The Transubstantiation of Henry Darger

by

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Abstract

Henry Darger (1892-1973), incarcerated as a boy, isolated and unknown during his life, has, in death, become one of the world's most well-known outsider artists. What do the work, life and afterlife of Henry Darger tell us about the ways normative society, and the disabled themselves, deal with mental disability? I claim there is something about disability — in this case psychological disability — that is challenging to the normative "healthy" person or social institution. Some of those challenges are obvious and practical; some are more metaphysical. Darger embodied both kinds of challenge: while alive he made strange noises, refused to bathe and avoided social interaction. When dead, he left a legacy of images and text that fascinates us, that we seek to enjoy and profit from, but which is also unsettling and even horrifying. I examine Darger's life and work, in the context of his psychological disability, and some social and critical strategies applied to him. This thesis details how critics, curators, academics and helping professionals used, and continue to use, a series of strategies: political/bureaucratic, religious/theological, and aesthetic/commodifying to dissolve the discomfort Henry Darger's presence and work created and still creates for us.
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INTRODUCTION


Henry Darger (1892-1973), incarcerated as a boy, isolated and unknown during his life, has, in death, become one of the world's most well-known outsider artists. His life, his work and his "after-life" (the critical and popular reception and celebration of both work and life) illustrate political, institutional, aesthetic and religious responses to the social management and dulcification which characterize our responses to people with mental disabilities.
Who was Henry Darger?

Until Darger’s writings and collage drawings were found by his long-time landlord and prominent photographer/designer Nathan Lerner six months before his death, no one suspected what the odd and solitary person who worked at menial jobs in Catholic hospitals, refused to bathe, and would only talk about the weather, was creating in his two-room apartment in Chicago.

What Lerner found were several hundred pictures (some three metres in length), many stitched together to create three large books, and over 30,000 pages of fiction and diaries spanning six decades. The illustrations—composed by tracing and collaging visual elements from advertisements, comic strips, children’s colouring books and other pieces of popular culture, enhanced with hand-drawn details and watercolour—place fresh-faced comic strip girls-in-curls, often drawn with penises, within scenes of extreme brutality. The effect is visually stunning and disturbing. These scenes illustrate the elaborate cosmology and narrative Darger set forth in his violence- and religion-drenched 15,000 page saga *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* ("Realms"). In addition to this central work, Darger’s writings include personal journals (the first of which was written in 1911 and the last in 1972), ten years of daily weather observations (*Weather Books* written between 1958 and 1967), an autobiography entitled, *The History of My Life*, which he wrote from 1963 to 1971 and handwritten manuscripts entitled, *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy*
House, in which the Vivian Girls travel to Darger's hometown and battle with brutal, sex-crazed demons who strip, rape and strangle little girls much like their human Glandelinian counterparts in The Realms.

Darger's biography seems to fascinate almost as much as his images and writings. In addition to his Dickensian childhood and impoverished adulthood, he was obsessively religious. For most of his life he attended mass daily (four or five times per day after his retirement). He had no family and no friends. Paradoxically, the absence of an extra-textual record has tied Darger's work to his biography more tightly than for any mainstream author. Almost every article about Darger seems to start with a description of his life.

Darger's art has now been exhibited widely. It is usually classified as "outsider" art and his texts as "outsider" literature. Although Darger's visual work has been public since 1977, and there have been many reviews and articles in the popular media, there are few published academic articles on Darger. This is partly because Darger's written work was virtually inaccessible until 2001 when it became the property of the American Museum of Folk Art. Prior to that art historian and psychoanalyst John MacGregor spent many years sorting, decoding, organizing and writing about Darger's formidably prolific output. Although I refer to many authors writing about Darger throughout the following chapters, it is the groundwork laid by McGregor upon which I have depended most. His efforts have made researching Henry Darger through primary sources possible. Not only did MacGregor spend over a decade sorting and making
sense of the thousands of documents and images in Darger's room, he was also central to organizing Darger's work in the archive at the American Museum of Folk Art. As well, his book, *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* (2002), at over seven hundred pages, is the only in-depth study of Darger to date. In addition to MacGregor's scholarly work, the last decade has seen an outpouring of more popular interest and Darger-inspired productions.

**Darger Transubstantiated**

My approach to Darger's life, work and posthumous critical and popular reception will be to examine it in light of the emerging field of disability studies. In addition to being a gifted visual artist and prolific writer, Darger was what we would now label mentally "ill" or "disabled" and, as a child, he was designated as "feebleminded" in the more brutal lexicon of his day. His work expresses a consistently violent and "abnormal" sexuality. There is no doubt at all that these and other features of his life and work—although sometimes downplayed—are a huge part of the explanation for his success. From the perspective of disability studies, his life, work and after-life can all help illustrate the strategies used to address the problem that the mentally ill and disabled create for the normative producer-consumer.

Henry Darger makes us (and I include myself here) uncomfortable. It is my position that this discomfort in regard to Darger and his work stems not only from the content of his work but from our perception of him as psychologically disabled or mentally ill. This thesis details how critics, curators, academics and
helping professionals used, and continue to use, a series of strategies: political/bureaucratic, religious/theological, and aesthetic/commodifying to dissolve the discomfort Henry Darger's presence and work created and still creates for us.

The strategy that most shaped Darger's life was the political/governmental strategy of creating a specialized bureaucracy to find technocratic solutions to the problem the disabled create. In Darger's early life, the solution was institutionalization and the problem was understood in light of the new "science" of eugenics. The institution Darger attended, the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children, underwent a change for the worse while Darger was there as a result of this conceptual revolution. As a young man, Darger tried to escape the Asylum's farm several times, yet the adult Darger describes his institutional experience in ambivalent, sometimes warmly nostalgic, terms. I attempt to engage the difficulties this reaction poses for us.

The "strategy" for addressing suffering and marginalization that is most evident in Darger's work is the religious-theological one. Throughout his life, Darger combined great piety with blasphemous threats and abuse directed at a God who would not heed his petitions. Darger quite literally responds to what he perceives as God's injustice in his own life by visiting suffering on the Christian characters, usually children, in his fictional work. As in orthodox Christianity, Darger's response to the problem of theodicy is not a logical explanation for how God might permit suffering, but a new cycle of suffering imposed on the
innocent. Interestingly, a similar cycle is used by critics to explain away the violence of Darger-as-creator: as Darger's own suffering is used to make him a kind of virgin saint.

The strategy that dominates Darger's after-life is the aestheticization and commodification of psychological illness and difference. Darger becomes a valuable commodity in part because his mental disability and life as an impoverished isolate purportedly render him "authentic"—outside the contaminants of commerce or Western art history. Darger's transubstantiation into "bread and butter" illustrates some of the paradoxes and questionable political economy of the outsider art movement and market. I conclude that this market is structured so that surplus authenticity is necessarily drained from the marginalized producers of this art, thereby reproducing their marginalization.

Although I have written about Darger from what I call a disability studies perspective, it has been a tentative engagement with Disability Studies. Disability Studies is a relatively new discipline, and as such, is dominated by the academics and activists. It is my hope that, in time, it will find more ways to allow for the disabled who are not intellectuals or activists to be recognized and represented within it. Appropriate representation of others, particularly those who cannot represent themselves, is an explosive subject, but one which needs to be addressed, especially in a discipline such as Disability Studies which by definition includes those who cannot always self-advocate. This needs to be done if we seek to represent not only disabled intellectuals and protestors, but
also, and however incompletely, voices who speak in unexpected ways like Darger, or those who do not "speak" at all.

The strategies which I criticize in the following pages are those that I am party to. I am not immune to the prejudices and limits of my own time, education and social class, nor do I claim to be. Yet my participation and culpability does not nullify my critique; it provides me with insights. I know what I criticize because it is my world and I am familiar with the attitudes and practices which characterize it. I chose not to study Darger from his own perspective, which I cannot know in any comprehensive way, but from that of his admirers, detractors, promoters and the few people who knew him. I have tried to understand how it was that Darger's difference, most clearly defined by what we currently call mental illness, has colored and shaped our responses to him. I believe that the strategies used to tidy up Henry Darger, both during his life and posthumously, have something to say about the ways in which we protect ourselves from the ethical and practical difficulties that the presence of people like Henry Darger poses for us. Because Darger was a gifted artist, but also one with highly unsettling proclivities, he provided me with a way to examine issues of disability within a great deal of complexity. Critiquing responses to Darger and his work allowed me to explore the ways in which social institutions and traditions often "solve" the complexity of the mental illness with reductionist emollients. A thesis is, in some ways, another way to "clarify," to "explain," to "enlighten," or to defend a stated argument persuasively; this has meant that writing a thesis about Darger, is in some sense, working at cross-purposes to my own intentions. I hope that the
ensuing chapters present Henry Darger as fully, unpredictably human and deserving of analysis in keeping with the dissonance he brings.

**Note on Darger’s Works**

All of Darger’s writings are in the Henry Darger Research Archive at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. They consist of two novels (*Realms* and *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House*) totaling over 25,000 pages, diaries dating from 1917 to 1973, 10 years of daily weather reports, and *The History of My Life* which is 5,084 pages long. Darger’s most famous work, *Realms*, has been microfilmed, but finding specific passages is daunting as Darger used multiple page numbers, and John MacGregor devised an alternate system of pagination. As librarian James Mitchell told me, neither of these systems of pagination match up to those on the microfilm. The original writing is in a delicate and disintegrating state.

I was fortunate to spend three days in October 2005 at the archive reading Darger’s texts — primarily *History of My Life* and *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House*, portions of which I copied, and have on file. Because of the inaccessibility of the primary sources, I have given secondary source references where they exist.
CHAPTER 1

Touched: Political/Bureaucratic Strategies of Containment and the Life of

Henry Darger

At what age and in what manner was any peculiarity first manifested?
Self abuse from six years.
Is the child very nervous?
Yes.
State any peculiar habits the child may have.
Self abuse.
Is the child given to self abuse or has it ever been?
Yes.
What cause has been assigned for its mental deficiency?
Self abuse.
Is it considered congenital or acquired?
Acquired.
Is the child insane, or has it been pronounced insane by a physician?
Yes.¹

I was taken several times to be examined by a doctor, who on the second time I came, said my heart was not in the right place. Where was it supposed to be in my belly?...I did not know it at the time, but now I know I was taken to the doctor to find out if I was really feeble-minded or crazy...Had I known what was going to be done with me I surely would have run away. (History of My Life, 41-42, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 45)

Unsocialized, odd and “crazy” people create a problem for the rest of us. The problem may be the very practical difficulties family members, neighbours, and helping professionals have in dealing with unpredictable or antisocial behaviour. Or it may be the more metaphysical threat that the existence of insanity poses to

¹ Henry Darger's application form for admission to the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children at age twelve (MacGregor 2002, 45).
the integrity of the "normal" self (Shildrick 2005). Henry Darger exemplified both types of problems. He was often unwashed\(^2\), occasionally hostile, and always hard to understand.\(^3\) The products of his mind, although secret in his lifetime, have become public since his death, and are both disturbing and fascinating.

Darger's early life exemplified one strategy for avoiding the problem that those now referred to as mentally disabled create for society. These decades were the beginning of the Progressive era in North America, a time when intellectuals and administrators started to think that problems previously believed to be endemic to the human condition could be solved, not by the rehabilitation of morals, but by the judicious application of scientific expertise and force. The particular manifestation of this Progressive pragmatic can-do attitude in relation to the problem posed by the mentally disabled was the ascendancy of eugenic theory. Mental disability, viewed by eugenacists as hereditary, was increasingly linked to other supposedly hereditary traits like criminality and immorality, including sexual perversion.\(^4\) Mass institutionalization was promoted as a way to reduce the immediate threat of crime and corruption of public morals posed by the physically

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\(^2\) David Bergland, a neighbor, recalled, "We got him a doctor's appointment, and I took him. But Henry refused to bathe. The doctor took one look at him and said, "You are to take him home, bathe him, and bring him back in three days." ...He did not like a bath at all." (MacGregor 2002, 79)

\(^3\) Kiyoko Lerner, his landlord, reported that he would often respond to questions by making irrelevant remarks about the weather. (Yu 2004)

\(^4\) "Among the characteristics which many eugenists viewed as almost exclusively hereditary were mental retardation, mental illness, pauperism, criminality, and various other social defects including prostitution, sexual perversion and other types of immoral behaviour." (Muir 1996, 747-748)
and mentally disabled. The less immediate threat -- that their rampant sexuality would lead to hordes of disabled offspring -- was to be dealt with by forced sterilization.⁵

During Darger's lifetime socio-political remedies applied to both physically and mentally disabled people resulted in incarceration and, later, sterilization. Darger experienced the first of these as a child and young man. As an adult, Darger lived independently and escaped further incarceration, but he did so by developing a strategy of lying low, of becoming less visible.

The specific practices of Darger's early lifetime are now discredited, but bureaucratic/political solutions to the "problem" of mental disability continue. After institutionalization-as-progressive-solution came coercive deinstitutionalization and, more recently, the widespread and sometimes coercive use of medication. Despite many changes in approach, fear of the disabled, especially those with psychological disorders, has endured.

Assumptions about their creativity, sexuality, and capacity for criminality continue.

Darger's status as a "feeble-minded" child and his diagnosis of "self abuse" (masturbational insanity) profoundly influenced his life and his opportunities. This same status should complicate critical evaluation of his work. To ignore the role

⁵"Eugenists also believed that these groups had a higher reproductive rate than other people." (Muir 1996, 748)
that (what we now call) mental disability plays in our analysis of Darger is to fail to notice how prominently it figures in responses to his work. Critics of Darger tend toward opposing theories -- either that he was childlike and sexually naïve or that he was a predatory pervert.  

Both are stereotypes of the mentally disabled. To move beyond these stereotypes, we must admit our profound discomfort with disability, and with the disabled Darger, as well as identify the strategies of avoidance we employ to alleviate that discomfort.

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6 Adam Mikos, reviewing a show of Darger's work at the Carl Hammer gallery in Chicago in 2000 writes: "The highbrow fascination with low brow perversion is very strange... Incidentally, next time you view Henry Darger's work, keep in mind that at a young age he was sent away to a hospital for the 'unwell,' for chronic masturbation in school" (Mikos 2000). Michael Bonesteel avoids the issue by presenting Darger's own recollection as if it were the actual diagnosis: "At the age of twelve or thirteen, he was examined by the school doctor. The diagnosis was that his 'heart isn't in the right place.' and he was transferred down-state to the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln, Illinois." (Bonesteel 2000, 9. Emphasis Added.)

Crazy

Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1892, Darger lost his mother and newborn sister in 1896. His mother died in childbirth and the sister was immediately given up for adoption. Darger never met her. During the next few years, Darger lived with his father, a tailor, and attended St. Patrick’s School. According to his autobiography, The History of My Life, Darger was fascinated with both weather and fire (MacGregor 2002, 35). He could be violent and had an intense dislike of small children (36). In History of My Life, he claims to have engaged in “cutting up a teacher...,slash[ing] her on the face and arm with my long knife... When I was aroused I was dangerous.” He also claims to have committed a number of assaults on other boys (History of My Life, 118, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 38).
History of My Life was written when Darger was in his seventies and there is no way to verify most of the anecdotes he relates. The tone of braggadocio which sometimes intrudes suggests at least some degree of hyperbole and perhaps literary revenge against some who, in reality, may have bullied him. What seems certain is that he was in conflict with both his peers and his schoolteachers at times.

From his own accounts, Darger was a solitary child. He seems to have had no close childhood friends. Reading newspapers and books as well as painting, activities that were to occupy him for life, had their beginnings in early childhood with his father. Darger tells us that his father taught him to read using the newspaper and that for Christmas he received picture and story books. His paints he bought himself: “Once in a while to paint pictures or anything else, I had paint boxes, but I myself bought them and other interesting articles.” (History of My Life, 7 & 18, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 34)

Sometime around 1900, Darger’s father could no longer care for him. Darger, then eight, was placed in The Mission of Our Lady of Mercy, a Catholic boys’ home.

As time passed on, my father grew worse in his crippled condition. I believe my uncles paid my father’s way into the St. Augustine Poor House. (History of My Life, 20, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 39)

Although Darger connects his placement in the boys’ home with his father entering St. Augustine’s, records show that his father remained at their former
home address until 1903 (MacGregor 2002, 674-675). Perhaps Darger's boasts about his violent behaviour were based on real events, and he was getting too difficult for his father to handle. MacGregor tells us the older Darger's cause of death was listed as cirrhosis of the liver. If, as this suggests, he was an alcoholic, it would have contributed to his difficulty in caring for Darger. (674)

While at the boys' home, Darger attended Skinner public school. About his first term at Skinner, Darger related:

I was good and studious, but not meaning any harm or wrong, I was a little too funny and made strange noises with my mouth, nose and throat in my classroom to the great annoyance of all the other boys and girls. And I thought they would think it funny, and laugh or giggle. But they gave me saucy and hateful looks. Some said if I did not stop it, they'd gang up on me after school and gave me the dirtiest looks. I defied them. After several months of it, it caused my expulsion from school. (History of My Life, 31-32, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 44).

We don't know if Darger was really expelled from Skinner in his first term. If he was, he was readmitted the next term. But at the age of twelve, he was assessed as mentally deficient and sent to the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children (45). The reason given for his institutionalization was insanity and the proof provided was Darger's alleged "self abuse".
The Bughouse

The institution to which the twelve-year-old Darger was committed was undergoing rapid change, a change which exemplified the new Progressive approach to mental disability. Old practices of moral management, which emphasized rehabilitation, gave way to new, ostensibly scientific theories of genetic degeneracy and correlative eugenic remedies.

Lincoln was the institutional successor of the Experimental School for Idiots and Feeble-Minded Children, which opened in Jacksonville, Illinois in 1865. The dominant philosophy at the time was "moral management." Moral management, which originated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, saw nervous illness as emerging from an emotional rather than hereditary imbalance. The French alienist, Phillipe Pinel (1745-1826), was a strong influence on American practice. Pinel viewed psychology as a "moral science" and emphasized attention to patients' emotions, and the importance of developing self-control and self-discipline as a way of rehabilitating patients. William Tuke, an English Quaker, founded the first asylum, "The Retreat at York," in which

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7 Darger relates that "the bughouse" was Mr. Allenberger's term for the Lincoln Asylum. (History of My Life, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 52) Allenberger seems to have been a staff member on the State Farm where Darger was sent to work in the summer. (MacGregor 2002, 676)

8 Lincoln Evening Courier, Section Three, August 26, 1953, 15 in Henson 2004.
Pinel's ideas, including the non-restraint of patients, were implemented (Skultans 1979, 57). In the mid-nineteenth century, insanity as a result of “self abuse” became a popular addition to the categories of moral insanity (69). It was a useful diagnosis partly because masturbation was then, as now, a common expression of sexuality. It was therefore easy to diagnose, as needed, in order to deal with otherwise difficult individuals, especially those with diverse "symptoms" which did not correspond to other accepted diagnoses. A diagnosis was a prerequisite to forcible confinement:

Masturbatory insanity provided a new way of seeing the person, one that included a set of symptoms so all-encompassing that it opened the doors to the pathologizing of a wide array of behaviour, much of which lay in the realm of indiscipline and disobedience. Masturbatory insanity, in other words, became a tool of almost unlimited potential to force men into shape—mentally, physically, financially, and socially. These men posed problems for their families and communities: they were behaving in inappropriate and disturbing ways, such that action was required—either of a medical or disciplinary sort. (Goldberg 1999, 161)

Ten years after it was founded, the original facility at Jacksonville was overcrowded, and a new one was built on forty acres purchased for the purpose near Lincoln. In 1880, the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children had an

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9 Michel Foucault famously argued that moral management, despite the lack of physical restraints, controlled inmates in even more comprehensive and insidious ways through instituting a form of psychological restraint. “What had been blindness would become unconsciousness, what had been error would become fault, and everything in madness that designated the paradoxical manifestation of non-being would become the natural punishment of a moral evil.” (Foucault 1973, 158).

inmate population of 296.\textsuperscript{11} By the time Darger entered it in 1904, there were 1,200 children and over 500 employees (MacGregor 2002, 46). The number of inmates increased to 1,439 a year later (676).

The original Jacksonville institution was founded as an experimental school, not a custodial facility, and its goal was to educate those who could not be accommodated by mainstream education. The students would presumably re-enter society at eighteen, having acquired some basic education and vocational skills (ibid., 47). The growth in the number of residents at the beginning of the twentieth century, along with the admission of people with severe levels of retardation and changes in societal understanding of mental disability, meant that by the time Darger entered the Lincoln asylum in 1904, the mandate had become primarily custodial.\textsuperscript{12}

Darger lived at the asylum from November 1904 until July 1909 – his father died in 1908 (MacGregor 2002, 54). During this time there were still some attempts at educating residents. Darger attended the asylum school, which emphasized rudimentary academic skills, supplemented by vocational skills. There was also a library and a school orchestra (MacGregor 2002, 49). It is difficult to know what Darger learned there, although he likely had ample opportunity to develop the

\textsuperscript{11} Lincoln Evening Courier 1953, 15, quoted in Henson 2004.

\textsuperscript{12} Many residents remained in the Lincoln asylum their entire lives (MacGregor 2002, 53).
manual labour and janitorial skills required at the hospitals he was to work in later.\textsuperscript{13}

In the second half of the nineteenth century, masturbation came to be viewed less as a moral problem and more a result of hereditary pathology (Skultans 1979, 74). The solution to hereditary deficiencies was not rehabilitation but sterilization—the inability of the degenerate to reproduce was thought to provide a permanent solution to an untreatable problem.

The rise of eugenic theories in the early years of the twentieth century fundamentally changed the treatment of the mentally ill in North America. Not only was mental disability seen as hereditary and untreatable, but it was thought to connote degeneracy in a very broad sense—those with mental disabilities were assumed to be predisposed to violence and crime as well as sexual deviance. As described by Gerald Robertson, expert witness, in a lawsuit brought by a woman sterilized in mid-twentieth century Alberta:

> The concept of inherited criminality dates back to the second half of the 19th century, to the writings of the Italian psychiatrist, Cesare Lombroso, and those of other criminal anthropologists such as Morel. The school of criminal anthropology purported to provide scientific proof that criminality was hereditary. This work had a major influence on eugenic philosophy in North America, and intensified the demand for sterilization laws.

> Many eugenists in the late 19th and early 20th century accepted in its entirety the view that criminality per se was an inherited characteristic.

\textsuperscript{13} In 1909 a psychology department was added to the institution. In 1910 its name was changed to Lincoln State School and Colony (Lincoln Evening Courier 1953, 15, quoted in Henson 2004).
Others believed that while probably not hereditary itself, criminality was highly prevalent among individuals who suffered from conditions that were considered to be hereditary, such as mental retardation and mental illness. Hence, eugenists believed that there was a strong and indisputable correlation between mental disability (particularly mental deficiency) and criminality, and many claimed that negative eugenics would lead to a rapid reduction in criminality and other delinquencies. (Muir 1996, 744-745)

The intellectuals and officials of the Progressive era considered immorality, including masturbation, less a matter of free will and sin, and more as proof of hereditary degeneracy and insanity.\(^{14}\)

Such was the emerging ideological climate when Darger arrived at the Lincoln asylum in the early part of the twentieth century. Partly because of the rapidly expanding inmate population, the larger number of inmates were treated according to the “necessities” of huge, regimented asylums in which both day-to-day practicalities and theories of genetic predestination undermined enthusiasm for, as well as efforts at, rehabilitation:

As the asylum grew in size such individual attention was no longer possible and, with increasing numbers, the old methods of physical restraint and regimentation returned. (Skultans 1979, 138)

Had the treatments which characterized the ideology of moral management — rehabilitation and education -- still prevailed at Lincoln during Darger’s time there, his institutionalization might have been less horrific. But the crowded

\(^{14}\) In her memoir, In corrigible, Velma Demerson includes a reference to a 22-year-old mother of two children, born out of wedlock, who in 1930 was sentenced to an industrial refuge and then transferred to a hospital for the insane. When she appealed her sentence (under the Female Refuges Act) and two medical doctors stated that she was not insane, the judge held that immorality was a symptom of insanity and denied her appeal (in Notes, 168).
conditions at the Lincoln asylum, along with increasing belief in psychological determinism, changed the reality of residents’ daily life. By the turn of the century the school founded on hopes of finding ways to successfully educate the “feeble-minded” had become a catch-all for the poor, the unfortunate and the unwanted.

Within a short space of time asylums had changed from small family-like units to vast hopeless units. Despite this transformation and obvious lack of success the asylum continued to grow. It became the refuge of a heterogeneous mass of people, including, in America, large numbers of immigrants. They were no longer classified, pretense to cure was abandoned and physical restraint was introduced. (Skultans 1979, 138 - 139)

By 1889, “criminals, paupers, the mentally ill, and more and more severely retarded people were coming [to Lincoln] in large numbers from county almshouses.” (Beaver 1982, 83 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 48) The Lincoln asylum seems to have been a difficult, even appalling, place to spend one’s adolescence. An investigation of the asylum in 1908, during Darger’s stay, revealed abuses:

While Darger was still in residence there, the Lincoln Asylum was at the center of one of the most sensational scandals of the period. Claims of abuse and neglect were leveled at staff who allowed one resident’s severe burns from a radiator to go untreated. Another inmate was burned while left unattended in a bathtub, and died. Harry G. Hardt, a supervisor at the asylum, was accused of tolerating physical violence by staff members, reducing the quality and quantity of food served, and stealing money from inmates. It was claimed that doctors there were drug addicts and that one assistant physician, Harriet Hook, had been storing the body parts of inmates, autopsied without the permission of their relatives, for use in
anatomy lectures, during which she referred to the parts by the name of the deceased (Bonesteel 2000, 9).¹⁵

Yet it is important not to give a simplistic and one-sided view of Lincoln. As an old man, Darger expressed nostalgia and some fondness for the place. He wrote that “the meals were good and plenty” (History of My Life, 56, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 48), and that he ran away from the asylum-owned State farm, where he worked in the summers, because he missed the asylum itself.

