cuts away to Kneller in the file room of the P.I.C. He walks among the high stacked shelves, finds Zia's folder and blows a tuft of white feathers from the pages before concealing it in his jacket pocket, presumably erasing Zia from their records. We then see Zia falling through the black hole, amid other lost objects, and Kneller's voice is heard saying: "Zia, you are one lucky son of a bitch. It pays to know people in high places huh". A blinding white light follows and then Zia opens his eyes to find himself in the hospital, his suicide having been unsuccessful, and Mikal lying in the adjacent bed.

Their ejection here from the fantastical setting admittedly seems more kind than the fate of Andreas, which can be partly ascribed to Kneller's capricious nature. He is a bit of a rogue and plays it fast and loose with the authority he has. The argument can also be made that the American film plays into audience expectations by changing the novella's conclusion, giving Zia the happy ending denied to him in the novella. But narratively, this ejection coincides with the divergence from magical realist convention. The optimistic denouement is only made possible by intervention from a higher power, those who pursued the understanding of the magic are removed, and the magic is allowed to remain unhindered for those still inhabiting the landscape. However, from this point the film becomes less conducive to the analysis, and focus will remain largely on the novella.

The use of *deus ex machina* is further problematic, especially in considering the attempts these narratives make to avoid overtly religious concerns. Having these assorted power structures in place has several broad spiritual implications which tie this afterlife to purgatory. Instead of gods, devils, angels and demons, these narratives depict seemingly human characters who

manage the day to day affairs of the afterlife. But they clearly are not just human characters, they serve some higher but unspecified cause and have insights and influence beyond those of any other characters. Interesting though this mundane depiction is, it amounts to a contemporary reworking of the authorities that govern religious afterlives, rather than an afterlife devoid of religious authority. The texts change the surface details of these divine agents, but not their mandate or operation.

In the anonymous organisation which interferes in Andreas' affairs and ultimately ejects him from that specific afterlife, is evidence of a spiritual power, albeit one that is superficially secularised. Whether it is God or a mysterious committee that controls the afterlife, it makes little difference to those who fall under their jurisdiction. Andreas is confronted by an unfathomable higher order, something he cannot comprehend because it is above his frame of existence, which wields power he appears unable to contest, and which intervenes actively in the affairs of the afterlife. The similarity to conventional theist notions is too strong, and this description would fit comfortably in any explicitly religious fiction concerned with the same subject matter. These notions appear to be but disguises, and what could superficially be considered to be original conceptions, are merely very familiar notions hidden beneath a contemporary veneer. As is mostly the case when trying to determine what lies at the bottom of the magical, the answer could very likely be disappointing. The new mould does not make them any less mysterious or implicitly religious.

Similarly, in the novella Kneller explicitly confirms that he was an undercover angel all along. There being no indication which deity he is the angel of, it might as well be any of them. In the film an attempt is made to further obscure this matter. After discovering that Kneller is one of the People in Charge, Zia states that he "always had a feeling that he was an angel or something". "An angel? Come on", Eugene scoffs in response. His words and attitude mirror the narrative's disinclination to rely on conventional religious notions. However, Eugene's rejection of the term "angel" seems to be contradicted when Kneller is depicted, dressed in a pristine white suit, blowing white feathers from Zia's folder. The imagery coincides too easily with conventional angelic portrayals of purity and transcendence. But, I ask, what is the difference? Whether angels or the People In Charge, there seems to be little to distinguish the two. The one conventionally uses wings to fly about while the other comes parachuting from the firmament. Both act on some

higher, presumably celestial, mandate and directly intervene in the affairs of the afterlife. Changing the name and appearance of these figures does not alter the conceptual trope, and they might just as well have been called angels, for all the difference it makes. Avoiding blatant religious authority, these texts come to settle on vaguely transcendental authority instead. And in the undefined nature and mandate of these authoritative organisations I find the root of the implicit secular commentary.

Throughout these narrative, the similarity, but not complete correlation, to religious afterlives entails one crucial divergence from the notion of purgatory. These do seem like depictions of purgatory, but, importantly, there is no way for the protagonists to redeem themselves and attain salvation. What is lacking in these texts is the hopeful dimension inherent to the concept of purgatory which Casey identifies. He states that “the sufferings [of purgatory] are shot through with hope and charity – confident hope of eventual salvation” (Casey 241), and qualifies this by explaining the role purgatory plays in religious convention:

Purgatory, nevertheless, answered profound needs. If it reduces the terror of judgement that had been centrally important to Christian tradition, this can count as an argument in its favour. For it tempers terror with justice and, indeed, mercy. It had always been a hard doctrine to swallow that a man who died with any unrepented sin should suffer for all eternity.

(Casey 230)

But indeed, from here then disregarding the film’s altered ending, this seems to be the fate of the protagonists. Despite the tribulations they face, they do not transcend this purgatorial condition. In fact, in Messiah King’s second suicide and Andreas’ icy final destination, it appears rather that these characters are more able to effect their own damnation. Andreas is packed off to a place without even his rejected materialistic comforts for comfort, while Zia, barring further suicide, is left to suffer eternity in his bleak and dishevelled afterlife. The undefined nature of their respective authoritative organisations entails that they do not require specific obeisance. Consequently those who encounter them have no way of knowing what is necessary to oppose or appease them. Because their mandate remains unspecified, there is no way for the characters to determine what, if anything, will allow them to redeem themselves sufficiently to leave this

diminished middle ground. Authorities with an unclear mandate make it unclear whether there is any way to win their favour and receive salvation. Significantly then, we see human characters finding themselves in an uncomfortable engagement with eternity, not as a condition to be desired, but rather one to be dreaded.

These texts then construct a strong, if only ever implicit, secular commentary. They use the notion of purgatory to depict post mortem continuation as a bleak and inescapable condition. Stripping religious authorities of their religiosity does not offer a secular improvement of the afterlife, but rather contributes to a secular commentary on the undesirability of spending eternity in the afterlife. It is important to point out that the protagonists lack agency in this condition. With undefined authorities exercising undefined authority over them, they have no recourse and no respite from the afterlife. When unconventional gods descend from above to intervene in the afterlives of the dead, the dead are robbed of the agency to determine the nature of their own afterlives. Similarly, when death, as an escape, is no longer a viable option, the dead cannot hope to take control of whatever lives they have. One way or another, eternity must be weathered, and this is a notion which understandably troubles these protagonists.

In these narratives, perhaps one of the most crucial obstacles in the way of reappropriating the afterlife for a dispensation which distances itself from notions of transcendence is revealed. To distinguish the secular from the religious, these texts do away with the variety of idiosyncratic details which specific religious institutions have added to the afterlife over the millennia, and replace them with more recognisable and human alternatives. However, in conceptualising the governing authorities and principles of this space without clear and explicit definition, the dead are deprived of self-regulation and agency. So if the afterlife is to be fictionalised with secular foundations, then alternative systems must be conceived to regulate it. It seems ineffective to merely remove explicit religious nuances, and leave the afterlife so undefined. In the following chapter, then, my focus shifts to a text which does not only discard religious trappings, as is done here, but rather wages open war on the entire institution. In this secularising war, the notions of authority and eternity, which so troubled this chapter, are convincingly overcome and replaced with the foundations of a secular dispensation.

Chapter 4

His Dark Materials and the War on God

Being a vocal atheist and outspoken adversary to the teachings of the church, Philip Pullman wrote his critically acclaimed work of high fantasy, *His Dark Materials*, with a specifically secular purpose in mind. The trilogy, comprising *Northern Lights* (1995),³⁶ *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000),³⁷ is a complex reworking of the biblical myth of the Fall and humankind's expulsion from the garden, which does not reach the same conclusion as its precursor. It is set against an imaginative backdrop of wildly different parallel worlds, populated by a host of characters, ranging from the human and animal to the outlandish and celestial. The fantasy aside, however, it would be simplistic to pigeonhole it as youth literature, as the trilogy incorporates a wealth of diverse philosophical, theological and scientific concepts as it progresses, which accounts for the large amount of academic attention paid to it.³⁸ To give an idea, throughout the narrative there is an interweaving of Judeo-Christian mythology, Greek philosophy, Chinese mysticism, Gnosticism, evolutionary theory, quantum physics and ecological conservationism, to name but a few elements. Using this rich underpinning, Pullman constructs at once a dense fantastical tale and a larger, sophisticated, anti-theistic (according to Bernard Schweizer, "misotheistic"³⁹) project. As David Martin notes about the nature of this text, it incorporates "the fusion of prescription and description, which is so much easier to get away with in fantasy rather than discursive prose" (10). This accounts, at least partially, for the surprising medium in which this secularising project is lodged.

Although it is by no means a novel notion to deconstruct religious concepts, rarely if ever has there been such a fictionalisation of this deconstruction, and in a work superficially intended for the young. What thus sets *His Dark Materials* apart is that it forms a comprehensively enacted fictionalisation of the ongoing confrontation between the religious and the secular, which culminates in the downfall of the kingdom of heaven. As such, this text has an entirely different

³⁶ Published as *The Golden Compass* in the USA

³⁷ These texts will be abbreviated referentially as *NL*, *SK* and *AS* respectively.

³⁸ *The Amber Spyglass* also won the prestigious Whitbread Book of the Year in 2001.

³⁹ "based on the Greek root meaning of "misos" (hatred) and "theos" (divinity)" (Schweizer 167).

secular strategy than those investigated in the previous chapters. Where they attempted to reimagine or rework religious notions along more secular lines, Pullman opposes these two ideologies in a literal war with each other. His project is not to reimagine religious notions, but to destroy them completely.

The medium and mandate of this text has then ensured that the trilogy has been written on frequently and from various sides of the debate.⁴⁰ Importantly, discussions have raged on Pullman's self-admitted anti-theistic venture, which has evoked no small degree of scorn from religious communities, concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of the younger readers. And theists have reason for concern. Though the trilogy, specifically the final instalment, is closely modelled on biblical myth, it utilises an inversion of this myth. This reinscription entails that the textual antagonist is the "Magisterium", an unveiled allusion to the Christian church, along with its God, its angels, its prophets and its preachers. God, often called the "Authority", and his church are not cast as benevolent, benign or even indifferent. As the character Mary Malone clearly explains: "The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all" (AS 464). Pullman's personal convictions are clearly evident in the obviously villainous nature of the Magisterium, and "even readers who don't know that Pullman calls himself an atheist will sense that the systematic voicing of anti-ecclesiastical views comes with authorial approval" (Schweizer 164). But along with this version of the church, the text also relies on notions easily recognisable to anyone familiar with traditional religious concepts. They are incorporated so that a deconstruction may ensue, followed by the construction of an alternative scheme, conceived from a secular perspective. Interestingly then, and this is important to this analysis, this deconstruction of religiosity must by necessity entail its initial construction. To subvert religious concepts Pullman must first posit religious concepts, devised as they are to be destroyed, like an elaborate sequence of dominoes painstakingly placed only so they can be toppled.

To extend the metaphor, and outline the analysis to follow, I must first explain how the narrative sets the dominoes, how the religious dispensation is constructed. Here I will expand on the mandate of the Magisterium, and the God it serves, and how they are collectively depicted as one of the most nefarious antagonists in fiction. This will then allow me to show how it is toppled,

⁴⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the texts, see *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy* (2005), edited by Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott.

how the text enacts the downfall of the religious institution. This downfall constitutes an elaborate and informative deconstruction of religion, and narratively this is where the afterlife, the textual land of the dead, comes in, as it is there that the greatest blow is dealt to this institution. But the successes of this deconstruction are also informed by the anomalous dominoes it has set outside the reach of its neighbours, spiritual notions it leaves undisturbed.⁴¹ In the way the narrative sets the scene for the climactic confrontation, there appears an interesting blurring of the secular and the religious, which can be used to call into question exactly how the one is constructed in contrast with the other. By thus investigating where Pullman literally draws his battle lines, I propose to find further ways in which distinctions are made between the camp of the secular and the religious. Finally then, I will identify the foundational stones put in place for the reconstruction of the secular dispensation which the narrative ultimately invites. Here, however, I will again illustrate how the secularising project turns a blind eye to the several conventionally spiritual notions that it incorporates into this dispensation, which reveals the uncertainty which surrounds secularity but also an attempt to establish a meaningful definition. As I will show throughout, this “secularization itself generates an entirely new type of religion”, one which Pullman perhaps did not foresee (Hanegraaff 312).

David Gooderham, in an analysis of the use of religious language and churchly lexicon in the texts, begrudges Pullman his explicit and undisguised use of Christian and church terminology in a genre which conventionally relies on veiled mythifications and allegories. He argues that the incorporation of this lexicon into an overtly anti-theistic narrative amounts to a similar, albeit inverted, indoctrination of its young readers, which Pullman denounces in other authors of the genre (most notably C.S. Lewis, whom Pullman has criticised on numerous occasions).

Gooderham’s argument holds merit, as in his portrayal of the church, one facet of the religious construct, Pullman pulls no punches, and throughout the texts the larger theistic institution is depicted as “a powerful and ruthlessly repressive organisation, determined to root out sin and to control weak human beings for their own good at any cost” (Gooderham 155). He also makes little or no attempt to disguise this organisation, relying instead on a “set of unvarnished Christian institutions and concepts: church, God, fall and afterlife” (Gooderham 156). As Gooderham states, “[h]e may be writing fantasy, but he will tell it as it is” (156). The claims of

⁴¹ On page 76-77 I explain how the term “spirituality” is used here to specifically be antonymous to “religion”.

indoctrination are, however misguided, as Bernard Schweizer explains that this “would be the case only with readers who are already partisan”, or indoctrinated to and by religious thought (170). The conventions of the genre aside, at least in the initial construction of the religious system of the narrative it appears pointless to fault Pullman for this biased depiction as it fits exactly into his authorial objective.

The unflinchingly adverse depiction of the church and its teachings, based as it is on an almost Inquisitional model, makes Pullman’s attitude and intention quite clear, even though he has also discussed this on many well-documented occasions.⁴² He is a secular humanist and his writing is not sympathetic to the cause of the church, its deities or its agents. The condemnations he so frequently puts into the mouths of his characters clearly reflect his opinion on religiosity, and it is certainly not favourable. As Ruta Skadi, a high ranking witch from the narrative, explains about the church: “For all its history [...] it’s tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can’t control them, it cuts them out”; and she continues; “[t]hat is what the church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling” (SK 52). Pullman’s sentiments can be expressed no clearer than this, and it appears that though his Magisterium is based on a predominantly Christian model, no religious institution is exempt from this condemnation. In light of this then, it should be unsurprising that the focal point around which the action of the trilogy takes place, is nothing less than a war on God, the abolition of the church and the overthrow of the kingdom of heaven.

Throughout the trilogy the Magisterium is guilty of all manner of diabolical activities, in fact it is exactly their conduct which catalyses the events of the narrative. In *Northern Lights* the Magisterium sets up an arctic research facility and abducts children on whom they can experiment. To explain the nature of their research, also going some way towards illuminating this institution in so doing, I must first explain one of the integral concepts from the narrative, that of the “dæmon”. In some of the parallel worlds of the narrative, every conscious individual is accompanied by a dæmon (homophonous to “demon”). A dæmon is an externalised portion of an individual’s soul (resembling the Jungian notion of the “anima” or “animus” as part of the soul), which assumes an animal shape of the opposite sex. Though a dæmon has a certain degree

⁴² I refer readers to his own website, where he expresses his views on this clearly: <http://www.philip-pullman.com/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=110>.

of autonomous agency, it remains intrinsically part of the individual, and a deep interconnectedness exists between them, to the extent that they can communicate telepathically if need be. The death of one is also the death of the other. Significantly, the *dæmon* of a child is not fixed and can change shape, usually reflecting the emotional state of the individual. When a child reaches adolescence, the *dæmon* assumes its permanent shape, which reflects the true nature of the individual.⁴³ This fixing of the *dæmon* accompanies every child's transition from a state of innocence to one of experience and knowledge, on their road to fully conscious adulthood.