[B]ut still I don’t know why but I did object to leaving the home [to go to the farm]. But as they say so you had to. As will be written later that was the cause of me running away two summers later. (History of My Life, 58, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 53)

The institution itself played a huge part in the economy of the town of Lincoln, particularly in terms of employment.¹⁶ Inmates like Darger¹⁷ had access to vocational training, training which may, in part, have qualified Darger for his future janitorial work. For the majority of residents, though, the skills they acquired did not make it possible for them to live independently. Their skills and free labour benefited the asylum, not themselves. The activities of the residents

¹⁵ MacGregor quotes from the report of the investigating committee in some detail. (2002, 536-537)

¹⁶ Under the heading “A Career of Untiring Service to Suffering Humanity: The Ruth Henson Story”, Leigh Henson writes: “The "State School" had seen many dedicated employees. One of them was my maternal grandmother, Ruth Ann (Webb) Henson. Ruth (still in her teens) and her itinerant farmer husband, John, had accompanied her mother, Parlee, to Lincoln, Illinois, in approximately 1917. Like many other people over decades in the nineteenth and 20th centuries, they had come from southern Illinois to Lincoln to find work at the state institution.” Henson tells us that three generations of his family worked at the Lincoln State School, as it was re-named in 1954. (Henson 2004)

¹⁷ The Residents of LSS&C varied in the individual capacities and dispositions, and while some might receive training others were totally unsuitable for it. (Stringer, S. online letter 12-16-2004 cited as “Example of Training at the Lincoln State School” in Henson 2004.)
over the years included small-scale artisanship such as shoe and brush making,\textsuperscript{18} farm and maintenance work:

In its heyday, Lincoln State School was a self-reliant, small-scale city. At various times over the years, residents not only made mattresses, shoes, and brooms, but cared for other residents and helped keep up the campus, working in the laundry rooms and cleaning the buildings. (Gelbach 2001 in Henson 2004)

In addition to work, there is also evidence that some inmates received art instruction and were able to borrow from a circulating library. Darger, as one of the less severely disabled residents, likely had access to both art workshops and books. MacGregor writes: “In the Report of the Special Investigating Committee of the Illinois State Legislature, reference is made to ‘clay modeling, painting and art work.’ ”(2002, note 136, 676) The report also stated, “We have also purchased a number of books for the circulating library, picture books and story books for the children.” (note 137, 676)

Darger’s ability to learn new skills and his capacity for physical labour meant that he was chosen to work on the State Farm during the summer. The upheaval of leaving the asylum proper seems to have been difficult for him even though the work itself was not:

The work was not hard we quit at four in the afternoon, started at eight in the morning, after milking the cows, and off again at four. We were off on

\textsuperscript{18} “Sometime in 1884 or the following year my grandparents moved to Lincoln, and granddad became a brush making instructor and LSS&C [Lincoln State School and Colony].” (Henson 2004)
Saturday afternoons and Sundays. We had our baths on Saturdays before dinner. [...] I loved to work in the fields. We worked on the farm only in summertime. During our working days we slept in a large place called the dormitory (Ibid, 60) At the approach of late fall we were returned to the asylum which Mr. Allenberger ‘termed’ the bughouse. I loved it much better than the farm, but yet I loved the work there. Yet the asylum was home to me. (*History of My Life*, 1963, 56-7, 61, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 52)

Darger’s nostalgia must be read together with the fact that he tried to escape three times. One contributing factor, Darger tells us, was the necessity of summers away. All three of his escapes took place from the farm. Darger’s first attempt was unsuccessful:

> During the early summer of the 4th year I made my first attempt to run away. But that farm’s cowboy caught me in a corn field, tied my hands together and made me run back all the way on the rear of his horse. (*History of My Life*, quoted in Bonesteel 2000, 255)

His second escape attempt ended because after reaching Chicago, “after a storm I foolishly gave myself up to the police who had me sent back.” (*History of My Life*, 62-63, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 54) At seventeen, Darger ran away one last time. He reached Chicago and contacted his godmother, who helped him get work as a janitor at St. Joseph’s Hospital.
The rationale for escape that Darger explicitly provides for us—missing the asylum while at the farm—would probably not have been sufficient reason for him to run away. After all, he knew he would return to it at summer's end. There were other reasons. Darger claims that he should never have been placed in the Lincoln Asylum: "I a feeble minded kid...I knew more than the whole shebang in that place." (History of My Life, 43, quoted in MacGregor, 2002, 44). This feeling, compounded by the fact that Lincoln offered little to stimulate Darger's
active intelligence and imagination, must have contributed to his desire to leave. It is also likely, considering the allegations of abuse leveled at asylum employees during Darger’s time there, that his desire to escape was driven by genuine distress at his surroundings. Despite these factors, he remained stubbornly ambivalent about his stay there:

I can’t say whether I was actually sorry I ran away from the State Farm or not but now I believe I was a sort of fool to have done so. My life was like a sort of heaven there. Do you think I might be fool enough to run away from heaven if I get there? (History of My Life, 74 - 75, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 54)

Given the evidence of widespread abuse at Lincoln, it is sometimes difficult to respect Darger’s own expressed ambivalence, and even warmth, towards the institution. Lived experience is easily derided as “false consciousness” when it clashes with what we post-Foucauldians think we know about institutionalization. But discarding the testimony of the individual in favour of the themes of our favourite theorists, and our contemporary tendency to feel superior to the past, is itself an act of arrogant power-knowledge. But the opposite ideological closure – of accepting Darger’s description of Lincoln as “a sort of heaven” as the authentic experiential truth to alleviate our moral unease – is no better. Both reflect the desire to “solve” the problem that the mentally disabled pose by willfully ignoring contradictory narratives. Whatever the elderly Darger’s interpretation, and giving it the respect it is due, Lincoln embodied a technocratic
strategy – a bureaucratic and political will to containment as resolution -- that was ultimately coercive and violent.

Degenerate

While a number of political/bureaucratic strategies for the containment of the mentally disabled coexisted during Darger’s lifetime, the dominant one, particularly among the up-to-date, was the pseudoscience known as eugenics (introduced above). In North America, enthusiasm for eugenics as a vehicle for social reform was widespread in the early decades of the twentieth century. This enthusiasm was expressed not only by those with unpalatable and racist agendas but by social reformers on the left who saw in it a humane antidote to poverty and disability. Such notables as Tommy Douglas, Canada’s architect of universal healthcare, were initially enthusiastic about the possibilities eugenics presented. In 1932, Douglas wrote a Master’s thesis entitled “The Problems of the Subnormal Family”, which advocated segregation and sterilization of the mentally and morally deficient as a solution to poverty (McLeod & McLeod 1987, 39).

The removal of the poor and disabled – people like Darger -- from mainstream society was seen partly as an act of charity. It was also viewed as an act of social self-defense based on the belief that disability/degeneracy and criminality
were closely linked. In his report as an expert witness in *Muir v. Alberta*,\(^{19}\) Professor Gerald Robertson wrote:

One of the most dominant and recurrent themes of eugenics philosophy in the late 19th and early 20th century was the emphasis on this link between mental retardation and criminality, and the consequent "menace" which mental deficiency posed to society.

Darger's incarceration in the Lincoln Asylum in the early part of the twentieth century was one bureaucratic strategy of containment. At that time, few eugenics laws had been enacted, and the movement had not achieved legislative change in Illinois.\(^{20}\) Darger was forcibly confined but not sterilized. In order to leave Lincoln, Darger, who was otherwise law-abiding, was compelled to take on the role of law-breaker, by running away. It is ironic that Darger's only hope for rejoining society required him to exhibit the stereotypical "criminal" traits expected of degenerates, by breaking the law. Yet, apart from his first escape attempt, when he was forcibly returned to the farm, no action was taken, either to make it harder for Darger to escape or to apprehend him. He was officially discharged from the Lincoln Asylum on September 17, 1910, just over a year after his third escape. Whether he was ever informed of his official discharge is not known. (MacGregor 2002, in notes, 171, 677)

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\(^{19}\) Lellani Muir, institutionalized in 1955 and subjected to involuntary sterilization in 1959, successfully sued the province of Alberta in 1996.

\(^{20}\) Indiana was the first state to successfully enact sterilization legislation in 1907 and eventually thirty states and two Canadian provinces (Alberta and British Columbia) also passed sterilization laws. (PSAT 2004)
During the time period when Darger was first employed at St. Joseph’s Hospital (1909-1922), containment of “degenerates” was increasingly being seen as inadequate (55). Progressive thinking required a decrease in degeneracy, not just the managing of it. The eugenic solution – which enjoyed increased public and legislative support – was, as mentioned earlier, sterilization. The most prominent North American sterilization case occurred when the U.S. Supreme Court considered the constitutionality of forced sterilization of the “unfit” in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927 (*Buck* 1927, in Posner 1992, 103-104). It exemplified the thinking behind the eugenic movement at its height, less than two decades after Henry Darger’s incarceration, and while he was still a young man. The Supreme Court opinion was authored by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who was simultaneously an influential judge and a modernist legal/philosophical intellectual of some distinction (Posner 1992). Carrie Buck, who had been forcibly committed to a psychiatric institution prior to the trial, became the first person sterilized under Virginia’s *Eugenical Sterilization Act*. The evidence proving Carrie Buck was “feeble-minded,” and therefore a candidate for involuntary sterilization, was highly subjective and rested largely on unsubstantiated statements by acquaintances of the Buck family and eugenicists. That Carrie Buck was an illegitimate child of Emma Buck, and had herself given birth to an illegitimate child, Vivian, was a vital part of the evidence which supposedly proved hereditary degeneracy. According to the eugenicists, illegitimacy was highly correlated with feeble-mindedness (Lombardo 2001b, 280). Harry H. Laughlin, an American eugenicist and crusader for the sterilization of defectives, submitted a damning
sworn statement at the trial which condemned the Buck family as morally
degenerate and socially inadequate, even though he had never met any of them
(White & Hofland 2004).

The fact that Carrie Buck had been committed to the Virginia Colony for
Epileptics and the Feeble-Minded by her foster parents after being raped by one
of their relatives was not put in evidence at the trial. Yet her subsequent
pregnancy was used as proof that she was irresponsible, degenerate and unfit
and her daughter was called a third generation imbecile by the country’s highest
court (Lombardo 2001a, 253).

Oliver Wendell Holmes’s opinion for the Supreme Court contains a cruel and oft-
quoted passage:

Carrie Buck is a feeble minded white woman who was committed to the
State Colony in due form. She is the daughter of a feeble minded mother in
the same institution, and the mother of an illegitimate feeble minded
child...We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon
the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon
those who already sap the strength of the state for these lesser sacrifices. . .
It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate
offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can
prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The
principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover
cutting the Fallopian tubes. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.
(Posner 1992, 103 -104)

We have no way of knowing if Darger was aware of eugenics and sterilization
laws, and there is no evidence that he himself was subject to them. But Darger
would have had to deal with the attitudes behind these laws: paternalism, scorn
and outright disgust. If the attitude of Holmes exemplifies the sophisticated
negative response to disability, the same attitudes expressed in less “reasoned” and more uncensored terms may have been even more harsh and degrading.

Darger did not write much about direct discrimination. What he did express was his confusion at being viewed as crazy. He realized too late that his behavior, strange to others but normal to him, was interpreted as mental deficiency and disorder:

I was looked on as “Crazy” and also called crazy. Especially for the strange way I threw with my left hand, like pretending it was snowing. Had I known that, I only would have done it where I was not seen. (History of My Life, 39 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 44)
Running Amok

Round us all up, send us away
that’s what you’d really like to do
But we’re too strong proud unafraid
in fact we almost pity you
You act from fear, why should that be
what is it that you are frightened of
the way we dress
the way we meet
the fact that you cannot destroy our love
We’re going to win our rights
to lavender days and nights. (Billig & Schwabach 1920)

During Darger’s lifetime, the logic of technocratic solutions for the “problem” of
the sick, odd and unwanted played out in counterpoint to the first recognition that
the art of the mentally disabled was worthy of serious study. In twentieth-century
Germany, the forces that characterized Darger’s life and afterlife crossed paths,
with the repressive strategy winning outright over the aesthetic one. Given the
lack of objective knowledge of Darger’s own experience of disability and
isolation, we cannot say how much these currents directly affected him. What we
can say is that the attitudes they embodied permeated Western society at large,
albeit not in as extreme form.

The Weimar Republic (1918-1933) was proclaimed following a revolution within
Germany after the nation’s defeat in the First World War. Emperor Wilhelm II
was forced to abdicate and the MSPD (Majority Social Democrats) and the
USPD (Independent Social Democrats) took power. The German republic faced
large-scale unemployment and hyperinflation, while daily life was characterized
by poverty, hardship and social unrest. At the same time the Republic’s liberal
constituted granted citizens greater personal and political freedoms. This freedom both nurtured and gave rise to a number of artistic movements: German Expressionism in its various incarnations of Fauvism, Die Brücke, and Der Blaue Reiter, as well as Dada, Neue Sachlichkeit and, in architecture, Bauhaus. Alternate lifestyles were explored and tolerated. Women's rights, homosexuality, bisexuality, and abortion on demand, were some of the formerly taboo topics that were now discussed, written, sung about and painted.

In this atmosphere of cultural freedom, attention turned to the artistic products of the insane. In 1921 the Swiss doctor Walter Morgenthaler published his work on the art of a schizophrenic artist, Adolf Wölfl, *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler*[^21] (Peiry 2001, 22). The following year, the German art-historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn published *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (*The Artistry of the Mentally Ill*). Prinzhorn's book, along with the large body of work by psychiatric patients that he collected (the "Prinzhorn Collection") was discovered and celebrated by early twentieth-century artists such as Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Paul Eluard, Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber, and André Breton, as well as Jean Dubuffet, the eventual founder of art brut (31), the genre into which Darger was later incorporated.[^22]

[^21]: Published in English as *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfl* in 1921.
[^22]: Discussed further in Chapter 3.
The sympathetic studies of the art of the insane of Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn built on earlier, hostile studies of "degenerate" art by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso and his disciple, Max Nordau. Lombroso was seeking an organic basis for the "degeneracy" which typified the criminal, the mentally ill and the "genius". He viewed genius as a form of moral insanity (94) and was interested in the creative output of psychiatric patients as evidence of this connection (93). Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn, in contrast, were interested in art by psychiatric patients as a new source of artistically meritorious work, relevant to clinical approaches and providing insights into human creativity. Art was seen as a result of a patient's creative activities and gifts rather than as evidence of pathology.

The attitudes toward the mentally disabled which motivated studies of art like those of Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn were, outside avant-garde art circles, the exception. The upheaval of Weimar was also generating harsher currents of thought. Mental disability, variously defined, was being increasingly considered evidence of hereditary and moral degeneracy which posed a threat to the general populace.

Eugenic enthusiasts in Germany looked to sterilization laws enacted in the United States with admiration. But for some, involuntary sterilization did not go far enough. In Germany, a polemic in support of "mercy death" was published by legal scholar Karl Binding and psychiatrist Alfred Hoche as early as 1920
(Friedlander, 2001, 147). Binding and Hoche did not use the normal definition of euthanasia in their work ("the death of persons suffering from a painful, terminal disease") but instead defined "mercy death" as "the death of persons, 'unworthy of life' who were neither terminal or in pain" (147). This type of scholarship provided a complicated political and legal/bureaucratic rationale for what was to become mass murder. Some scientists in North America returned the compliment, advocating similar measures on the other side of the Atlantic.23

Both the aesthetic and the repressive fascination with the mentally ill were responses from a society in which traditional morality had lost its hold, while progress was understood to involve questioning everything and "solving" what had hitherto been considered fixed components of the human condition.

The attitudes to sexuality and lifestyle which characterized artistic circles in Weimar Germany would have been hard to contemplate from the kitchens of Grant hospital and later St. Joseph's hospital where Darger worked as a dishwasher. America was also undergoing dislocation, in the Great Depression, and radical solutions on left and right were being proclaimed, but we cannot know how much Darger, an avid consumer of war histories and newspapers, was affected by these developments. Das lila Lied (the Lavender Song) was a gay rights cabaret song. During Weimar, cabaret's traditional satiric form was

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23 One American scientist who later received an honorary degree, from the Nazis, was Foster Kennedy, a prominent member of the US Euthanasia Society and an advocate of the killing of the intellectually disabled. (Crook 2002, 371).
used to mount sometimes-scathing critiques of the status quo (Arnold 1981). This combination of social criticism and often ribald entertainment, along with the leftist political affiliations of many of cabaret's participants, were anathema to the values of the National Socialists. The Third Reich re-introduced censorship, including that of print media, radio broadcasts, books, films, visual art, theatre and music. Whatever did not meet with National Socialist approval was labeled degenerate. Homosexuals were, like the mentally ill, rounded up, sent away and murdered, a cruel sequel to the calls for freedom and rights of a few years before.

Back in Chicago, Darger was making his own challenging art in the thirties, without the benefit of any such theoretical sophistication. He did so secretly for reasons we can only speculate about. He also struggled with poverty and demanding physical labour, sometimes experiencing difficult working relationships with his employers at the hospital, the nuns:

> I was under another prime and severe one, sister Rufina. She had both Mrs. Stevens (Grant Hospital) and Sister Depaul put together beat by a mile. If you talked back to her it would also result in loosing your job...As there was then an awfully severe depression on [1929], and it was utterly impossible to get a job with any place, I had to stay there and go through a number of years of misery because of her constant nagging. (*History of My Life*, 96 & 98, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 66)

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24. The most well-known of these were writer Bertolt Brecht, composer Kurt Weill and singer Lotte Lenya, who had worked together in Weimar Germany and all of whom went into exile.

25. MacGregor discusses the dates of Darger's artistic production and concludes it began in 1918 and continued until at least 1959 (McGregor 2002, 118 & 168-169).
In 1932 Darger moved to 851 Webster Avenue, where he lived in two rooms on
the third floor for the next forty years (66). Life in the Great Depression was
difficult for everyone; life for a former inmate of an asylum for “feeble-minded”
children was even more precarious. But Darger -- although he complained
frequently in journals about his employers, the weather, and his inability to adopt
a child -- managed to keep his job and remain independent, as well as to
continue to work, write, and produce his early collage-drawings (67).

In Germany, meanwhile, the National Socialists had come to power and those
labeled feeble-minded were being marked for death. The disabled were deemed
a drain on national resources and a contaminant according to the doctrines of
Rassenhygiene (racial hygiene), the dominant German branch of eugenics
(Friedlander 2001, 147). The mentally ill were being forcibly sterilized, not only in
Germany, but also in North America and other parts of Europe. American
eugenicist Harry Laughlin’s Model Eugenic Sterilization Law developed in 1922
was the basis for the German Law on Preventing Hereditarily Ill Progeny. (Crook
2002, 369) Laughlin, whose testimony had helped ensure that Carrie Buck was
sterilized in Virginia in 1927, received an honorary medical degree from the
University of Heidelberg, for his efforts in the “science of race cleansing” in 1936
(Lombardo 1983, 13). The Eugenics movement was international, yet it was in
Germany that eugenics developed into race hygiene and subsequent mass
killing.
Under Hitler, the theories of Lombroso and Nordau linking insanity, genius and degeneracy found favour, and art by inmates of asylums like that in the Prinzhorn collection was packed away or used as propaganda to exemplify a threat to Aryan supremacy via genetic contamination and moral and aesthetic impurity:

These pseudoscientific ideas, most clearly embodied in the work of Cesare Lombroso, found their most influential expression in the aesthetic theories of National Socialism, and specifically in the doctrine of "degenerate art" (Entartete Kunst) (MacGregor, 1989, 237).

The Entartete Kunst exhibition in Munich in 1937 sought to make a clear connection between modern art, especially Expressionism, and moral and mental degeneracy. It consisted of modern art shown alongside art by the mentally ill and the intellectually disabled. It also included other examples of "degenerate" art: work by Jewish artists, work believed to be connected to anarchism or communism, and work influenced by "racially inferior" traditions such as African and South Sea Island art (MacGregor 1989, 241).

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26 This strategy is used in reverse, when comparisons between acknowledged masterpieces of art and contemporary outsider art by the mentally disabled are used to prove that artists like Darger do not belong in the "inferior" outsider category. (See Bonesteel 2000, 16-18). Attitudes to the art of the mentally ill continue to be characterized by the negative and patronizing stereotypes which persist regarding the mentally disabled generally. The art world’s response to Darger’s art, in the context of his status as a disabled person and his classification as an outsider artist, is discussed in Chapter 3.
The strategy of proving degeneracy by juxtaposing the art of the mentally
disabled and that of the German Expressionists, while simplistic and literal, had
already been used successfully in 1928, before the Nazi takeover, by Paul
Schultze-Naumberg. His popular book *Kunst und Rasse (Art and Race)*
compared portraits and self-portraits of Expressionist artists with portraits of the
deformed, mentally disabled and mentally ill (MacGregor 1989, 239). Throughout
the *Entarte Kunst* exhibit, contemporary artists and supposed asylum artists
were not only viewed in close proximity, but were grouped together to equate them:

> Working from a very primitive concept of the nature of mental illness, they
> [the curators] attempted to create an environment expressive of
> psychopathology, extending the chaos they detected in the paintings out
> beyond their frames. Pictures were hung at all levels and in curious
> groupings, and works of sculpture were placed on the floor or at
> inappropriate heights. Crudely written graffiti slanderously attacking both the
> art and the artists covered the walls. (MacGregor 1989, 241 - 242)

The Nazis removed a great deal of modern art from public collections in
Germany. Some pieces were burned, some were sold to foreign collectors, and
some were used for propaganda purposes, as in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition
(MacGregor 1989, 240). The artists themselves were persecuted to the point of
being forbidden to paint:

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27 About the origins of these works MacGregor observes that although some of the works were
loans from the Prinzhorn collection, "it is not known where [the organizer of the show], [Adolph]
Ziegler, obtained the pictures in the exhibitions said to have been the work of mentally ill
individuals." (242)
Painters were visited by members of the Gestapo who searched their houses for fresh paintings or wet brushes. The threat of imprisonment was very real. Armed with absolute dictatorial power, Hitler and his minister of culture, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, were able to all but obliterate the last traces of the German Expressionist movement. (MacGregor 1989, 240)

As a result of Nazi harassment, many artists and intellectuals left Germany. The mentally ill more rarely had the resources or opportunities to leave. In addition to murdering Jews, Roma and Sinti Gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, political prisoners and homosexuals, the Nazis tortured and murdered tens of thousands of psychiatric patients and people with intellectual and physical disabilities. The disabled were to become the earliest test subjects for the gas chambers (Friedlander 2001). Several of the artists in Hans Prinzhorn’s Collection – including Franz Karl Bühler, Paul Goesch, Josef Grebing and Johann Faulhaber -- were among them (Brand-Claussen n.d.). The Prinzhorn Collection itself, following its misuse by the National Socialists in 1938, was packed away until its rediscovery in the 1960s (Brand-Claussen n.d.).

**A Suitcase Without a Handle**

After the Second World War, enthusiasm for eugenics waned in reaction to knowledge of Nazi policies and atrocities related to race hygiene. In the U.S., conscientious objectors working at mental institutions during the war were shocked by the sub-standard living conditions they found. In 1947 some of them founded the National Mental Health Foundation with the dual aims of advocating for mental patients and educating the public about their treatment (San Francisco
State University Disability Programs and Resource Center n.d.). Many left-leaning eugenics enthusiasts also reversed their positions. But what Stephen J. Gould described as "guilt by genealogical association" (Gould 1985) remained alive and well in the second half of twentieth century. Many disabled and otherwise marginalized people in North America continued to be sterilized into the 1970s.

Darger was not re-institutionalized although he claimed he was threatened with it:

Once in searching for something that got lost from me in a very dark enclosure of the exit on the ground floor...I scared some young woman (she was cowardly and timid anyway) out of her wits accidentally. When Sister Rose heard of it, by someone telling her, she scolded me good, and said she surely believed that I am really crazy....Several times while scolding me for something, whether I did it or not, she threatened to send me back to the Lincoln asylum. (*History of My Life*, 71-72, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 55 - 56).

Darger avoided institutions, in part, by cultivating a degree of invisibility. Desires, such as adopting a child, which might have raised Darger's profile if acted on, remained secret despite their obvious importance to him. Two documents written anonymously, but actually by Darger, ask and answer questions about why

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28 By 1944 Tommy Douglas, then Saskatchewan's minister of health, rejected recommendations for the application of eugenical measures. "After the election of the CCF government in 1944, he [Douglas] received two official reviews of the Saskatchewan mental health-care system, one from a liberal expert and one from a radical left-wing scientist. Both recommended that the new government undertake a limited program of eugenical measures, including some sterilization of the mentally handicapped. Douglas, as Minister of Health and Premier, rejected these ideas and moved towards a system that emphasized therapy for the mentally ill and vocational training for the mentally handicapped" (McLeod & McLeod 1987, 41).
Darger had not been able to adopt a child. Why had his prayers not been answered?

To begin with since the year nineteen seventeen he had constantly prayed for a means as it is called for his hopes of adopting little children and it is now the year nineteen hundred and twenty nine, and his petitions are not yet answered. *(Found on Sidewalk, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 67)*

Darger was not just naïve. He was also reluctant to engage with the appropriate institutions. Having been an orphan and a ward of the state himself, he would have had some idea where to inquire about adopting had he been willing to do so. He wasn’t. Despite his desperate desire for a child he did not risk it. A miracle was preferable. Darger may have realized that he would not be viewed as an appropriate adoptive parent, but maintained the fantasy nonetheless. His attitude to actual children was one of grumpiness and hostility. When Amy Lund, whose father was Darger’s landlord, was found by Darger in his room, playing with his clock, he did not admire her bright eyes and curly tresses, as might be expected of the "man of child worship" who authored *The Realms*. *(MacGregor 2002, 261 & 688)*. He was outraged.

“I used to say I was going to the bathroom and sneak in Henry’s room”, says Lund. “He had this really big clock. It had chains, I’d pull on them.” Once she recalls, “He caught me. He started screaming. He hovered over me, really enraged. I still remember the look on his face. His eyes—there was fury.” *(Eskin 2000)*

In her 2004 film *In The Realms of the Unreal: The Mystery of Henry Darger*, Jessica Yu interviewed Darger’s neighbors and acquaintances. People remembered him, but many of their specific memories did not agree with one
another. Was his surname pronounced with a hard or a soft g? Where did he sit when he attended mass at his local parish, St. Vincent de Paul?

"...and he sat right up front—the front pew." - Regina Waters (Neighbor)

"...in the back, he would sit in back pews because he had his own little pew in the back and nobody else would be around him." - Mary Rooney (Parish Bookkeeper)


Someone as unusual as Darger, had he cultivated relationships with the people around him, should have been more memorable. But he kept a low profile, perhaps in part because he was profoundly lacking in social skills:

He was in his own world. I would greet him and he wouldn’t respond. I felt he didn’t like women, he looked down and avoided my eyes. He scuttled. You didn’t know what a person like that might do, but he never did anything. He seemed anxious to get back to his room. (1992 Interview with Mimi Lerner, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 78).

Perhaps it was also because his fantasy world sustained him in ways reality could not:

He didn’t have any human relationships, not really. I did not know Henry for twenty years. I don’t think anyone knew him. While he seemed a lonely man without friends during the day, at night when he entered his room, his loneliness must have vanished. He was in his own world of imagination, surrounded by all of his creations. He spoke to them [aloud] and they answered [aloud in different voices]. The room was small, but the world he created there had no boundaries. (Lerner 1987, 4-5)

Yet Darger also seems to have been careful not to offend:
Henry was living above my apartment. He was a pleasant man. He was very quiet. He didn’t make any noise. Nobody ever came to see him. He’d say hello, how are you, thank you, or goodbye, but little else. He wasn’t talkative, and seemed very private. We weren’t sure he was “all there.” (1993 Interview with Mary E. Dillon, 1993, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 78)

Keeping a low profile is a survival skill by which the socially unacceptable give the rest of society what it wants, and it wants the “problem” to go away.

It is easy to think of the history of eugenics and institutionalization as a matter of past injustices, now overcome by a more enlightened society. Beginning in the 1970s, North American jurisdictions increasingly turned to “deinstitutionalization,” and then to the use of pharmaceuticals, sometimes applied without consent, as an alternative to the practices of Darger’s lifetime. Whether this is a cause for celebration is controversial. In Cruel Compassion, Thomas Szasz contends:

Many deinstitutionalized patients, especially if they have spent long periods in mental hospitals, beseech psychiatrists to let them remain in the hospital or readmit them... The forcible eviction of desocialized patients from mental hospitals is a moral scandal on par with the forcible involuntary mental hospitalization of persons who are not desocialized. (Szasz 1994, 184).