It is this attaining of consciousness which threatens the existence of the Magisterium. Thus, the experiments they run are attempts to sever children from their *dæmons*, before the onset of adolescence, in a process called "intercession". It is performed to circumvent the change which accompanies the transition to adolescence, an attempt to keep the populace in an eternal state of innocence, though the process also leaves its victims in a zombie-like condition of docility, malleability and servility, in other words, the perfect members of the congregation. This is but one of the deplorable acts of the church, but it gives a clear enough idea of the villainous lengths to which this institution goes to advance its cause. However, to grasp the full horror of this institution, I must explain to what they direct their greatest ire.

Dust (capitalised to distinguish it from common dust), is a fluid concept in the trilogy, and this metaphoric fluidity has been comprehensively discussed in an essay by Anne-Marie Bird.⁴⁴ In the protagonist Will's world (our own), Dust is a newly discovered elementary particle, called "dark matter" by the scientist Mary Malone (who comes to play the role of the temptress in the garden). As such "Dust is the actual physical 'stuff' that holds the universe together" (Bird 113). However, Dust is also the essence of consciousness, which, among other things, causes the fixing of a child's *dæmon* at puberty. When a higher level of consciousness is reached, at the onset of adolescence, a person attracts Dust, but also takes part in the constant renewal thereof. In the absence of Dust, the absence of liberated conscious autonomy, "[t]hought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but a brute automatism" (AS 476). It is Dust which the Magisterium views as its greatest nemesis; the free and conscious agency it grants to

⁴³ The text uses puberty as the age where consciousness manifests itself in the individual, which accompanies also the sexual awakening which the Magisterium wishes to suppress (NL, SK, AS).

⁴⁴ Anne-Marie Bird. "Without Contraries is no Progression": Dust as an All-Inclusive Metaphor in Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials". 2001.

those capable of receiving it threatens the foundations of this institution. The witch Serafina Pekkala explains: “all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity [...] the followers of wisdom have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed” (*AS* 506). Thus it is the Magisterium’s ultimate objective to destroy this Dust, in the name of God, while a rebellion is waged to preserve it, in the name of humanity.

Considering the nature and aims of the Magisterium then, the trilogy unfolds against the intricate backdrop of an impending war between the religious and the secular. Lord Asriel, Pullman’s own rendition of Milton’s Satan, is hell-bent on tearing down the kingdom of heaven. And like Satan, he is equipped with all the antiheroic power and ambiguous ambition, unafraid to challenge the “Almighty”. The secularising project which the novel constructs, then also hinges on the war with heaven which Lord Asriel instigates. The Magisterium and its agents are corrupted beyond redemption, and their influence across the multiverse is wholly corrupting. To overthrow this institution is thus an act of tremendous liberation. Yet as Asriel’s servant Thorold explains, the rebellion is not concerned with earthly skirmishes, because “[the church] was too weak to be worth the fighting” (*SK* 48). Instead, Asriel’s purpose is to kill God himself. As Schweizer explains, “the declared aim of the plot is not ecclesiastical reform or even the demolition of the established Church; it is, rather, open warfare against God, and that is quite a different matter” (164). Thus mirroring Pullman’s own project, Asriel is striking at the very roots of theism, and not merely its earthly incarnations. The anti-theistic venture of the trilogy is enacted in the actual anti-theistic venture around which the narrative events oscillate.

With Asriel’s true adversary in sight then, I must turn away from the earthly agents of religion and focus on the deities of the institution. As Gooderham notes, God has been “reduced to a mere walk-on part in the apocalyptic drama” (164). Throughout the trilogy numerous discussions hint towards a God which does not fit the omnipotent bill. In a conversation with two angels, who do not fight for God’s cause, it is revealed that the “Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty”, was not the creator, but rather the oldest sentient being in the universe, the first angel made from the coalescence of Dust (*AS* 33). Being the first he was also the most powerful, and “[h]e told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie” (*AS* 33 -34). He is a self-proclaimed and fraudulent Authority,

never worthy of the titles he gave himself. This reimagined origin myth then effectively robs God of any claims to divine incontrovertibility, and casts doubt on any claims or actions made on his behalf or in his name.

Additionally, the ages since God had assumed ownership of existence have not been kind to him and he has fallen into ancient decay. Throughout the trilogy his existence is marked by his absence, his inability to act on his own behalf. When he is glimpsed for the first time, where he is held in a “crystal litter” (a casket which preserves him), he leaves an impression of “terrifying decrepitude, of a face sunken in wrinkles, of trembling hands and a mumbling mouth and rheumy eyes” (AS 416). And while God wastes away the regulations which had governed his kingdom of heaven falls into disrepair. The Magisterium follows its own malicious agenda, and atop the Clouded Mountain, where the heavenly host resides, “the Regent [is] at the reigns” (AS 393). Metatron, the Regent of God, has risen to power in God’s absence, and “if he wins this battle, he intends to intervene directly in human life” (Ibid). He is a mighty angel, “sexually repressed, brutal, and power-hungry” (Schweizer 165), and he wishes to establish “a permanent Inquisition” over all of creation (AS 393). If God had proven to be an inadequate deity, “[t]his new one will be far, far worse” (Ibid).

With the apex and foundations of religiosity, the godhead, and the earthly agents of his cause so described, it is no small wonder that the reader is sided with the secular forces. The explicit nature of Pullman’s attack on the church and its doctrine reflects, perhaps problematically, the historical ferocity with which this institution has perpetuated its own existence. In the unambiguously malevolent conduct of the Magisterium and its celestial authorities, an amalgamated incarnation of the worst aspects of church history is conjured up, because in order for the critique to be effective, it can allow no ambiguity about the nature of religion. This then accounts for the accusations of indoctrination directed towards the texts. However, it is no small task to mount an effective deconstruction on literally millennia of conceptual supremacy, but this is Pullman’s main concern, the “deconstruction of the traditional complex of Christian beliefs, values and practices and the construction of an alternative system” (Gooderham 157). I tend to agree with Schweizer who notes that the views expressed by this text, and others of a similar disposition, “have been insufficiently conceptualized, let alone historicized”, making this text a

necessary one for the discourse of defining secularity (163). Though, just as with its religious counterparts, the text is not without its own troubles.

Firstly, I must question the logic of fighting fire with fire. Despite many of the allegations aimed at religion ringing true and having historical precedence, the text does ultimately construct this institution in the form of caricature. The evil of the church is hyperbolised, as is the detrimental effects of religiosity, especially if, as the text contends, its aim is the abolition of all conscious agency. As Gooderham points out, this creates “the effect of unproductive posturing on both sides of the ideological divide” (159). A discourse with so much grey area cannot be successfully argued in the black or white and a secular crusade could prove just as destructive as a religious one.

Moreover, increasingly problematic contradictions arise with the juxtaposing of transcendentalism with corporeality, religion with secularity. The text leaves certain metaphysical doors open for secularity which it firmly closes for religion. Or alternatively, it does not always coherently identify what it wishes to exclude from the side of the secular and condemn for siding with the religious. Importantly, Dust, the banner behind which the secular amass, verges uncomfortably close to a deified concept. Pullman robs God of omniscience, only to bestow it on Dust. Lyra, the primary protagonist of the trilogy, is given an instrument called the “alethiometer”, a compass-like device, which allows her to learn truths which she would otherwise have no way of knowing. The alethiometer is crucial to the unfolding of events and she regularly consults it to ascertain facts, or to ask for guidance when she is uncertain about what she should be doing. Eventually it is revealed that this device operates (somehow) by creating a conduit to Dust, thus allowing her to access this seemingly universal consciousness. The same is true for Mary Malone, the scientist who creates a computer program which allows her to do the same thing. Through this she discovers what role she has to play in the reinscribed myth. When her research is confiscated, she uses the yarrow stalks and Book of Changes, the I Ching, to gain access to the same insights. What these characters are effectively doing is praying, not to the God of the church, but to the universal consciousness of secularism. The difference, and perhaps an interesting bit of commentary, is that their prayers are answered clearly, and not only in the sanctity of their own minds.

Further, though, the Dust itself also shows signs of partisanship. The Magisterium, too, is in possession of an alethiometer, but they seem not to receive the same guidance that the secular parties are granted. They receive the answers they request, but Lyra and Mary Malone receive additional information which actually advances their cause, something very akin to divine intervention, to aid them in their arduous journeys. This can be somewhat explained by the fact that Dust is essentially consciousness, and would, according to the internal logic of the narrative, give aid to whichever cause worked to preserve it. But an omniscient agent capable of interaction and powerful intervention for the sake of self-perpetuation does seem to resemble deification of sorts. To complicate matters further, in Mary's initial conversation with Dust it refers to itself collectively as "Angels" (SK 260). It is revealed that these angels, or this angelic-collective, had intervened in human evolution to instil consciousness in an act of revenge against God's assumed authority, they are the rebel angels who turn against God (SK 261). Thus Dust seemingly comes to act as the God of the secular, one opposed to the God of religion. Dust becomes an immensely influential and omniscient agent, apparently an angel of sorts, who works towards the perpetuation of itself and its cause; God by any other name.

Also, the reappropriation of the spiritual nomenclature, on the one hand making angels the agents of consciousness, is further counterworked on the other, with God and Metatron as the angelic oppressors of this same attribute. Dust resembles God too closely for the distinction to hold up. Again the internal logic of the narrative tries to avoid this resemblance, by making God part of Dust, as has been explained. But the logic is flawed, as this only situates Dust one metaphysical tier above God, an even more expansive entity with similar attributes and capacities, though they are exercised in a more benevolent and reserved manner, locked in a struggle with something of its own creation. Instead of the traditional God, the secular seem to rally behind his more obscure father.

Essentially, Dust is treated in some way as a secular god, which is interesting in light of the explicit opposition of religion and secularity. Attempting to create some form of transcendent cause for which the secular can fight, a unifying banner for the secular disposition, Pullman relies on an ultimately spiritual construction. This is then where I need to explain what is meant by spirituality, and for this I rely on Wouter J. Hanegraaff's article "New Age Religion and Secularization" (2000). Hanegraaff argues that New Age spiritualities are a form of secular

religion, created by the individual appropriation and alteration of existing symbolic systems to enable a personalised “possibility for ritually maintaining contact with a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning” which is used to find sense in life (Hanegraaff 304). It is a turn away from the doctrines of established religions, and instead allows a personal tailoring of transcendence. To explain, Hanegraaff states:

They are based upon the individual manipulation of religious as well as non-religious symbolic systems, and this manipulation is undertaken in order to fill these systems with new religious meaning. As far as existing religious symbolic systems are concerned, New Age spirituality generally concentrates on whatever is not associated too closely with the traditional churches or their theologies. Hence their preference for alternative traditions, from gnosticism and western esotericism in their own culture to various religious traditions from other cultures. As far as their use of non-religious symbolic systems is concerned, by far the most important area is the popular “mythologies of science”. In countless ways New Agers give a spiritual twist to the symbolism of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity, various psychological schools, sociological theories, and so on.

(Hanegraaff 304)

The accumulative effect of this is the creation of “a complex of spiritualities which emerge on the foundation of a pluralistic secular society” (*Ibid*). As religion thus becomes increasingly individualised, it is removed from the actual scope of religion (as Hanegraaff defines it), and falls rather into the amorphous sphere of spirituality. In *Dust* then, Pullman does exactly this, reappropriating the characteristics conventionally associated with God, and applying them to a newly conceived entity which allows for the construction of a meaningful higher order, one which is mythic yet scientific, spiritual yet secular. The narrative gains a strong imagery in *Dust* which it interestingly contrasts to the imagery associated with God, and in the process Pullman starts to reveal where he regards the detrimental doctrines of religion to end and the constructive benefits of secularity, or indeed spirituality, to begin.

Further still, those characters charged with the construction of a secular world, those who oppose the larger religious dispensation, also cast doubt on exactly what has to be overcome

in this war. The witches, who form an important part of the rebellion, also portray this New Age disposition. Those of them who are important to the narrative make several proclamations of this broader kind of spirituality. They have powers beyond that of normal humanity, abilities, though closely linked to nature, which still verge on the mystical. They also ascribe to a different pantheon than that of the church, so that the “witch-people have different gods from ours [the Authority]” (SK 47). Included in their way, is the deity Yambe-Akka, “the goddess who came to a witch when she was about to die”, who is describes as “merry and light-hearted”, her visit being a boon instead of a curse (SK 41). In contemplating the secular cause, one witch expresses that “Lord Asriel’s god was not her own”, but concludes that he was worth fighting nonetheless (SK 49). So though they are opposed to the Authority and the Magisterium, they still retain some interest in preserving their specific kind of spirituality. Similarly in Will’s father, the shaman John Parry (also called Stanislaus Grumman), a complicated amalgamation of naturalistic mysticism is portrayed to allow him certain transcendental abilities. As he explains to another: “I can do many things you don’t understand” (SK 222). Again, his powerful magic is entwined with the forces of nature, with which he seems to have some undefined connection. So he, too, seems to fall outside what the narrative wishes to formulate as the religious.

The same contradiction is embodied, perhaps most interestingly, in Lord Asriel, the head of the secular cause. Of initial note is his name, which on the one hand invites questions of hierarchy. What exactly he is lord of, is never explained, but his eventual self-sacrifice for the secularising cause, indicates that he does not wish to be established as a new ruler of anything. Further, it could constitute a reappropriation of the term “Lord”, to apply it to the adversary of religiosity instead of its ruler. It has also been noted that Asriel is reminiscent of the mythological angel of death, but could also “recall the archangel Ariel (i.e., one of the “Atheist crew” overthrown by Abdiel in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*)” (Schweizer 164). His name aside, Lord Asriel produces another striking contradiction in his misotheistic ambition. Though his servant describes him as “just a man, with human power, no more than that”, the statement is qualified by the implication that Lord Asriel can achieve things beyond the rest of his ilk (SK 49). This is most clearly exemplified by the massive undertaking he instigates and oversees, that of building his Adamant Tower, and directing the amassed armies of the secular. The sheer scale of his effort, and the timescale necessary to accomplish what he does, forces one witch to proclaim that Asriel

“commands time, he makes it run fast or slow according to his will” (*SK* 282). This is never expanded on or explained, yet it is accompanied by several other indications of some supernatural quality to Asriel, usually associated with his immense ambition and fierce will.

By then allowing certain parties of the secular camp to retain broadly spiritual abilities, capabilities or inclinations, the narrative reveals what it denounces as religious and what it invites as secular. If the witches are allowed to keep their gods, the shaman to commune spiritually with the forces of nature, and Asriel to transcend the laws which strictly govern the rest of humankind, where exactly does the narrative draw the line between protagonistic and antagonistic spirituality? It seems to allow greater leeway to secularity, including among its ranks those who may be spiritual, but not conventionally so. The secularising project seems not to be directed at the entirety of spiritual ideology, but rather at those elements which have become rigidly and historically institutionalised. Effectively, it seems that mainstream, organised religion is targeted, while those subcategories of spirituality which do not have such a history of deleterious actions to be convincingly enshrined in the Magisterium, are realigned to the secular cause. The battle lines are thus drawn, to vehemently oppose traditional, institutionalised religion, but to simultaneously allow the less formalistic spirituality, as described by Hanegraaff, to join the ranks of the secular army.

With the formations thus in place, I can finally turn to the land of the dead, where the secular camp gains its most important narrative victory. In the final novel the two pre-adolescent protagonists, Lyra Belaqua and Will Parry, travel to the land of the dead, and it is here where they play their hand, and it is a rather impressive one considering the stakes. As Lord Asriel’s forces prepare above for the war against the Clouded Mountain, they find themselves heading to the underworld, she to ask forgiveness from a friend whose death she inadvertently caused, and he to unite with his estranged father who was murdered moments after their first meeting. This episode forms perhaps the most cleverly enacted deconstruction of traditional religion, utilising several religious notions to create the foundations for a strong secular mandate.

The first information the reader is given on the land of the dead is from the two angels Baruch and Balthamos, who are interestingly portrayed to be passionate, even homosexual, companions. They explain that “[i]t is a prison camp” which “[t]he Authority established [] in the early ages” (*AS* 35). They do not know the details of this place, “[e]ven the churches don’t know; they tell

their believers that they'll live in Heaven, but that's a lie" (Ibid). With this land of the dead "Pullman's task is to replace the old myths with a new, more honest story, written to replace the delusion of an afterlife" (Gooderham 161). The land of the dead is a bleak and nightmarish place, and the rules which govern it are utterly draconian, yet eventually the protagonists will arrive to bring secular salvation. As Gooderham points out, "[t]heological discourse is in the main absent from this construction", but this is arguably indicative of precisely what Pullman is saying about the conventional conception of the afterlife; that God has abandoned it (Gooderham 162). Instead, the text relies on equally fantastical mythological concepts, which "draws heavily on both the Greek underworld of "Hades" and the Hebrew "Sheol", the rubbish dump to which, after lives lived in the presence of God, the dead are consigned to decompose away from that presence" (Gooderham 161). The horror of this place is then what gives clear justification to the secular cause.

On their way to the land of the dead, however, the protagonists must first venture through the Suburbs of the Dead. Following a winding procession of ghosts, who feel compelled to "[g]o where all the others go" (AS 263), the protagonists reach a dilapidated and ramshackle town of "shacks and shanties" (AS 267). Before entering the ruined town, they are stopped by an official, who, like them, is not dead, manning what "had the look of a customs post on a rarely visited frontier" (AS 268). They are informed that the living must wait in this town, this "holding area", until they have passed away, thereafter only being allowed to enter the true land of the dead (AS 268). It is a transitional place, somewhere between life and death, a bleak limbo of those in varying stages of mortification. They are given papers to take to another official who will allow them into the holding area, but "[t]hey were simply scraps of paper torn from a notebook, with random words scribbled in pencil and crossed out" (AS 268). The subsequent official would only wordlessly look at the scrap and nod, leaving them to wait.

The desolation of this town, and the lacklustre disorganisation of the officials, is the first indication that the afterlife has either fallen into decay, or has always been that way. Amid the "wretched shanties and pools of sewage" they have seemingly been charged with the bureaucratic arrangements of limbo (AS 267). Yet whoever holds them in employ has long forsaken this place and its inhabitants. Will perceives the situation "as if these people were playing a game, and waiting to see when the travellers would challenge them or give in and

laugh” (AS 269). There appears to be no sense in what they do other than force of habit, two pointless officials sending bits of paper hither and thither with no discernable purpose, accountable to no higher office. The desultory condition of this place is the result of a broken system, left untended by its creator. These officials find themselves trapped as part of a forgotten order, robbed of agency and purpose, awaiting their demise in tedious squalor.

In this limbo then, the protagonists discover that to reach the true land of the dead, they must be ferried across a Styxian body of water, a process which can only be negotiated by their personal deaths. They are informed that, unbeknownst to them, they and every other sentient living thing entered life with their own death right beside them. They encounter a figure “so ancient it was almost a skeleton” (AS 273), who turns out to be one such death, a being who “goes everywhere with ‘em, all their life long, right close by” (AS 275). It is explained that “the moment you’re born, your death comes into the world with you, and it’s your death that takes you out” (Ibid). This limbo is where one discovers one’s own death, a skeletal being that accompanies each person throughout life, unseen and unheeded, but always there. It is this personal death which informs a person when it is time to move on to the land of the dead, and who facilitates the process.

Grim though this sounds, it appears that this death is a kindly one and his benevolent nature is explained, when Lyra inquires about the process of dying. It is a passage worth inclusion, as it reveals an interesting aspect of the narrative’s commentary on the inevitability of this occurrence:

Your death taps you on the shoulder, or takes your hand, and says, come along o’ me, it’s time. It might happen when you’re sick with fever, or when you choke on a piece of dry bread, or when you fall off a high building; in the middle of your pain and travail, your death comes to you kindly and says easy now, easy, child, you come along o’ me, and you go with them in a boat out across the lake into the mist.

(AS 275)

Countering the misery of this limbo, the text then includes the notion that death is to be embraced rather than feared, when the time comes. This physically incarnated and personal death is “your special devoted friend, who’s been beside you every moment of your life, who knows

you better than yourself” (AS 282). It comes not as a thief in the night, but as a friend in time of need, to take each “on a safe calm journey” when life has come to an end (Ibid). This is the first indication of how Pullman attempts to address the fear and uncertainty of death, by making it familiar and kind, and the narrative will eventually elaborate on this.

This idea is not exclusive to a secular disposition, and spirituality makes the same claims, relying on the hope of some improved situation after the end of life. This notion will, however, be given a decidedly secular spin when the land of the dead is ultimately undone, undoing promises of a post-mortem righting of earthly wrongs. Death as an end is to be accepted, not death as a passage to salvation of some kind. Effectively, this limbo reveals how Pullman uses the conventions of the religious afterlife to undermine itself. His depictions of life beyond the grave are steeped in depression and degradation, using the most horrific imagery from religious and mythological tradition to undermine the whole notion of the afterlife. But the skeletal psychopomp is then the first hint of the construction of the secular alternative to the afterlife. This personal death then also leads the protagonist to the river, where the ferryman comes to collect them.

In accordance with mythic convention then, they are asked to pay a fee before they can be carried across the river to the land of the dead. They must leave a part of their soul behind, that part of them which has not died as it has for the others who enter this place. What follows is an anguished scene, as Lyra must leave her dæmon behind, while Will (up to this point lacking an externalised dæmon) endures a similarly excruciating separation, though from something he does not understand as tangibly. This passage, along with the nature of those found hereafter in the land of the dead, raises quite a daunting question about exactly what it is that crosses over to the afterlife, a question which obviously has no simple answer. However, in the way Pullman treats the subject, he finds the foundation for yet another strong secular imagery.

In an earlier conversation the protagonists speculate on the possibility of reaching the afterlife, and inevitably must consider what part of them can reach that place. They contemplate that “dæmons fade away when we die [...] and our bodies, well, they just stay in the grave and decay, don’t they?” (AS 175). This leads Lyra to the conclusion that there must be a third part to conscious existence, “[b]ecause I can think about my body and I can think about my dæmon – so there must be another part to do the thinking” (AS 176). They call this third part the ghost, and the land of the dead is populated by these forlorn beings. This tripartite division of human

existence is an effective tool for Pullman's secular project, as he uses all three aspects to great effect.

The body, of course, is the least worrisome, metaphysically speaking, and in the land of the dead it will become clear what role corporeality has to play in the construction of a secular dispensation. However, the *dæmon*, which is such an integral part of the narrative, is surely an explicitly fictionalised version of the soul, that elusive concept without which religion is impossible, not to mention unnecessary. The inclusion of the *dæmon*, which is already introduced in the very first sentence of the trilogy, invites inquiries into the nature of the soul, and seems to be another concession made to religiosity. The secularising agenda does not distance itself from this ineffable aspect which receives so much attention from religious institutions. Even following the undoing of the afterlife, this *dæmonic* part of conscious existence remains intact. But these unusual depictions of the soul, far from being problematic, furnish Pullman with cause more important than defeating God.

While the children venture to the afterlife, their now separated *dæmons* find their way to the battlefield where Asriel's forces square off with the armies of heaven. Here the secular and the religious then discover that the key to victory would be to keep the *dæmons* from being captured by the other side. Were the religious forces to gain control over the *dæmons*, they would gain control over the children who are so integral to the secularisation project, and obviously the secular fight to avoid this. The immensity of Asriel's efforts then all boil down to this: instead of fighting to kill God, he must fight to save the souls of the two child protagonists. For Asriel this realisation is "as if he'd come to the end of a long and complex calculation, and reached an answer that made quite unexpected sense" (AS 398). The apocalyptic final battle then hinges on these two young secularising agents, emblems then of the next (secular) generation. In light of the religious downfall being enacted, Pullman uses the imagery of these two children's souls as a symbol of the future of the secular world. In the reinscribed myth of the Fall, these children eventually become the Adam and Eve of the new secular dispensation, and the secular army fights tooth and nail in an apocalyptic battle against superior forces to ensure their liberation.

While this battle then rages above, below the protagonists arrive at the land of the dead, and this is where the secular venture gathers momentum. The protagonists and the narrative having finally reached the afterlife, there follows a powerful subversion of religious tradition. Without

their dæmons and hence in a state of tortuous despair, the two children see the wall which surrounds this prison, the “[g]igantic stone blocks, green with ancient slime, [rising] higher into the mist than they could see” (AS 304). Inside they “found themselves on a great plain extending far into the mist”, bathed in a “dull self-luminescence that seemed to exist everywhere equally” (AS 309 – 310). In the bleak light they see that “[s]tanding on the floor of this huge space were adults and children – ghost people – so many that Lyra couldn’t guess their number” (AS 310). They are a dispirited mass of spirits, the ghostly backlog consisting of every dead sentient being in the multiple universes. The land of the dead is a prison created by God, where eternity must be waited out with nothing whatsoever to do to pass the time, as “[n]o one was moving about, or running or playing” (Ibid). It is a place of silence and gloom, and it does appear that all who entered there abandoned hope in doing so. The pale, powerless and whispering ghosts huddle around these living creatures, “jostling and desperate” for any feeling of vitality (AS 311). They long desperately, not only for the missing part of their souls, but for their corporeality as well, as some even converge on a drop of Lyra’s blood “looking for contact with something so vibrantly alive” (AS 312).

These ghosts, lacking soul and body, are depicted as desultory creatures; their voices are muted and they cannot interact with materiality. In their terminal insubstantiality Pullman reveals another integral aspect of his critique of religion, as “the conviction that it is our corporeality that makes us human, or truly alive, is a central theme of the final book” (Bird 119). In another passage, when Will discusses angels (who also lack corporeality), he says that “[a]ngels wish they had bodies ... [and] can’t understand why *we* don’t enjoy the world more ... [i]t would be a sort of ecstasy for them to have our flesh and our senses” (AS 463, original emphasis). The same rings true for the ghosts, who crowd around the children to warm themselves on living matter. Ethereal existence is thus not an ideal state, and it is material existence which should be appreciated for the temporary bliss that it is. Without bodies, which allow physical desires and sensual pleasures, but do not exclude pain and discomfort, the most valuable human attributes are lost. By casting spiritual or ethereal existence in this harsh guise, Pullman cleverly undermines the importance religion ascribes to further transcendent existence after the end of physical life.

But the ghosts suffer in another way as well. This prison has warders, harpies straight out of Greek myth, who had “seen thousands of years pass, and the cruelty and misery of all of them had formed the hateful expressions on [their] features”, who guard the land of the dead, and inflict constant psychological torture on the dead (AS 304). The “Authority gave [the harpies] the power to see the worst in every one, and [they] have fed on the worst ever since, till [their] blood is rank with it and [their] very hearts sickened” (AS 331). Whisperingly one ghost tells of how the harpies torment them, and “wait till you’re resting [...] and they come up quiet beside you and they whisper all the bad things you ever did when you was alive, so you can’t forget ‘em” (AS 323). Their “jeering hate-filled sound reminded Will of the merciless cruelty of children in a playground, but there were no teachers here to regulate things, no one to appeal to, nowhere to hide” (AS 305).

Similar to the ferryman and the officials in the Suburbs of the Dead, these harpies appear to be the remnants of some long forgotten order. They had been given a task to do, millennia ago, and the reasons behind its discharge have faded in the mist of antiquity. This post-mortem arrangement has been left untended, winding out into senselessness. In the horrific state of the harpies and the unthinking adherence they show towards a specified yet age-ravaged set of regulations, the abandon of the afterlife becomes clear. There is no heaven or hell, no reward or punishment, only this forgotten prison, endlessly growing in population, with a missing warden and mercilessly aimless guards. All of these elements “are far from merely decorative: they furnish Pullman with an imagery and a logic important to the construction of a convincing secular liberation narrative” (Gooderham 161). By creating an afterlife which is absolutely devoid of any desirable qualities, the secular alternative offered seems nothing less than true salvation.

Into this place of abandoned hope, this “place of nothing”, Lyra and Will come as two saviours to free the assembled dead of all worlds from their eternal sentence (AS 336). After finding the boy she had come in search of, Lyra finally realises their part in the unfolding conflict, “to help all of the ghosts out of the land of the dead for ever” (AS 325). They are to enact the salvific prophecy, as Lord Asriel had expressed it: “*Death is going to die*” (AS 325). Using the subtle knife (a powerful device which can cut through the fabric of the universe) Will can open a window of escape, enabling the mass liberation of the dead. The comparison to the most

fundamental Christian narrative is clear; they have died in some way, to rise again from the land of the dead, breaking it open to all held prisoner in doing so. Except, whereas Christ had fought alongside God in the battle for heaven, this time the saviours fight against him. Here Pullman cleverly inverts the situation found in Milton's text. Where the saviour was the trump card in God's deck, played on the third day to the downfall of the rebellion, here Lord Asriel has the ace up his sleeve, the saviours who can turn the tides of war. As one character exclaims upon hearing of this plan: "This will undo everything. It's the greatest blow you could strike. The Authority will be powerless after this" (AS 326).

Thus does the secular gain its greatest victory over religion. Will opens a window to the world of the living, "making it big enough for six, seven, eight to walk through abreast, out of the land of the dead" (AS 382). For the first time the dead have hope and feel excitement, as "young children and aged parents alike [look] up and ahead with delight and wonder as the first stars they had seen for centuries shone through into their poor starved eyes" (AS 382). The first ghost who walks free "laughed in surprise as he found himself turning into the night, the starlight, the air...and then he was gone, leaving behind such a vivid little burst of happiness" (AS 382). The ghostly aspect of the person that goes to the underworld comes out and "all the particles that make [them] up will loosen and float apart", to join the dæmon, the body and all other things material (AS 335).

Compared to the horrors of the land of the dead, this dissipation, this "becoming part of everything alive again" seems the sweetest of ends (AS 335). This emancipatory release is cleverly developed, and "Pullman achieves a powerful and coherent narrative precisely by jettisoning popular notions of the soul living on in a happy afterlife and by returning to older fears of the horror and finality of death – from which only a raising from the dead, a resurrection, can be sufficient remedy" (Gooderham 161). The secular mandate is at its clearest here; gone is the need for spiritual transportation to some fictional afterlife, life is to begin and end in the material world, the rightful place of the conscious being. Essentially, human life is wasted in fabricating and perpetuating unfathomable fictions, and should rather be spent in acts of replenishing Dust, which is so crucial to the secular cause. It is a conclusive victory for Asriel and his army of the secular.

This opening of the land of the dead is perhaps the most important concept for this secularising project and reveals an important distinction Pullman wishes to draw. By so overcoming the afterlife, allowing the dead to nevermore be confined to this morbid prison, Pullman puts an end to the need for religion. Though the dead will still go to the underworld, they are free to leave, and to dissipate into the material world where they belong. This effectively ensures an inversion of the conventional belief that the afterlife is eternal, while corporeal existence is temporary. Instead, now the afterlife is but a temporary obstacle, from which the spirit can escape to return to the physical world. Breaking open the land of the dead removes the importance attributed to post mortem continuation, and the text literally breaks open the prison of religious afterlives. Coupled with the narrative emphasis on corporeality over ethereality, the secular message is clear, and the narrative proposes that the longing for after-life existence which theist fictions describe should be discarded. Instead mortality should be coveted for the incredibly rich experience that it is. Thus commences the mass exodus of the dead, to empty the bleak wastes of the afterlife.

Importantly, however, this secular liberation is not entirely devoid of transcendental notions. Several characters express the idea that this dissolving of the ghost, this return back to the substance of all materiality, is not entirely the end of conscious agency. Before leaving the land of the dead, the ghost of the aeronaut Lee Scoresby proclaims that “there’ll be all the time in the world to drift along the wind and find the atoms that used to be Hester [his *dæmon*], and my mother in the sagelands, and my sweethearts” (AS 404). This is confirmed by the narrative voice when, amid the raging apocalyptic battle, “conscious only of his movements upwards, the last of Lee Scoresby passed through the heavy clouds and came out under the brilliant stars, where the atoms of his beloved *dæmon* Hester were waiting for him” (AS 440).