De-institutionalization has decentralized the physical housing of those deemed mentally ill which formerly kept them away from the rest of us. It has not necessarily decreased the social segregation and pressure on them to ensure we are not made unduly uncomfortable by their presence. Perhaps there were people who were not pleased to have Darger in their neighborhood, but he “behaved.” He was extremely private and saved his most overt eccentricities, like carrying on lengthy conversations with himself in a variety of different voices and
the obsession with little girls expressed in his writing and his art, for the privacy of his room. He did not attempt to share his work with anyone. Had he been less discreet, more frightening, or disruptive he would have certainly been evicted and forced to live elsewhere:

I remember Henry standing out on the porch and looking at me. I think he expected me to say, “You know, Henry, you are going to have to move. The building now belongs to me.” It was so pathetic. I don’t remember what I said to him, but he just turned around and went upstairs. I saw absolutely no reason why a man who was certainly neutral and harmless should have to move...I can assure you, had I read some of this stuff [Darger’s writing] while he still lived here, I would have been very uneasy. (Lerner 1987, 4 - 5).

The conception of the disabled as a potential threat or problem, calling for a coercive solution, continues in political discussions and policies directed at those with intellectual, social or psychological disorders. Involuntary treatment under circumstances of “incapacity” is still the law in Canada (Starson 2003). Treatment, as always recommended “in the best interests” of the individual, no longer defaults to the physical removal of patients but emphasizes biopsychological approaches, especially medication. Out-patient court orders can require that a person take medication, and “medication non-compliance” can mean continued detention at psychiatric facilities.29

Darger’s life ended in the Saint Augustine Poor House in 1973, sixty-five years after his father had died in the same place. Shortly after this final

29 See for instance, Part 3: Admission and Detention of Patients in British Columbia’s Mental Health Act, R.S.B.C. 1996, c. 288, s. 36.
institutionalization, his former landlord discovered his life's work. Subsequent decades led to wider circles of popular and academic exposure, culminating in a twenty-first century Darger boomlet. The posthumous Darger is seen as once again in need of institutional aid and containment. The following chapters will discuss how prescriptive application of theology, art theory and social theory have often diminished Darger in attempts to avoid what is unsettling about him. The way an enhanced Darger is projected by mainstream institutions suggests that although we may condemn the society which locked Darger up, we still fear the difference in him.

This chapter has tried to show how one strategy that society uses to avoid the problem of the mentally disabled – diagnosis, institutionalization and medicalization – affected Henry Darger personally and worked out in his lifetime. Darger was incarcerated, albeit in a place he later looked back on with some nostalgia. Although he would not have stood out at the Lincoln Asylum, he learned to stay inconspicuous once he re-entered mainstream society. During his lifetime, he hid his life work – for reasons we can only speculate about, but which must have included concern about how a dangerous outside world would view them.

During Darger's final illness, his work finally came to the attention of that world. The work fascinates, but presents visceral problems, more insistent than his own presence in life, for the world that has received it. New strategies — aesthetic,
consumer and theological -- have been developed and employed to contain and avoid those problems, without ruining our enjoyment of the work he left behind.
CHAPTER 2

As a Lamb Among Mad Wolves a Fish Hung on a Hook\(^1\): Theological Strategies of Legitimation and the Work of Henry Darger


\(^1\) Saint Margaret describes herself (Robertson 1991, 275). An early version of this chapter was presented at a conference in Edmonton: sociology is passé/la sociologie est passée, Department of Sociology, University of Alberta, October, 25-26, 2003.
Enough—I have heard enough! I am sick of your consolations! How long will you pelt me with insults? Will your malice never relent? I too could say such things if you were in my position: I could bury you with accusations and sneer at you in my piety; or whisper my easy comfort and encourage you with a word. (Job 16:2-4, trans. Mitchell 1994, 44)

God is too hard to me. I will not bear it any longer for no one. Let him send me to Hell, I'm my own man. (*Predictions and Threats*, 295, quoted in MacGregor, 2002, 643)

Bureaucratic-political strategies of segregation and “cure” are not the only ways to address the problem created for active, healthy producer-consumers by the presence of the disabled. Religion can be another.

Explaining suffering, specifically in a cosmos believed to be ordered by God’s love, is the traditional task of the branch of theology known as theodicy. Religion — in Darger’s case, Christianity — solves theodicy’s “problem of evil,” not by a rational demonstration that an all-loving creator is logically consistent with debilitating disease, injury and psychological pain, but by transfiguring that suffering into sacrifice, martyrdom and redemption — by making it positive corporeal and psychological proof of God’s existence. In this way, religious discourse becomes a significant part of the political economy of disability. For some experiencing physical or mental disability, religion’s answers are a way —perhaps the way —of making suffering meaningful: for them, religion is the basis of their sense of agency. But as Job and Henry Darger protest, the religious economy of love-sacrifice-redemption can also impose the easy comfort of legitimation, by positing that everything (including inequality, pain and disability) is for the best and working in support of a higher purpose. This crudely
karmic Christianity serves the comfortable well, but delegitimizes the experiences of those who suffer.

The disabled have long been social repositories of myths, one of which is that of the suffering saint redeemed and transfigured by pain, social alienation and material poverty. Adversity is viewed as essential to the transfiguration of those who, being inadequate or different, are in need of transformation. If the disabled of the world do not acquiesce to serving a higher purpose, then they do not properly complete the narrative: they are simply the wretched of the earth, who have refused to fill their symbolic role in society, and their own stubbornness is seen to perpetuate their suffering.

Darger used his mytho-theological reading of the world in a different way. He never doubted the reality of divine agency, but he railed all his life against its injustice. God became a focus for his rage. At the same time, he constantly propitiated God, with carefully documented acts of piety, and reproduced the suffering God imposed on him in the world of his own creation.

Darger's theology, and his grappling with the problem of theodicy, have not gone unnoticed. Unfortunately, some commentators have overstated his theological sophistication. Others have used undoubted parallels between his work and

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2 McGregor, for example, compares Darger to the Desert Fathers: "The Desert Fathers of the early church were also isolated from reality, seeking God and encountering the devil. Like them,
Catholic martyrology to normalize Darger, instead of problematizing the
tradition, or have tied his spirituality into an overly neat narrative of Darger's
personal redemption.

My goal in examining both Darger's theology and the theological use of Darger
by others will be twofold: to show how religious narratives of suffering are used
by both critics and champions of Darger to erase that suffering, and make us
more comfortable with it; and also to see how Darger's own theology
simultaneously perpetuated the Christian tradition of sacrificing the innocent (the
child slaves in Realms) and resisted that tradition by refusing to accept his own
suffering as necessary and part of God's plan. I will look at how Darger's
unorthodox Catholicism visited his frustrations and disappointments on (fictional)
female bodies, and explore the parallels between Darger's Vivian girls and the
late medieval stories of virgin martyrs to show how pain, suffering and the
violation of the female body are the raw material both for spiritual sanctification
and cruder titillation. But I will also examine the ways in which Darger fought

Darger too fell prey to monstrous visions, experiencing irrational and uncontrollable outbursts of
lust, doubt and rage. And like them he was strangely innocent, at once a child and a holy fool.
His deliberate retreat from the world, his poverty and isolation, his compulsive contemplation of
inner reality, and his near hallucinatory involvement with figures arising from within, brought him
increasingly into relationship with God. (2002, 647). However, as McGregor would have to
acknowledge, we have no reason to believe that Darger's "retreat" was deliberate, and McGregor
in this passage somewhat sidesteps the monotony of Darger's complaints and the magical and
literal conception he had of prayer.

3 Gerald Wertkin, former director of the American Folk Art Museum, compares Darger's imagery
to that of Catholic martyrology, but he explicitly does so to make Darger seem "less threatening
and strange, more transformative and redemptive." (2001, 126)

4 Vine 1998. See discussion below.
against Christian ideals of suffering as inevitable, deserved and acceptable. Finally, I will look at how Darger himself has been posthumously cast as a fool-saint, and how his suffering, too, has been used to promote an image of him which reassures art consumers and thus benefits those who profit in various ways from his work.

I will start with what we know from Darger’s autobiographical *History of My Life* of his formal religious training and beliefs (83, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 18). Then I will turn to the religious themes in his *Journals* and in his major work, *Realms*. Once these have been described, it will be possible to analyze Darger’s theology. Finally, I will look at how Darger’s religiosity has been received by the critics, with the aim of showing that they tend to assign him a role in their own redemptive narratives, including that of virgin martyrdom, and miss how Darger remains stubbornly unreconciled to the end.

**Early Catholic Influences**

Darger’s Catholicism was a vital part of his identity, thought, work, and day-to-day life. As a child, his local parish was Old St. Patrick’s and the first two schools he attended were run by its clergy (MacGregor 2002, 37). Although no record of his baptism has been found, he writes of it in his autobiography: “My Godmother had me baptized on the snowy afternoon, in St. Patrick’s church on Desplains...
and Adams street, Chicago" (History of My Life, 74, quoted in MacGregor 2002, note 77, 674). In 1900, Darger was placed in a Catholic boys' home. He tells us:

My Godmother, which until now I forgot to mention, who proceeded at my Baptism at eight years of age, took me to a place on Jackson Boulevard, nicknamed the News boys home. The right name was "the Mission of Our Lady of Mercy." (History of My Life, 20-21 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 39). 5

At the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children four years later, Darger's Catholicism was cut off from any institutional roots. The asylum did not stress religious observance:

I was a baptized Catholic but in the asylum, I even then knew all things of the religion, but also in the asylum and on the State Farm they never even for us all showed any kind of religion. They seemed even Godless, even in the school there. (History of My Life, 51-52; 73-74, MacGregor 2002, 50)

Although a Protestant minister was sometimes present at Lincoln, opportunities for worship were limited to songs and prayers. Darger felt insulted by the lack of more substantial religious instruction:

Once in a while in the school hall on the ground floor we were entertained with shows, training exercises, and church meetings or Sunday school on Sunday morning. Those who could sang hymns and recited prayer meeting. The minister never gave any sermons...I suppose they had the idea that feeble minded could not all understand religious instruction. Then why were they to go to school? (History of My Life, 73-4)

5 The identity of Darger's godmother remains a mystery. They seemed to have maintained some contact while Darger was growing up. MacGregor tells us that it was through her intervention that he got his first job at St. Joseph's hospital in 1909 (2002, 55).
After leaving the asylum, Darger was employed at a series of hospitals as a janitor, dishwasher and bandage roller. Except for Grant Hospital, in which he worked from 1922 to 1928, all of his employers were Catholic institutions. Darger began work at St. Joseph’s in 1909 and stayed for twelve years. Once there, he started attending mass, and his attendance was frequent: “On the Christmas Midnight mass, a cold snowy one in December, 1909, I received in their [St. Joseph’s] chapel my first Holy communion.” (History of My Life, 72, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 56). His Catholicism did not make him uncritical of his employers, the nuns:

Sister Depaul had a bulldog like face, and seemed to have the disposition of one. I don’t really believe any Catholic Sister should [have -JM] such a disposition. That is not Charity or Christ like. Though she was a Sister I had a very intense dislike for her and did my best to avoid her (History of My Life, 86, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 57).

Nor did Darger’s piety make him uncritical of God. When he was a child, still living with his father, Darger claims, “In my younger days I forgot to mention when angry over something I burned holy pictures and hit the face of Christ in pictures with my fist.” (History of My Life, 69; MacGregor 2002, 39) This animosity toward God goes unmentioned in Darger’s accounts of his life in both the boy’s home and the asylum, but is renewed once he is living independently.

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6 After Grant Hospital, Darger returned to St. Joseph’s and stayed until 1947 when he was dismissed after being told the work was too difficult for him. A week later he began work at the Alexian Brother’s Hospital where he stayed until his retirement at seventy-one in 1963. (MacGregor 2002, 66; 69; 72)
and involved with the church once again. As a young man, his anger at God is primarily re-directed through his fiction:

Inlisted into the American army September 20 1917 in expectation of having chance of seeing great war. Reduced in health at critical time. Failure of limbs and right shoulder to support me in trying to make success in drilling. Eyes go on(?) the brim. Rejected from Military Service December 6, 1917. Receive Discharge papers December 29 1917. Sent home. Another cause why Christian defeat is impending most serious break of all. Will not relent in threatening safety of Christians. (Predictions and Threats, Dec. 6, 1917)\(^7\)

The Realms of the Unreal

God obsessed the adult Henry Darger, but his intense religiosity often took unconventional form. In the clutter of his room, along with newspaper clippings of raped, murdered and missing little girls and natural disasters,\(^8\) were a Bible and numerous tracts, prayers, hymns and icons. Darger attended Mass daily, and several times a day on weekends. His public Christianity, apart from his supererogatory mass attendance, was typical. His private approach to God,

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\(^7\) Darger was drafted in the autumn of 1917. Before the end of the year, he was honourably discharged -- officially because of trouble with his eyes and poor physical health (MacGregor 2002, 57).

\(^8\) Lynne Warren, a neighbour and art student who saw Darger's room after he moved out, described it this way: "Newspaper clippings—most detailing brutalized girls or natural disasters—were tacked to the walls...balls of twine, nylon neatly wrapped to baseball size, jute wound to bowling-ball dimensions; hundreds of bottles of Pepto-Bismol, scrubbed and aligned; piles of newspapers; stacks of books; boxes of decaying rubber bands; packets of maple syrup. All graced by a variety of miniature Madonnas. It appeared the only place Darger could sit, or even sleep, was a broken-bottomed wooden chair accessible via a path cleared through the accumulation." (Eskin 2000)
however, was direct, literal and combative. When God would not answer his petitions, he responded by blaspheming and threatening. He also vowed to visit devastation on Christians in the world he created and controlled – his literary world of *Realms*. This private, heterodox Christianity exhibits two features of the relationship between religion and the disabled. On the one hand, in his own world, Darger acted as an avenging deity – paradoxically visiting his vengeance on the most vulnerable and guiltless; on the other, Darger’s continuing, if sometimes infantile, argument with God exhibits a refusal to capitulate to accept “the will of God” as a sufficient answer to his own suffering.

Darger began writing his most significant fictional work -- *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* (“Realms”) -- soon after he left the Lincoln Asylum in 1909. The world of *Realms* is populated by “thrillions of men and hundreds of thrillions of women and children” (vol. 1, introduction, 1-2, quoted in Bonesteel 2000, 39) some of them from good, Christian, abolitionist nations (primarily Abbieannia, Calverinia and Angelinia), and some from the land of evil and godless child slavers, Glandelinia:

The scenes of this story, as its title indicates, lie among the nations of an unknown or imaginary world or countries, with our earth as their moon...The names of these nations are Angelinia, Abyssinkile, Protestentia, and Abbieannia, four great Catholic nations, there being no Protestant nations.

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9 Darger gives us three start dates: 1910, 1911 and June 1912. (MacGregor 2002, 59)
Other Catholic nations, but rivals of Glandelinia also are Mormounuia, Hickenile, Hickencile, Condennencia, Glandlina, Spoonnia, Creteria, Madorria, Claresinia, and Pruetinia. Next to Abbieannia, Glandelinia is the most powerful of them all, and three quarters of the population are as wicked as wickedness can be. There are scores of other nations, but their names are not given. The two nations Glandelinia and Abbieannia alone have in this story hundreds of thrillions of men and many thrillions of women and children. The names of the oceans are the same as the nations. (Realms, Vol. 1, Introduction, 1-2, quoted in Bonesteel 2000, 39)

The 15,145 page narrative (MacGregor 2002, 89) of Realms and the accompanying illustrations\(^{10}\) combine epic battles and “girls’ own” adventures with torture scenes worthy of de Sade. When Darger’s fictional Realms is examined alongside his Journals,\(^{11}\) it is clear that the fates of the Christian armies, the heroic Vivian girls, and the child slaves they are attempting to free, are intimately connected to the daily occurrences and unfulfilled longings of Darger’s actual life.

Together Realms and the Journals offer a running commentary on Darger’s level of spiritual satisfaction and, more often, dissatisfaction. They tell us how he reacted to his own suffering both by indignantly blaming and threatening God and by inflicting further suffering vicariously on children in his fiction. If Darger’s epic story is unusual, conveying the solution to suffering as lying in more suffering reflects the conventional Christian relationship between theodicy and atonement. Darger created an endless supply of sacrificial children, “other Christs” as he

\(^{10}\) Darger began experimenting with collage as early as 1918; in the 1920s and 1930s Darger began illustrating Realms (MacGregor 2002, 159). His collage-drawings depicting Realms are the basis for his deserved fame as an artist.

\(^{11}\) The Journals begin in 1911 and (with some gaps) end in 1972.
referred to them, (Realms, vol. 7,500, ibid, 629) as a response to personal frustration.

The content of Realms is legitimized by the purported goal of abolitionism. The Glandelinian practice of child slavery so enraged the Christian nations that they declared war. This issue of child slavery provides Darger with a formal explanation for the conflict and allows him to indulge his interest in, and knowledge of, the American Civil War (History of My Life, 19-20, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 43). As the story develops, though, child slavery increasingly serves a different purpose. It provides Darger with a rationale for depicting recurring (and play-by-play) torture and murder scenes. Consider the death of child slave Clara Hortense:

feeling for her neck in the darkness, after tearing off her clothing, and having got hold of which he at once lifted her halfway, dragged her backwards toward a large sink, prostrated her body halfway over it, while she screamed piteously. “Help me, Help me, Oh God, help me.” After which the fearful Glandelinian got a fresh hold of her neck and then all was still, except that her assailant saw was her protruding tongue and bulging eyes, and he

12 In History of My Life Darger writes, “I once told my teacher...that I believed no one truthfully knew the losses in the battles of wars (including our Civil war), because each history told different losses...I had three histories that told different losses at the civil war battles, including, Pittsburg Landing, Antetam Run No 2, Gettysburg, and so on, and it is true,” (19, 20 in MacGregor 2002, 43).

13 John MacGregor, who has read more of Realms than anyone to date, believes that, “[W]hat is referred to as “child slavery” is really only an excuse for presenting the systematic deprivation, torture, and murder of children, largely little girls. The little girls are simply victims of sadistic, sexually motivated attacks by adult males, with Darger making very little real effort to connect the institution of slavery in The Realms with real economic exploitation of children’s labor.” (541) Michael Bonesteel suggests, less convincingly, that despite the violence inflicted upon them, Darger’s depiction of the child slaves allows us to “see how much compassion he felt for children like himself” who suffered (2000, 20).
pressed and squeezed so hard that her tongue seemed to protrude farther. He heard the cracking of bones. The child died quickly, the blood streaming out of her eyes, nose and mouth. (*Realms* vol. 2, 118, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 449-550)

Or the Glandelinian delight in the prolonged roasting of live children:

The Glandelinians who went near this furnace, had the same lotion on them that is used to save human beings from suffering from the intense heat. The lotion put on Gertrude and Mary only protects them from death but not from suffering...They tried to get out for their suffering was unbearable, but the Glandelinians only laughed, and stirred up the fire to make it hotter...The children tried desperately to climb the walls to get out of the reach of the cruel flames, but it was useless. The children with all their vehemence tried to get out, and beat at the Glandelinians, for they had left the door open to see the performance as they called it...At last when the lotion threatened to wear off from the heat, the Glandelinians pulled the children out with long hooks and flung them rudely on the floor, where they writhed in indescribable agony. (*Realms*, vol. 3, 571 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 562, 563)

In addition to child slavery, the other principal reason for war was the “Aronburg Mystery”:

The Aronburg mystery as well as the murder of the Aronburg child, had threatened the doom of the three Christian states, for the whole length of the great Glandeco-Angelinian war and it was predicted that the solving of the Aronburg Mystery and revenge on her assassins was the only hope for any chance of the Christian nation winning the war. (*Realms*, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 93)

The “Aronburg mystery” was linked to a specific event in Chicago, the abduction and murder of five-year-old Elsie Paroubek in May 1911 (MacGregor 2002, 59). Darger had clipped her photo from the *Chicago Daily News*, lost it, and then became obsessed with this loss, petitioning God for its return, building a shrine,
and repeatedly threatening the death of Christians in *Realms* if it did not reappear.  

Storming Heaven for Petition.

Erecting mimic altar to pray before in order to obtain petition before destruction of Christians arrive. Sacrifice will also be made for the granting of Petition. Making the mimic chapel neat and clean no matter how much work. Buying materials of all sorts for shrine. Read Bible every evening and say all the Litanies when shrine is finished. *(Journals, March 1, 1916).*

On account of the loss of manuscripts and pictures of children the huge disaster and calamity at Grahams lanes will never be atoned for no matter if even the lost articles should be back even now. It would be more disastrous if the Christians went into action there again. The losses of said articles shall be avenged to the uttermost limit no change will be given now. *(Journals, undated page between May 15, 1916 and May 16, 1916, p. 45)*

On August 16 Club through reasons not stated here was broken up. Great loss in pictures on account of it makes situation for Christian cause worse. Au- Alter pulled down. ?ain to be payed to Christian nations.  

Christians will be saved now only if God permits me to gain the means of owning property so that I can adopt children without suffering them the dangers of unsupport. Only chance now left. There will be no other under any condition—condition so serious that progress in manuscript is delayed. *(Journals, August 11, 1916)*

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14 MacGregor believes it is possible that Darger may have been Paroubek’s killer (2002, Note 210, 677), although there is no concrete evidence to support this idea.

15 The club Darger refers to was likely formed with his only known friend Whilliam Schloeder (MacGregor 2002, 64- 65). It appears that Darger was angry about the destruction of an altar built in Schloeder’s barn in order to petition God for the return of the Paroubek photograph (MacGregor, 2002, 59). Darger seems to have known Schloeder since the early 1920s when he worked at Grant hospital (63), but possibly as early as 1910. When Schloeder moved with his sister to Texas Darger wrote letters to him until his death in 1959 (65). Schloeder appears in *Realms* in Christian and Glandelinian forms (246).

16 MacGregor writes that, “While Darger never spoke of the possibility of finding his lost sister, he did very frequently raise the issue of adopting a little orphan girl. Indeed, as we shall see, one of the central issues in his personal quarrel with God concerned his desire and his inability to adopt a child.” (2002, 628, 67, 68).
In a compensatory act, Darger makes Paroubek a Christian character in his story: Annie Aronburg, child rebel leader (Bonesteel 2000, 10). In *Realms*, there are two lost pictures of Annie/Paroubek. General Henry Joseph Darger takes one photograph of Annie from her body, after witnessing her murder. Annie’s killer is General Phelan (MacGregor 2002, note 210, 677), a demonization of Darger’s former roommate, Thomas M. Phelan (58), whom Darger blamed for the loss of the Paroubek picture as well as some of his manuscripts. The second newspaper photo is stolen:

Annie Aronburg habited in her nighties, had been probably occupying her mind for some time by planning for victory, when the brute seized her by the hair which was loose and flourishing a razor about her face...instantly he began to choke her, tearing her nightie to tatters, then with one determined sweep of his muscular arm he nearly severed her chest open with his razor.... (*Realms*, vol. 12, 2256-2257, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 504)

“June 1911 or 1912,” said general Viviana sharply and with ardent suspicion, “I thought you received the picture from her waist?” “I did, but I lost it. I had received another in a newspaper that told of the tragedy, which was also stolen with many others I had.” [said Darger] (*Realms*, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 503-504)

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17 The link between Paroubek and Aronburg was initially made by Michael Bonesteel. (MacGregor 2002, note 209, 677)
18 Bonesteel’s brief summation of these events has a different slant. “In his story, which Darger wrote himself into, he witnesses the brutal slashing with a razor and strangulation of Annie Aronburg, who had given him a picture of himself that he later loses.” (10) Bonesteel does not back this up with text from *Realms*. 
Henry Darger, *After the Battle of Drowsabella Maxillian*. Vivian Girls find articles which they believe relate to the Aronburg mystery — smashed safe like box open and find box of moulded paper, three bloody knives, queer shaped pistol — and picture of child whose body has been slashed wide open with all the intestines exposed to view. Starring destroyed the picture. Left panel of a three-panel collage-drawing. Watercolor, pencil, carbon, and collage on paper. 48.1 X 178.1 cm. Gift of Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner. 1980. 102R, The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved. © Kiyoko Lerner / SODRAC (2005).

The loss of the newspaper clipping was a cause of obsessive consternation in Darger's real life. His reaction to this was to impose consequences on God, which were played out in *Realms.*
The writing of the Glandeco Angelinian war started in June 1912 and still progressing up to January 1916 without change on account of the loss of the said picture of little Miss Annie Aronburg taken from the Chicago Daily News of June May or July. In case of no return by March 1916 the Glandelinians will not be forced into submission but shall progress better than before whipping the Christians to the bitter end. Petition for return of same said picture was requested some time in March 1915 and a year from then only can give chance for Christian success. (Predictions and Threats, August 1912)

"Late this morning before the battle began today a soldier came to me and told me there was a man who lost a picture of the Aronburg child whose name was Annie Aronburg. The picture was not exactly lost, but stolen on him with a lot of other pictures of children, or burned or something. He claims that this battle, which extended fifty miles along the Conservatory Run, will never be won unless it is recovered" [said the Christian General Baldwin] (Realms, vol. A, A-29, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 497)

Darger, whose fictional wars were caused by the plight of enslaved and abused children, avenged himself against an apathetic God by having these children tortured and killed in large numbers. His loss of Paroubek’s photograph distressed him, but his tribute to Paroubek, casting her as Aronburg, is complicated not only by her murder in Realms, but also by its circumstances.

Darger, as a character in Realms, watches as Aronburg/Paroubek is (the account suggests) raped, strangled, and then disembowelled by a Glandelinian “brute” (Realms vol. 12, 2256-2257, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 504). Darger punishes God for the lost photograph, but his vengeance takes the form of destroying the object of his desire, the reason for vengeance in the first place.

The appearance of Annie Aronburg in Darger’s story cannot really be explained by Darger using the loss of Paroubek’s photo “in a creative or positive fashion by channeling this personal crisis into his art,” as Michael Bonesteel suggests
(2000, 11). The complex relationship of Darger to the photo of Paroubek, whom he symbolically rescued and resurrected as a hero only to subject to a second rape, torture and violent death (with himself as audience), resembles the strange logic of Christianity more than art therapy. This logic, which demands suffering to transcend suffering, reveals an equation in which sado-masochism will be satisfied one way, another, or both ways, since much of humanity, is still destined for the lake of fire.

The most celebrated heroines of Darger's story are seven “little saints” (*Realms*, vol. 1, 69 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 94), the Vivian sisters, young Catholic crusaders from Angelinnia. The father of the Vivian girls is Robert Vivian, governor of Angelinnia (MacGregor 2002, 94) or emperor of Abbieannia (Bonesteel 2000, 20). Darger gives their names and ages as: Violet Mary 9 1/2, Joice Catherine 10, Jennie Frances 10, Catherine Cecelia 7, Daisy Gertrude 7, Hettie Annie 8, and Angeline (or Evangeline) Celestine 9 (*Crazy House*, vol. 1, 26, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 293). Despite the differences in their ages, the girls are indistinguishable from one another. The Vivian girls are princesses, blond, beautiful and meticulously costumed. Darger describes the reaction of his fictional alter-ego, Jack Ambrose Evans, guardian of the Vivian girls (Bonesteel 2000, 20), and of some soldiers on meeting them:

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19 *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House* is a sequel to *Realms*. 
At first they were overawed at the presence of the little saints, and were at first almost afraid to touch them, but Violet, knowing the reason of their silence, said, "my name is Violet Mary Vivian, and these are my sisters, Joice, Jennie, Angeline, Daisy, Hettie, and Catherine Vivian, real flesh and blood, and not celestial children which no doubt you are mistaking us for. So there is no need to be afraid of us. We cannot help our appearance." (Realms, vol. 1, 69 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 94)

The Vivians (like other children in the illustrations to the Realms) are hermaphrodites (295). Almost indistinguishable from each other, the sisters are distinguished from all other children by their courage:

Violet and her sisters were not afraid to be alone being afraid of only sin. (Realms, vol. 2, 272, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 616)

Violet and her sisters proved themselves to be dangerous spies to the enemy, and spies whom they could never hold when captured. (Realms vol. 1, 397-401, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 321)

The Vivians are notable as well for their superlative beauty and purity. In a somewhat creepy paraphrase of the biblical Song of Solomon mixed with romance novel cliché and original Dargaresque phraseology, Penrod, the boy hero, holds forth to the girls:

"How can I compare or overdo seven little celestial girls who are so fair and lovely that the best author groups [gropes – JM] in vain for words to describe their beauty...even the language of the angels and the Saints has not words to express the love I have for you and your sisters. The hair of every one of

20 As far as I have been able to determine, Darger's texts identify the Vivian girls and female child slaves simply as little girls (Prokopoff 1996, 4/5). It is only in his art that we see that they have penises. There is a great deal of speculation about this, but no satisfactory explanations.