This sentiment is echoed by the two protagonists, who in a surprisingly tragic denouement, eventually discover that they must both return to the worlds from where they came, unable to remain together. Lyra, again incorporating some conventionally spiritual notions of post-mortem life, after their greatest secularising victory, proclaims:

I will love you for ever, whatever happens. Till I die and after I die, and when I find my way out of the land of the dead I’ll drift about for ever, all my atoms, till I find you again... I’ll be looking for you, Will, every moment, every single moment. And when

we do find each other again we'll cling together so tight that nothing and no one'll ever tear us apart. Every atom of me and every atom of you... We'll live in birds and flowers and dragonflies and pine trees and in clouds and in those little specks of light you see floating in sunbeams... And when they use our atoms to make new lives, they won't just be able to take one, they'll have to take two, one of you and one of me, we'll be joined so tight...

(AS 526)

For this newly secularised world, death, it seems, is also not entirely the end. Instead of complete oblivion, there appears to be some form of afterlife, and though it does not conform to traditional theist variations of life after death, it does incorporate the notion that death is not entirely final. Obviously modern science would attest that this recycling of the materials of the dead is perceivable, and inevitably entropy causes the redistribution of energy. However, it is interesting that the narrative attempts to soften the blow death can come to have in such terms. By allowing this gentle release, and explicating the concept of this merging with all other things while retaining some rudimentary and elementary notion of selfhood, the narrative attempts to sidestep the sombre finality of death through the nebulous lexicon of spirituality. The way in which the fear of death is then allayed, lies somewhere in the assimilation into the natural world, as part of the universally intricate cycle of life.

Ultimately though, the secular forces achieve the purging of this imaginative landscape. The narrative events climax, in the chapter strikingly called "Authority's End", to enact the downfall of Metatron, and in another subtly devastating blow, to enact the death of God. Metatron is dragged into a gaping abyss which the Magisterium inadvertently opens, thereby destroying the figurehead which had usurped God's role. As for God, "Pullman [...] has no interest in reconstructing a more comprehensively-conceived deity; the whole thrust of his narrative is to reduce this figure to a footnote in the apocalyptic scenario" (Gooderham 165). The protagonists stumble upon his fallen litter, and how far the almighty has fallen. I will include here (nearly) the entire passage, profound and striking as it is; the death of God:

Will saw [Lyra's] hands pressing against the crystal, trying to reach to the angel and comfort him; because he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and

cowering away into the lowest corner [...] Will cut through the crystal in one movement and reached in to help the angel out. Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, and he shrank away from what seemed like yet another threat [...] The shaking hand seized [Will's] and feebly held on. The old one was uttering a wordless groaning whimper that went on and on, and grinding his teeth, and compulsively plucking at himself with his free hand, but as Lyra reached in too to help him out, he tried to smile, and to bow, and his ancient eyes deep in their wrinkles blinked at her with innocent wonder. Between them they helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn't hard, for he was as light as paper, and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun. But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief. Then he was gone: a mystery dissolving in mystery.

(AS 431 – 432)

God is no more; his omnipotence has become invalidity, he is infantile in his dependence, and he is “[transformed] from an object of worship to an image of loathing” and pity (Schweizer 166). His reign, his kingdom, and his earthly agents are shown to be tragically misguided, and thus the cause to overthrow it becomes entirely just. Finally, his power usurped, his mind gone, God in all his decrepitude is granted a much appreciated gift; the release of death and the chance to return to everything else. And, given this new and secular send-off, the mystery disappears as mysteriously as it had come about.

This chapter is then a triumph for the new dispensation, God is dead, and his Regent has fallen, and “the whole religious job-lot collapses down into the abyss, pit, final black hole, and the world is cleared, secularized, ready for its new human-scale regeneration” (Gooderham 164). As Schweizer notes, God is not only a “personified figure in need of iconoclastic destruction, but [denotes] rather a system of ideas, a social construct that has to be attacked from an ideological point of view” (169). This depiction of the godhead and his institution then forms the imagery with which Pullman creates a fictionalisation of the

destruction of the kingdom of heaven and the very foundations of theism. This allows the construction of the *republic* of heaven, at the hands of the liberated secular world order.

The crucial difference is that Dust should be protected and regenerated, not sought out and destroyed. This can only be achieved by “helping [everyone else in your world] to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious” (AS 520). This mandate leaves no room for the church or its deities as the text depicts them, and accordingly it locates the republic of heaven on earth, far removed from the lofty afterlives of religious doctrine.

Importantly, this new republic has to be built in the material world, instead of in fictional transcendental dimensions. Now that the kingdom of heaven has come tumbling down, the ghost of Will’s father explains that “we have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is nowhere else” (AS 382). Lyra also emphasises this discarding of a spiritual kingdom, saying that “[w]e shouldn’t live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place” (AS 548). This facet of Pullman’s critique is crucial, as it emphasises the absolute imperative for good and conscious human actions on earth, and discards any notions that this life is unimportant, a mere stepping stone to a greater state of being. In effect, corporeal life is all humanity has, and as such it should put a lot more effort into making it worthwhile for everyone concerned. I turn to Schweizer once again, who states that “[i]f God and His servants stand in the way of fulfilling such liberal objectives, then it is legitimate that the system be overhauled and dismantled by the story’s protagonists” (171).

As Gooderham states: “This is the Grand Narrative to end all grand narratives, the High Fantasy to end all high fantasies, the Eschaton to end all kingdoms of heaven! After this there are just plain human dimensions, human tasks and human stories” (164). Written as it was for a younger generation of readers, this trilogy becomes, in effect, a set of guiding principles from which they should draw for the construction of the new world, seemingly greatly improved by the exclusion of religion. And the most fundamental notion for this new generation to keep in mind is that the afterlife is gone, and that they subsequently have one

life to get it right. It is a welcome thought, and one which deserves the attention Pullman gives it. As the wise aeronaut, Lee Scoresby, says: “Life is good, and death is over...” (AS 404).

Yet, the downfall of the institution of religion is not accompanied by an equally expansive downfall of spirituality. As explained, Pullman invites several notions into the fold of secularity. But their inclusion seems contingent upon their lack of rigid institutionalisation, the emphasis remaining on individual conceptualisations of transcendence and spirituality. The secular is essentially revealed to be contrasted rather with specific religious strains, and not with the entirety of spirituality. By siding several obviously spiritual notions with the secular, the narrative becomes a partial deconstruction, one which draws the secular line around the individual. For Pullman then, the secular army consists of a wider range of ideologies than a purely anti-theistic one. He includes those elements of New Age spirituality which Hanegraaf argues constitutes “a new form of religion”, and a secular one at that (306).

This new religion then falls squarely in the middle of the purely secular and the purely religious, and “provides the possibility for people to construe a spirituality according to their own individual preferences, within the context of a culturally pluralistic society” (Hanegraaff 307). On the one hand, it entails “a turning away from everything associated with traditional dogmatic theology and church institutions”, while on the other, “the search for meaning based upon intuition, transcending the senses and the rational mind, reflects an equally strong pattern of criticism with respect to everything associated with a purely rationalist scientific worldview” (*Ibid*). It is neither religious nor entirely rational, but rather an amalgamation of the two which allows symbolic reappropriation from both systems. The narrative subverts religious transcendentalism and eternal spiritual exploits, replacing it with temporary human naturalism and thoughtful conscious agency. Ultimately, it seems that Pullman’s definition of the secular is found in this New Age reworking, quantum mechanics alongside naturalistic mysticism, the I Ching alongside evolutionary theory, Dust alongside death.

In the next chapter, I build forth on this secularised world, by investigating several works of science fiction and the notion of posthumanity. Though religious concepts are still apparent, they are not the focus of such a militant opposition. Instead, religious notions are effectively reappropriated in an afterlife which has no foundations in spiritual concerns.

Chapter 5

The Secular Afterlife of the Future

I turn lastly to science fiction, a genre which has proven to be perhaps the most prophetic of speculators on uncertain futures. The possibilities suggested by scientific advancement give these authors an expansive wellspring of technologies, existing or hypothetical, from which to construct seemingly possible, often convincing, occasionally accurate, futures. Small wonder then that this genre has also directed its gaze at the afterlife, bringing skilled speculators with a different set of instruments to the discussion. Replacing spiritual notions with technological hypotheses effectively allows a complete rethinking of the afterlife. It becomes not a place reached through spiritual transcendence or uncertain divine agency, but rather a manmade condition reached through scientific advancement and human ingenuity. This being the case, I consider these texts to be secular since they replace conventional spiritual methods of post mortem continuation with strictly technological methods. Consequently, they raise some truly unique possibilities in conceptualising the nature of the afterlife. In Chapter 4 Pullman's war cleansed the world of the institutions of religion, and brought an end to the afterlife as religion has conceived it. These texts then, for argument's sake, build forth on the secular world order he creates, and construct a new afterlife with its foundation in human development instead of religious supposition. Though they still utilise the concepts and lexicon of religion, they also rid these concepts of their religious content, and apply them to a context which leaves little if any room for spiritual concerns. As a result, these texts also allow a novel determining of the constituting line of secularity, with its foundation in human technological endeavours.

Though quite a variety of science fiction works include the notion of a virtual afterlife, I will narrow the focus here to two texts, one for its influence in the genre, the other because it has such an elaborately articulated notion of this speculative afterlife. The first is, unsurprisingly, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), one of the original cyberpunk texts, in which Gibson "gave us both the word cyberspace and its most compelling descriptions" (Porush 130).⁴⁵

Though it has been frequently and thoroughly discussed, it still deserves inclusion for the impact it has had in shaping the genre, the interesting ambiguity with which it incorporates futuristic

⁴⁵ This novel also won all three of the major awards of the genre, the Philip K. Dick, Arthur C. Clarke and Nebula awards.

technologies and the accuracy with which it pre-empted such a large range of virtual possibilities. For its impact in the genre, Patrick Novotny has called it “the most formidable literary work in cyberpunk”, and as such its rendition of the post-mortem condition deserves attention here (103). The second is *Feersum Endjinn* by Iain M. Banks (1994), and is included due to the expansively imagined futurescape and the fascinating possibilities it incorporates into its version of the virtual afterlife. Though Banks investigates the posthuman condition more thoroughly in his *Culture* novels, it is in *Feersum Endjinn* that this condition is most clearly connected to the notion of the afterlife. Whereas the previous chapters focussed at length on the important interplay between religiosity and secularity in conceptualising a secular afterlife, this chapter will argue that these specific afterlives explicitly incorporates several fundamental religious concepts and tropes, but does so in a decidedly secularised fashion.

To investigate this secular afterlife of the future, I must point to certain speculative technologies of the future, or alternatively, to explain how these science fiction texts construct their versions of the afterlife, I must explain which existing technologies they utilise and extrapolate. This proves beneficial as it allows me to draw from a firmly established corpus of scientific speculation in addition to the chosen narratives and secondary readings. Instead of attempting to explain too finely the actual scientific principles or processes behind what is being proposed, however, I will take my queue from the genre of science fiction, and rather explain the conceptual extrapolations these principles and processes enable. The chosen narratives will then aid as different depictions of these possibilities and how they have been fictionalised. The primary notion of import here is posthumanism, or at least that part of posthuman theory which speculates about the outcome of the increasing digitalisation and mechanization of the world at large. In addition I draw on the work of Robert M. Geraci and his useful article *Apocalyptic AI: Religion and the Promise of Artificial Intelligence* (2008). In it he draws a strong comparison between the principles of posthumanism and the apocalyptic narratives found in Judeo-Christian theology, which I incorporate to explain how the virtual afterlife has the potential to reinscribe several crucial spiritual notions for a secular agenda. Firstly, however, it is important to note why science fiction has such an intimate connection with religion, but also how this connection has become increasingly oppositional throughout the past century.

Adam Roberts (2006) explains that “[a] great deal of SF is fascinated with religion”, because, he and others maintain, “religion is so similar to SF” (Roberts 146). He continues to explain this similarity, stating that “in some respects religious belief depends upon an apprehension of the world in which we actually live, and in some respects it posits a world utterly different from this world”, a description which certainly superimposes neatly over the genre of science fiction (*Ibid*). He strengthens the correlation further by explaining that “[r]eligion is a speculation about the nature of the cosmos that operates symbolically rather than literally”, denouncing any claims fundamentalists can have about religious concepts being “straightforwardly and literally true” (*Ibid*). Again, the same can be said of science fiction, where elaborate metaphoric speculations are mounted onto various aspects of human nature and the cosmos at large. This is then what allows Roberts to state that “SF is a specifically non-religious religion, an atheistical theism” (*Ibid*). As a non-literalist religion, which does not claim the intricacies of its belief structure to be strictly speaking true, science fiction’s “currency is not ‘truth’ but ‘possibility’” (Roberts 147). The similarity between religion and science fiction lies then in both nature and aims, which makes it perhaps unsurprising to find religious allusions strewn liberally throughout the genre.

Further, in the article “Religion and science fiction” (2003) Farah Mendlesohn gives a detailed tracing of the evolving discursive relationship between fictions of science and fictions of faith. In it she outlines the fluctuating nature of the way in which religious thought has been treated by a broad spectrum of science fiction authors from its popular emergence in the early decades of the twentieth century. Though I do not intend to duplicate her efforts, to explain how the genre has incorporated, contested and questioned religious notions in contrast or accord with emerging secularity, certain key elements of this evolution are important here.⁴⁶ Though science fiction dealt with religious themes since its advent, the discourse bred discord between the historically opposing camps of faith and reason during the 1940s and 1950s, when “[t]he association of religion with the uncivilized remained a common trope” (Mendlesohn 266). It is a notion still entertained today, an often used charge against religion in which it is depicted “less as a mode of thought and more as a lack of thought” (*Ibid*). Here too the detrimental effects of the war and its nuclear climax reverberated, and “the demonstrated legacies of religious prejudice mainly served to convince sf writers that they were correct in their general suspicion of religion in all its forms”

⁴⁶ She gives extensive examples from the genre to substantiate her claims, so I will not do the same. Rather I explain how the discourse has reached the point of interest for this chapter, and refer the reader to her article to for details.

(Mendlesohn 268). Though the discourse is much more nuanced and has undergone several shifts, it becomes clear that science fiction has not looked favourably on religion. The two fields of fiction seem diametrically opposed on the larger question of human transcendence, the one claiming ancient and ultimate truths, the other firmly continuing to look for better answers. The increasing secularisation of the western world and specifically America, where the genre has the largest following, broadened the divide.⁴⁷ The result, during and after the 1980s, was increasing antagonism, and “for many [sf writers] it became necessary to challenge Christianity head-on, showing the power of other traditions” (Mendlesohn 273).

As Mendlesohn points out, “[w]hat strikes the reader when examining these texts as a body is the overriding message: that religion is dangerous and misleading, but that sentient beings are generally too weak-willed to reject it” (269). It would seem to be a love-hate affair, and the genre generally casts its vote with the latter of the two emotions. Having such strong foundations in the possibilities enabled by scientific advancement, the genre has understandably become increasingly disinclined to include positive depictions of religion. However, for all that, it has never stopped including it, and religion is a common theme which resurfaces frequently throughout science fiction narratives. This then gives some sense of the ideological formations present in the discourse, and supports an argument that these texts tend to either contest religious and spiritual notions, or actively advance secular agendas. It is against this backdrop then, that I will discuss the speculations and fictionalisations of a virtual afterlife, and I turn now to posthumanism, which forms the fundamental scientific possibility which underlies this secular afterlife.

Posthumanism is a notion considered by those interested in fields such of robotics, artificial intelligence and the mapping of neurological networks, which seems to converge on the place where futurists and science fiction authors regularly ply their trade. The growing potential, application and reliance on mechanisation and digitisation which arrived at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the much heralded new millennium, has seemingly revealed the possibility of the blurring of boundaries between human and machine. This great shift “requires the establishment of a new world order in which machine life succeeds biological

⁴⁷ As explained in the Chapter 1, this secularization is certainly not as simple as this, and neither is it a one-sided phenomenon, with religiosity also in a state of revival. Still, however, it is not problematic to assume that the greater majority of science fiction authors have not taken part in the religious revival.

life” (Geraci 146). This possibility has perhaps been most comprehensively formulated by thinkers such as the noted futurist Raymond Kurzweil in works like *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (1999) and *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005). Along with others in the field,⁴⁸ he proposes that the next evolutionary step could be entirely manmade and that the entire species could be effectively digitalised. In his article “Progress Accelerates Exponentially” (2008) he explains that “creating a new intelligent ‘species’ is not the primary implication of creating human-level AI. Rather we will merge with the intelligent technology that we are creating” (Kurzweil 37). Geraci optimistically explains the libertarian potential outcome of this possibility: “Human beings will cast off the limitations of their bodies for mechanical and virtual bodies which will live forever in eternal bliss” (146).

This is quite an extraordinary claim from the posthumanists, and does seem to resound with several widespread spiritual proclamations. Effectively, these theorists seem to claim that as a species we have found the fountain of youth, the door to eternity and the keys to heaven all in one fell swoop. Obviously there are those who maintain we should advance cautiously, for such promises may prove disastrously elusive. It is easy to see the utopian potential of such technological mastery, but Kurzweil is quick to admit that it is “neither utopian nor dystopian”, and just like conventional life, has the apparent potential for either (7). As seems so often to be the case, what is perceived as utopia may turn out to require a decidedly negative prefix.

To explain the connection between posthumanism and religion, I incorporate two of the three distinct similarities Geraci identifies for his notion of Apocalyptic AI. His article explains how the notion of the posthuman correlates in several crucial ways to the apocalyptic narratives found in religious texts and thought, arguing then that posthumanism effectively constitutes the apocalypse reimagined. In Christian and Jewish apocalyptic traditions, he contends, believers “anticipated God’s intervention in history”, and maintain that “[a]fter the end of history, God will create a new world and resurrect humanity in glorified new bodies to eternally enjoy that world” (Geraci 140). He is of course referring to the notion upheld by so many religious institutions, that at some point in the future, the world will be laid to waste and that true

⁴⁸ Hans Moravec, David Puresh, Hugo de Garis, Kevin Warwick, Marvin Minsky, Daniel Crevier, Noreen Hertzfeld, Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles to name a few.

followers of the (correct) faith will find themselves transported to a fantastical utopia in the presence of whichever god proves to be the real one.

Of note here is that this chapter is not only concerned with a virtual afterlife as the post mortem condition. At some point, the post mortem state and the posthuman state fuse. It would seem that the initial step to virtualisation would be for the dead to pave the way, as they would become the first posthumans to fully inhabit the virtual afterlife in a purely virtual incarnation, while the living will initially remain tourists who have two states of being, corporeal and virtual. This would then be followed by an increasing shift away from corporeality, and the majority, if not all of humanity will eventually exist purely as virtual entities. It becomes not only the afterlife which one enters upon death, but the dimension of existence which comes after conventional life has ceased to exist entirely and the “real” world is no longer the habitat of humanity. This merging of virtual life with death is also evident in the two narrative depictions I include here, the one being Gibson’s *Matrix*, wherein the AI called *Neuromancer*, who eventually becomes the sum total of the matrix, states that “I am the dead and their land” (244), and the other being Banks’ quite self-explanatorily named “*Crypt*”. Thus, throughout the analysis of these virtual landscapes of the un-alive (at least in the conventional sense), the distinction between the virtual afterlife as the condition for those who have died, and the virtual after-life as the condition which follows this evolutionary phase of human life, will also tend to converge.

The second and more expansive of these stages (the after-life as opposed to the afterlife), Geraci argues, corresponds to what is generally and religiously called the kingdom of heaven (though the phrasing may differ from religion to religion). It is the afterlife par excellence, in that it is the final destination of believers after life and the earth has been left behind. What Geraci thus points out is that a very similar expectation has been voiced by Apocalyptic AI proponents, but that they have done away with God as the agent of this drastic change, relying instead on “evolution as a transcendent guarantee for the new world” (*Ibid*). The next mechanical step in evolution will do what God has apparently neglected for so long, and humanity will transcend to a different, and according to the posthumanists, a more liberated state of existence.

In explaining how a secular, virtual afterlife has been constructed, I must first explain what that afterlife would be constructed of. The first of Geraci’s correlations which I then utilise is the notion of the “New Jerusalem”, which, when transposed to the posthuman context, he calls the

“Virtual Jerusalem” (Geraci 148). It relies on the hypothetical event horizon, rather ominously called the “singularity”. It is described as a “future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed” (Kurzweil 7). At the moment the processing speeds of computers are growing at an exponential rate, which would culminate perpetually in this “moment of cataclysmic change”, “the point on the graph of progress where explosive growth occurs in a blink of an eye” (Geraci 149).⁴⁹ This singularity entails the creation of an expansive artificial world, rendered in virtuality, and the construction of machines which are sufficiently advanced to become, for all intents and purposes, sentient. The vast computational capacities and self-replicating possibilities that this could grant to machines could then very well mean that “in a short time, the world will shift from the biological to the mechanical” (Ibid). Crucially, this step also involves the liberation of human agency from a vast variety of societal demands as well as biological constraints. Mechanisation will not only continue to make much of human effort in society superfluous, but on an individual level as well, increasingly accessible, advanced and applicable technologies could be harnessed to supplement failing biologies. This is then what could lead to a large scale turn towards virtual life, to supplement what could in relation be perceived as the failings of corporeal life.

In *Neuromancer* Gibson hints at the coming singularity, with the narrative playing out against a dark post-virtuality future, where a large degree of mechanisation and the creation of a vast virtual environment has altered society drastically, mostly for the worse it would seem. As such it gives an interesting glimpse at the formative stages of the virtual afterlife, its functioning and the seemingly utopian potential it contains, even though the narrative remains decidedly dystopian. One of the central plot elements of the novel is the matrix, the virtual world in which the protagonist Case plies his trade as a data thief. Such a virtual world has been conceptualised extensively in science fiction narratives.⁵⁰ It is perceived by those who “jack in” as a convincingly realistic and detailed environ, but their interaction within it has virtual instead of physical consequences. Gibson describes it as a “consensual hallucination” (5), but if a

⁴⁹ In “*The Singularity is Near*”, Kurzweil, using his “law of accelerating returns” predicts the singularity to be as close as the year 2045.

⁵⁰ The popular 1999 film by the Wachowski brothers *The Matrix* is perhaps the best known of such depictions of virtual reality. It perhaps then also exemplifies the concept most coherently, with a fully realized seemingly physical landscape accessed only through a conscious resituating to a virtual dimension. It is an idea echoed throughout much of science fiction, eg. the Metaverse in Neal Stephenson’s novel *Snow Crash* and Bruce Sterling’s *Schismatrix*, Iain M Banks’ *Culture* series, even Jeff Noone’s *Vurt* has something similar.

hallucination is widely, even globally, shared, who is to say where reality ends and illusion starts? Effectively, this means that the distinction between reality and sign is broken. Upon leaving the matrix and returning to the corporeal world, Case explains that the experience was “[r]eal as this”, indicating around himself, “[m]aybe more” (Gibson 128). When he is forced into a false virtual representation of his past, complete with old girlfriend, habits and hangouts, it is so convincing that he momentarily loses himself in the illusion and slides easily into his old persona.

In this virtual world, digital information has reached the point where it can seamlessly substitute for conventional reality, as “[t]here will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality” (Kurzweil 9). But at the same time this information remains easily malleable. This allows the virtual world to represent anything programmable, which is why Case is able to be transported between different, and often surreal, virtual locales instantly, while the perceivable representations of data assume any variety of appearance. As Michael Ostwald points out in his article entitled “Virtual Urban Futures” (2000), “because of this simulation, the new [virtual] space is inherently unstable” (660). It is a phantasmagorical space, an artificially created world, which has the necessary realism to become indistinguishable from conventional reality, but which is also capable of fast and drastic alteration due to the changing artifice of its nature. In a place like this, even the laws of physics can be circumvented by the necessary programming. The potential of such a virtual reality is thus that it can effectively substitute what has heretofore been humanity’s primary mode and medium of existence and interaction. More importantly, this new reality is massively fluid, ours for the making, and can be constructing to reflect whatever we can render digitally.⁵¹

This is then why such an expansive virtual environment contains promises of utopia. If altering the sign alters reality, potentially every individual can furnish their virtual existence in any manner desired. The predicament with utopia which I pointed out in Chapter 2, that it is doomed to crippling stasis and uniformity, is largely and effortlessly avoided here. Any amount of idiosyncrasy and conflict can play out, because the connection between cause and effect will be broken, the laws of physics becoming an avoidable restriction. Pointing to the first ever

⁵¹ I use the term “we” rather broadly here, because like the content on the internet, this information will be largely determined by the multitude of individuals who utilise it.

communal virtual environ, Lucasfilm's "Habitat" of the early 1990s, Ostwald explains that it "attempted to create an ideal world by breaking universal laws: by allowing 'people' to be resurrected and to live without food, water and sickness" (672).⁵² The digital self does not have to age, has no biological urges or needs, even "dying" causes only temporary inconvenience as the individual must "effect another spokesperson" (Gibson 119).⁵³ As a space which can be rendered in any way imaginable, and which can be inhabited without the threats and restrictions of mortality and corporeality, such a virtual world does indeed start to mirror religious notions of the promised hereafter.

A similar situation is found in *Feersum Endjinn*, Banks' novel of the distant future. It depicts a post-singularity world, which has reached levels of technological mastery beyond anything within the contemporary framework, the entire planet being a supercity, constructed as a global computer. The Fastness, which is the physical environment of the narrative, is an immense cityscape, complete with stratospheric towers and castles, volcanoes and oxygen plants. But the Fastness is also one massive computer, built into the very fabric of the vast landscape. At this point in human development, every aspect of life has been mechanised and virtualised, the infrastructure effectively also constituting a fully computerised planet. But though the physical backdrop of the narrative is truly immense, it is overshadowed by the expansive virtual world presented within the text. The "Crypt", or "Cryptosphere" is a global communications network, as in *Neuromancer*, it is a super-advanced version of the internet, and again it incorporates a world of virtual possibilities. Every character, whether human, chimeric (sentient animals or a "human in the garb of an animal" (Banks 66)) or otherwise, has access to the Crypt, through the use of implants if they are plebeian, or portable device, if they are "privileged". The Crypt acts as a freely accessible body of information, the "data corpus", and entering it allows several noteworthy possibilities.

⁵² In Ostwald's article, however, we see that this utopian ideal was not realised, as this primitive virtual world was plagued by crime and marauding gangs of bandits, revealing the same problem I identified in Chapter 1, in which it is questionable how large a degree of human behaviour can be incorporated into utopia without it becoming dystopian.

⁵³ I realise many of these texts, these two included, prescribe that "certain internal logics [must] be honoured", limiting the scope of the possible (Gibson 119). Often virtual harm can also be translated to the physical person. Firstly, however, these logics seem to pose more as narrative rather than conceptual prescriptions. Further, and I will get to the dead shortly, having already died means that the worst has already happened, so there is no further harm to be done.

The Crypt allows an instantaneous method of interaction and any person venturing into its seemingly fathomless depths can contact any other therein, or access the sum total of all accumulated information. Importantly, this interaction happens within the consciousness, and unlike the case in *Neuromancer*, the use of computer terminals, “decks” or “simstims” have been supplanted by the aforementioned implants. This is perhaps best explained when looking at the two young lovers Gil and Lucia (peripheral characters though they may be). While in conversation, the character Pieter Velteseri contemplates their silence, thinking that “[i]t was fairly common for those in the first inflammatory rush of infatuation, lust or love to embrace almost exclusively the inner voicelessness of implant-articulation in preference to the somehow off-putting and clumsy medium of normal speech” (Banks 59). Similarly, when Chief Scientist Gadfium requests some information from the data corpus, her aide has but to “[upload] some files from the oxygen works, and sit with her eyes closed [...], reviewing the information” (Banks 8). It thus becomes clear that a direct connection has been established between human consciousness and the workings of the Crypt, a seamless interaction between human and machine, which affords the characters a freer range of interactive modes and abilities.

Furthermore, similar to Gibson’s matrix, the Crypt is also perceived as a fully articulated, albeit virtual, reality, with the full scope of accompanying sensory experiences. Through the perspective of the character “Bascule the Rascule”, the child prodigy who narrates in makeshift phonetics, the reader is given a comprehensive glimpse at the intricacies of the Cryptosphere. In his quest to find a lost friend, Bascule plumbs the depths of the Crypt whenever he gets the chance, capable of choosing various incarnations therein, as often as not settling for a “feerth hok” (fierce hawk) (Banks 77). When another protagonist, Count Sessine, finds himself in the deep levels of the Crypt, the structuring of the data is extensively explained:

Cliffs and mountains indicated buried fastnesses of storage and computation, rivers and seas embodied unsorted masses of chaotic but relatively harmless information, while volcanoes represented mortal danger welling from the explosively corrosive depths of the virus infected corpus... The wind was the half-random machine code shiftings symbolic of the movements of languages and programs within the geographical image of the operating system, while the rain was raw data filtering through, slowed, from base reality...

(Banks 186)

This is then the vastly realised data construction within which the characters operate when entering the Crypt. It does not share the limitations, nor is it bound to the physical laws which govern corporeal space.

This is then also the foundations of the Virtual Jerusalem and the fabric of the afterlife. As a space which is “transcendentally other, it surpasses human life and replaces it with something that – while perhaps connected to the physical reality of our current lives – exists on another plane altogether” (Geraci 152). Because virtuality can come to eventually replace corporeality entirely, our entrance into this dimension of existence *can* open the door to a utopian space, one which transcends the conventional limits, boundaries and restrictions of our current lives. As I will continue to explain, “[t]he Virtual Kingdom is a transcendent plane of cyberspace where history ends, pain disappears, and truly meaningful life becomes possible” (*Ibid*).

But if this is the fabric of this secular afterlife, I must turn to the second of Geraci’s similarities, and explain in what way it can be reached and experienced. As machines are created to be increasingly humanlike in their capabilities, and humans are altered to be increasingly machine-like in *their* capabilities, at some point there will be a merger, a time when humans and machines will become indistinguishable.⁵⁴ The potential then exists that eventually computing capacities will have reached such a level as to duplicate the entirety of the human consciousness.⁵⁵ This process has supposedly already started with the growing supplementation of natural abilities with computer hardware (evident in so much of modern medicine, among other fields), and will expand to allow “enhanced memory, additional senses (such as infrared or ultraviolet vision), internal networking to the internet, rapid powers of computation, and more” (Geraci 153). Growing mechanisation of the individual would result in the rise of human/machine hybrids, or what has been dubbed the cyborg.⁵⁶ Ignoring the nightmarish images this term conjures up, one needs only think of something as humble as a pacemaker or a hearing aid to understand that this

⁵⁴ In the article “Us. And them.” by Chris Carrol, published in the Augst 2011 issue of National Geographic, he gives an overview of the ways in which those in the field of robotics are attempting to create robots with increasingly human capabilities.

⁵⁵ Though the dual nature of this development is important to this possibility, that machines grow more human while humans grow more machine, so to speak, for the remainder of the chapter I will focus mostly on the ways in which this development is evident from the human perspective, leaving the robots to the roboticists.

⁵⁶ The term is a contraction of “cybernetic organism”. Donna Haraway, in her “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1991) catalysed the field of cyborg theory.

possibility is not so outlandish.⁵⁷ But if mechanisation could eventually prove to bypass or improve all biological processes, the balance may very well shift from primarily biological to primarily machine in nature.