21 MacGregor notes that Darger's Marco Shoefield Penrod was inspired by Booth Tarkington's boy hero, Penrod Schoefield, in the children's story "Penrod," published in 1914 when Darger was in his early twenties (262). Darger's Penrod sometimes operates as a spy disguised as Adeledefob, a Glandelinian boyscout. (264)
you little girls is as spun gold, your eyes are purple pools of light into which when I gaze my heart is almost charmed from my body. The skin of you beautiful beautiful little girls is smooth and sweet as the petals of the fairest flower in all the world, and your crimson lips were surely made for kisses from Our Blessed Lord Himself. Fair are your beautiful little bodies, oh my lovely sisters, and shapely your white little limbs. When any one of you lie in my arms with your heart beating against my breast, my unworthy breast, and her lips on mine.” (Realms vol. 10, 286, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 617)

In the latter parts of Realms, Darger describes the sisters as “angel possessed”:

But to give the reader ease of mind I would say never worry [about-JM] them. Violet and her sisters seen the end of the war and the glorious effects of the victory, and Heaven knows how long they lived after that. But in this story where people and children are so good, angel possessed children, for angel possessed they were, do not die until they go to heaven alive. They can be killed of course, but do not die naturally. They are in the same position as people in the Oz land, and angel possessed children stay children until they go to heaven and then they are most beautiful children ever imagined. (Realms, vol. 10, 692, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 617)

The Vivian girls stand in for the virgin saints of Catholicism. They are simultaneously heroic, erotic, virtuous, and underage. The indistinct masses of child slaves — less beautiful, less devout and lacking backbone — on the other hand, are “poor hopeless wretches,” an interchangeable, sentimentally useful bunch, sinners all, who provide the chosen ones with a purpose and highlight the results of their good breeding: high-grade moral fiber, unflappability, fight and cuteness. The Vivian girls suffer too, but mainly they witness (in their roles as child-warriors and spies) horrors visited on others. They are not always immediate in their heroic ministrations to the pitiful child slaves. Sometimes, for the long-term good of the Christian cause, they must watch in silence. Darger
allows himself to view atrocities, often at length, by seeing them via the
adventures of the Vivian girls, and through their eyes:

Just as they entered ten children had swooned under a terrible beating from
iron piked lashes. It was worse than anything they had ever seen before.
The little children stripped naked were literally mangled by the cat-o-nine-
tails which tore their skin like knives. Violet and her sisters could see the
horrible gashes on the bodies of the children who in truth had died under the
scouraging. Then the Glandelinians before their very eyes had torn their
bodies open and scattered the entrails all over the floor, it indeed being a
horrible sight for the Vivian girls to witness, but they did not dare betray
themselves and so they could do nothing (Realms., vol. 4, 1599, quoted in
Henry Darger, *Vivian girl princesses are forced to witness frightful massacre of children*—*Vivian girls not shown in this composition. At Jennie Richee-via Norma. The children who are naked are made to suffer from the worst torture under fierce tropical heat imaginable* [third panel of three panel collage-drawing, watercolour, pencil, carbon on paper, 22 X89 in., Kiyoko Lerner/SODRAC 2005].

Darger's basic storyline is a familiar one, including the voyeurism it entails. Many stories (and all societies) have disposable members whose status as "the wretched of the earth" are used to serve the narrative and ideological (and sometimes erotic) drives of the more comfortable, and whose suffering is used
to enhance the images of others as compassionate and humanely heroic.
Darger, as a disabled man and an orphan, is often represented as a variation of
the wretched nobody, the "harmless creature" (Steinke, 1/3), who, in Darger's
case, was discovered to be "somebody" after all.\textsuperscript{22} Lost souls, sinners, and
heathens, in the Christian salvation/damnation narrative, like Darger's child-
slaves and society's "nobodies," are reduced to illustrating spiritual, moral, and
social generalities. Darger creates his own version of pitiful wretches and
ministering angels. The child slaves and the Vivian girls are an idiosyncratic
imitation of the stories, social, fictional, and religious, which surrounded him.

The child slaves provide a convenient supply of passive victims: generic,
damaged, dying and dead bodies. Although Darger seems to have made some
attempt to write about the heroics of the child slaves during the rebellion (Darger
Vol. III, 332, 334, quoted in Bonesteel, 83-86), he seems to have had difficulty
sustaining his own interest in their activities. Apart from his descriptions of a few
singular child rebels like Annie Aronburg, Darger seems to have found describing
hell more engaging than evoking heaven. In this, he has many predecessors
including such notables as the painters Brueghel and Bosch and the writers
Milton and Dante.

\textsuperscript{22} The quote in context reads: "By all accounts Henry Darger was also a strange and harmless
creature. In his threadbare work shirt, black electrical tape holding the frames of his glasses
together, he traversed his Chicago neighborhood, going to mass three times a day and collecting
bits of string. But Darger was much more than a local eccentric; he was also an artistic innovator,
appropriating images from newspapers and coloring books for his own work 20 years before
Warhol and Lichtenstein began the practice." (Steinke 2000, 1/3).
Darger -- who creates multiple good and evil Darger characters, and Darger alter egos, and at times identifies strongly with the Vivian girls -- does not create the child slaves in his own image, although he may have drawn on some of his own experiences in creating them. The child slaves are an occasion for depictions of violence rather than a convincing reason for the war in *Realms*. They are victimized repeatedly, usually anonymously, with very occasional pious asides:

Dead cut up bodies of little children lay in rows, or heaps, while rows of them hung by chains their little bodies frightfully sliced. Blood covered the floor, while the walls of the lower parts were besmeared with gore. In the small straight rows, hung the hearts of the butchered innocents, the lungs and the wind pipe attached to it, while the rest of the intestines lay all over the floor. Skeletons were also hanging in rows. (*Realms* vol. 3, 521, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 548-549)

If this story were true, these, also probably among victims of massacre, disasters, and dying child slaves would be Chosen Bands in Heaven, so like the Holy Innocents, First Flowers of Christ's Coming, yet so different, who would be terrible witnesses against all things recorded against the Glandelinians recorded already in these many volumes so far. (*Realms* vol. 7, 500, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 629)²³

But in rare moments Darger seems to identify with and feel sympathy for the child slaves. At these moments, he questions God's justice:

"There is no use calling on the Lord—he never hears us," said the boy most steadily. "I don't even believe there is a God, or even if there is, He has taken sides against us. Don't you see from the way the christians get licked so hard, and they are fighting to free us. All goes against us, heaven and earth. Everything is pushing us slaves into hell..." (*Realms*, vol. 5, 86, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 627)

²³ This somewhat confusing statement about the murdered child slaves is, according to MacGregor, a reworking of an [unspecified] religious text. (Notes 62 & 63, 706).
In contrast to the dispensability of the child slaves, Darger is strongly attached to his creations, the Vivian girls. Although he threatens repeatedly, in his early *Journals*, to harm them, and does, he cannot bring himself to kill them off. Most of the story acquaints us with the adventures (heroic and romantic) of the girls, emphasizing their singularity and favour in the sight of God and man. When he does harm them, it is in response to what he experienced as catastrophic developments in his real life.

In 1910, a portion of *Realms* went missing. This loss angered Darger increasingly over the years. Time after time his threats had been ignored. Omniscient God, who must have known its whereabouts, refused to return it to him:

> On account of the loss of the manuscripts in September 1910, it is found impossible to cause the capture of Calverinia by sea. The accounts of this wonderful feat was in that manuscript alone and only the return of the manuscript can cause this wonderful adventure to occur. Other wise this wonderful feat will be willfully held back come what may. Its loss shall be avenged to the uttermost limit (*Journals*, 47, page before May 16, 1916).

Darger's first journal/diary is titled *Predictions* and begins in June 1911. By August of 1912, *Predictions* has become *Predictions and Threats*. In the world of *Realms*, the Christian body count rose along with Darger's anger. *Predictions*

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24 Versions of "Predictions and Threats" exist in several places: in Darger's journal, and in the first and the last volumes of *Realms* (MacGregor 2002, note 199, 689).
and Threats ends with a list of terrible consequences to come.25 Darger, obviously angry, stated that the 27 big disasters “caused by enemy” in Realms had grown to 32 and would likely continue up to 150. By the autumn of 1918, it was clear to Darger that despite the magnitude of his threats, the manuscripts would not be “returned.” He was incensed. In desperation, he threatened to kill his beloved Vivian girls:

Vivian Girls almost fatally injured. Their lives will be readily lost on July 4 1919 if last of manuscripts are not returned by that time. (Predictions and Threats, September 1918)

The Vivian girls were Darger’s trump card. He was their creator and in various guises their lover, friend, guardian and saviour. He refused to resign himself to his disappointments, such as the loss of the manuscripts and the Paroubek photo, or to the failure of God to respond to his petition for their return. In retaliation, he caused the girls to be seriously injured by an exploding landmine. When Darger’s disfigurement of the Vivian girls was complete and his petitions nevertheless remained unanswered, rather than executing them as threatened, he had them transfigured, to a state more beautiful than before. Yet this did not mean his resentment and threats against the Almighty ceased. With the failure of his most serious threat, he simply went on protesting by having the other children tortured, injured by natural disasters, and killed. He continued in this way, in what

25 As the last dated entry in the journal is December, 17, 1917, the list was likely compiled in late 1917 or early in 1918.
became a habitual method of revenge (and probably titillation) to fight in his fiction against perceived injustices in his own life in the sequel to *Realms*, *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House*, and in the equally violent *History of My Life*, which he worked on until shortly before his death.

In *Realms*, the Christians are Catholic and the Glandelinian unbelievers are lapsed Catholics who have broken with the church. General John Manley is one such villain who has turned his back on God:

Hard and reprobat as the Godless Glandelinian general John Manley seemed now, there had been a time when he had been rocked on the bosom of a Saintly mother, cradled with an ocean of prayers and Catholic Hymns, his now seared brow bedewed with the waters of Holy Baptism (*Realms*, vol. 4, 1407, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 620).

Glandelinian “unbelief” is not a denial of the existence of the divine order; it is a passionate, heretical and sacrilegious mocking and provocation of God. The Glandelinians have become cruel, evil and blasphemous in order to defy the Christian God, rather than because they dispute his existence. “We are God’s foe it is true, and we do hate him and all that is his, but that does not make us

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26 MacGregor believes much of *Realms* was written during a period when Darger broke with the Catholic Church. According to *Found on Sidewalk* (referred to in MacGregor, 2002, 641 and in Notes, 214, p. 677), Darger quit attending mass and receiving the sacraments for four and a half years. Yet his daily rapport with God (threatening and petitioning) continued in his *Journals*. In *Realms*, the “godless” Glandelinians, like Darger, remained obsessed with God.

27 MacGregor consistently uses the word “atheist” to describe the Glandelinians. In his *Notes* he claims that, “Darger uses the term atheist on occasion and clearly understood its meaning...He also refers to the enemy as Glandelinian anarchists” (note 33, 705). If Darger understood the meaning of atheist, and still applied it to the Glandelinians, then he purposely misused it, perhaps as a generic derogatory term.
ignorant, that no matter what we try we cannot get the best of him.” (Realms, vol. 13, 3186) Within Darger’s Journals, the Catholic and lapsed Catholic provides some echo of these warring factions. Particularly as an old man, his entries consist of the number of times he attended mass (daily) and the frequency and severity of his “tantrums” in which he defied God. In his early Journals, though, Darger’s entries consist mainly of angry threats to empower the Glandelinians if the Almighty does not answer his petitions satisfactorily:

The Glandelinians anger God by worshipping false Gods on purpose to defy Him...They even worship stones, animals, dogs, sticks, and wicked things, even the walls and houses, and clouds, hills, nay the very devils themselves are adored as Gods...The weak and helpless children taken from the vanquished nations are made as slaves, the poor, the old, and the sick, are treated with a barbarity that only the most frightful selfishness can explain. All this they do knowingly to displease God, because they hate him bitterly, as the worse bitterness can explain (Realms, vol. 1, 116-117 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 195).

Graham’s bank went in smash. Great sum of savings lost. Lost or threatening to be lost. Loss irreparable, inexcusable. Either Vivian girls or Christian nations shall suffer if money is not returned within January 1, 1919. No mercy will be shown. Am against Christian cause, and desire with all my heart to crush their armies and win war for the Glandelinians. Results of too many unjust trials. Will not bear them under any conditions, and vengeance will be shown if further trials continue. (Journals, August 1917)

But it is not only in Darger’s Journals that we find him reacting to God in both pious and impious way. In his story, Darger plays himself in many guises, both cruel and blasphemous, pious and heroic. Just as he was eventually to keep detailed accounts of his tantrums, measured against his attendance at mass, Darger attempted to balance his evil deeds in Realms with good works. Darger’s acts of vengeance against the innocent children, although imaginary, were
something he took seriously enough to counteract with a modicum of mercy. He balanced the saint and sinner in *Realms* by incarnating himself as many different characters.

Some of these characters are heroes: General Henry Joseph Darger, who "longed to fold [the Vivian girls] in his strong arms" (*Realms*, vol. 13, 13-216 [3342], quoted in MacGregor 2002, 248); Hendro Joseph Dargar, Chief of the Abbieannian Gemini Society of "spies and great thinkers" (*Realms*, vol. 3, 112, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 239); H.J. Darger, war correspondent who "taking in scenes of Glandco-Angelinian war made discoveries that great war is more terrific than it was ever expected to be" (vol. 1, 295, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 243); and various other minor characters named Darger or variants such as Dargin and Dargarus (MacGregor 2002, 250). The Dargers who are Glandelinian villains include General Dargin, "the Glandelinian butcher" (*Realms*, vol. 12, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 245), another General Joseph H. Darger (MacGregor 2002, 238); General Judas Darger; and Frederick Darger (Bonesteel 2000, 20). The two principal General Dargers share the same name and title, but fight on opposing sides of the war, perhaps representative of Darger's approach to coping with his own mixed feelings and impulses:

Anyway it seems to be a man either on the Christian side, or on the enemy's side by the name of Henry Darger. This is also suspicious besides mysterious.
"And he looks the same like the one whom we returned the manuscript to [Henry J. Darger, author]." whispered Jennie. "I don't like this. It is either he is treacherous, or there is something else. He seems to wear the purple on one day and the gray the next. We will have to watch them, or him."

(Realms, vol. 12, 12-295, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 238)

The good and bad Dargers of the story28 parallel the more mundane good and bad Dargers revealed in his Journals, who combines the Glandelinian quality of defiance with Christian piety. Darger may have given up hope that God would change things like the weather to meet his demands, but he never stopped believing that God was responsible and should be defied and made aware of Darger's dissatisfaction at the failure to alleviate his discomfort:

Bad words at Heaven and defiance of God because of heat. Masses and communion before this not kiss. Life History. (Journals, Wednesday August 21, 1968)

Weather (and geological) events have always played a significant role in theodicy, since destructive weather represents "natural evil," as opposed to "moral evil" explained by the misuse of free will.

Darger was fascinated by weather all his life. In History of My Life he writes:

28 Within the story, there are also other characters which appear to be Darger alter-egos. Some of the most prominent are Jack Ambrose Evans, guardian of the Vivian girls, (MacGregor, 2002, 274), the French-Canadian boy scout hero, Penrod (262), who sometimes disguises himself as the Glandelinian boy scout, Adeleedefob (264). Penrod's best friend, James Radcliff, the Rattlesnake boy (who unbeknownst to Penrod is a girl) (265), Walter John Starring, "boy scientist and investigator"(253), also a guardian of the Vivian girls, and his evil brother Gerald Starring (256), leader of the Glandelinian boy scouts (257). These multiple personas allow Darger a wide spectrum of emotional experiences and vicarious adventures, heroic, romantic and murderous. They also allow him to get close to the Vivian sisters in the more appropriate form of a little boy.
I was very interested in summer thunderstorms (still am old as I are) and during winter (cold) could and would stand by the window all day watching it snow, especially if there was a great big blizzard raging. I would also watch it rain with great interest, also short or long showers. (Realms, 10 quoted in MacGregor 2002, 35)

Extreme weather and natural disasters play a prominent destructive role in Realms. There are blizzards, floods, earthquakes, forest fires, tidal waves and volcanic eruptions (445), usually on a massive scale leaving many dead. Often there is some question as to whether or not the Glandelinians had a hand in causing the disasters. The catastrophes are recounted in detail:

Shrieks and prayers and screams from the unhappy beings imprisoned in the floating masses and debris from the wrecked houses pierced the air...There were countless unknown numbers of men, women and even little children held down on the upper layers of the floating jams and were compelled to watch with indescribable agony and terror the flames creeping slowly toward them until they were burned to death, and even those who were not burned quickly enough were either slowly roasted or even frozen to death. (ibid, vol. 4, 16, in ibid, 458)

Darger speculates that Mother Nature has taken the Glandelinian side:

But has Nature—if we are justified in personifying the laws and forces of the universe—Has Mother Nature begun to take sides with the Glandelinian foe, and is she in the mood to help Glandelina sweep the christian countries like leaves from her path? (Realms, vol.8, 8-184 [366], quoted in MacGregor 2002, 412)

Darger spends thousands of pages describing natural catastrophes and their devastating afteraths, in which Nature inflicts death and suffering upon the earth. Nature provides an opportunity for Darger to vent his rage and indulge in

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29 MacGregor says that “most of the more than 15,000 pages comprising this enormous work contain detailed descriptions of the destructive effects of nature out of control.” (417)
his fascination with the macabre on a more grandiose scale than even the 
Glandelinian atrocities. Storm, fire, and flood become retaliatory devices, 
allowing him to make more expansive good on his threats against God. Nature, 
like Darger, is furious.

At this moment Robert Vivian chanced to glance up, and beheld in its [the 
typhoon’s] approach an appalling canopy of crimson clouds spreading over 
the sky near the zenith, and moving forward with the most amazing rapidity. 
It had a resemblance as if the judgement day, and hell’s immense clouds, 
had come at the very same time, and the vaery clouds seemed to roar in the 
most relentless rage with the continuous roar of rolling thunder growing 
louder and nearer every moment the rage of the approaching storm seeming 
to defy anybody, even the heavens. (Realms, vol. 1, ch. 2, 19-21, quoted in 
MacGregor 2002, 414)

[N]ot a wind but a whirl of supernatural power seemed to grasp thousands of 
buildings at every breath, and in a twinkling of an eye sent them careening 
into piles upon piles, of twisted chaos and wreckage. (Realms, quoted in 
MacGregor 2002, 415)

The flood really had fits of fury beyond anything known, seeming to abandon 
itself wholly to rage, having for four days been exceedingly dangerous. 
(Realms, vol. 4, 1362, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 464) 

Lytle Shaw has pointed out Darger’s “transcendental aesthetics” of weather, both 
in his Journals and in Realms (Shaw 2001). Darger’s characters share his 
obsession with meteorology. Darger follows the Judeo-Christian tradition in his 
use of storms as emblematic of divine wrath, but in Realms the wrath is often his 
own, directed at the God who rules the real universe, and manifested in 
punishment of the good within the universe that belongs to Darger.

More rarely, Darger uses Nature as an intervention to save the Vivian girls. An example is the 
collage-drawing, “At Norma Catherine. But wild thunderstorm with cyclone like wind saves them.” 
in which the Glandelinians are dispersed by a storm ‘mid-strangle.'
At the simplest level, the contents of Realms seem to fit its widely promoted image as a universal story of good triumphing over evil (Anderson 2001) and faith in God supplanting the dismal abyss of unbelief (Vine 1998). Realms ends with a grand victory for the brave and virtuous Vivian sisters, and Christian nations, when they finally triumph over the evil Glandelinians and the surviving child slaves are freed. The Glandelinian general, Johnston Jacken Manley, is captured, repents, and is forgiven by the Vivian girls and the Christian forces:

"I know," he had said to Violet and her sisters, "that I have persecuted you a lot, but it was mostly for spying, and not the motives that my two wicked sons had persecuted you for. But for all I have done, I do ask pardon...I shall atone for all the children who have been slain, and also will atone for all the ravages that my war has caused...and when I return to Glandelinia I hope I will be a better man. As for the little Vivian girls...We must be friends now since the war will soon be over, and hope to stay friends as long as we live."

Manley is allowed to shake hands with Violet and her sisters, and then all of the Christian generals shake hands with him (Realms, Vol. 13, 13-317b/13-318 [3542-3545], quoted in MacGregor 2002, 230). Manley is then "led outside, and he passed through the long files of Christian infantry, seated upon his own magnificent horse, and rode off toward his own native home" (Realms, vol. B, pp.317/side b-318/side a, quoted in Bonesteel 2000, 232). The utopia that follows is described in Volume One:

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31 It comprises 16 of over 15,000 pages (MacGregor 2002, 229).
32 MacGregor (230-231) tells us there are two endings, one at the end of Realms and one fifty pages into volume 1. The "ending" in Volume One portrays the Glandelinian nation in more desperate straits. General Manley is captured while trying to commit suicide. He is sent back to Glandelinia to "make her better and more christian like." (Realms, vol. 1, 50)
All the while that Violet and her sisters had been back in Abbieannia since the war ended, the weather had been good and perfect, though scorching-hot at times. No severe storms had ever showed themselves, except heavy rainstorms, but that is not the kind I mean...

The flowers were plentiful and what was to make the scenery still more beautiful was the appearance of so many beautiful Blengiglomenean creatures everyday. Violet and her sisters enjoy the sights of so many brilliant creatures, and also enjoyed still more those two whom they had invited to remain in their own private gardern. (Bonesteel 2000, 232)

Darger's fiction and art do not, in any obvious way, seek to explain the suffering they depict. But the old adage “show; don’t tell” is one he inadvertently follows. Darger suffers and then fights back by inflicting suffering. He punishes God by imitating him. Within Realms, as in Christian cosmology generally, the cycle of violence does not end, but is magnified. Darger does not simply lock his fictional children into institutions, as was done to him, but he sacrifices them to his anger, recounting their horrible deaths at length and in great detail again and again. While Darger stops short of sacrificing those he loves most, the Vivian girls, the Christian God orders killed his “only begotten” son (John 3:16), whom he loves, in part, because of his willingness to die. 33 How is it that violation and death are the answer to suffering which a God of love provides? Darger’s own attempts to play God in Realms replicate the acts of God as if God were Henry Darger. At one point he even has children crucified, a strange combination of tribute to the

33 “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again” (John 10: 17, KJV).
crucifixion of Christ, and sacrilege, according these murdered children the same importance as the son of God:

Children unable to work or overcome from Tortures lasting months were cruelly crucified, nailed to crosses by their fingers and toes and hands and feet combined—and stripped of their clothes—even little girls, and scourged with iron spiked lashes as they hung there. Nay, the crucifixion was similar to that of our Lord, and equally horrible, and thorns were crushed upon the heads of the dying children. (Realms, vol. 12, 168, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 626)

Darger’s Realms can offer us an opportunity to see conventional Christianity defamiliarized. There is nothing ennobling about crucifixion. Our horror at Darger’s crucified children is a horror appropriate to the slaughter of Jesus and others like him. We comfort ourselves with metaphors and avert our eyes, but Darger’s children allow us to see the cruelty of our own narrative and religious traditions anew and think about their implications. Despite his many bizarre, fascinating and extreme contributions to the good vs. evil narrative, Darger does not contravene the basic Christian tenets of love, the sacrificial innocent, and redemption. Rather, he promotes conventional Christian patterns, obsessively duplicating the intrinsic necessity for sacrifice and suffering found in Christianity.

It is possible to speculate that Darger struggled, on some level, with fundamental questions of how to come to terms with his belief in God within a world in which suffering proliferated, and that the usual answer—create more suffering-- did not

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34 MacGregor interprets this as heresy. “By crucifying two dozen innocent little girls at once the overwhelming significance of the death of Christ is called into question” (2002, 626).
always satisfy. MacGregor rightly sees Darger's rages as, at least in part, a manifestation of his spiritual anguish:

But from childhood on, Darger was in conflict with God. He couldn't understand God's failure to answer prayers. His inability or refusal to prevent the sufferings of children, or to punish those who might harm them. Darger was tormented by God's evident silence in the face of evil. Throughout his life, his simple but profound belief caused him terrible anguish; often provoking him to rage, lived out in *The Realms of the Unreal*. (MacGregor 1998, 16)
Henry Darger, The Glandelinians "were" about to hang the brave little girls. See how they were "hanged" in next picture. Central panel of a three-panel collage-drawing, 24X231 ½. 19 X 70 in., © Kiyoko Lerner / SODRAC (2005).
Darger's aesthetic sense, as shown by the text and illustrations of *Realms*—the gore, the excess, the unapologetic sentimentalism and moral didacticism—demonstrates familiarity with religious iconography and Catholic lay doctrine. However, the obvious Catholic influences and the generic good-overcoming-evil ending in Darger's work should not be used by readers as a strategy of avoidance, to normalize the excessive sadism in this work. Gerard Wertkin, former director of the American Folk Art Museum, explicitly uses the Catholic tradition to ease our discomfort: "Roman Catholic martyrology is replete with the stories of young girls who suffer and die for the faith... Seen in this context, Darger's accounts of cruelty seem less threatening and strange, more transformative and redemptive." (Wertkin 2001, 126) In my view, this is the wrong reaction: seen in the context of Darger's work, Catholic martyrologies should appear more threatening and strange, as should conventional morality tales which tell us that suffering and disability are somehow for our own good.

The most explicit example of Darger's mimicry of Catholic imagery is his portrayal of the Vivian sisters. His descriptions and images of the beauty, courage, sanctity and tortures of the Vivian girls parallel (presumably without direct influence) the extreme and sexualized violence imposed on innocent female bodies present in the medieval tradition of female martyrology. If Darger disturbs us (and I believe he should), then he also raises the political and moral problem of how we avoid the implications of narratives which require the
suffering and violation of innocent bodies in order to reach an obligatory redemptive conclusion. In both martyrologies and Darger's stories, violence against the bodies of traditional victims (women and children) is constitutive of a cosmic order based on sacrifice leading to transfiguration. Their suffering is an opportunity for them to glorify God and to prove themselves worthy of redemption.