And the brain is apparently not as irreplaceable as has been generally believed, it is possible that it too may eventually be mechanically reconstructed, even improved upon. This will “depend upon our ability to represent the pattern of neuron firing in our brains” (Ibid). According to noted roboticist Hans Moravec, pattern identity “defines the essence of a person [...] as the *pattern* and *process* going on in [his/her] head and body, not the machinery supporting that process. If the pattern is preserved, I am preserved” (Moravec cited in Geraci 153). This could then culminate in the ability to “download our consciousness to machines”, eventually “freeing ourselves from human bodies altogether” (Geraci 153). And this digitalisation of the consciousness is what allows humanity access to the virtual afterlife of the future. It corresponds then to the second apocalyptic correlation Geraci draws, that of “glorified bodies” and the new condition of humanity after the end of corporeality (145). In apocalyptic tradition it is the purified state, what has been called the ghost, the spirit or the soul, a notion which all previous chapters have struggled to explain, and which for the first time is given some concrete conceptual foundations. The afterlife will not be filled with the mysterious and ethereal essence of the human, but rather by the perfectly digitalised consciousness which acts as our conduit to transcendence.⁵⁸

It effectively means that the consciousness of the individual is displaced to a virtual incarnation, where it acts much as it does in conventional reality but comes endowed with certain practical upshots of advanced technologies and virtuality. Having the consciousness removed from the physical universe allows the establishment of a unique set of principles, and just as in religious convention, removes the individual from the laws of physics, time and causality. Effectively humanity will be able to experience “multiple ways of being embodied”, the one conventional and limited, the other virtual and liberated (Clark cited in Haney 34). Eliminating the need for conventional embodiment and replacing it with virtual embodiment in a virtual environment (all

⁵⁷ For the extent of current cyborg technologies, see “Next Step for DARPA’s Mind-Controlled Prosthetics: Reliability” by Madhumita Venkataramanan (8 April 2011) : <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/04/next-step-for-darpas-mind-controlled-prosthetics-reliability>. The article explains the recent breakthroughs which have been made in artificial prosthetics, and focuses on a robotic arm which can be attached to an individual and effectively controlled by the brain in much the same way as a conventional human arm.

⁵⁸ As I will later explain, this is not as simple as posthumanists may wish to make it sound.

of which is grounded in a larger mechanical foundation) thus effectively enables the construction of an entirely new, posthuman existence.

In *Neuromancer* this process of virtualisation is seen in the once formidable hacker and protagonist Case, who has sustained severe neurological damage at the hands of those he wronged criminally as a data thief. As a result he can no longer utilise his skills in the matrix. Having thus been “reduced to meat” (Haney 94), Case has fallen into a state of poverty, degeneration and drug dependence, until he is given the opportunity to have his brain damage repaired. Before regaining access to the massive virtual network, his dilapidated biology has to be restored and enhanced mechanically. In exchange for his services as a hacker, powerful employers pay exorbitantly for the procedure which restores Case to his neurological prime, throwing in an additional pancreas and a repaired liver, though upgraded ones which filter out any of the recreational drugs Case regularly consumes.

This same kind of technological supplementation is seen in varying degrees in several other characters. Though Case is clearly more human than machine, the same is not true of Molly, who falls somewhere in the space between. She is a cyborg with permanent black lenses grafted over her eyes, surgical blades which extend from her fingers and even brain sockets which allow her to connect to the matrix, but for all that she is still essentially human. The same cannot be said about the character Armitage, or Corto, who is even further removed from his biological roots. After being horribly injured in a botched military mission, he is largely rebuilt mechanically, physically as well as mentally, and has “a Rom personality built around the fragments of [his] ‘real’ personality” (Haney 96). While Molly remains a recognisable human character despite her mechanical alterations, Armitage falls uncomfortably in the “uncanny valley”.⁵⁹ He appears to lie on the mechanical side of the continuum, and has lost some ineffable aspect of human nature in his technological reconstruction.⁶⁰

So the first step towards the posthuman glorified body lies then in the increasing incursion of technology on biology (and biology on technology), and the replacement of human attributes

⁵⁹ “...a term invented by pioneering Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori more than 40 years ago. Up to a point, we respond positively to robots with a human appearance and motion, Mori observed, but when they get too close to lifelike without attaining it, what was endearing becomes repellent, fast” (Carroll 76).

⁶⁰ I will return to the possible dehumanisation which accompanies the posthuman condition and the problematic questions this can raise.

with mechanical devices (and conversely, the imbuing of mechanical devices with human attributes). Though these three characters depict various stages of the transition, they have all been altered in some way by advanced technologies, which remove them from the fold of conventional humanity. This gives some indication of what this artificial step in evolution entails, a move away from flesh and blood humanity, and an increasing reliance on mechanical enhancement. The next step, however, concerns the shifting of the human consciousness into a virtual space, a substitute for conscious interaction in any corporeal space, because “[j]ust as the old flesh cannot inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, [...] it cannot inherit the Virtual Kingdom” (Geraci 152).

In the narrative, Case frequently enters into cyberspace, where he is embodied as a virtual representation of himself. For him there is no distinction between the experience of virtuality and corporeality. But, he does however, possess the ability to flit through the vast recesses of this virtual world with incredible speed and freedom. For his virtual body, several conventional constraints have fallen by the wayside, and he experiences a greater degree of liberation than he does when he acts only in his capacity as “meat”. Further, and more importantly, Case comes into possession of an information cassette on which the construct affectionately called Dixie or the Flatline is kept. Dixie was once a “redneck jockey” called McCoy Pauley who had been a legendary hacker, until the day he tried to hack into a formidable AI (Gibson 77). The encounter left him braindead, but somehow he recovered, returning to life as the “Lazarus of cyberspace” (Gibson 78). Eventually he does succumb to a bad heart, but his consciousness is retained as a “ROM personality matrix”, making him one of the first fictional characters to have reached the afterlife of the future (Gibson 79).

Despite the assistance Dixie lends to Case and his cause, Case still finds it unnerving to “think of the Flatline as a construct, a hardwired ROM cassette replicating a dead man’s skills, obsessions, knee-jerk responses” (Gibson 76-77). Even to Case, the construct resembles the deceased human too closely for comfort. In his interactions Dixie certainly seems to pass the Turing test.⁶¹ For the

⁶¹ The Turing test is one designed by Alan M. Turing in October of 1950 and published in the article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” in the philosophical and psychological journal *Mind*. In it he asked the question “Can machines think?”, and attempted to establish parameters to answer this question. The proposed test entailed the “imitation game”, in which a man, woman and computer are to converse textually while remaining further isolated from each other. Though more intricate than I have time for here, the gist of the game is to see whether a computer can imitate or replicate human interaction to such a degree that the other parties cannot discern whether they are

most part the conversations between Case and Dixie play out with just as much believability as if Dixie was any other conventionally human character. He has a distinct way of speaking, and at least seems to have a personality. He is capable of appreciating humour, as he laughs at one of his own jokes, saying that the “[o]l’ dead man needs his laughs” (Gibson 169). Furthermore he even appears to have a measure of autonomous agency within the matrix when not being used by Case, as upon being booted up at one point he tells Case that he had “been hearin’ lurid stories” about him since they last spoke (Gibson 167). Dixie is entirely disembodied, yet the distinction between him and the more conventional human characters is tentative, to the extent that Ronald Schmitt refers to Dixie as the “computerized version of a man’s ‘spirit’” (68).

For all intents and purposes Dixie seems to have most, if not all, of the distinguishing characteristics conventionally reserved for humanity. However, some doubt lingers about the degree to which Dixie retains true humanity. He explains that when compared to the advanced AI Wintermute, he is “not human either, but [he] [responds] like one” (Gibson 131). To clarify the distinction Case asks him whether he is sentient, and Dixie’s response reveals his own reservations on the topic: “Well, it *feels* like I am, kid, but I’m really just a bunch of ROM. It’s one of them, ah, philosophical questions, I guess...” (Gibson 131). Indeed, and a tricky one at that. His words certainly indicate that he is self-aware, and his referral to his feelings indicates at least remnants of human consciousness made the transition to digital format. But at the same time, Dixie seems to realise that he is missing some crucial aspect of human life and that he does not truly regard himself as human. Death, it seems, is never survived unscathed. What is interesting to note, and I will return to this later, is that Dixie requests that after his assistance is no longer needed, Case delete the files which keep him alive as the artificially undead.

In Gibson’s Dixie the potential of post mortem digitalisation becomes apparent. A true to life digital reconstruction of the human personality, the gloriously disembodied, would then be able to inherit the virtual kingdom, one in which seemingly human agents can continue to exist after the inevitable conclusion of physical mortality. Admittedly, the matter is not as clear cut, as Dixie himself testifies, and he may be nothing more than a very advanced piece of software, able

conversing with a computer or a human. Thus, it seems just as we lack the ability to sufficiently define human consciousness, he does not propose to determine whether machines can become conscious. Rather, he proposes that if machines were ever to reach a level of complexity where it can believably interact indistinguishably from humans, the difference might become moot.

to mimic the human that he is based upon. But if nothing more, this gives an idea of the potential that posthumanists find in this concept. The loss of the indescribable essence of humanity which may accompany this posthuman condition remains troubling though, and I will return to it later. Turning now to *Feersum Endjinn*, however, it becomes clear how this concept has been elaborated even further.

In the narrative the Crypt is entered either through the character's own consciousness, as explained above, or by the complete duplication of the consciousness into a digital format. Unexplained technologies make it possible to create complete and true reproductions of individual consciousness, which can then function autonomously within the Cryptosphere, virtual replicas which proceed to develop within as the physical character develops without. As Bascule contemplates, after nearly dying within the Crypt: "I shood ½ takin a bit moar time & juss sent a send ov miself in; a image or construct whood ½ dun everyfin I did & felt everyfin I felt & in fact wude ½ been a dooplicate me" (Banks 82). This complete digital rendering of the full human consciousness is then what again enables individual continuation after physical death.

Because the Crypt can host the entire and unaltered consciousness, it is possible, even standard practice, that a person can be reincarnated into another body when the original has been lost. According to the (unexplained) rules of the Crypt, a person is granted eight physical incarnations, one natural birth and seven reincarnations into bodies which can be customised according to individual preference.⁶² This explains the numerical titles attached to characters which have lost one or more physical lives, and also reveals the possibility that an individual can shift between appearance and even gender from one life to the next, as Gadfium has done. Further, if a person were to run out of physical incarnations, the consciousness is granted eight further incarnations in the Cryptosphere as a purely digital entity, the Crypt-body also being susceptible to death.⁶³ Only once these eight incarnations have been spent, consciousness reverts to the base-level of the Crypt, the chaos, where it "dissolves" into the data-corpus (Banks 40). As Count Sessine muses, "the crypt was deep and the human soul was shallow. And the shallower

⁶² The idea of fabricating alternative bodies may again sound like a very distant possibility, yet the field of three dimensional printing has recently begun to experiment in the printing of blood vessels and organs. See the article "Artificial blood vessels created on a 3D printer" by Katya Moskvitch (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-14946808>).

⁶³ Again, this seems more like a narrative prescription than a practical requisite, but I will soon elaborate on this idea of a finite virtual afterlife.

the soul, the less of it survived as any sort of independent identity” (*Ibid*). The effect is incredible longevity of the individual consciousness well past the limits of physical embodiment, and to grasp the true extent of this longevity I must explain the unique nature of Crypt-time.

An important narrative device is the idea that the Crypt is not subject to conventional notions of time, as “the speed-up factor between base-reality and the crypt is [...] ten thousand” (Banks 268). The practical upshot of this is that for one day experienced in base-reality, the Crypt and those within it experience ten thousand days. Thus, When Bascule asks the old philosopher Mr. Zoliparia to wake him from the Crypt, having asked the latter to “giv [him] a minit”, that minute translates into a week that Bascule spends within the Crypt (Banks 82). Similarly when Count Sessine finds himself post-corporeally relocated to the depths of the Crypt, he subjectively experiences “almost twenty eight years”, while “[o]utside, in the world, a little more than a day had passed” (Banks 216). If this immense time-delay is taken into account, then the additional eight Crypt-lives can effectively stretch out to something close to infinity. This then explains why the Crypt is so named; it is filled with the digital dead, who live out their long afterlives exploring and experiencing a virtual afterlife.

In this narrative, mortality is largely a thing of the past. The moment of death is no longer the end of the individual and thus no longer a source of fear or uncertainty. Instead death is held at bay by advanced technologies and the creation of a virtual afterlife, which, if anything, seems to give the dead more time and freedom than the living. Even were the careless individual then to lose all available incarnations, resurrection is possible were anyone inclined to bring such an individual back. Having effectively captured the individual consciousness, the Crypt can reproduce it using the “precedent-saturated data stream” to reconstruct the individual from the “already existing database of sentience types” (Banks 40). Relying then on the vast multitude of previously encoded consciousnesses, and individual can be reconstituted, copied and pasted, in what amounts to digital reanimation. Conversely, however, this also means that a person whose “originality quotient was effectively zero would dissolve almost entirely within the oceanic depths of the crypt’s precedent-saturated data streams and leave only a thin froth of memories and a brief description of the exact shape of their hollowness behind, the redundancy of their beings annihilated by the crypt’s abhorrence of over-duplication” (Banks 40). True individuality and originality is then the key to avoiding this complete informational evaporation.

These narratives then gives a strong sense of what it could mean to die in the future. As Kurzweil hypothesises, “[t]here won’t be mortality by the end of the twenty first century...Up until now, our mortality was tied to the longevity of our *hardware*... As we cross the divide to instantiate ourselves into our computational technology, our identity will be based on our evolving mind file. We will be *software, not hardware*” (Kurzweil 128 – 129). Effectively, this kind of digital duplication enables continued human existence far beyond the end of physical life, and we “will live forever, cast aside pain and want, and participate in a truly universal network of knowledge” (Geraci 154). The virtual afterlife can then come to be a timeless place, where we can continue to engage in the activities we choose, in an environment we can alter to meet any specifications. It is clear to understand why it has come to be regarded as a utopian possibility, a society of the dead, or at least the unconventionally alive, who can do as they please without the repercussions which conventionally deter such actions in corporeality. It also becomes clear why Geraci has found such striking similarities to more traditional apocalyptic narratives, wherein glorified bodies gain access to a wondrous world of possibilities and new meaningful cognitive activity. The posthuman condition mirrors several spiritual and religious notions of transcendence, with their foundations significantly displaced. No gods need to be prayed to, no biblical tenets need to be followed. Instead, technology needs only to run its course, and the next mechanical step in evolution embraced. However, the arguments that Ronald Schmitt and William S. Haney II advance exemplify two entirely contradictory attitudes towards this speculative eventuality, though both of them concern themselves with what will become of humankind if we turn virtual.

For Schmitt this posthuman state represents an accentuation of the connection between humankind and its mythic sensibilities. In his article “Mythology and Technology: The Novels of William Gibson”, he argues that these advanced technologies “[allow] man not to become a robot, but to realize some of his deepest primordial fantasies of transformation” (73). Drawing on the tropes of the trickster and the primitive warrior, as well as the various supernatural agents of mythology, Schmitt shows how the posthuman condition allows a greater realisation of human nature, and especially the human ability to enter the mythic space. Instead of dehumanising humans, advanced technologies like those explained above, imbue humanity with the ability to transcend the limitations of the human body, to resemble more closely the mythical figures that have been conjured up since prehistory.

Throughout both narratives the protagonists encounter entities which “are often referred to directly as ghosts, demons, and gods”, Dixie being an example of the first, Wintermute the second, and the combination of Wintermute/Neuromancer the last (Schmitt 68). In Banks’s novel *Count Sessine* is one of the ghosts in the machine, the “horribl hed fing” (horrible head thing) is something demonic (84), the girl Asura seems to have the qualities of a goddess about her,⁶⁴ and there is even the seemingly inexplicable appearance of the strangely attired angel, “[a] one-time part of the data corpus charged with the overseeing and functioning of the rest, and with the monitoring of the world’s welfare” (239). Considering the wide range of abilities virtual reality allows, from fabricating the environment around personal preferences, to encounters with the dead and non-human entities with great capabilities, the virtual life, and afterlife, seems to allow a richer range of experiences than corporeal life.