The royal Vivian girls epitomized beauty for Darger. Physical beauty and noble birth are also linked to virtue in hagiographies of female saints. Clemence of Barking, a nun writing in the thirteenth century, begins the story of Saint Catherine as follows:

In the city of Alexandria...there lived a young girl of high rank and great beauty. The maiden was eighteen years old, and her name was Catherine...

When she entered in full view of everyone, they gazed upon her and marveled at the inexpressible beauty through which her goodness was manifested...Her gentle features demonstrated clearly the wisdom in her heart. At that time, there was no one on earth as beautiful as this handmaiden of God. (Wogan-Browne and Burgess, 5; 12)

MacGregor remarks: “For much of The Realms, Darger plays with the reader, building an ever greater case for the sanctity of these little girls, elaborating on the mystery of their seemingly supernatural qualities. Strangely, it is generally their physical beauty rather than their behaviour which convinces everyone of their more than human perfection.” (616) In the context of traditional martyrologies, it is understandable why Darger uses the Vivian girls’ physical
attributes--seven (the number of sacraments in Roman Catholicism) blonde images of perfection and royal blood -- to substantiate his vision of their role as morally and spiritually precocious heroines.

But it is not enough to be beautiful and innocent: there must also be pain. In Catholicism in particular, the redemptive suffering of Christ is imitated by the suffering of holy Christians. Holiness increases in proportion to suffering. In medieval Christianity, female salvation was linked to the female body. Darger endowed the Vivian girls with intelligence and courage but it was their physical beauty that truly held him.

As he [Penrod, now the adopted brother of the Vivians] listened to her [Jennie's] silvery voice, he was admiring again the perfection of the profile of her and her sisters, the creamy smoothness of her and her sisters' skin, and watching fascinated the gentle rise and fall of her bosom beneath her purple silken uniform jumper. The touch of her golden hair on his cheeks as he bent his head close to hers, ostensibly to study the maps set his pulse throbbing and he had to curb the wild desire to hug her in his arms then and there, and smother her with kisses...No lover ever loved his sweetheart as Penrod loved his beautiful sisters, and a holy love it was too. His primitive instinct was stirred. (Realms, vol. 10, part 1, 10-201b [236], quoted in MacGregor 2002, 269)

Elizabeth Robertson discusses the role of corporeality in medieval female holiness:

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35 Robertson traces this female link with corporeality to Aristotle. "Conceiving of the soul as possessing nutritive, sensitive or appetitive and reasonable faculties, Aristotle saw women's souls as deficient in all three aspects, but especially in the faculty of reason. Aristotle's opinions about the nature of the soul as well as his reproductive theories that associate women above all with matter, because they define women through their bodies alone, are fundamental to the concept of female spirituality we see in The Life of Saint Margaret (1991, 269-270)."
Because a woman can never escape her body, her achievement of sanctity has to be through the body. Her temptation by the devil will be through the body and most probably will be sexual. She can overcome that sexual temptation only through her body, primarily by countering her physicality with her endurance of extreme physical torture. (269)

But physicality “is not only a woman’s problem, however, it is also her solution. Physical suffering was the primary corrective to female sexual temptation.” (272)

This emphasis on physicality and sexuality is reflected in the coupling of “holy love” and primitive instinct which accompanies Darger’s portrayals of the trials and adventures of the Vivians. Darger probably did not read translations of medieval martyrologies, but the aesthetic he brings to *Realms* shares something with them. For him, the corporeal torment of the Vivians was a necessary, and at times titillating, step on the road to their eventual transfiguration. There is, of course, little correlation between saints or Vivians and the everyday suffering of those with debilitating or disabling conditions. The Vivians’ suffering is enhanced by their continued physical appeal, even in the midst of torture:

Jennie [Vivian] remembered when the Glandelinians had turned on her sisters and grasped their fair necks in a vise like grip...she had seen their fair golden heads thrown back and their protruding tongues...she had seen the streams of blood come from their nose, mouth, and ears. (*Realms*, vol. 7, 99, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 550)

The story of Saint Christina presents us with a medieval counterpart to the Vivians. Christina, at eleven, seems to have stirred her own father’s “primitive instinct”:
Seeing how Nature had endowed her
With unsurpassable beauty.
Urbain felt a deep love for his daughter,
And could not spend a day without kissing her eyes and face
(Cazelles 1991, 139).

Raised a pagan, Christina converts to Christianity. This eventually leads to her torture by Urbain. After being stripped, hung by her hair and beaten, she is still defiant, flinging a chunk of her own flesh at him. She is flogged en route to the stake and the crowd is moved by the suffering of such a beauty. Like the Vivian girls, but unlike those who actually suffer disfigurement and dismemberment, virgin saints remain stunningly attractive, which in turn elicits sympathy, and proves their spiritual superiority:

Blood flows down from her breasts.
The women spectators lacerate their faces,
When they witness the torments endured by their lady.
‘Alas!’ they all say, ‘one has never seen
Such a beautiful body endure so shameful a treatment. (148)

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Catholic Church promoted lay religious instruction by the abridgement and translation of saints' lives from Latin to the vernacular (Winstead 1997, 64). The legends of virgin saints translated during this period downplayed devotional aspects of the earlier Latin legends (65) and focused on the more reliable attractions: sex, violence and death. Christina exemplifies the spirit of these saints: articulate —indeed frequently caustic, physically aggressive, and-- in keeping with the prevailing tone-- fiery and hyperbolic. The Vivian girls are similarly outspoken and can fight and kill when necessary:
Manley, seeing who had fired at his men, rushed upon the little girls with a wild curse, and struck poor little Jennie down from her horse with a terrible blow of his saber, wounding her severely and dangerously. He turned to rush Violet but she swept aside, and struck him a blow in the eye with her pistol butt crying "Take that you rascal and enemy of God, John Manley. I hate you you abuser of Our Lord." Blinded by rage he rushed Catherine to strike her down with his sword...Catherine avoided him, by a rush, and put a bullet neatly between Manley's eyes. He fell down from his horse dead, having been killed instantly. (Realms, vol. 13, 13-194b, 3300, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 227)

One difference is that the courageous Vivian girls, although tortured, are not required to sacrifice their lives. The child slaves fulfill that role. Medieval virgin saints, despite their strong personalities and fighting spirit, end up dead. Shortly after the Vivians are mutilated by land mines in what Darger calls "Tragedy at Brigano," Darger writes in his journal that "their lives really will be lost on July 4, nineteen fourteen" if his lost manuscript isn't found. But, in the end, he cannot bring himself to let them die (Predictions and Threats, March 16, 1916).36 Instead, they face the possibility of being "disfigured and crippled for life":

Indeed, the little girls were horribly mangled and were fairly tossing in agony. Their bodies had been frightfully lacerated...The doctor who was preparing to operate on them had great doubts if the little girls would live, but afterwards he declared that they could be saved if kept perfectly quiet, but that nevertheless they may be horribly disfigured and crippled for life..."I'm doing my best." said the doctor [to General Vivian]...only the good God can prevent what is coming to your daughters. Pray to him, and offer him a reward, and probably they may come out of it all right." (Realms, vol. 12, 12-178b 2437, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 284-285)

36 "March 16, 1916 passes. Little hope of Christian successes now. War may surely be lost. Year already close to end it being November...Tragedy at Brigano. [Be]cause of Aronburg mystery. Vivian Girls almost fatally injured. Their lives will really be lost on July 4, nineteen fourteen if lost manuscript is not returned by that time...The loss of pictures of children, manuscript and rejection from Glandelinian army shall be avenged." (Realms, vol. 1, 295 ff., in MacGregor 2002, 284)
Mutilated bodies are part of the hagiographic tradition. When Christina is submitted to fire and venomous snakes, and has her tongue cut out and her breasts cut off by her third and final torturer, Julian, she “walks about, singing with the angels” unharmed in the furnace, the “vipers licked her feet, the asps clung to her breasts…and the cobras wrapped themselves around her neck and licked her sweat,” while milk, rather than blood, flows out of her chest. Christina takes her severed tongue and throws it at Julian, hitting him in the eye and blinding him (Voragine 1997, 67). But then Christina’s voice is restored to her. Without her tongue, “she spoke even better and more clearly than before of divine things and of the one blessed God…” (Brownlee 1991, 124)

Angry that the Vivian girls have been injured by mines set by Christians to kill Glandelinians, General Vivian (their father) lashes out at General Jack Evans who set them. Evans, who is also a guardian of the girls, is devastated:

“I suppose because they will be disfigured for life and crippled you will lose your love for them,” said General Vivian [to Evans]; Evans answers, “Beauty, Ha. I detest outward beauty more than the devil…Their condition now only makes me saddened and almost broken hearted, and when I think of their being disfigured and crippled for life— Oh, I can’t—bear to speak—of it.” (Darger, Realms, vol. 12, 12-202/12-202b [2484-2485], quoted in MacGregor, 286).

It is following this near-death incident that their transfiguration takes place. No matter how angry Darger was with God, and even though he was capable of maiming his heroines as an act of retaliation against a real life disappointment, Darger could not bear to leave them in a damaged state. He finds the means not
only to keep the Vivian girls alive and to restore their beauty to them but also to enhance it to such an extent that they are unrecognizable to those who knew them:

[Jack Evans] saw sitting on the porch four fair little girls, really ten times more [beautiful] than the Vivian girls could ever have been... Then he paused in overpowering emotion and awe, for from these pretty children a strange fragrance as of the most sweetest flowers, a strange odor that was completely divine, that filled the air, as he gazed at them, he discovered that they were etherically beautiful and wore the most beautiful white guazy dresses, whiter than the most great whiteness could ever be dreamed of... to his surprise he fancied he saw a luminous golden halo appear above the fair heads of each of the little girls. A feeling of strange awe came over him, an overpowering sense of being among the celestial inhabitants of God's heavenly kingdom (Realms, vol. 12, p. 12-202/12-202b [2484-2485]; 12-279 [2618], quoted in MacGregor 2002, 286-287).

Darger's transfiguration of the girls contains many of the classic elements of traditional transformations: white flowing robes, enhanced beauty, a sweet smell, a halo. Consider this example of St. Faith's transfiguration:

As the dove hovered fluttering over her it began to shake its wings gently. With the dew that fell from them the red coals grew black, and therewith Faith's pains grew less; with the dew that fell on her, all her wounds were perfectly cured. She was immediately clad in a snow-white gown and mantle, and then the dove set the glorious shining crown on her head. (Delany 1992, 75)

And though her body was kept unburied for four days after her death, no evil odor came from it but, rather, an odor of solace that marvelously comforted all who entered the place to visit the body (Delany 1998, 194-195).

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The seven lovely Vivian girls are genuine heroines. They are presented as intelligent strategists, fierce and skilled fighters and, in the final analysis, the only ones who can secure victory for the Christian forces and freedom for the child slaves. But in order for them to fight the good fight there must be evil and almost unimaginable cruelty to pit them against. This is how not only their bravery, but also the slaughter of child slaves and the torture of the Vivian girls themselves serve the narrative.

Late medieval vernacular legends of virgin saints, like Christina, display a similar tendency. She taunts her persecutors and, in the case of Julian, physically attacks him, using her severed tongue as her weapon. In spite of her fierce assertiveness, she is tortured horribly and dies. Feminist approaches to this tradition of martyrrology have therefore been somewhat ambivalent: on the one hand, the narratives are clearly a celebration of violence against women; on the other hand, they have a possibly subversive aspect in their depiction of female agency. Similarly, with Darger, we have to ask what the ethical and political implications are of these sometimes highly violent texts and images that simultaneously tell of the degradation and “thrilling” adventures of his heroines.

When Christina finally dies after having her heart cut out we are told:

To all those who will honor this holy day
In the name of the maiden whose earthly sojourn did not last long.
It was on a Thursday that she left this world,
Her white and tender flesh all tortured.
And it was on account of her torments that she was welcomed to Paradise.  
(Cazelles 1991, 150)

As in the *Realms*, Christina’s story ends happily (in Paradise). The claim is also made that the extreme and sexualized violence visited on this eleven-year-old girl was necessary for her eternal happiness/redemption. Darger, although he indulged in considerable violence in telling his story, did not explicitly claim that the violation of young children (the Vivians and the child slaves) was needed to secure their redemption. By comparing Darger’s account of the saintly Vivian girls with the story of Saint Christina, we see in Darger a defamiliarized replaying of what is most problematic in Christianity: the perverse displacement of wrath and violence onto the innocent object, in an economy of love.

Despite the recognizable inclusion of Catholic imagery and sensibility in Darger’s work, it is important not to exaggerate the sophistication of Darger’s theology. He never appears to doubt God’s literal reality, but he frequently rails against God when his petitions go unanswered. Darger’s “tantrums” are a result of not getting what he wants, and in this way, his relationship with God was quite literally like that of a child to a Father who is not forthcoming. 38 What is most valuable in Darger’s theology is precisely his unwillingness to passively “accept” his fate. Darger, like his God, rages at injustice, and like his God, he visits his rage on the most innocent “objects” he can find. The circuit is both undeniably perverse, and

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38 MacGregor has suggested that Darger’s tendency to blasphemy and sacrilege via the Glandelinians was an attempt to provoke a response from an unresponsive God (2002, 626).
undeniably Christian. Darger's work is valuable in exposing this circuit so starkly and without the accoutrements of sophisticated theology and venerable tradition.

The Transfiguration of Henry Darger: Critical Responses

After his death, Darger's work was received into a new context of highly educated and sophisticated critics with very different theological assumptions from either the Catholicism in which he grew up or his idiosyncratic personal religious notions.

Virtually all of Darger's critics have noted the religious themes in his work. John MacGregor observed that the writing style of Realms suggests, "the poetic phrasing of the Bible...the oratory of sermons, and the naive religiosity of Christian tracts and moral tales." (106) Gerard Wertkin writes, "Often the epic reads like chapters from the lives of the saints. Even its language—Calverinia, Angelinia, Abbieannia—is reminiscent of the Latin of the Catholic liturgy" (126). Michael Bonesteel calls Darger a Catholic artist:

A Catholic artist [working] firmly within a tradition that has historically prized the physicality of experience—the Word, as it were, made flesh...The combination of ethereal exaltation and carnal suffering can be found in a fifteenth century painting such as the Martyrdom of St. Erasmus by Dirck Bouts. It can be found in a contemporary piece like Catholic artist Alfonso Ossorio's painting of the flayed corpse of St. Bartholomew. And it can be found in the child-slave disembowelings of Henry Darger's art. (2000, 30-31)

Critics have evolved a number of strategies to deal with Darger's unusual, literal, and unsophisticated theology. The first misreading is to characterize Realms as
a simple moral fable of good triumphing over evil. Anderson, for example, writes: “While throughout the tales there is much death and destruction, in the end the Vivian Girls prevail: good triumphs over evil, and the enslaved children are freed from their captors” (2001, 12). This reading gives too much importance to the ending. Given Darger’s Catholicism and penchant for children’s stories, the sentimental happy ending is no real surprise. However, the gore and sexualized violence against child slaves and the Vivian Girls in considerable portions of Darger’s text and images, and his lifelong rages against God recorded in his Journals, do not support the interpretation of Realms as an innocuous morality tale.

The ending of Realms, which includes the repentance of the Glandelinian leader, General Manley, and a subsequent outpouring of Christian forgiveness, is borrowed by Darger from the trite religious tracts and sentimental children’s stories so familiar to him. The Glandelinian defeat, preceded by volumes of Glandelinian debauchery can be read as a concession to conventionality, rather than an indicator of Darger’s spiritual ascent, and does nothing to establish that Darger ultimately reconciled himself to an unresponsive God.

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39 Darger’s collection of books included The Wizard of Oz and its thirteen sequels, Heidi, several novels by Dickens and many other less famous children’s novels. (MacGregor 2002, 99-101)

40 Darger’s library contained many religious tracts, books, prayer books and a Bible. (MacGregor 2002, 106)
The retaliatory violence in Darger’s fiction conveys his refusal to accept God’s failure to listen and respond to Henry Darger. Diary entries from the end of his life tell us that he continued to resent God’s apathy and remained unrepentant about his revolt:

Over cords falling down angry temper spell with some blasphemies. Almost about to throw the ball at Christ statue. Blame Him for my bad luck in things. I’m sorry to say so. I’ll always be this way, always was, and I don’t give a damn. (Journals, April 6, 1968)

Another common reaction to the religious themes in Darger has been to normalize the shocking violence as part of a corporeal Catholic tradition, a move which, according to Gerard Wertkin, allows us to see Darger’s work as “less threatening and strange, more transformative and redemptive” (2001, 126). This strategy is also ultimately objectionable, not because the connections are nonexistent, but because the sado-masochism conveyed should increase our unease with the martyrological tradition rather than diminish our shock at Darger.

A more interesting strategy uses Darger’s own life story to complete the sacrificial circuit by turning Darger himself into a sacrificial lamb who is redeemed through suffering. This effectively deals with the feeling of discomfort over Darger’s impoverished and marginalized existence by transforming it into the solution to the discomfort created by his violent and sadistic imagery. Disability and marginalization are reinterpreted as innocence and his suffering as necessary to Darger’s personal psychological redemption. However, viewing
suffering as redemptive presupposes a “sinner” in need of redemption. In addition to being deserved, that suffering becomes obligatory, a necessary working out of atonement, a process which should not be interrupted nor the suffering relieved. In this sense, then, Darger becomes the sacrificial lamb, the naïve, the childlike one whose suffering brings forth art and literature and gives us something to write about, while reconfirming our convenient belief that there is nothing we can or should do to help minimize that suffering:

He basically came from a very traumatic childhood. He grew up to be emotionally disturbed as an adult. But he was able to save himself, to keep himself functioning, by having this life goal, this creation to live for. His real life was a pale shadow of his creation. That says a lot about the healing power of art in this man’s life. Art can save your life. (Bonesteel in Eskin, 4/6)

He did not do this to gain fame or make money. He did it to save his life. And though he fought with God over it and risked losing his soul in the process, it worked. (Bonesteel 2000,7)

This strategy is exemplified in a 2000 piece by Darcey Steinke in the Village Voice Literary Supplement. Steinke acknowledges the violence in Darger’s work, while minimizing it by reference to his Catholic background: “Children were his icons and he used them as spiritual vectors, as Catholics have long prayed to gory depictions of the saints” (3/3). However, the chief achievement of Steinke’s rhetoric is to make Darger himself a virgin martyr, whose suffering brings forth a miraculous redemption:

Darger had the sort of life that drives people to therapy, but instead of joining the culture of complaint he worked for 50 years on the story of seven brave little girls fighting injustice. Darger enlivened and mythologized the themes of
his own life. By telling himself a story he made something miraculous out of his pain and loneliness. Some people say he was crazy, but as my father explained to me long ago, even crazy people get a chance to redeem themselves. (3/3)

At first glance, pointing out that Darger did not pursue expensive therapy or attend personal growth retreats seems odd, since neither his income nor his social class made these anyway-anachronistic options available to him. But viewed as a rhetorical strategy to establish Darger's authenticity (especially in relation to the presumed readership of the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*), it makes sense. Like a virgin saint, Darger must be "innocent" and to Steinke's audience a person innocent of the "culture of complaint" is innocent of life. Steinke's rhetorical moves embody what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the "perverse temptation" -- the love for the outcast precisely for being an outcast, a love which therefore requires the outcast to remain marginalized (Žižek 2000, 125).

Richard Vine also situates Darger in the traditions of martyrrology and theodicy, and uses a (somewhat inaccurate) account of Darger's life to tell a narrative of salvation:

*The Realms of the Unreal* covertly addresses the problem of evil: how can a perfectly benevolent, all-powerful deity permit suffering and death to exist? This philosophical conundrum marks the modern schism between the secular humanists like Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazaov, for whom no spiritual Kingdom, however glorious, can ever justify the unmerited tears of a single infant, and devout religionists, who accept the necessity of evil "on faith"—either as a logical entailment of virtue (since "good" cannot be conceived apart from it, as St. Augustine argued) or as the occasion for a more wondrous salvation. (1998, 5/7)
In a medieval twist, Vine even invokes Darger's celibacy, and a purported calming of his sexual urges late in life, as part of his story of redemption and acceptance, pointing out that *Realms* was a “product of the celibate Darger’s most sexually volatile years.” (3/7) Vine's account of Darger's solution reads:

Long before TV brought carnage into our living rooms with the evening news, he depicted—in images of heartbreaking directness—the arbitrary carnage of "total war," indeed of all man-made and all natural disasters. That he did so without, in the end, losing either his religious faith or his appreciation for childish beauty suggests a "solution" completely at odds with comforting post-modernist ironies. In his scenario, evil derives from sin, and sin derives from misguided free will. It is only when Darger finally accepts the loss of the Aronburg photo (and by extension, the loss of his sister and his own juvenile freedom)—only when he subordinates his illicit desire to an inscrutable Divine Will—that the war can draw to its proper close, in the hard-won Christian victory that brings a “peace which passeth all understanding.

However, this account is flawed, as there is no evidence that Darger obtained “peace” in his old age, nor does he seem to have lost his fascination with violence. This excerpt from his journals a few years before his death makes this clear:

Had trouble again with twine [?] Mad enough to wish I was a bad tornado. Swore at God ([Journals, April 16, 1968).

Darger fulfilled this wish in *History of My Life*. The 5,084 handwritten pages of *History of My Life* starts off autobiographically, but after 206 pages (MacGregor, 2002, 670) it becomes instead the tale of a very bad tornado named Sweetie Pie:

January 1, 1971. Also 1th of February 1971. – From Friday 1969 to Monday February 1th 1971 From Friday 1970 til Monday 1971. Everything I did was
the same including writing a fictional story of a huge huge twister called "Sweetie Pie" and the unbelievable horror it did. (Journals)

Sweetie Pie is a cloud formed in the shape of a child being strangled. In Darger's descriptions of her, her eyes bulge and her tongue protrudes and when her own belly is ripped open it becomes a tornado (History of My Life, vol. 3, 3110, 3113, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 511) which strips, strangles, dismembers and slaughters just like the Glandelinian soldiers in Realms and the demons in its sequel, Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House. Darger's tastes in violence remained remarkably consistent over six decades and the majority of the violence in History is still, predictably, directed at children.

The playground presented an appalling appearance bodies of children and even nuns and others stripped totally naked by the fierce explosive force of the wind lay dead about the ground, many children with their bodies, bellies and chest torn wide or torn away completely, and the crowd of injured were also torn up every which way helpless and suffering some of which may even die.

I saw to it that prompt assistance were rendered to the injured and the poor-tortured children hospitalized as soon as possible. I have omitted to mention that out of one hundred Sisters that was in charge of the Orphanage none survived. (History of My Life, 4357)

In once instance that morning I saw the body of a half naked pinioned among the branches of what was left of an uprooted tree and it wasn't in the grounds either.

The body was horribly torn and lacerated as hit for two hours by a cat o-nine tails the most horrible of whips and she had evidently lain amid the branches to die. (History of My Life, 4356)

Vine claims, without evidence, that Darger's internal conflicts found a conventional, religious resolution: "[Darger's] traveling show now reveals the
techniques he used to convey an internal 'civil war' that could find resolution only in religious grace.” (Vine, 1/7) It would be truer to Darger's actual history to claim that he was never reconciled to his disappointment in God's will, although he always alternated blasphemy and complaint with ritual devotion and prayer.

Darger maintained his contradictory attitude of pious defiance to the end.

The theological legitimation of visible suffering related to difference, and attempts to justify the way it is visited most dramatically on a specific group of people, are as old as the comforters of Job, and the reaction of defiance is as old as Job's response. The moral danger in any theological discourse is that it will answer the cosmic problem caused by the presence of visible suffering, isolation and difference by suggesting it is necessary and even good. This response permeates Christian teachings. In one of his Journals, Darger copied out a prayer which began, “Oh Jesus by a most unjust judgement, thou was condemned to a most bitter death, that thou mightest deliver us from eternal damnation, through the abyss of thy mercy….” (Property of Henry Jos. Dagarius, “Friday”). He knew that acceptance of “God's will” as it pertained to him was expected, but he refused to acquiesce.
Both Vine and Steinke exemplify the two-sided nature of the theological 
appropriation of pain. On the one hand, they are able to appreciate Darger, his 
conflict and his work, by looking at it in a religious light. But by placing his life in a 
ready-made narrative of redemption, they falsify it, and posit the difficulties he 
experienced as necessary and unavoidable. More important, they participate in 
the depersonalization of the child slaves, and normalize what is properly 
disturbing in Darger's work – the repeated sexualized violence against children.

This theological answer to the victimization and sacrifice of the innocent is 
ultimately mythological, and is no answer at all. The unexplained suffering of 
children, of the “innocent,” is resolved by Vine and Steinke by pointing to the 
“greater” pain of someone else (Darger/Christ). The “secular humanist” can see 
that this answer may be psychologically satisfying to many, but this 
psychological resolution is at the same time a political strategy of making moral 
sense out of suffering, and therefore perpetuating or perpetrating it, rather than 
seeking to alleviate it. Darger himself reenacted the sacrificial economy on his 
fictional creatures, but while he never doubted the reality of God, he never 
stopped struggling with Him either. Darger was always part Glandelinnian.
Darger’s Theology and the Economy of Love-Innocence-Suffering

Henry Darger, *They are almost murdered themselves though they fight for their lives. Typhoon saves them* [left panel of triptych], water color, pencil, carbon on paper, © Kiyoko Lerner / SODRAC (2005).
Christianity, like the narrative of *Realms*, is built upon a necessary horror vital to the fantasy it supports. Since violent acts can in no way be linked to verifiable notions of love and redemption, how is it that we find them paradoxically knotted together in both Christian dogma and Darger’s illustrated fiction? Slavoj Žižek discusses fantasy as that which both grounds and sustains notions of a cosmic order. I would contend that the Žižekien idea of fantasy also underlies what can be termed the Christian fantasy, in which the ultimate act of violence (the crucifixion of Christ/God) is understood as an absolute and fundamental act of love.

The paradox is thus that, far from simply deranging/distorting the ‘proper balance of things,’ fantasy at the same time *grounds* every notion of the balanced Universe: fantasy is not an idiosyncratic excess that deranges cosmic order, but the violent singular excess that *sustains* every notion of such an order (Žižek 2000, 86).

For Darger, as for contemporary North Americans generally, the paradigm of “innocence” is the prepubescent child. As a result, his imagery of suffering is more disturbing than conventional representations of the crucifixion, or even the suffering of early-adolescent female saints. For this reason, Darger poses more viscerally the moral and sexual sadism of the economy of sacrifice, which is the root of those other traditions: evil is overcome and love triumphs precisely through violence against innocent bodies. The reception of Darger’s work presents evidence of a complex and ubiquitous sadistic economy which allows an elite of culturally-knowing readers to enjoy their Darger without guilt, but serves to normalize and perpetuate suffering.
Some interpretations of Darger suggest that he wrote and illustrated *Realms* as a way to point out the terrible suffering of children and to act as their “protector.”

A saintly man who frequently attended Mass, Darger saw himself as the ardent protector of children. He could, therefore, in his own works and images, subject his creatures to terrible trials from which it was in his power to rescue them (Prokopoff 1996, 4/5).

Others, like Steinke, employ feminist (as well as religious) themes to make us more comfortable with his work (2000). The “agency” of the Vivian girls is used to make politically acceptable what would otherwise be reprehensible. Yet the obvious and painful conclusion is that Darger’s search for answers led him instead to perpetuate suffering in his fiction. In this, Darger comes to a Christian conclusion. Orthodox Christianity also “solves” the problem of everyday suffering through the one cosmic sacrifice of the altogether innocent.