But it is not only in the things we encounter, but also in the things we can become, that this mythical state is enhanced. As the individual can customise and alter their “physical” self inside of the virtual world (consider *Bascule* as a fierce hawk or *Case* riding “piggyback” inside of *Molly*’s mind), “to be someone or something else for a time”, we finally achieve the ability to realise “so much of children’s play as well as adult’s entertainment” (Schmitt 73). The consensual hallucination literally allows humanity to make contact with a different state of being, one in which we interact with the characters from our most primitive mythic roots (human/animal hybrids, the dead, “gods” etc) and one in which we can assume new glorified bodies. As Schmitt emphasises, this “allow[s] the barrier of the single corporeal body to be breached, allowing for the dissolution of individual perspective into frantic electronic pantheism in which minds, bodies and senses blend, merge, and spin in a consensual hallucination of sensory overload – hardly what we imagine robot existence to be like” (73).

Schmitt’s point is thus that such a turn to virtuality does not hold the threat of dehumanisation, quite the opposite in fact, as “[t]his extrapolated technology actually expands rather than limits human’s sensual experience” (74). As Geraci also explains; potentially this virtual embodiment and world “would allow human beings unfettered joy through idyllic environs and limitless personal experience” (149). This is an important concern, as should some crucial aspect of

⁶⁴ The name “Asura” refers to “a member of a class of divine beings which in Indian mythology tend to be evil and in Zoroastrianism are benevolent (OED).

humanity be lost in transition, a virtual afterlife would not be one worthy spending eternity in. Schmitt thus takes a positive approach to the whole question and asks that if “machine[s] can be an extension or perhaps even an enhancement of the human spirit, endowed with mythic qualities, is it so bad to become a machine?” (76).

On the other end of the spectrum, however, Haney expresses all of the fears of dehumanisation which Schmitt attempts to allay, and finds that “[s]elf-transformation comes in many forms, not all of which as we have seen are necessarily good for the self” (Haney 177). In his work *Cyberculture, Cyborgs and Science Fiction: Consciousness and the Posthuman* (2006) he draws a distinction between the posthuman belief that “to be conscious is to be conscious of something” (Pepperell in Haney 1) and the tenets of Eastern philosophy “which posits a qualityless state of pure consciousness or ‘a void of conceptions’” (Haney 1). He draws on several works of science fiction and argues that in the variety of mechanised and virtualised characters, there can be found an absence of representations of consciousness as something which can, and in fact does, exist without the need for something to be conscious of. It is in the loss of this void, this pure consciousness that Haney and others find to be “the most subtle component of human nature”, and one which could be easily and detrimentally lost during the transition to the posthuman state, that humanity can lose itself (Haney 8). As he states: “Once we consider the strong evidence for the capacity of human consciousness to be aware of itself as a void of conceptions, certain invasive technological features of the posthuman, though as yet unrealized beyond the realm of science fiction, may lose some of their appeal” (Haney 2).

Haney’s book makes a strong case, drawing on a wide range of consciousness studies, Zen philosophy of the notion of “no-mind” to argue that consciousness in and of itself may be separate from all other human faculties, “that consciousness is a unified witness to, and thus separate from, the duality of both mental and physical activity” (Haney 9). What is more, the experience (or non-experience) of pure consciousness is unbounded and unique, since there is nothing to distinguish one absence of all phenomenological qualities from another, and may thus form the basis for the underlying and “sustaining aspect of human nature” (Haney 10). It is then Haney’s belief that “computers will never be able to replicate human brain functioning to the point of reflecting *purusha* [pure] consciousness, and in turn humans may radically undermine

their innate capacity for this state if they overextend themselves through bionic technology” (Haney 93).

When looking at *Neuromancer*, Haney finds that Dixie “lacks volition”, and his death-wish is attributable to his realisation that he lacks the ability to reach true transcendence as a virtually disembodied entity (Haney 98). The same goes for Wintermute, who “does not possess higher order consciousness [and] has no awareness upon which to be conscious of being conscious or to transcend conscious content” (Haney 100). They remain ultimately unconscious, inhuman and most importantly, will forever lack the capacity for reaching the state of pure consciousness which could, Haney argues, be a fundamental attribute of human nature. Perhaps it is in the very sensory overload that Schmitt describes, that the inner void is drowned out, that access to the core of consciousness is lost. Haney ultimately feels that “access to pure consciousness, which some believe will always remain a mystery to the third-person approach of science, may now be under threat by our posthuman condition” (Haney 177). He warns that losing this “unsayable dimension of life” could have unforeseen dehumanizing effects, which casts a doubt on whether or not the posthuman condition is something to be desired or realised (*Ibid*). And certainly, if posthuman nature is somehow a diminished form of human nature, and is accompanied by a loss of the ineffable essence of consciousness, then some caution and reservation is necessary.

So whether or not it is wise to proceed in this direction is still uncertain, at the very least these are representations of an alternative afterlife. Effectively the notion of posthumanity constitutes an original conception of the afterlife, not only of the individual but also of the species, in that it speculates on what could come after this version of life. It is an apocalyptic notion, which has nothing to do with spiritual concerns, but rather deals only with the possibilities of human advancement. The afterlife of the future can be “a world evolved out of this one, invented to our specs, completely artificial, completely deterministic in its platform for [the] unpredictable in its degrees of freedom” (Porush 132). This is then why these thinkers and the science fiction authors who fictionalise the potential of their ideas incorporate the language of spirituality. They are effectively rewriting the apocalypse and replacing the old tomes and speculations of religious thought with new scientific texts and hypotheses on what the future may hold. Instead of old gods and devils, we will confront new virtual entities of our making, for good or bad. Of all the texts and speculative notions investigated, these are the only ones which do not use the

terminology of spirituality uneasily. If anything, these texts have taken the language and given it a whole new context within which it can be applied. It is an effective reappropriation in that it utilises the lexical and conceptual conventions of spirituality, but discards the actual spirituality which lies at its foundation.

Interestingly, if these texts or the scientific musings on which they draw are proven accurate, spirituality will effectively become obsolete. What need is there for God if we become part of a universal consciousness? What need is there for salvation if we achieve immortality for the individual consciousness? What need is there for heaven if we can create it ourselves? The fact that so much of science fiction, as well as the speculative efforts of leading scientists from several fields, utilises the vocabulary of spirituality to formulate concepts which have the potential to so wholly obliterate spirituality, proves illuminating. From this it seems apparent that any and all speculations on transcendence and the post mortem experience has been heretofore monopolised by spiritual philosophy. The afterlife has been so fully conceptualised by religious and spiritual thought that even those who, whether knowingly or uncaringly, advocate and plan its end, utilise these conceptual conventions. This certainly seems to indicate that no other conceptual templates have been available. If conceptualisation was possible without relying on such archaic and decidedly unscientific notions, certainly these of all speculators would have grasped the opportunity to do so.

However, they use these concepts devoid of irony, as they are displaced to a technological, rather than spiritual context. It seems then that as a speculative possibility this is the only one which can lay claim to an actual reinvention of the afterlife. This is largely enabled by having foundations, however loose, in scientific fact, which enables a sure, if largely hypothetical, footing on the speculative precipice reached at the end of life. Of all the speculative discourses, this alone seems to have novel materials with which to fashion an alternative and truly secularised afterlife. As with the previous texts investigated, these also reflect a comingling of secular and religious notions indicative of the fluid boundary between the two. But for these texts secularity is not such an indeterminate notion. Here the secular mandate does not lie in a liberalised heaven, or a discarding of religious institutions and doctrines, or even a contemporary reimagining of the afterlife. Rather, secularity pervades every aspect of this post mortem formulation, as every aspect of this posthuman state is removed from the religious sphere and

placed firmly in the human, or posthuman, condition. They do not express a hope or even a certainty that this afterlife awaits us after death, but rather draw the speculative blueprint and identify the technologies on which humanity can construct this afterlife. And though several spiritual or religious notions are recycled throughout the genre, and specifically in these virtual afterlives, the recycled materials are used in a purely secular manner. Instead of cloud banks there will be computer banks, instead of a spiritual host there will be a collective consciousness, instead of God from the machine, there will be God the machine.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

What remains then is to clearly identify the unifying delineations which are found throughout these texts of alternative afterlives. In different ways and varying degrees they all utilize the afterlife to demarcate the fluid boundary between the religious and the secular, and it is here where I must find the meaningful distinctions which I, drawing on Kaufman, mentioned in the introduction. Twain started the process by secularising the popularly held Christian beliefs about heaven, showing them to be nonsensical while attempting to reconstruct a more rational, liberal and secular replacement. In Chapter 2, *Wristcutters* and *A Bothersome Man* used the notion of a contemporary purgatory, largely devoid of obvious religious details, to construct afterlives which, at least superficially, do not concern themselves with religion. Pullman took a more direct approach, and enacted the overthrow of the religious institution by a secular dispensation, liberating the dead from the afterlife in the process. Finally, the science fiction texts constructed a new afterlife, one with foundations in technology instead of spirituality.

So though all of them find their secular nature through different means, several common conceptual fronts nevertheless become clear, problematic religious notions which are overcome through secular alterations, substitutions and alternatives. These similarities can be considered in relation to three broader conventionally religious categories which are uniformly rejected or contested: that of doctrine, that of damnation, and that of eternity. Furthermore, and importantly, these secularising projects also engage in different ways with the two foundations of the afterlife which Casey identifies in the introduction: the righting of earthly wrongs and the fear of death. These two elements, which were instrumental in the formation and elaboration of fictions of the afterlife, are addressed throughout these texts in ways which run entirely counter to what theist and transcendentalist ideologies have hitherto had to say on the matter.

Unsurprisingly, the most obvious of the secular alterations to the afterlife is the discarding of a great deal of religious doctrine, a removal or subversion of the conceptual and ideological details with which the afterlife has been religiously furnished. All of texts reimagine, reappropriate or

contest the conventional beliefs held and prescriptions propagated about the afterlife by religious tradition. This is clearly explained by Flynn, a member of the Council for Secular Humanism, when he describes how secular humanism relates to atheism: “We welcome [atheism’s] vision of a universe upon which meaning was never imposed from above. But secular humanism goes further, calling on humans to develop within the universe values of their own—as it were, from below” (Flynn n.p.). These texts then all do away with the earthly propagation of divine mandates and agendas, denouncing them as nonsensical, unnecessary or inapplicable to meaningful human life, depending on who does the denouncing. Instead, they construct alternatives from below, afterlives which are more fathomable to human sensibilities. Religious doctrines, believed to be divine in origin, are discarded to make room rather for a system of “rational ethics based on human experience” (Flynn n.p.).

In Twain’s text it became clear that his heaven makes room for all kinds, that the specific cultural or religious inclinations of the dead have no bearing on their chances of being saved. All nationalities, cultures, creeds, times and even galaxies are included into heaven, there being “pure savages” from long before the founding of Christianity walking side by side with the blue, one-legged, seven-headed extra-terrestrials (Twain 92). This inclusivity is in direct contradiction to the strict and subjective (or religion-specific) salvation offered by religious doctrine, and a (very) small measure of good human attributes and actions seems to allow what religion claims only true belief in the correct faith can permit. In addition, Twain also shows the preconceived notions of heaven to be ridiculous, and although the halos, harps and other trimmings of heaven he satirizes do not necessarily fall strictly under religious or biblical prescription, Captain Stormfield clearly shows that heaven is nothing like the preachers would have had him believe. He thus replaces it with a more sensible system which takes into account the massive diversity of human culture and experience, although admittedly, as became clear, the system he proposes has no small measure of its own troubles and inconsistencies.

The texts investigated in Chapter 3 also engage in this discarding of doctrine, with their afterlives being purgatorial places stripped of religious specificity. In their depictions of a modernised post mortem condition there is a complete lack of any defining dogma or prescription. Though I show that these texts do include notions which coincide very closely to religious conceptions, the purgatorial template and undefined higher authorities do not act according to any recognisable

religious agenda, which consequently trouble these texts. The dead are mostly left to their own devices, and the authorities only intervene when the efficient operation of the afterlives in their care are threatened. There are no systems of regulation in place which are comparable to the tenets of any religious institution, neither are the deceased expected to offer obeisance to those authorities who hold a measure of power over them. It was exactly this unspecific nature of the authorities which meant that the dead could not escape their purgatorial hardships.

Through his secularising war, Pullman depicts the dissatisfaction with doctrine most clearly and aggressively. The secular forces rid the multiple universes of all manner of religious prescription and those who propagate it. In the earthly republic of heaven they leave no room for the oppressive tenets of religion, and its construction requires instead what the text formulates as its diametric opposite - free and conscientious consciousness. No religious institution is left standing, because institutionalisation entails a degree of homogenisation, which the text explicitly opposes. Though the war is aimed directly at God and his agents, this is done not only to destroy a corrupted and false authority, but also to obliterate the foundations of the doctrines which the church has used to such detrimental effect. The draconian and malevolent prescription of institutionalised religions is entirely destabilized to allow for a more individual formulation of personalised beliefs, “which emerges on the foundation of a pluralistic secular society” (Hanegraaff 300). So though the new secular dispensation does not entirely exclude notions of spirituality, it leaves these in the hands of the individual instead of the institution.

Finally, in the afterlives of the future, the regulations of religion are replaced by the regulations of computation. Instead of holy texts, there is machine code. Instead of subjective moral prescriptions, there are largely unfettered virtual possibilities. There are no gods, except those that are manmade, and as such there are no doctrines except those that are manmade. As virtual entities, the dead engage in the virtual afterlife, unhindered even by the laws of physics, which makes it seem highly improbable that subjective moralistic systems would be entertained whatsoever.

The rejection of doctrine, and the turn away from strict, specific yet broadly applied moral conventions is then something which is uniformly evident throughout the texts. None of them include the notion that belief in a specific religious system is required to achieve a desired post-mortem goal. But as I said, this is only to be expected from secular reimaginings, because as

Flynn states, it is an ideology which is “rooted in the world of experience; objective; and equally accessible to every human who cares to inquire into value issues” (Flynn). Its rootedness in worldly experience means that it does not disregard the heterogeneous nature of human experience; its objectivity means that it does not ascribe to notions of exclusivity; and finally, its accessibility to inquiries into its value systems brings it back full circle to a “rational ethics based on human experience” (Flynn n.p.).

Accompanying the subversion of religious tenets, it is also evident that these texts do not buy into the binary afterlife so widely advanced throughout religious tradition. None of these secular afterlives explicitly utilise the notion of damnation as opposed to salvation. This is certainly one of the results of disregarding unsatisfactory religious doctrine and avoiding exclusivity, but it also ties into how these texts engage with one of the foundational motivations for fictions of the afterlife. The righting of earthly wrongs, what Casey claims to be one of two clear principles which gave rise to belief in and fictions of post mortem continuation, as well as a notion which recurs throughout the long evolution of these fictions, is then also one which is interestingly contested by these secular and secularising afterlives.

As mentioned, damnation is largely absent in Twain’s text, and even though Stormfield presumes he is heading for warmer climes, he is emphatically welcomed into heaven. In fact, the measure of inclusivity evident in this heaven is so broad that it is entirely unclear what manner of atrocious conduct is required to warrant damnation. Furthermore, the only righting of earthly wrong evident in the text is the allocation of each soul to the niche in which their skills could be most effectively and gainfully utilized. This seems less like a righting of earthly wrongs than a correction of human oversight, and a perfection of the bureaucratic shortcomings of life. There is no indication that Stormfield needs to atone for any of his past indiscretions, and the passage where the eleventh hour convert arrives to great celestial fanfare reveals that heaven is nothing if not supremely forgiving.

In Keret’s novella, and the two films, it is precisely the absence of repentant possibilities which poses such a problem for the protagonists. Though it could be argued that their bleak afterlives are the punishments that they must endure, that they have been consigned to purgatory due to their respective earthly wrongs, they lack the agency or incentive to atone for the wrongs they have committed. Having such vague authorities with such unclear mandates, consequently

nullifies the possibility that earthly wrongs can be actively righted. These seeming purgatories, where convention would grant the most explicit and coherent atonement for the indiscretions of a life ill-spent, do not offer this possibility. Implacable authorities do not allow the dead to rectify whatever mistakes they made, and thus the evils which befall the living are not corrected by the dead. The implied punitive damnation which seems possible, in Messiah King's further afterlife and Andreas' icy final destination, are again not punishments for earthly wrongs, but rather the consequences of an afterlife ill-spent.

For Pullman too, the afterlife is not a binary system of reward or punishment. Instead, there is only the bleak and morbid prison to which all the dead go, regardless of past piety or regular wrongdoing. He constructs the land of the dead specifically so that there is no better or worse alternative to be selected according to earthly actions. Thus, there is also no post mortem justice to be had from a divine judge. As became clear, there is only tortuous entrapment, with no recourse or retribution. Significantly, the secular forces rather arrive there to right heavenly wrongs, and to liberate the imprisoned from an arbitrary and rundown system. And in the blissful dissipation of the dead which the two protagonists effect, there is a universal liberation from this place. Salvation lies in the gentle release into the material world, damnation lies only in the refusal to leave the land of the dead (as one misguided priest in fact does (*AS* 334 – 337)).

In the science fiction texts too, there is no conceivable reason why salvation or damnation would figure into the afterlife of the future. This afterlife is not constructed as a binary system, but rather as one "consensual hallucination", vast and amorphous though it may be. It is also manipulable to a large degree by each individual, and, as explained above, free from any subjective moralistic systems. As such there is no reason to include a higher adjudicating authority, the highest power being the computers and computations which form and maintain this virtual space. Conduct in life has no bearing on access to this virtual afterlife (just as our morally questionable actions today have no bearings on access to the internet), and the posthuman is in no way accountable for the actions of the human. In fact, it is entirely unclear whether there are any consequences to undesirable actions, as even the rules of causality can be largely circumvented in such a condition.

It is interesting to note, then, that fictions of the secular afterlife make no attempt to compensate for the evils which befall the living. This notion of post mortem remedy for earthly wrongs,

which is a foundational concept for of the afterlife, is subverted to varying degrees by all of these texts. None of them have a clear depiction of the afterlife in which a uniform justice is applied, in which those who did not conform to societal or religious prescriptions are punished, and those who did are rewarded. On the one hand, this again ties in to what Flynn argues about the objectivity of secular humanist ethics, in that it “appeals to science, reason, and experience to justify its ethical principles” (Flynn n.p.). As he explains, “[o]bservers can evaluate the real-world consequences of moral decisions and intersubjectively affirm their conclusions”, rather determining in life what religion considers to become universally evident in death (Flynn n.p.). For the secular ideology then, the actions of life are measured against the “consensus moralities [based] on consequentialist principles”, which each human society “invariably construct[s]” (Flynn n.p.). However, this disregard for post mortem justice is also intimately connected to the last distinction I identify; that the secular afterlife finds the notion of eternity wholly undesirable, in so doing also contesting the other of Casey’s foundational elements.

In one way or another, all of these texts disrupt the religious notion that while life is fleeting, the afterlife is eternal. Life eternal may be a very convenient and effective way to placate the fear of death, but a loss of the fear or uncertainty of death has consequences perhaps unforeseen by religious advocates. Thus these secular afterlives again contest the very foundations on which fictions of the afterlife originated. Narratively at least, I can turn to Walter Benjamin, who makes a strong argument for the importance of death. In his interesting discussion of the loss of the storyteller, Benjamin expands on the importance and significance of death for the telling of a story, stating that “[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell” (Benjamin 369). The fact that existence is finite imbues not only a narrative, but life itself with agency and significance, and grants to life and the narrative “that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him” (*Ibid*). Benjamin then argues that it is exactly this authority which “is at the very source of the story”, and by implication, it is death which is at the very source of life (*Ibid*). I turn again to Eagleton, whom I quoted in the introduction, and who maintains that “[t]o accept death would be to live more abundantly” (210). Without a deadline to existence, the incentive for any human agency is undone. In finitude lies the compulsion to do more and live more. These secular afterlives all seem to endorse this notion, and emphasise a thoughtful and conscientious life more than they do an eternal afterlife.

It is only when Stormfield is told that he need not spend eternity in tedious praise and worship, and that he can find gainful employment instead, that he sees the sense of the heaven he finds himself in. The person who sits next to him on the cloud bank, hossanahing with increasing sheepishness, at some point turns to him and says: “It’s a long time to hang to the one – eternity, you know” (Twain 65). He is referring to the only hymn that Stormfield knows off by heart, but it applies just as readily to any action which is performed into perpetuity. Again the wise Sam Bartlett explains the situation: “Eternal Rest sounds comforting in the pulpit, too. Well try it once, and see how heavy time will hang on your hands” (Twain 66). The only way for Twain to rationalise eternity is if he can fill it with a seemingly infinite amount of meaningful and productive activity, and even then Stormfield soon becomes “restless, the same as [he] used to on earth when [he] had been ashore a month” (Twain 98).

An equally uneasy engagement with eternity is evident in *Kneller’s Happy Campers*, *Wristcutters* and *A Bothersome Man*, as the protagonists all struggle with the tedious lack of agency which accompanies eternity. All three texts depict the afterlife as a somewhat senseless condition, with the protagonists struggling to find meaningful existence in a state which allows no change. Before embarking on the road trip, Zia finds his post mortem condition cripplingly boring, so much so that he contemplates suicide again. In his eventual return to his town and job, the same sense of futility is created, the events of the narrative amounting to nothing. In addition, Mikal’s entire narrative arc hinges on her desire to break free of this ceaseless pointlessness. Andreas, too, finds the tedious homogeneity of his afterlife so frustrating that he literally takes the leap that Zia fears, onto the subway tracks. The lack of agency which accompanies infinite existence becomes clear, and the protagonists struggle in different ways to find meaning and purpose in an existence which, due to its eternal nature, ultimately has none.

Pullman once again engages most clearly with this problem, and constructs his secularising project around the end of the afterlife. The protagonists literally break open the land of the dead, and lead the eternally entrapped back into the physical world, where they reintegrate with the rest of materiality. The fear of death is allayed then, not by any claims to post mortem life everlasting, but rather by the blissful depiction of this “becoming part of everything alive again” (AS 335). Pullman then finds eternity in the endless recycling of the materials of life, rather than further transcendental states of being. As Thomas Moore so eloquently states: “From my rotting

body, flowers shall grow and I am in them and that is eternity” (Moore n.p.). But his destruction of the afterlife is also intimately linked to his foundations for a secular dispensation. As was explained, a central notion throughout the trilogy is the focus on corporeal existence, and the advocacy of thoughtful and benevolent consciousness throughout life. Removing the afterlife then not only undermines religiosity, but also forms his most coherent statement about the beneficial alternatives to be found in secularity. The fundamental idea behind the end of the afterlife is that “[w]e shouldn’t live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place” (AS 548). Only in accepting death can the most be made of life.

Again, the future afterlives subvert the notion of eternal continuation in the hereafter. Though my argument showed that a virtual afterlife has the potential to be an eternal post mortem condition, this need not necessarily be the case. The science fiction texts both include the notion that the digital dead can cease to exist. This is evident in Dixie’s wish to have the files which keep him “alive” erased, while Sessine teeters on the edge of oblivion with his one last digital life remaining. Geraci’s optimistic notion of the posthuman who “will live forever, cast aside pain and want, and participate in a truly universal network of knowledge” is not entirely unqualified (Geraci 154). Kurzweil perhaps explains this most clearly when he says that “we will be able to live as long as we want (a subtly different statement from saying we will live forever)” (9). The subtle difference is that an exit from the afterlife is built into this post mortem condition, a readily available way for a digital construct to end its existence, as easily as files are deleted from a computer. Evidently the proponents of the virtual posthuman condition foresee that the individual can grow weary of eternal existence, and do not prescribe that we have to live forever, only that we potentially can. Thus the virtual afterlife need only be endured as long as one can stand it.

The cumulative effect of these challenges to convention is the interesting phenomenon that these alternative afterlives are effectively removing the foundations on which the concept of the afterlife has been constructed. These secular afterlives strip the conceptual landscape of the furnishings and prescriptions of conventional religiosity, cast doubt on their logic and rationality, and contest them sufficiently to pose as significant alternatives. But they do not stop here, and take their secularising project further back to the very foundations of the speculative concept.

Secular afterlives no longer right earthly wrongs, neither do they allay the fear of human finitude. Thus they undermine the reasons for the original construction of the afterlife as a method of addressing death, and replace it with an argument for the acceptance of finitude and worldliness.

Implicit to this argument is an optimistic aspect of the secular humanist mandate. This relies on the secular predisposition for and foundation in temporality and corporeality, which creates a naturalistic worldview that “eschews transcendentalism in any and all forms” (Flynn n.p.). Contesting notions of post mortem states of existence, states that lie just beyond the limits of this life, grants secular humanism a strong ideological grounding, one which lies firmly in this life. Flynn again describes this attitude to death most clearly when he states that “[b]ecause no transcendent power will save us, secular humanists maintain that humans must take responsibility for themselves” (Flynn n.p.). If a finite life is all there is, the agency robbed by notions of eternity comes thundering back, compelling the mortal to make the most of mortality. If there will be no retribution in death for the evils of life, it becomes imperative to address these evils during life. The potential behind acknowledging and accepting death is not hard to see, because, as Eagleton contends, the one condition and conclusion of mortality may enable humanity “to relish [life] all the more” (210).

Ultimately, the secular afterlife seems to be an interestingly self-defeating project. On the one hand the afterlife is used as an insightful vantage point from which to create distinctions for the boundary between religion and secularity. These texts imaginatively engage in the discourse of death and create alternative conceptions of this speculative landscape which stand apart from those traditionally advanced by religion. Through depictions of the afterlife they define the notion of secularity as that which does away with doctrine, damnation and eternity. The ironic situation thus arises that these elaborate fictions of the afterlife are used to undermine the need for elaborate fictions of the afterlife. Removing the speculative foundations of the afterlife leaves room for an alternative perspective on death, a perspective which has several beneficial implications. Instead of hoping for divine retribution, there should be justice on earth, instead of yearning for eternity, death can become a powerful ally to the living. If I understand these texts correctly, and they are making a case for a greater engagement with life, I cannot help but agree most emphatically.

Works Cited

- A Bothersome Man* (Original: *Den Brysomme Mannen*). Dir. Jens Lien. Tordenfilm, 2006.
- Banks, Ian M. *Feersum Endjinn*. Great Britain: Orbit, 1995.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work on Nicolai Leskov." Hale, Dorothy J, Ed. *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Bird, Anne-Marie. "'Without Contraries is no Progression': Dust as an All-Inclusive, Multifunctional Metaphor in Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials'." *Children's Literature in Education* 32.2 (2001): 111 – 123.
- Browne, Ray B. *Mark Twain's Quarrel With Heaven: "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" And Other Sketches*. New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press Services, Inc, 1970.
- Bush, Harold K. Jr. *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of His Age*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007.
- Carroll, Chris. "Us. And them." *National Geographic*. August 2011. 68 – 85.
- Casey, John. *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Clasquin, Michel. "From Captain Stormfield to Captain Kirk: Two Twentieth Century Representations of Heaven." *Myth and Symbol*. 4.4 (2007): 57 – 66.
- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008.
- Delbaere-Garant, Jeanne. "Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English." *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Faris, Wendy B. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 249 – 263.
- Dennett, Daniel. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking, 2006.

Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

Elliot, Robert C. *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970.

Faris, Wendy B. "Scheherezade's Children: Magical Realism in Postmodern Fiction." *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Faris, Wendy B. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 163 – 190.

Feinberg, Leonard. *Introduction to Satire*. Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1967.

Fessenden, Tracy. "'The Secular' as Opposed to What?" *New Literary History* 38.4 (2007): 631 – 636.

Flynn, Tom. "Secular Humanism Defined." *Secular Humanist*. 23 October 2011
[www.secularhumanist.org].

Geraci, Robert M. "Apocalyptic AI: Religion and the Promise of Artificial Intelligence." *Journal of the American Academy of Religious Studies* 76.1 (2008): 138 – 166.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Book, 1984.

Glendining, Simon. "Japheth's World: The Rise of Secularism and the Revival of Religion Today." *The European Legacy* 14.4 (2009): 409 – 426.

Gooderham, David. "Fantasizing It As It Is: Religious Language in Philip Pullman's Trilogy, His Dark Materials." *Children's Literature* 31. (2003): 155 – 175.

Hagglund, Martin. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. "New Age Religion and Secularization." *Numen* 47 (2001): 288 – 312.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.149-181

Hill, Hamlin. *Mark Twain, God's Fool*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Holyoake, George J. and Bradlaugh, Charles. *Secularism, Scepticism, and Atheism: verbatim report of the proceedings of a two nights' public debate between Messrs. G.J. Holyoake & C. Bradlaugh : held at the New Hall of Science ... London, on the evenings of March 10 and 11, 1870*. Austin. 1870.

Kauffman, Michael W. "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession." *New Literary History* 38.4 (2007): 607 – 628.

Keret, Etgar. *Kneller's Happy Campers*. Trans. Miriam Shlesinger. Great Britain: Chatto & Windus, 2009.

Kumar, Krishnan. *Utopia and ante-utopia in modern times*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

Leal, Luis. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature." *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Faris, Wendy B. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 119 – 124.

Martin, David. *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*. England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005.

McEwan, Todd. "Plastic People." *The Guardian*. 24 March 2007. 30 Oct. 2011 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview21>].

Mendlesohn, Farah. "Religion and science fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. Edward, James. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 264 – 275.

Moore, Thomas. "A Quote by Thomas Moore on life and eternity". Gaiam Life: Stream of Consciousness. 31 Oct. 2011 [<http://blog.gaiam.com/quotes/authors/thomas-moore/49923>]

Moskvitch, Katya. "Artificial blood vessels created on a 3D printer". BBC News. 16 September 2011. 30 Oct. 2011 [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-14946808>].

- Novotny, Patrick. "No Future! Cyberpunk, Industrial Music, and the Aesthetics of Postmodern Disintegration." *Political Science Fiction*. Eds. Hassler, Donald M. and Wilcox, Clyde. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996. 99 – 123.
- Ostwald, Michael. "Virtual Urban Futures." *The Cyberculture Reader*. Eds. Bell, David and Kennedy, Barbara M. London: Routledge, 2000. 658 – 675.
- Plotkin, Diane M. "Creator and Fallen Angel: The Christian Atheism of Mark Twain." *The Forum on Public Policy*. Brookhaven College and University of Texas, 2008. 1 – 15.
- Porush, David. "Transcendence at the Interface: The Architecture of Cyborg Utopia – or – Cyberspace Utopoids as Postmodern Cargo Cult." *Thinking Robots, An Aware Internet, and Cyberpunk Librarians*. Eds. Miller, R. Bruce and Wolf, Milton T. Chicago: Library and Information Technology Association, 1992. 127 – 136.
- Pullman, Philip. *Northern Lights*. London: Scholastic, 1998.
- Pullman, Philip. *The Subtle Knife*. London: Scholastic, 1998.
- Pullman, Philip. *The Amber Spyglass*. London: Scholastic, 2001.
- Roberts, Adam. *Science Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques. Enright, D.J. comp. and ed. *The Oxford Book of Death*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Schmitt, Ronald. "Mythology and Technology: The Novels of William Gibson." *Extrapolation* 34.1 (1993): 64 – 78.
- Schweizer, Bernard. "'And He's A-Going to Destroy Him': Religious Subversion in Pullman's His Dark Materials." *His dark materials illuminated: critical essays on Philip Pullman's trilogy*. Eds. Lenz, Millicent and Scott, Carole. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005. 160 – 173.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007.

Turing, Alan M. "Computing Machinery and Intelligence." *Mind*. October 1950. 433 – 460.

Venkataramanan, Madhumita. "The Next Step for DARPA's Mind-Controlled Prosthesis: Reliability." *Wired*. 8 April 2011. 30 Oct. 2011

[<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/04/next-step-for-darpas-mind-controlled-prosthetics-reliability/>].

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. London: The Penguin Group, 1963.

Weidner, Daniel. "Thinking beyond Secularization: Walter Benjamin, the 'Religious Turn,' and the Poetics of Theory." *New German Critique* 37.3 (2010): 131 – 148.

Wristcutters: A Love Story. Dir. Goran Dukić. Autonomous Films, 2006.