Rather than normalizing the suffering in Darger’s own life and that which he inflicts on his fictional characters, readers may consider how Darger’s story destabilizes and critically challenges the normative economy of sacrifice we function within and perpetuate both on institutional and individual levels. Darger refused to accept the ideological erasure of his own suffering as constitutive of greater meaning. This refusal and the difficulty critics have in resisting a redemptive analysis of Darger’s life, despite his own rejection of such an

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41 This interpretation is favoured by many in folk art and outsider art circles and will be explored further in Chapter Three.
interpretation, tells us something about the social barriers the disabled face when attempting to interact as equals, rather than filling an appointed symbolic-redemptive role. The economy of love-suffering-innocence offers a theological explanation of suffering which obscures its actual causes and its effects. Darger, through his obsessive duplication of this economy in his fiction and art, and through his struggle against it in his actual life, highlights the inadequacy of Christianity's redemptive narrative and the need for its re-evaluation.
CHAPTER 3

_A Moonflaw in the Brain: Aesthetic Strategies of Consumption and the Afterlife of Henry Darger_

Henry Darger, _At Jennie Richee_. They had seized a Glandelinian officer who had been in swimming, and though he is half naked, they had forced him to sign a pass through the foe lines, and tied him to a tree so he could not raise the alarm. Collage-drawing. Left panel of a three-panel composition. 19 X 70 in.© Kiyoko Lerner / SODRAC 2005.

It would have made the moon faint (Darger, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 190).

The first few years of the twenty-first century have seen a bull run in the art of Henry Darger. Darger remained relatively little-known through the 1970s, '80s and into the '90s, but now fetches some of the highest prices in the self-
taught/outsider art market. In 2003, Christie's held its first specialized auction for "outsider art" -- formerly obscure, now a small but established component of the mainstream art market -- generating revenues of over US$1 million. Darger's pieces were among the most valuable, setting new auction records for outsider art approaching $100,000 a piece. In April 2004, a Cologne art fair included, among the more traditional offerings of art and antiques, a floor in the exhibition hall dedicated to art brut and Outsider Art (Thorncroft 2004). In 2005 Forbes informed its readers: "today Henry Darger is the most bankable outsider artist since Grandma Moses, his pictures fetching up to $100,000" (Jones 2005).

Not only Darger's art, but his fiction, journals, and even the proverbial sink from his former room at Webster Street, have become valuable. Darger's writing, sketches, source material, and more mundane effects have been saved and are in the process of being made available to the public. His writing is now housed in New York City's American Folk Art Museum along with twenty-six of his paintings and selected source material, tracings and other ephemera (Anderson 2001, 11). The Museum opened a Henry Darger Study Center in 2001. A year prior to that, through a combination of gift and purchase, Intuit (the Chicago-based "Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art") obtained the remaining contents of Darger's room, which had been kept relatively intact for almost thirty years (Jones, 2005). Intuit plans to recreate Darger's room, to scale, and fill it with his "meager personal possessions": furniture, typewriter, scrapbooks and the aforementioned sink, "to
construct an authentic environment that provides insight into the life and art of Darger,” (Driever, 2004, 14), who is described by a student researcher at the center as “one of the most enigmatic, creative geniuses of recent art history.” (14)

Jessica Yu's 2004 documentary about Darger, entitled In the Realms of the Unreal and narrated by child star Dakota Fanning, won critical adulation and did well in the art house circuit. Paul Chan's digital animation, Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization —After Henry Darger and Charles Fourier (2003), debuted at the Greene Naftali Gallery in New York to great acclaim, and continues to be exhibited.¹ Darger has inspired a book by American poet John Ashbery (Girls on the Run: A Poem) and has been cited as an influence by the Turner prize-winning ceramic artist Grayson Perry.² He has influenced a growing number of works and other forms of tribute, including websites (Michael n.d.; Ayers 1997-2006; Whitmore 1997),³ an Australian punk band called "The Vivian Girls" (Vivian Girls & Ninety Nine 1999), a Natalie Merchant song (Merchant 2001), an online video game,⁴ several other films,⁵ a Barbican show,⁶ dramatic

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¹ Chan also made a three-minute video 34 Flower Types for Henry Darger (Chan 2001).
² Darger and Perry’s work were also exhibited simultaneously by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in the fall of 2005. (http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/2006/spring/feature3.html)
³ Michael n.d. is a comprehensive site on all things Darger, which initially alerted me to some of the Darger-influenced works.
⁴ Sissyfight, found at http://www.sissyfight.com/
theatre,\textsuperscript{7} a modern dance piece,\textsuperscript{8} and a series of paintings by Paula Rego.\textsuperscript{9} Darger was even featured along with several other self-taught/outsider artists in the April 2005 issue of \textit{House & Garden}.

Several serious books about Darger have been published in English—one in 2000 by Michael Bonesteel and the other --the most comprehensive book to date and the one frequently cited here -- in 2002 by John MacGregor.\textsuperscript{10} In 2001, the American Folk Art Museum also published a book of selected images from their collection. The book included an essay by Michel Thévoz, curator of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne.\textsuperscript{11} An additional book based on the exhibition, “Disasters of War” (2000), featuring work by Goya, the Chapman brothers, and Darger was published in 2004.

\textsuperscript{5} MacGregor writes that the earliest film was shot in Darger's room in 1973 by Colleen Fitzgibbon and Michael S. Thompson. He mentions a short documentary also filmed in Darger's room by Claudia Polley and Nigel Noble for the American Folk Art Museum. (2002, 12) Thompson is currently working on a film called, \textit{Henry Darger, Lee Godie, Mr. Imagination: 3 Self-Taught Chicago Artists} for Bullet Proof Films, http://www.bulletprooffilm.com/docs.html.


\textsuperscript{8} \textit{The Vivian Girls} (2003) Pat Graney Company.


\textsuperscript{10} See also MacGregor 1996 and MacGregor 2000.

\textsuperscript{11} See also Biesenbach 2001.
With the exception of MacGregor’s exhaustive psychobiography of Darger, the other books are primarily useful in helping to make reproductions of Darger’s art widely available. The illustrations for Realms — “three huge bound volumes...several hundred pictures, many over 12 feet long and painted on both sides” (MacGregor, 19) — were first shown in 1977. They are now in a number of collections, so impossible to view together.

Darger’s posthumous success is due, no doubt, in part, to the arresting effect of his impressive images, which were not publicly available during his lifetime. But, as any experienced market participant can testify, a boom cannot be understood only by looking at the supply side: it is important to consider demand as well. Darger, when discovered, fit ideally into the pre-existing market for “outsider art.” The genre is an outgrowth of art brut, founded by Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s and based on his ideas of authenticity and of an art “uncontaminated” by culture. Thanks to Dubuffet’s original quest, outsider art has now become an established genre which can quicken the pulses at Sotheby’s or Christie’s.

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12 It was in the 1980s that outsider art first emerged as having significant market value. “New supplies of noncommercial, and therefore uncorrupted, art were discovered in the works of many individual geniuses who were not overt players in the market game...The ‘outsider artist’ (the Other among us) had gained great notoriety and success by the mid-1980’s...” (Rawlings 2001, 45)

13 In Dubuffet’s words: “We understand by this term [art brut] works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture, where mimicry plays little or no part (contrary to the activities of intellectuals). These artists derive everything—subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms styles of writing, etc.—from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art. We are witness here to a completely pure artistic operation, raw, brut, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artists’ own
Both art brut and outsider art have given exposure to the work of brilliant mentally disabled artists, including Darger. But aestheticizing psychological disability as "genius" or "authenticity," allows those involved in the market side of outsider art to avoid the reality of disabled lives and render disability a commodity, one that the disabled themselves rarely benefit from. This chapter will consider the posthumous career of Henry Darger and how it illustrates strategic choices of avoidance, censorship and commodification by those who stand to gain from promoting specific interpretations of Darger's life and work. It will look at the ways in which outsider art is designated as such and the implications of this for the disabled and otherwise marginalized artists. It will discuss the supposed authenticity and unfettered creativity demonstrated by the mentally ill and the social and financial price that marginalized/disabled artists pay for their designation of authenticity. It will examine the implicit and explicit censorship practiced on Darger so that he fits into the legitimizing myths which define his place.

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impulses. It is thus an art which manifests an unparalleled inventiveness, unlike cultural art, with its chameleon-and monkey-like aspects." (cited in Maizels 1996, 33-34)
Branding Darger


The increased monetary value of self-taught art is hard evidence of its new prestige. The higher stakes have intensified wrangling over what constitutes authentic work. You can’t be too poor, too uneducated, too psychologically or physically disabled, or too lacking in self-interest, when your outsider status is at stake. Steve Slotin of Slotin Folk Art Auctions describes the ideal, as well as the necessary compromises:

Everyone hopes to find that one-armed illiterate sharecropper who is creating amazing, totally uninfluenced pieces. But those days are over. Fortunately, there’s so much in attics and barns waiting to be found. People don’t throw away crazy Uncle Eddie’s naked paintings anymore. They recognize their value. (Cerio 2005, 102)
Conveniently for the distant relatives, the dealers, and the collectors, as long as Uncle Eddie is truly authentic, he would never seek recognition and profit from his naked paintings himself. A Slotin web page entitled "What is Folk Art?" tells us, "Self-taught artists do not seek out the art world. The art world, collectors and dealers, passionately seek them out" (Slotin 2001). Or, as auctioneer Kimball Sterling says: "No true Outsider artist cares about money. Often it's tough to buy a masterpiece from a real Outsider artist. They love that piece more than you ever can." (Cerio 2005, 102)

Jean Dubuffet's insistence that art brut artists be free from the contagion of culture meant that many of the artists he collected were institutionalized, usually in insane asylums. Today, as a result of the decreased supply of institutionalized producers and increased demand for product, the criteria for outsider art has of necessity become somewhat broader.14 The constant is that whether a work of art is legitimately considered "outside" is primarily based on the artists' life and social status rather than their art. Characteristics crucial to the story of an outsider artist include disability, trauma or misfortune (preferably all three), low social, economic and educational status, a refusal or inability to see their art as a viable source of income, and a lack of desire to alter their low status. Such people, it is assumed, have unmediated access to the primitive, instinctual,

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14 Dubuffet collected before deinstitutionalization and the development of medications which minimize psychotic episodes, so "his" artists produced art under more "ideal" conditions: under isolation and with an intensity of expression presumably not dulled by medication.
unconscious or spiritual knowledge that the rest of us lack, and they offer us a way to experience it secondhand. Their “innocence” must be protected, especially from corruption by the art market: paradoxically, it must be so protected in order to maintain the very monetary/status value that is the source of the “corruption.”

Darger is in many ways the ideal outsider artist: his work really is visually stunning, his content strange, and his life story attests to his marginality. His death prior to discovery sidesteps the issues of contamination of authenticity since his success is posthumous. While Darger was alive he was an isolate, poor, psychologically disabled, with limited education and a traumatic childhood. He made no known attempts to show or sell his art, but he produced and preserved a substantial amount of it. In addition, Darger has no known relatives to argue over his estate,\(^{15}\) so those who promote his work are given a free hand. This “free hand” has been used to build an outsider legend which, combined with Darger’s considerable skill and originality as a visual artist, have made him a “something for nothing” bestseller:

\[\text{Darger] never worked in the real art world, he never made any enemies or allied himself with factions, and he died before he was discovered. Which makes him ideal fodder for people who “interpret” art, given that he can’t argue back, or articulate any meanings of his own work.}\]

\(^{15}\) Ed Park of the Village Voice writes that John MacGregor was able to gain access to Darger’s work, “after assuring Nathan [Lerner] that he had no intention of tracking down any possible Darger relations—which might have meant contesting the rights to the artwork.” (2002)
The discovery of his [Darger's] work, after his death, plays into another fantasy, the "something for nothing" thing that fascinates the mainstream artworld, the desire to discover unknown, top-quality, marketable art, like diamonds lying on the ground. (Kennicott 2005)

Michel Thévoz's essay in Darger: The Henry Darger Collection at the American Folk Art Museum provides an excellent example of the ways in which Darger's image is accessorized to meet the requirements of art brut and the outsider art market. Darger is presented as culturally and artistically innocent, damaged, disabled and isolated, working from a position of unmediated and primal creative expression, his work unacknowledged by "fine arts" institutions (2001, 15) presumably because its raw power is a threat to the status quo. This lack of conventional success also assures us that Darger is special, understood only by connoisseurs, and that he never sold out.

Unlike the more "gee whiz" descriptions which characterize much North American writing about Darger's work, Thévoz makes it clear that he is writing as an intellectual by invoking the language and ideas of Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis, surrealism and structuralism. In six short pages, he references the Nabis, symbolist and neo-Expressionist movements, Picasso, Velazquez, Lucien Freud, Edward Hopper, Raphael and other painters, Nietzsche, Kafka, Camus, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and medieval mystery plays; he borrows his title

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16 In his apparent fondness for psychoanalytical ideas and terms Thévoz differs from Dubuffet who, when asked about Freud by John MacGregor, replied, "I don't like him at all! I don't like his theory, and I don't like all psychoanalysts." (MacGregor 1989, Note 50, 359)
“The Strange Hell of Beauty...” from Jean Genet. Thévoz’s intellectual scaffolding serves to emphasize the distance between his own acculturation and Darger’s alleged lack of it: “how could a poor, uneducated man who explicitly denied any graphical or pictorial ability create such undeniable beauty and maintain it from painting to painting?” (2001, 15)

Thévoz begins his essay by suggesting, I think correctly, that our discomfort with Darger is not solely due to his subject matter, “the child nudity, the transsexuality, the violence, the voyeurism, the sadism—these themes burst onto the art world long ago” (2001, 15), but has something to do with the fact that we cannot really know what Darger’s intentions were: “Does the artist support this horror, or does he condemn it? Is he a moralizer or a pervert?” (15) Most art, even when it includes shocking content, comes with a point of view or a rationale. Even if we do not agree with the artist’s intent, the ability to see it within (or as challenging) a recognizable intellectual, art historical, political or aesthetic framework makes it less threatening. Hans Bellmer’s poupées rival Darger’s images for their explicit violence against the female body. But Bellmer was a surrealist and he provides a motivation: “I wanted to help people, come to terms with their instincts” (Foster 2000, 107). Whether we accept Bellmer’s rationale or not, his intellectual framework – a combination of surrealism and

17 The quote from Nietzsche, “Happy is the poor spirit who harbors within himself not just one immortal soul but a thousand mortal souls,” which Thevoz uses to bolster his idea that Darger’s sense of “self” was undeveloped (“childish polymorphism”, 18), is also used by him in “An Antimuseum” to describe the “loss of ego” (72) essential to true makers of art brut.
psychoanalysis — is familiar. This familiarity creates a bond of comfort which in turn makes his work seem likely to represent something besides misogyny. We don’t have an explanation from Henry Darger.

The second reason Thévoz gives for why we find Darger disturbing is less convincing, but does reveal how Darger’s “outsider” status can be rhetorically established and promoted. According to Thévoz, “our discomfort is aggravated by work that has not been formally approved and ratified by the institutions of ‘fine arts.’” (15) In fact, art by Darger is in a variety of public collections including those of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the Art Institute of Chicago, the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (Andrew Edlin Gallery 2006). The context of Thévoz’s statement — a publication sponsored by the American Museum of Folk Art, which he refers to as “a prestigious New York City museum” (21)—makes his claim all the more incongruous. It could be argued that a museum of folk art is not an institution of “fine art,” but in that case, given the conservative tastes of the folk art world, Darger’s acceptance by that community would signify that his work was seen as less, rather than more radical. In any event, since he was discovered, Darger has never really lacked the blessing of the art world. In light of this, Thévoz’s contention that Darger is too “radical” for the conventional world of fine art is

18 When Dubuffet was asked by John MacGregor “if he would be in favor of the burning of the museums” he “agreed this would be beneficial.” (MacGregor (1989) Note 40, 359)
clearly an attempt to enhance Darger’s “outsider” status and hence increase the
claims of authenticity and singularity which are seen to characterize works of art
brut.

Thévoz -- who previously described art brut as “an art free of the dictates of
tradition or fashion, an art liberated from all social compromise, an art indifferent
to the applause of initiates, an art which draws its strength from an impassioned
way of thinking, an almost autistic inner necessity” (1994, 63)—now positions
Darger within the genre. Thévoz characterizes Darger’s art as amoral, primal,
highly individual, but also universal:

A priori, this work is neither edifying nor sacrilegious; it does not at all state a
truth, nor does it take on an underlying ethical stance. It comes from a much
more primal level. A supernumerary of the human species made it up for his
own private use as the framework of his inner feelings and thoughts, as an
imaginary space where his most antagonistic impulses and outpourings
could find a voice. It is not a speech but a language that could be used in all
possible speeches. (2001, 19)

This characterization replays a longstanding theme in the critical treatment of art
brut work. Thévoz describes Darger as having special, unmediated access to
the unconscious by virtue of his status as a supernumerary, an actor without a
speaking part, moved by forces beyond his control. Darger’s disability, his mental
illness and his fundamental “deprivation” are vital to creating the conditions

19 Consider this statement by Fred Licht: “But [art brut] artists such as Wölflı or Alóise live
outside communal time. There is as yet no practicable way of relating their work to each other or
to the events, fears and hopes of the time in which they lived. All notions of style that we have
formed since the beginning of art history and art criticism are thoroughly exploded by their
expressive art. “ (Licht 1986, 35)
which, according to Thévoz, allow Darger to exemplify the “game of ‘who loses wins’ remarkably well.” (19) Darger becomes a primal force, contact with which acculturated individuals crave. Thévoz offers proof of Darger’s authenticity in the form of a recitation on deprivation:

Henry Darger’s cruel fate was that he was deprived of everything, including his mother, his sister, family affection, and a child’s right to a real education, and as a result was deprived of the most normal adult relationships. The label “crazy” would follow him until his death. Darger was not asocial; it was society that made him an outcast. He was not retarded but was held back by unfortunate circumstances. From his early childhood on, Darger was deprived over and over again of formative images of all kinds—images of his parents, mirror images identifying cultural models. He was thus left to grapple with terrifying mood swings using only his own emotional resources to challenge this primeval internal struggle. (18)

So Darger produces highly original work, not because he functions as an agentive individual, but because he does not. “Darger does not control anything; he is not the master of painting, nor is he even a master’s assistant—he is a sorcerer’s apprentice.” (18) The insistence that Darger was someone who did not control anything means that, while Darger could produce work, it must be interpreted by educated others — such as Thévoz. Darger becomes a compulsively productive tabula rasa, a warped medium for, rather than an agent of, meaning.

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20 In the preceding sentence he says, “The language (verbal or figurative) of outcasts and, especially, the language of those deemed mentally ill is very likely to one day convey the most meaningful expression because it says that which is the most unspeakable, voices the most radical contempt and makes the most major claims.” (19)
Gary Alan Fine talks about the importance of a non-agentive identity in authenticating self-taught works of art such as Darger's:

I explore the creation of the idea of personal legitimacy as part of the market for self-taught art as a means of valorizing aesthetic authenticity, sponsored by the cultural authority of elites...Their social positions—their identities—naturalize the production of their art, separating them from groupings based on similarities of form, content, or intention. These artists are categorized by means of the definition of their identities as authentic in the production of objects, unburdened by assumptions of strategic careerism or lofty intellectualizing. In this, in their outsider role, separate from images of a corrupt elite, they are ostensibly ennobled in a form of identity politics—but, in this, perhaps they become noble savages with the colonialism that such a troubling designation implies. (Fine 2002, 155. Emphasis in original)

The necessity that Darger be “deprived of everything” means that his knowledge of the world outside himself must be played down. In fact, Darger managed to absorb quite a lot of information about the bourgeois world which surrounded him. He was a Civil War buff (MacGregor 2002, 43-44; 103), read newspapers (104-105), and had within his collection of books works by Frank L. Baum, Cervantes, Jules Verne, the brothers Grimm and Harriet Beecher Stow. In his writing, Darger refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (Bonesteel 2000, 24). Darger’s source material included comic and coloring book pictures, as well as magazine illustrations, reproductions of paintings, photos from magazines, and copies of religious icons. At one point

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21 Darger's “At Jennie Richee while sending warning to their father watch night black cloud of coming storm through window” contains “a collaged reproduction of American painter Martin Johnson Heade’s 1868 ‘Thunder Storm on Narragansett Bay’ taken from the February, 1945 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*.” (Bonesteel 2000, 17)
in *The Realms*, Darger mixes an actual work of art by George Grey Barnard being exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) into his fiction:

> I wonder if any of you boy and girl scouts, and you dear princesses have ever seen a group in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Angelinia Agathia city?

> “I did once” said Penrod. “It is called ‘The Two Natures in Man’ and the sculptor has represented the eternal struggle as a wrestle to a finish between two great big wrestlers. In the group Man’s lower nature is down but not out. Man’s Higher Nature stands over the prostrate form, and I came away wondering which will finally deliver the fatal blow?” (*Realms* vol. 11, 456, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 644)

The idea that Darger was innocent of culture and that his work was primarily a product of his unconscious is more difficult to sustain when his texts are taken into consideration. Even the title of his most well known work *The Realms of the Unreal* acknowledges the un-reality of his fantasy life. At one point in the story the Vivian girls discover books written by “Henry J. Darger, Author.” The books tell a history of the wars which they are currently involved in (*Realms*, vol. one, 138, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 20, 96). The girls also discover some of Darger’s pictures:

> Every picture seems to look you straight in the face as if you had some secret to tell them, or as if you suspected them of knowing your thoughts.” “And probably he had them to use as company, as he was childless.” “Maybe that is so, and he wanted them all to look as if they were paying attention to him,” said Jennie.

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22 Some good examples of these can be found in the “Selections from the Archive” section of the book on Darger published by the American Museum of Folk Art (2001).

23 MacGregor 2002 identifies the sculpture as “Struggle of the Two Natures in Man” by American sculptor George Grey Barnard, given to MOMA in 1896 (Note 131, 707).
"He must have been a very odd man."

"I wouldn't mind seeing him." said Violet (Realms, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 22).

Thévoz does not address Darger's texts. He does, however, discuss the objection that Darger's use of pop culture images as source material compromises his outsider status:

What can we say about Darger's dependence upon magazine images that come from his visual culture? The issue is precisely this dependence, almost infantile or perverse (terms that are not necessarily contradictory). Darger works openly in all "innocence," in the same way that officially recognized artists would rather hide their sources and cover their tracks. (17)

It is unclear which "officially recognized artists" Thévoz is referring to. His use of the present tense would seem to suggest artists from the late 20th and early twenty-first century. Since that is a time when a generation of postmodern artists' critical mandate included exposing their sources, the comment is puzzling. Perhaps Thévoz is referring to the period in which Darger created his art. According to John MacGregor, "As early as 1918, and perhaps earlier still, he [Darger] had begun to create pictorial images..." (2002, 118). Yet even if Thévoz is referring to this earlier time period, his claim seems willfully dismissive of work by artists such as Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. For instance, Ernst openly used material from varied sources including popular culture, psychotic art, and
“primitive” art. MacGregor writes that, “Even in his later painting and sculpture, [Ernst] frequently adopted things whole, undisguised, bringing together easily identified fragments from meaningfully selected pictorial sources” (1989, 278). In 1919, Marcel Duchamp added a moustache and a beard to da Vinci’s Mona Lisa renaming it “Mona Lisa LHOOQ.” The success of Duchamp’s provocation was explicitly tied to the recognizability of its original source.25

Ernst and Duchamp’s motives may have been less “innocent” than Darger’s and it is unlikely that Darger was directly influenced by either of them. But it can’t be claimed that the use of borrowed pop or mass cultural images—in the twentieth century—shows a particular independence from the artistic mainstream, or is likely to create discomfort in sophisticated art purchasers. Some of the technological, social and economic influences which affected Darger’s artmaking—the capacity to reproduce images and texts cheaply and in great numbers, easy access to mass-produced publications such as newspapers and paperback novels, and the spread of popular culture via magazines and comic books -- are also reflected in the work of his contemporaries. He may have produced his art without education and in solitude, but he was nevertheless an

24 MacGregor traces Ernst’s interest in the “art of the Insane” back as far as 1910 (1989, 277).
25 The Mona Lisa, with variations continued throughout the twentieth century. Duchamp’s was followed by Dalí’s “Self portrait as the Mona Lisa (1954)”, Warhol’s serigraphs of the Mona Lisa (starting in 1963), Botero’s “Mona Lisa (1977)”, and others, until by the end of the century the image of the Mona Lisa had literally been burnt into slices of toast in Tadhiko Ogawa’s “Mona as Toast” (1997), and been presented pregnant, as part of Yasumasa Morimura’s _Self Portrait as Art History_ series (1998). For an exhaustive list of all things Mona Lisa see Baron n.d.
artist of his time. Many of his methods, although developed independently, were shared by other artists.

Perhaps Darger's "innocence" is really ignorance romanticized, however impressive the resulting artwork. Duchamp's motive (provocation) was quite different from Darger's (compensating for his limited skills as a draughtsman). It was out of necessity and resourcefulness that Darger produced, in comparable isolation and with limited access to and knowledge of contemporary art, a visual language which pre-dated the widespread use of appropriated images and text from popular culture by pop and postmodern artists. Thévoz reinscribes lack of knowledge and lack of skills as magical:

Academic art is distinguished from so-called primitive or prior art (and art brut, in particular) in that the academically trained artist attempts to control all forms of artistic expression. He resorts to materials that are pliable and manageable, such as oil paints and specialized tools that leave no mark, in order to obtain a transparent, unequivocal language of expression. The academic painter rigorously controls his expression and suppresses any interfering static; he emits or tends to emit a "message without noise." Conversely, the so-called primitive or archaic artists or artistes bruts, are inclined to amplify the primary "noise" emitted by the enchanted materials that fall into their hands. (17)

Thévoz describes Darger's work as "the exact opposite" of academic art:

Darger, of course, does the exact opposite [of an academic painter]. He steals his images, lifts them from conventional narratives, common everyday journals, and sentimental stories. He takes them out of context, disorients them, and reenchants them. Indeed, he uses these images to reconstruct

26 For a thorough treatment of Darger's methods see Ch. 3 "Adopted Images: The Invention of the Collage-Drawing" in MacGregor 2002 118-181.
another narrative ensemble, but in the process, the images do not reject their origin but persist like foreign bodies, bodies with a disquieting strangeness. (17-18)

But much art of the second half of the twentieth century was intent on deconstructing what Thévoz so belatedly critiques: representation and authorship. It did this partly through the appropriation and use, out of context, of mass cultural images. Darger's methods were certainly motivated by other concerns, but they cannot reasonably be said to be the opposite of "academic art." Darger may be unusual, but it is surely not because he appropriates images. Instead his methods may help explain his current popularity; he speaks a visual language recognizable to contemporary consumers of art.

It is not Darger's style and methods which differentiate him from other twentieth century artists, but his independent development of them and his intent and highly personal point of view when employing them. Other twentieth century artists (Dada, Surrealist, Pop) used appropriated and mass produced materials,

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27 "In the absence of art training, he was often forced to invent his own solutions to problems for which solutions had long existed...Darger arrived often at traditional means of pictorial construction via utterly unconventional and personal routes, which essentially had nothing to do with the making of works of art." (MacGregor 2002, 179)
overpainting, collage, photographic duplication etc. to actively challenge established art practices, bourgeois values and the transcendent rhetoric and single media preoccupations of high modernism. Although Darger's art was driven by personal rather than social and critical concerns, his capacity to grasp the technical and aesthetic possibilities offered by new modes of re-production and to tap into popular culture as a creative resource suggests intelligence, ingenuity and agency. Even though the motivations for Darger's innovations differed from those of the avant-garde challenges to the prevailing art establishment and socio-political and economic structures, Darger managed somehow to tap into the changes afoot in visual culture:

Throughout his life Darger was remarkably attentive to various aspects of the popular culture of America, particularly its pictorial manifestations. Without being conscious of what he was doing, he created an art form, the collage-drawing, which in its obvious exploitation and manipulation of popular visual culture, anticipated many aspects of Pop Art. His work represents a superb example of the way in which the spiritual and aesthetic preoccupations of an age enter unconsciously into every artistic manifestation, even those occurring "naturally, " free of any conscious awareness of evolving developments in art (MacGregor 2002, 180).

Darger's fame and his emerging position in the art market should be awkward for Thévoz, who wrote in "An Anti-Museum":

Naturally the insolent disregard of constraints implicit in such an exorbitant adventure of the imagination [art brut] can have no truck with the promotional and commercial strategies which regulate the normal art world. (1994, 64)

Surely it is obvious that if one were to try to introduce such people to the art market, one would only lead them to their doom. (73)
True makers of Art Brut, by definition, recoil from any operation which seeks to integrate them within a system devoted to promoting and selling their work. (72)  

Although authenticity makes material benefit impossible for the artist, it need not do so for his estate. Thévoz, seemingly in contradiction to earlier statements about Darger’s “non-ratification” by institutions of art (2001, 15), now cites Darger’s posthumous success as evidence of status:

An uneducated man among the uneducated, he shows up in the most spectacular way in the most beautiful museums in the world; mute among mutes, he is the creator of work as communicative and touching as ever existed; a poor man among the poor, he demands a healthy price on the world market. (19)

In 1994, as the art brut and outsider market flourished, Thévoz wrote,

We functionaries who are interested in Art Brut with no thought of financial gain...launch a salutary challenge: to discover and to collect works before they become the object of prohibitive valuation from whose profits, in any event, their makers will receive no more than a few crumbs, and try to protect the vulnerable among them from the more aggressive buyers by reintroducing the convention of the pseudonym, as was once the practice in psychiatry, though for different reasons.” (73-74)

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28 It is interesting to note that Adolph Wölfli, a major figure in art brut, was given to demanding widely varying prices for his work. In his 1921 publication, Madness & Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli, Walter Morgenthaler wrote, “The value he places on his pictures is extremely variable. They almost always reach, in his eyes, an extraordinary price which one can hardly pay, even with millions of Swiss francs. Then it just as easily occurs to him to decide in a will that a volume should be sold for 3.5 francs. At other moments he will give someone a sheet as a gift, saying apologetically that the recipient must have children who will enjoy looking at a colorful picture.” (25) Wölfli does not appear to have shown the requisite financial disinterestedness Thévoz prizes, despite his unorthodox pricing practices and inability to “integrate” with the art economy.
In short, the artists get neither money nor credit. Thévoz’s heartfelt concern for the vulnerable seems open to question, while his desire to monopolize the field of art brut with an extensive collection in Lausanne seems completely sincere. Finally, Thévoz admits there is something uncomfortable about the promoting and marketing of Darger’s art. His solution to this discomfort is to blame Darger:

Collecting and exhibiting this work, which was intended for private consumption, is in essence embezzlement—embezzlement which, we must remember, Darger himself practiced with his stolen drawings. We have only redirected the tinkering to another level, recovering it and taking responsibility for it ourselves. When all is said and done, Darger unloaded the problem onto us. Since that time, he has also given us the responsibility of making sense of it (2001, 21).

Darger’s success is in some ways Thévoz’s own. He curates the Collection de l’art brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, to which Kiyoko Lerner (the wife of Darger’s landlord Nathan Lerner) donated a significant number of Darger’s works. The more effectively Thévoz convinces his readers that Darger is authentic the more his collection is enhanced by Darger’s inclusion in it.

**Darger as Outsider**

While Thévoz has held that Darger meets the stringent criteria for art brut, Darger is usually classified as an outsider artist, the criteria for which are a little less austere. Art historian Roger Cardinal, who coined the term “outsider art” in

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29 Twenty paintings according to Allen 1998 or thirty according to Eskin 2000.
the 1970s (Cardinal 1972), favours a more inclusive definition than the one
Dubuffet employed for art brut:

And while our conception of Outsider Art would become pointless if it did not
carry an expectation of a high degree of innovation and creative
independence, I submit that it no longer makes sense to belabor the
stipulation of utter pictorial innocence. (Cardinal 1994, 31, emphasis in
original)

Nonetheless, Cardinal does not want standards to drop too far: “One aspect of
Dubuffet’s prejudice is worth preserving. He was, I believe, entirely right to
contend that creativity alters its character once the creator is made aware of the
expectations and aesthetic standards of other people.” (33)

Cardinal attempts to
craft an “outsider aesthetic” and to move away from the almost complete reliance
on biography and “extra-aesthetic considerations” which typically establishes a
work as authentic.

But whether strict or loose, it is always biography that is the central marker of
authentic “outsider” work. Following his five-year study of the self-taught art
market, Northwestern’s Gary Alan Fine tells us that:

30 This is in contrast to Dubuffet’s definition: “What we mean by this term [art brut] is work
produced by people immune to artistic culture in which there is little or no trace of mimicry (as is
invariably the case with intellectuals); so that such creators owe everything—their subject-matter,
their choice of materials, their modes of transcription, their rhythms and styles of drawing, and so
on—to their own resources rather than to the stereotypes of artistic tradition or fashion. Here, we
are witness to the artistic operation in its pristine form, something unadulterated, something
reinvented from scratch at all stages by its maker, who draws solely upon his private impulses.”
(Dubuffet 1949 in Cardinal 1994, 23). Cardinal responds as follows: “What is awkward about
Dubuffet’s celebration of “antimimetic” tendency is that it confuses formal training in the fine arts
with a defense of the naturalistic, as if art schools were historically frozen at some point long
before Cubism.” (30) As we have seen, Thévoz engages in a similar confusion in relation to
Darger’s use of source materials.
The biographies of self-taught artists justify their authenticity, serving as a primary criterion of evaluation. To be sure, the work itself matters, as many people have interesting biographies, but the biography invests the material with meaning. As dealers sell objects, they provide biographical details, details that are not equally emphasized by neighboring galleries that specialize in contemporary art. (2003, 162-163)

At the extreme, a biography of a self-taught artist may be the primary commodity rather than his or her work. As a collector of outsider art told Fine in an interview:

> In many cases with this work, the story is far more important than the art is, and people are buying the story as opposed to the piece of art for art's sake, and, you know, who's to say that's a problem...There are artists I've supported financially just because I like them, and I like their story, but not because I believe the pieces are outstanding. (2003, 172)

Many consumers/fans of Darger's art find evidence of his authenticity in select aspects of his biography. Unlike with some artists, the facts of Darger's story — including a difficult childhood, psychological disability and an impoverished and solitary adulthood — are indisputable. As dealer Randall Morris says, "Those artists whose authenticity is 'beyond argument' are the ones who can sell their work in the six-figure range." (Fine 2003, 165) Consider these examples from a cross-section of Darger's public in which his story is used to introduce and authenticate his art:

> Journalist (San Francisco Chronicle)

For those not yet initiated into the cult of Darger, he was a Chicago janitor who suffered the early deaths of both parents, spent most of his teenage years in a mental asylum and as an adult led a lonely, reclusive, religion-obsessed life. (Ganahl 2004)
Undergraduate (The School of the Art Institute of Chicago)

A highly prolific artist, Henry Darger's output dwarfs most other bodies of creative work...The impetus behind the materialization of an oeuvre of such magnitude derives from a deprived and tormented childhood. Darger's formative experiences were encumbered by immense personal loss and abandonment, which left the janitor-cum-artist with deep emotional scars. (Dreiver 2003)

Independent Feature [Film] Project (IFP) Screening Announcement

Henry Darger was known, during his life, as a reclusive janitor, living alone in one room in downtown Chicago without friends or family. He is now considered the greatest "outsider artist" of the 20th Century. In Jessica Yu's latest work, we look at Darger's transcendence over poverty and isolation through his wildly creative and highly controversial art. (Promotional material for Yu 2004)

Fan website

Darger's main influences weren't images or writing but the events of his life. He was filled with anger at the adult society that had mistreated him, as is evidenced by the whole theme of a war between children and adults, fought over child slavery. His compulsive communion with God and the act of writing himself into his book could both be seen as symptomatic of his intense loneliness. His obsession with young girls and his distress over losing the picture of "Annie Aronburg" seem intimately tied in with the loss of the sister he never knew. (Whitmore 1997)

Academic

The scale and intensity of Darger's work, over such a long period of time indicate a complete immersion in a self-made world. Darger's work is a reaction to his own dissatisfactory reality. His feelings of anger and despair are translated into the persecution of the innocent Vivian Girls. They suffer horrific acts of violence hinting at the author's own need to express his emotion. (McNally 2005)

Hollywood producer

"I think he was a very brave guy just to exist," Besman said. "Whatever came out of his work was because he missed his little sister." (Allen 1998)
Darger’s biography dominates the reception of his work. That his biography, rather than the work itself, guarantees he is “genuine” is a typical valuation in the outsider art arena. It is what Joanne Cubbs calls the “relentless fetishizing of difference.” (1994, 89) Outsider artists like Darger are proven to be original in part by “the exaggeration of the work’s perceived singularity, and in the exploitation of the maker’s often real-life marginalization.” (89) There are those within the outsider art market who disagree with what they see as “a heavy reliance upon the extremism of the story and not consistently on the works of art” (Carl Hammer, Chicago dealer, in Fine, 2003, 170-171), but they are few. As Fine points out, while the mainstream art world presumes the primacy of work over life story, this ranking is a contentious issue in the world of self-taught art (171).

In 1999 the San Diego State University sponsored an outsider art show in conjunction with the Kaplan Collection of Self-Taught Art. In their Media Release SDSU gives a profile of an outsider artist:

Many of the artists lead traumatic lives punctuated by poverty, broken homes, illiteracy, mental disability and unrelieved bad luck. Several of them such as Jimmy Lee “the Mud Man” Sudduth have been in jail. But through their art, they were able to find joy in their life. And they were able to transform that “spontaneous overflow” on the canvas. (Callo 1999, 2/3)

Fine recounts an interview he conducted in which a dealer suggested “that the status system of this market is upside down. The dealer reported that at a party he overheard a portion of conversation about an artist: ‘Is he educated?’ ‘No,'
'oh, good.' ‘Is he black?’” (Fine 2003, 163) Another anecdote recalls a collector who had discovered that a work done, in her words, by a “really untutored” artist she had admired and bought was “bogus.” (166) It was bogus because he wasn’t poor: 

She explains that he is the wealthiest person in his (rural) town, living in a “nice new rustic house” and adds: “We lived with it for two weeks before we began laughing at it...We fell for it. Everything is so overdone. So hyped. This guy is rich! (166)

Fine found that: “Although the domain of self-taught art is ostensibly defined by the fact the artists have not been formally trained, in practice self-taught art is know through the social position of the creators, and, thus, I label it as Identity Art.” (155) He concluded: “The identity of the [self-taught] artist is embedded in the definitions of the field and in the practices of selling.” (163)

Part of the outsider identity is the attribution of unencumbered access to creative urges which are then channeled into original and expressive artworks. Maurice Kaplan of the Kaplan Collection of Self-Taught Art tells us: “The beauty of Outsider Art is that there is no form, no logic, no formal discipline. They just turn out what’s in their imagination, crafting their art with whatever they have.” (Callo 1999, 2/3). Charmaine Kaplan (also of the Collection) explains,

What interests me about 'Outsider Art' is its spontaneity. Here are people who don’t understand or appreciate conventional art forms yet are creating art for their own happiness and because it makes them feel good. To me that is what art is all about...coming straight from the soul onto the canvas. (1/2- 2/3)
Even Michael Bonesteel— who questions Darger's inclusion in the outsider genre— expresses his admiration for Darger in ways that seem tied to notions of outsider authenticity. Bonesteel sees Darger as able to reveal the deeply mysterious, unconscious and childlike:

We stare transfixed by awe and fascination as a self-taught savant peels back the skin of the creative process, exposing shreds of subconscious anguish and ecstasy. In the end, Darger invented a luminous and bewildering hybrid of prose and art, history and fantasy, unfettered childhood bliss and unremitting psychological torment. (2000, 7)

Roger Cardinal describes “an extreme state” where outsider artists mediate “something transpersonal, even otherworldly”, which he, like Thèvoz (2001, 77) calls “possession”:

As an enhanced locale of affectivity, the “tautness” of the self-taught artwork can transmit an almost erotic appeal, pulsating and insistent. Another consequence of passionate self-involvement can be the compulsive production of separate pieces...where fertility is manifested at such a pitch as to suggest not self-possession but possession pure and simple! At the extreme, artists may abandon themselves to the creative act so utterly as to enter into those emotional and physical states variously described as ecstasy, jubilation, or frenzy. Such states appear strangely “selfless” in so far as the creative consciousness seems here to connect with forces beyond its boundaries, and to mediate something transpersonal, even otherworldly. Yet

31 While Bonesteel resists what he sees as the ghettoizing of Darger as an outsider artist (2000, 15-18), he still recreates him as a sympathetic cliché of a tortured artist who works out his “issues” via his art. Bonesteel would like to distance Darger not only from any nastiness but from the overemphasis on his apparent mental illness to the detriment of his skill as an artist. He complains that “MacGregor has called Darger ‘the single most important American example of outsider art in existence’ and by alluding to ‘Darger’s pathology,’ MacGregor has placed the artist squarely among the mentally ill segment of the Outsider art population” (2000, 15, 16). Bonesteel is right that the label of art brut or outsider comes with some unwieldy and problematic baggage. Yet if Darger must be reinterpreted and distanced from any evidence of psychological disorder or disability in order for his work to be valued as equal to “high” art, then this tells us less about the quality of Darger’s work than it does about ongoing views of the mentally ill as necessarily second-class: creatively, intellectually, and as agentive, moral beings.
this very selflessness may turn out to be the creation of a struggle to press
the centre of the private self up to that sublime point where, as it were, it
coincides with the axis of a superior cosmology. (2001, 77, 78)

Critic Hal Foster suggests that modernists of the early twentieth century also
"saw the art of the mentally ill according to their own ends only—as expressive of
an aesthetic essence, revelatory of an innocent vision, or defiant of all
convention—and for the most part it was none of these things." (Foster 2001, 3)
Similar assumptions were perpetuated by Dubuffet, mid-century, and today by
Thévoz and Cardinal. Foster questions Dubuffet's motivation:

Like other primitivists before him, Dubuffet targets academic art first and last;
in this regard his outsider logic is finally an insider move, a gambit designed
to win a place within avant-gardist lineages"(15).

What implications arise from promoting Darger's work as the product of
unconscious divination (art brut), or as the ultimate in “overcoming” by the
mentally disabled and traumatized innocent outsider who transforms his pain and
often transcends it, via art and writing? In either case, the field of self-taught art
is dependant on a narrative of genius enhanced by disability and disadvantage.
Darger, whatever his reality actually was, cannot be portrayed as simply
miserable, mentally unstable and talented. He must be seen to be making
lemonade out of life's lemons:

In a real sense, Henry Darger remained a child, not intellectually but
emotionally...Darger only felt at ease with children. Not real children,
imaginary ones, primarily little girls. He found them abandoned in the
garbage: in magazines, in coloring books, as fashion illustrations in the
newspapers, and in the comics. Little girls no one wanted, he brought home
to his room...It would never have occurred to Darger that these serious and
secret activities had anything to do with "Art." For 60 years Darger played with his children in an imaginary world-cutting and pasting, tracing and colouring in. (Anon. 2002)

Unless we de-mythologize this transcendent version of Darger's life story and psychological disability, we risk making suffering and overcoming suffering the price Darger (and outsider artists generally) must pay for our enjoyment. The secular sacralization of psychological disability, isolation, poverty and misfortune, accompanied by the view that these are in some way transformative for Darger, allows the rest of us distance and reduces any guilt we might feel when we enjoy that misfortune vicariously, attached as it is to our definition and enjoyment of outsider art. We can view Darger from a safer intellectual and emotional distance as the archetypal victim whose compensation was to be a possessor of a special insight. Conveniently, for those who benefit from this transformation, if fate has already compensated outsiders like Darger with this insight, our only responsibility to them is to recognize their gifts. Those who benefit from that special insight are able to view any material benefits that accrue to them as a result as a tribute to Darger himself.

An over-reliance on the significance of certain aspects of Darger's life story also leads to viewing Darger as someone whose work is good only because he was disabled: "Thus from the beginning, art brut was set under the sign of madness, in Dubuffet's eyes the quintessence of inventiveness." (Thévoz 1994, 64) This romantic image conveniently ignores the practical, social and financial difficulties
of living with a psychological disorder and the sometimes acute discomfort the state of "madness" is accompanied by. Fine tells us that self-taught artists are defined by what they don't have (their "lack") rather than their attributes:

The artists' shared lack of training—the quality of being *self-taught*... connects their varied social positions into a single identity category. While the concept of *self-taughtedness* has blurry boundaries, in practice these artists are uneducated, elderly, black, impoverished, mentally ill, criminal, or rural. Within the art market, they lack *social capital*, ties to elite communities, and are not fully integrated professionals in this mainstream art world. It is their *lack*, rather than their attributes, that defines them. (2003, 156. Emphasis in original)

Curator/critic Joanne Cubbs writes:

Projecting the image of nonconformity and rebellion onto individuals whose lives and work may or may not contest cultural norms and artistic traditions, the discourse of Outsider Art imposes a false intentionality upon some makers, obscures the original subversive content of others, and finally asserts its own hegemony of meaning over those it views as culturally disempowered in a way that is similar to the system it protests (1994, 86).

The canonical art brut artist Adolph Wölflis, who was incarcerated in the Waldau Sanitarium near Bern, Switzerland, in 1895 (Morgenthaler, 1992, 10), experienced hallucinations and paranoia. Walter Morgenthaler, who treated him and wrote *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (A Mental Patient as Artist) about his prose, poetry, musical compositions and drawings, discussed his behaviour "under the sign of madness." Although he acknowledges that Wölflis probably experienced "state[s] of inspiration" especially during the initial acute phase of schizophrenia" (1992, 23), more often his hallucinations made him irritable and violent:
In 1897 he began to have massive hallucinations which ended in acts of violence so that on two occasions he had to be placed in seclusion. In February he admitted hearing voices but blamed the doctors, since, he said, it was they who made people sick or well as they pleased. He saw himself being driven to the brink of death and stayed in bed until noon; then he would recoup his energy and said that he wanted to get married but that the doctors prevented him from doing so. He often became sexually excited, was irritable, and worked very little. In March he claimed all of a sudden that another patient had sexually assaulted a young girl; with great agitation he threw himself on this person and knocked him down. When he was consequently transferred to another section he defended himself vigorously; he grabbed a bench and threw it at the guard and violently kicked the head guard. (11)

Many authors of autobiographical accounts of psychosis, schizophrenia and other psychological disabilities write about terrifying and painful experiences. These accounts, place the “glorification of madness” by promoters of art brut etc. in a disturbing light. E.A. Daniels, in a biography accompanying her on-line art, identifies herself as an expressionist artist who has survived childhood abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia. The short text below accompanies her visual work, “Daisy Killer”:

This is a zombie that I saw rip my pug, Daisy, to pieces when I was walking her one day. I saw blood spatter everywhere. It was horrible. I didn’t see things back to normal for about fifteen minutes after I came back inside” (Daniels 2003).

Compare this to Thévoz’s fatuous statement: “Indeed what he [Dubuffet] considers to be pathological is not insanity but, instead, sanity and academic standards.” (1994, 64).

In History of My Life, Darger makes it clear that he objected to his status as feeble-minded —“I a feeble-minded kid...I knew more than the whole shebang in
that place" (43, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 44) — and crazy — "I was looked on as "Crazy" and also called crazy. Had I known that, I only would have done it [throwing his left hand in the air] where I was not seen" (39, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 44).

Hal Foster says Dubuffet’s imaginings about the mentally ill were not just inaccurate, but the opposite of the truth. The insane artists were trying desperately to create a system of stable meaning for themselves:

Far from the antcivilizational heroes, as Dubuffet wanted to imagine them ("insanity represents a refusal to adopt a view of reality that is imposed by custom"), these artists are desperate to construct a surrogate civilization of their own, a stop-gap symbolic order in default of the official one that, like the angelus novus, they perceive to be in ruins. (Dubuffet quoted in MacGregor—p. 303, Foster, 16,17)

In his introduction to Morgenthaler’s monograph on Wölfli, psychiatrist Aaron, H. Esman says something similar, citing Wölfli’s work as an example: “The driving motive behind the creative act in the mentally ill, at least, is the human need for coherence, meaning and order” (1992, xvi).

Of course Darger, being dead, cannot literally be harmed by misrepresentation or romanticization of his life and work, but the ways in which his work is interpreted and promoted still matter. The story of Darger as told by others tells us about generic representations of disability and marginalization, attitudes which need to be critically examined and challenged. The example of Darger also shows how a life story, and the art attached to it, can become a status good
for those seeking to buy the "innocence," "spontaneity" and "primal energy" they lack, to differentiate themselves from whatever herd they happen to belong to.

**Binding Sweetie Pie**

![Image of the artwork][1]


Using Darger's work as an opportunity for marketing authenticity is not the only possible reaction from the art world. Another is outright censorship. Most outsider artists present an image of non-threatening eccentrics. Much of Darger's
work, in contrast, is disturbing. It does not fulfill the happy naïf’s obligatorily weird but charming narrative structure. Darger’s fictional worlds upset. His violent subject matter is an exception in the Museum of American Folk Art, not only among the weathervanes, household furnishings and other decorative arts, but among other outsider works such as Sister Gertrude Morgan’s quirky, overtly evangelical Christian work, Minnie Evan’s intricate flora, stars and faces, and the American landscapes of Joseph Yoakum. This means that Darger must be modified in more overt ways, not only to make him marketable, but in order not to offend too much.

Darger’s *History of my Life* is an autobiography 5,084 handwritten pages long. On page 206, and for the remainder of *History*, Darger’s life story becomes fantasy (MacGregor 2002, 83)—the story of a rampaging tornado “Sweetie Pie” which takes the shape of a naked girl-child being strangled:

“I went to the window and saw a vast cloud shaped like a little girl’s head turned sideways.” she described. “The tongue was sticking half way out and the head was inclined slightly downward. Hand-shaped clouds were attached to the neck as if strangling the child...The neck seemed to squeeze in, the tongue protruded more out, and suddenly from the inward part of the tongue; came a shaft of twisted snake-shaped lightening that made the oncoming blackness blinding bright... .” (*History of My Life*, 3160, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 436)

Sweetie Pie’s protruding tongue, at a pivotal point re-enters her mouth, and then explodes through her abdominal wall, after which the funnel of the tornado issues from her burst abdomen and visits destruction on the earth (MacGregor 2002, 437). As MacGregor points out, the havoc wreaked by “Sweetie Pie” is
focused on little girls and her style of torture and murder is similar to that of the Glandelinians in Realms (509):

There were children, both girls and boys with amputated hand, feet or parts of arms. Broken bones busted noses. An eye or so gouged out teeth knocked out, bad bleeding cuts and stabs. Also stuck with pieces of timber in arms, legs, chests, or abdomen and shoulders. Also badly blackened eyes, one or both lacerated cheeks or chin. Everything you can think of.

One strange thing. Three children two boys and a girl stripped totally naked and hog tied by ropes (History of My Life 4760, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 438).

All the dead mostly children blown from the supermarket were stark naked, their clothing apparently having been torn away from their bodies like so much tissue paper. In the vast majority the way they must have been flung every which way seems to have been the sole cause of death. Great numbers of the bodies have been burst asunder by the force of the terrific wind and lie disemboweled...There were many of the little victims who died with their bellies torn open (History of My Life 4863, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 438).

Although attractive to a cult following, this aspect of Darger’s imagination is a problem for a typical curator or publisher promoting self-taught art. One thing that makes Darger’s image malleable, and amenable to being shaped to meet the needs of the market, is that his images are shown widely, but his text is difficult to access. The more of Darger’s texts one reads, the more one understands MacGregor’s characterization of Darger as “a man with pretty serious problems” (in Park 2002). There does not seem to be a push to publish more of Darger’s writing in addition to the excerpts quoted in MacGregor and Bonesteel’s books: likely for practical rather than conspiratorial reasons. Darger’s full textual work totals over 30,000 pages (Anderson 2001, 11). His original
writings are falling apart, his art is not always consistent with the textual narrative of *Realms* from which most of the images are derived, and the calibre of Darger's writing, with the exception of a few descriptions or turns of phrase, is not nearly as good as the art.

MacGregor tells us that Darger's descriptions of battles are "strangely static and unconvincing." (2002, 103) The work is highly repetitive: "The interminable and cumulative effect is of a single, endlessly varied sentence being repeated again and again." (103) In my own experience the description of endless interminable repetition can be expanded to include many events in *Realms* and in Darger's fiction generally. After I read the fictional portion (4,878 pages out of 5,084) of *History of My Life* and large chunks of *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House* and *Realms*, Darger's obsessions became undeniably clear, as certain elements and events are repeated with unsettling regularity over thousands of pages. These are descriptions of children, usually girls, stripped naked, injured,

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32 I was fortunate to spend 3 days in October, 2005, at the museum's storage facility reading Darger's texts -- primarily *History of My Life* and *Further Adventures in Chicago Crazy House* (portions of which I copied). *Realms* is on microfilm at the museum library, but because Darger used multiple page numbers and MacGregor used his own and because none of these page numbers corresponded to those on the microfilm (Mitchell 2005), examining *Realms* was not the best use of my limited time. Fortunately, substantial chunks of it are included in MacGregor and Bonesteel's books.

33 An obvious example is the visual inclusion of hermaphrodites which appear nowhere in Darger's writing.

34 Based on her reading of excerpts of *Realms* from Bonesteel's book, Deborah Markus writes: "Reading Darger is like listening unrelievedly to a child chatter all day long. There are going to be funny bits, even brilliant ones, and little unexpected phrasings that will make you smile or blink; but by nightfall, those clever moments are going to shimmer as oases in a vast desert of repetitious nonsense" (2002, 51). Bonesteel writes that, "There is really no plot..." (2000, 19)
tortured, strangled, disemboweled or killed in some other way. Hundreds of pages of lengthy, stomach-churning descriptions of this sort make the violent content of Darger's art harder to rationalize, sanitize or dismiss. Because of this, the lack of access to Darger's texts is significant. They are not irrelevant to his art, but inform one's reading of it. Calling Darger a "saintly man" (Prokopoff, 1996, 4/5), or someone with a contemporary counterpart in Harry Potter's creator J.K. Rowling (Anderson 2001, 11), would not be feasible if the texts were widely known.

Darger had a knack for combining the whimsical and the creepy, with promoters playing up his whimsical side and downplaying violent or pedophilic content. A good example of this is the way in which the dragon-like Blengiglomeneans (Blengins) in Realms are presented to the public. Blengins love children and are naturally enemies of those who harm them, such as the Glandelinians: "To see a child crying makes a Blengiglomenean serpent cry, to see a child injured by a Glandelinian seems to make a hell enter a Blengiglomenean serpent... (Realms, vol. 1, 172, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 347). Following the definitive Christian victory, which concludes Realms, Blengins, along with freed child slaves and the

35 Over the course of the story these cave dwelling, dragon-like creatures mutate from the form of winged serpents to that of an animal-human hybrid with the head and torso of a human and a dragon's body and tail, to their final incarnation as hermaphrodite children with ram's horns, spectacular wings and a dragon tail. (MacGregor 2002, 347; 353; 377)
seven Vivian girls, inhabit tranquil Abbieannian gardens (398-399).\textsuperscript{36} Blengins appear to be a strange but safe part of Darger’s imaginary world.

Images of Blengins are some of the most commonly reproduced. This is partly because Blengins populate the more innocuous examples of Darger’s art (few penises on display and less violence) and make non-controversial illustrations for mainstream publications. In addition to appearing on the dust jacket of Michael Bonesteel’s book, Blengins feature prominently in other books and articles\textsuperscript{37} and on websites.\textsuperscript{38} Blengin likenesses are also showcased in Darger-inspired works such as \textit{The Vivian Girls} by the Pat Graney dance company. Darger’s image entitled “Spangled Blengins, Boy King islands. One is a young Tuskerhorian, the other a human headed Dortherean” was used to promote Jessica Yu’s film.

Blengins, because of their novelty, beauty, and Darger’s child-like execution of them, shore up the image of Darger as an outsider innocent lost in dreamland. Reviewers describe Blengins as follows:

\begin{itemize}
  \item --benign dragonlike beasts (Hughes 1997, 2/2)
  \item --benevolent dragonlike beings (Cotter 1997, 1/3)
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{36} For a detailed exploration of Blengins, see chapter 7 of MacGregor’s book.\textsuperscript{(2002)}


\textsuperscript{38} Contemporary Center and Henry Darger Center 2007. The introductory image of Anderson 2005a; Michael n.d.; Ayers 1997-2006.
--friendly dragons (Allen 1998, 2/8)

--some have butterfly wings; others seem quasi-human; but, much like guardian spirits, they exhibit protective concern for the Vivian girls (Polanski 2000, 5/7)

--dragon-like Blengins that love children as fiercely as Darger (Karlns 2000, 3/8)

-- weird butterfly-winged dragonlike creatures, nicknamed Blengins, who protected children from cruelty (Karlns 1997, 94)

--Sometimes butterfly winged, dragonlike, or satyred humanoids, the Blengins exhibit maternal care for the Vivian girls. Their role is of guardian angel (Larsen 1997, 3/5).

But if we look at Darger’s text, we discover something else about the apparently inoffensive Blengins: “They have three membranes in their mouth. A huge tongue, a long forked tongue also, and a long sharp hollow thing in their mouth attached it seems to its tonsils, which has the form of a thin blue or yellow lance or needle.” (Realms, vol. 1, p. 43, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 373) The third membrane -- “the lance”-- can be used to pierce the skin of a child and to inject a “fluid of a very sweet smell” into “the blood vessels of a little girl or boy”:

(Realms, vol. 1, 172, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 374)

"What was the membrane the creature did it with?" asked Evans of Violet, "Did you or any of your sisters ever see it?"

"No, we didn’t," said Violet. "After the attack, it put us all into a deep trance or sleep, and when we revived, we felt as if all the sorrows of the world was gone from us. But we never saw anything but that the creature embraced us just before the happiness came. They did not reveal the lances to us." (Ibid, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 373-374)
Blengin injections seem to be modeled on a combination of inoculation and penetration. “Injected” children are left with a small spot of “a beautiful pinkish hue” (Realms, vol. 1, 172, MacGregor 2002, 375) and are protected from disease and harm by creatures, earthly or otherworldly (Realms, vol. 1, 44, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 375). They become happier than other children and when the “spot” is touched experience bliss:

I examined the red spot on the child’s breast, and accidentally touched it, with the same result that has and still happens to my little nieces, a sudden strange happiness striking her almost prostrate. (Realms, vol. 1, 165, quoted in MacGregor 2002, 377)

Darger’s sexual longing, exemplified by the Blengins and their lances, is an important counterpoint to the sexualized violence which characterizes the Darger/Glandelinian attacks on children. This violent side to Darger’s sexual fantasies is readily apparent in his art, but the “romantic” Darger is obvious only in his writing, with the action sometimes generated by Blengins and sometimes by the affection permitted between the Vivians and various Darger alter egos, such as their brother Penrod (“Penrod was just then hugging Jennie in the flame of his holy passion for her.” (Realms, vol. 10, pt. 1, 10-204 [241], quoted in MacGregor 2002, 269) and General Darger: “Darger loved Violet and her sisters as strongly as Evans [their guardian—JM] did though he hardly had them in his embrace as yet (Realms, vol. 13, 13-216 [3342] quoted in MacGregor 2002,
The Blengin images, although able to more readily escape censorship than other Darger paintings, are incomplete without the texts which reveal the sexualized aspects of their relationship to the Vivian Girls.

It is evident —not just in Realms, but in its sequel Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House—that the objects of Darger’s sexual desire were little girls. Naked and half-naked girls appear again and again throughout Darger’s fiction. This in itself adds a layer of meaning even to the most whimsical of Darger’s landscapes populated by prepubescent girls. Although admitting Darger’s ongoing sexualized fascination with little girls adds an element of discomfort even to Darger’s most idyllic images, it is critical to understanding his work.

The upper part of her [Angelina’s] body was bare and more than half of her legs too and all of her arms too but nevertheless it was a very beautiful little body to look upon, one so dainty and so well reformed [box drawn around “re”] that you’d long desperately to have her for your own. Her little neck was fantastically moulded her arms perfect and legs too and her (legs) skin was pearl white (Crazy House, 1594-1595)

Pedophilia is clearly a tricky subject for an institution promoting Darger’s work. Michel Thévoz briefly discusses the “burning question that is difficult to avoid concerning the work of Henry Darger: The question of pedophilia.” (2001, 18) His psychoanalytic explanation is a quick sketch rather than a real study. Thévoz

39 MacGregor tells us that this statement is followed in Darger’s text “by thirteen dots, four exclamation points, four dots, and four more exclamation points.” (248)

40 Some reviewers have identified the Blengin lance (Homes 1997; Vine 1998; Cronenberg 2007)
says that the death of Darger's mother caused him to remain in “a maternally dominant pre-oedipal world” of “polymorphic perversion” (implying that Darger is psychologically a child and as a result his sources of sexual pleasure are multiple and undifferentiated). Thévoz believes that given the possibility that Darger retained a “pre-oedipal fixation,” the longed-for girls and hermaphrodites of Darger's work should be considered an aspect of his autoeroticism rather than evidence of pedophilia (18). This analysis is not necessarily wrong, but it does not really deliver on its promise to answer “the burning question of pedophilia.” Darger’s paintings, when examined with his texts, suggest autoerotic acts, but pedophilic thoughts:

To her dread the key would not turn in the lock. She was locked in.

As she turned she saw a horrible apparation. It had a human form in some respects with gigantic black feather like wings.

It seemed as if the toe nails and finger nails of the huge hands were like five scythes and six hoes and a head that had such hedious features that Sally screamed....screaming fearfully curseful (?) blasphemies it aimed to grasp at Sally.

She shrank back speechless with terror. Fifteen feet high it lunged towards her, turned into a ball of singing flame and disappeared.

Then instantly she felt a sensation that made her cough violently and steadily and tried to scream but only gurgled and gasped.

She tried to make for a win[ dow] to jump out, but something unseen held her fast by the throat, increasing the pressure

She was slowly rising into the air and she kicked and struggled but to no avail.
The pressure was no so strong yet to force her tongue out but she couldn't breathe and that made her desperate.

Then came a loud pounding on the Library door.

Probably the pounding Phenomenon The grip tightened dreadfully and her mouth opened and her tongue began to protrude while she hung limp. The pounding continued more louder it came crash after crash It didn't sound like phenomena Some one was really trying to force the door.

The full pressure was on her throat now and she became too feeble to struggle, she grew faint as her tongue came all the way out.

There came a terrific bang against the door and it crashed open with a slam. (Crazy House, vol. 1, ch. 30, 5416-5419)

The orgasmic trajectory of certain of Darger's descriptions is undeniable—the gradual increasing pressure on Sally's throat, the longed for opening of her mouth and glimpse of her tongue, and the loud, then louder pounding on the library door—until "her tongue came all the way out," a "terrific bang" and the door crashes open. There is a clear autoerotic element to this description by Darger, but the object of desire, the child Sally, is essential to the autoerotic fantasy and so autoeroticism cannot simply replace pedophilia, and ease our minds about Darger's work, as Thévoz suggests.

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41 Darger tells us on the following page that having been rescued by Penrod and the Vivian sisters, "Violet and Joice lifted her [Sally] to her feet Penrod had gone out because Sally was naked." (5420)
Understandably, curators want to play down this aspect of Darger's work, and avoid the potential controversy and possible withdrawal of funding it could engender. One can understand that making Darger's writing easily available, for example, might jeopardize this. In the U.S., powerful organizations like the American Family Association (formerly known as The National Federation for Decency) patrol the American gallery circuit and monitor NEA (National
Endowment for the Arts) funding mobilizing their many fundamentalist, Christian members when they feel their values have been offended. (American Family Association Online n.d.) And so Thévoz's portrayal of Darger as "condemned to childish polymorphism" (18) is not without its usefulness. But it is closer to a sleight of hand than an explanation. Rather than confront pedophilia, Thévoz uses psychoanalytic terms and concepts to project an image of knowledge and expertise, and then, having established his credentials, to suggest that readers unsatisfied with his explanation had best examine their own consciences. Thévoz proclaims that those who continue to suggest Darger was a pedophile are "closet pedophiles:"

As far as we know, Darger never committed a misdemeanor that went to court, that pedophilia exists latently in those who wallow in reading information of this kind and who look obsessively for the occasion to be indignant about it, and indeed, that works of art have always had a sort of mirrorlike quality. (19)

Several years earlier, in 1996/97, Stephen Prokopoff, director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art, organized Realms of the Unreal, a traveling exhibition of Darger's work. Prokopoff chose to exhibit Darger's least controversial images:

In organizing the exhibition from the University of Iowa Museum of Art, the late art historian Stephen Prokopoff intentionally omitted Darger’s brutal images. Prokopoff's selections were dominated by the artist’s brilliant

42 The show began in Iowa and went on to San Francisco, Chicago and New York (Bonesteel 2000, 15).
landscapes, in which happy children play in gardens of flowery abundance. (Wertkin 2001, 125)

Although Prokopoff omitted the “brutal” images, he still found it necessary to address the content of the remaining, cheerier, but still violent, ones. First, though, he tells the tragic story of Darger’s early life and the surprise discovery of Darger’s work, in which a “picaresque” tale (Realms) is key (1/5). In the catalogue for the exhibition he writes:

Darger’s imagery, when it details mayhem and sometimes the lurid mistreatment of little girls, can be distressing. An observer characterized a picture in a sunny landscape in which images of children, exotic flowers, butterflies and exploding bombs were joined as “being like Beirut.” The only possible response in such instances is that art, being often fashioned from artists’ obsessions, is rarely a vehicle for the description of perfection: Darger created art from the visions available to him. (4/5)

In fact, Darger seems to have based his visions precisely on what was unavailable to him except as fantasy: companionship, power, and sex. Prokopoff’s “only possible response” paints a contemporarily acceptable picture of Darger as a victim of his visions, rather than the architect of them. What the denial of Darger’s agency in invoking violence and perversity comes to is a refusal to give him credit for the power of this vision. Darger as victim is a panacea, offered so that viewers’ fascinated responses can then continue without their acknowledging its connection to their own perversity.

43 Gerard Wertkin was director of the American Museum of Folk Art, which participated in the traveling exhibition.
John MacGregor, who spent more than a decade studying Darger's art and writing, publicly disagreed with Prokopoff's decision to censor Darger's work. The dispute is described by S.L. Allen in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*:

> In fact, MacGregor and Prokopoff squared off when Prokopoff censored the more violent images from the show that later came to Yerba Buena. He defends the act by saying that he “wanted to show that Darger was not an ogre... and I honestly thought they [the violent ones] were just not as good.” MacGregor criticized it as a reduction of Darger to another “cutesy and quirky” folk artist (Allen1998).

When the traveling show arrived in New York in 1997, the Museum of American Folk Art, chose to include some of Darger’s more violent paintings, as well as those where the mixed sex of the children was visually apparent (Karlins 1997, 96). Wertkin later wrote: "Stewardship of Darger's legacy through the Henry Darger Study Centre requires the Museum to present and interpret his work with sensitivity but without sensationalism, and with due regard for the needs of the audience." (2001, 125) “Due regard for the needs of the audience” meant that the more controversial paintings (violent and/or showing the children as hermaphrodites) were confined “to one area with a warning to parents who might not want young children to view them” (Karlins 1997, 96).44

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44 The segregation of these images of hermaphrodites is somewhat puzzling. While at first it would seem to exemplify the stigma attached to intersexuality, it is more likely they were cordoned off as a result of the frontal “male” nudity — curiously especially controversial in the U.S. While there is no way to know why Darger gave his girls male genitalia, their depiction as hermaphrodites may actually serve to make Darger's more violent work more acceptable. These unexplained depictions of intersex children put Darger's work more solidly into the realm of fantasy. The violation of little girls is incomparably more disturbing to most people than the
Making Darger Safe for Consumption


Rather than outright censorship, most portrayals of Darger commit acts of omission. When the Museum published a book on Darger (Anderson 2001), it

violation of imaginary, almost mythological beings. The term "hermaphrodite" is not representative of most, some say any, people with intersexual characteristics. In the reception of Darger's work it is commonly viewed appropriately as symbolic or metaphorical.
was evident that they took their pedagogical role seriously. Wertkin wrote in the
Afterword, “Darger’s legacy must be approached in its totality—the troubling
images of his narrative along with the uplifting, the banal with the otherworldly,
the evil with the saintly.” (125) Yet the carefully worded introduction for the book
by the curator of the museum’s Contemporary Center, Brooke Davis Anderson,
and the rest of Wertkin’s Afterword, show that this was a tall, perhaps impossible
order.

In the Introduction, Anderson presents Darger as creating a complex work of
family entertainment, an accessible fantasy world in which conventional morality
prevails:

> Darger left behind a treasure that continually testifies to his sharp
intelligence and dry wit, his obsessive nature, and his arrested emotional
development. The works reveal his loneliness and torment as much as
playfulness and humor...We are witness to an imagination of genius parallel
to that of L. Frank Baum, author of the Oz books, or a contemporary
counterpart, J.K. Rowling, who makes real the world of Harry Potter...While
throughout the tale there is much death and destruction, in the end the
Vivian Girls prevail: good triumphs over evil, and the enslaved children are
freed from their captors. (2001, 11-12)

The Afterword, entitled “Transcendence at the Edge of Darkness,” focuses on
Darger’s Catholicism: “His lifelong and intense, if ambivalent, connection to the
Roman Catholic Church.” (125) It interprets his more difficult art as the working
out of his redemption through artistic vision (126). Both of these
characterizations of Darger fall far short of the unabridged Darger that has been
promised. But this Darger, portrayed as childlike, intense and unusual,
marginalized, creative, but fundamentally conforming to the moral status quo and involved in a spiritual struggle culminating in transcendence, conforms well to the acceptable outsider stereotypes. The American Museum of Folk Art's Darger is more complex than Prokopoff's, a bit edgier, but the omissions keep it suitable for the PG market.

Darger promoters, usually dealers and curators, often play up his innocence in order to protect his legacy from negative press. Darger is presented (correctly) as marginalized and therefore deserving of tolerance and compassion. But the "celebration of the marginalized" easily shades into the erasure of anything that does not fit the image of a harmless eccentric. The public can only remain tolerant if it is protected from Darger's most questionable texts and works, but protecting the public "for its own sake" is condescending as well as problematic, even if that's what the public demands.

The sanitized dream of Darger — as the childlike innocent, the tormented artist or the spiritual seeker—is obviously tempting, not only for marketing purposes, but because people prefer it to the more accurate version. Filmmaker Jessica Yu set out to "eschew[ing] expert opinion" so that she could "immerse us in Darger's world and all its strange beauty," according to the press kit for her 2004 film, In the Realms of the Unreal. Yu says she did this because she wanted to "let the
audience make up their own minds," a somewhat ingenuous statement coming from a filmmaker, given the precise shaping of content the medium requires. Audience reactions are tied to Yu's selective presentation of Darger. In an interview with Jane Ganahl of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Yu explains her motives for wanting to make a film about Darger:

> I wanted to explore what I thought Darger was trying to do with his work, she says. He seemed to be trying to find fulfillment in his life, trying not to be such an island. He was so alone that he populated his world with imaginary children, which could have been sad. But at the same time I was awestruck by his tremendous ambition and vision. And I thought his art was simply stunning. (Ganahl 2004, 3/4)

If these were Yu's intentions, it is not surprising that while not completely erasing the more difficult aspects of Darger's work, the film keeps things light and upbeat. Darger's work is diluted by whimsy, its intensity reduced through playful animation and a soundtrack that mixes narration, cartoon explosions, villains with evil laughs, girlie giggles, gasps and shrieks, with generic background music complete with intermittent angelic chorale. Gentle humor abounds. Jessica Yu's own conclusions about Darger's work are readily apparent. Of course, in addition to finding and retaining the funding to work in such an expensive medium, Yu needed permission from Kiyoko Lerner to use Darger's materials. Like museums and galleries, there are many possible reasons why she gives us the safe

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45 In an interview with Anderson, Yu says, "No experts, no art historians or psychoanalysts. I decided on this filmic device pretty early...People's responses to Darger's writing and paintings say so much about themselves, really. Once you embrace the mystery, the many opinions seem less compelling. I wanted my audience to decide for themselves." (Anderson 2005b.)
version of Darger that she does, but the film's selectiveness cannot be completely explained by extenuating circumstances.

One example of Yu's reductive perspective is when the film mentions Darger's failure to adopt a child. Yu has child actor Dakota Fanning say: "He continued to save children through the pictures he found." Without context, this statement plays to the sentimental stereotype of the non-threatening innocent, the damaged and somewhat loopy outsider. While MacGregor, in his psychobiography of Darger, says something similar when describing Darger's cache of found images, it is not as a stand alone tear-jerker, but qualified by its context:

Behind these often inconsequential accounts and photographs of lost children lurk profound feelings of sadness, desire and also rage. We must remember that Henry too was abandoned. In his room he became the champion of lost and mistreated children. His vast collections represent a lifelong rescue operation: every image of a little girl he found, found a home with him. There was, however, another side to Darger's collecting activity and his love of pictures of little girls. His nightly examination of newspapers and magazines was also motivated by a powerful combination of sexual and aggressive drives. (2002, 122-123)

Yu's stance, suggested throughout the film, is that Darger is an "innocent" with a traumatic background. The inference is that the disturbing aspects of Darger's work can be understood by knowing about his difficult childhood. This is mostly (and significantly) conveyed through the voice of a seven year old girl (Dakota Fanning). Throughout the film, Fanning makes statements such as, "As a child, Henry learned to answer violence with violence" and "by depicting the slaughter
of children, Darger became their avenger.” When Yu asks Darger’s former acquaintances why they think Darger’s girls had penises, she follows statements which suggest Darger didn’t know the difference between the sexes, by quoting (in Fanning’s voice) a definition of rape he inserted in *Further Adventure in Chicago: Crazy House*:

“What is rape?” asked Penrod.

“According to the dictionary, it means to undress a girl and cut her open to see the insides” said Joice. (quoted in Bonesteel 2000, endnotes, 19, 34)

Considering the amount of evisceration/rape described in lascivious detail by Darger in *The Realms*, using this definition to add evidence to the suggestion of Darger’s sexual “innocence” is frankly misleading. Yu ends the film with a ham-fisted proclamation—Tom Waits’ “Innocent When You Dream.”

A sentimental ending also marks the end of Yu’s interview with Ganahl:

Christmas carols are playing overhead in the restaurant as Yu finishes her fancy meal.

“As Henry wrote, in the end, he never had a nice Christmas or a nice New Year’s,” she says. “What’s even sadder is that one of the things he collected was used Christmas cards. I’d like to think it was because of the pictures on the front, but I don’t know.”

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46 Bonesteel’s interpretation of this is that “Darger took every possible precaution to avoid any direct reference to sexuality in his writing, even to the point of redefining ‘rape. When used by Darger, the word had no overt sexual implications but did denote physical violation in its most extreme form.” (2000, endnotes 19, 34)
She sighs. But if anything, I hope this film shows that every life has value. And that everyone, no matter how alone, wants to reach out to others and leave something behind." (3/4)

Galleries, museums, independent filmmakers and publishing companies are often vulnerable because they are dependant on government and charitable funding. But presenting Darger as a posthumous version of the American Dream, the pitiful (but imaginative) victim who “overcomes” life’s hardships by writing and illustrating heart-warming “picaresque” tales (Prokopoff 1996, 1) and “ripping yarns” (Bonesteel 2000, 19. Emphasis mine) with edifying morals, who tugs at our heartstrings as a Dickensian character forlornly collecting used Christmas cards, is untrue to the more complicated reality. The image of the disabled but courageous victim, seen through a soft-focus haze of touching naïveté, goes beyond the exercise of caution, and presents us with a Darger simplified and sanitized beyond recognition.

Darger’s posthumous existence – including the use of his biography and low social-economic status as a guarantor of artistic authenticity, and the sentimentalization and sometimes outright censorship of his work – is an instance of how the art market commodifies the experiences and work of many self-taught and disabled artists. Outsider art, like art brut before it, constructs psychological disability as primitive, authentic and redeeming. In doing so, it transfers surplus “authenticity” from the producer to the consumer of the artistic product.
In this way, the aesthetic commodification of outsider art/art brut lives becomes a third strategy by which "normal society" contains and makes "productive" the product of the disabled mind. Just as institutional/political strategies turn the mentally disabled into objects of "scientific" knowledge and bureaucratic practice, and religious narratives can make the suffering of the disabled "redemptive" and consoling, so too the outsider art market romanticizes psychological disability and turns it into a commodity by linking gritty life stories to the commercial and aesthetic valuation of the art.
What then, do the work, life and afterlife of Henry Darger tell us about the ways the normative society, and the disabled themselves, deal with mental disability?
There is something about disability -- in this case psychological disability -- that is challenging to the normative "healthy" person or social institution. Some of those challenges are obvious and practical -- some are more metaphysical. Darger embodied both kinds of challenge: while alive he made strange noises, refused to bathe and avoided social interaction. When dead, he left a legacy of images and text that fascinates us, that we seek to enjoy and profit from, but which is also unsettling and even horrifying. I have examined Darger's life and work, in the context of his psychological disability, and some social and critical strategies applied to him.

In the chapter "Touched: Political/Bureaucratic Strategies of Containment and the Life of Henry Darger," I looked at the primarily carceral strategy used to address the problem Darger and others like him posed during his lifetime. I looked specifically at the Lincoln asylum, in which Darger spent five years of his life. Darger's stay coincided with a change from a moralistic (and relatively humane) strategy for "improving" the "feeble minded" to an ostensibly scientific and progressive one based on hereditary pathology. The objective historical record about Lincoln is mostly grim, and Darger attempted to escape three times. At the same time, Darger's own recollection is a nostalgic, semi-benign one. This poses the question of the extent to which we should listen to the subjective experience of mentally disabled people, and the extent to which we should dismiss it as false consciousness. Neither approach seems ideal, but Darger's
interpretation should be given its due, even as we qualify it by what we know of
the conditions at Lincoln and the bureaucratic/political strategy of containment
used to “solve” the problem of the mentally ill.

Darger spent his adult life outside of the literal institution of the asylum, but he
was aware of both the stigma of being a former inmate and of others’ perception
of him as simple or “crazy.” The dominant trend of progressive “scientific”
thought of his day – eugenics – was finally discredited by the Nazi experience in
Germany that came to light in the 1940s. But the discrediting of one technique
does not eliminate our need as a society, or as individuals, for “techniques;”
ways to ensure that we are “protected” from unmediated contact with the
mentally ill and that they are “protected from themselves.” Darger remained
sensibly cautious about authority throughout his life, while the technological
approaches changed from institutionalization to medication and forced
homelessness. His prodigious creative output, which he kept private, should be
viewed against this backdrop. Darger had no desire to increase his visibility and
with it his vulnerability to potentially coercive authority.

In the second chapter, “As a Lamb Among Mad Wolves a Fish Hung on a Hook:
Theological Strategies of Legitimation and the Work of Henry Darger”, I
examined the structure Darger himself looked to when he sought to make sense
of his suffering – religion, specifically Catholicism. When we look at the
reoccurring religious imagery in Darger’s work, we see that it is closely aligned
to sexualized violence. We also see that Darger – although outwardly pious –
took a combative stance towards God. Throughout his life, Darger raged at what
he perceived to be God's injustice, which he “punished” by visiting sexualized
brutality on the creatures of his own fictional universe. In Darger, we see the
circuit of love-suffering-sacrifice-redemption that is so central to more orthodox
Christianity. In particular, there are close parallels between Darger's Vivian girls
and the virgin martyrs of medieval Catholicism.

Darger's theology and theodicy have not gone unnoticed, but, paradoxically,
there is an attempt to turn Darger himself into the suffering virgin martyr who is
redeemed by his difficult life circumstances and disability. Too much weight is
given by a number of critics (Anderson, 2001; Steinke, 2000; Vine, 1988), I
believe, to the conventional ending of The Realms, in which good triumphs and
the repentant are forgiven. Not enough is given to the evidence that Darger was
never finally reconciled, that he continued the alteration between appeasing and
railing at God to the end. A supposedly post-feminist age may try to blunt the
descriptions of violation of prepubescent bodies by emphasizing the “agency” of
the Vivian girls. But a closer look at the violence makes this a morally
problematic strategy for increasing our comfort with and interest in Darger's
work.

In the third chapter, “A Moonflaw in the Brain: Aesthetic Strategies of
Consumption and the Afterlife of Henry Darger”, I looked at Darger's afterlife as a
hot artistic commodity. The market for work produced by untrained artists with psychological disabilities, formerly called the art of the insane, sells raw, “authentic” artistic expression to the (presumably) sane and solvent. The development of Dubuffet’s philosophy of art brut and later the field of outsider art legitimated self-taught art and helped lead to this work’s current status as highly marketable and collectable. My analysis of Darger’s influences intended to show that the mentally ill are no more “innocent” of acculturation than anyone else. Further, I tried to explore the ethical dilemmas and paradoxes in a market powered by the linking of biography to creative authenticity and of social and economic marginalization of self-taught artists essential to rising market prices. I then explored how the increasing prominence of Darger’s work has been inseparable from a soft-pedalling of the disturbing violent and pedophilic themes in it.

What Darger’s life, work and afterlife suggest is that mental illness is not (and perhaps cannot be) encountered without strategies of containment and avoidance. I cannot claim to have avoided these themes myself. There are, after all, also academic strategies of avoidance, of making sense of, as part of the process of academic production. Roland Barthes’ declaration of the Death of the Author (Barthes 1989, 55) seems to license us as academic readers to do anything with any “text.” Since divining authorial intent perfectly is impossible, it may seem to be unnecessary to even try. But Darger was not an all-powerful
author of the type Barthes was rebelling against, and we (I) ought to be cautious
and respectful about using him to illustrate our (my) favoured theories.

There is no way to examine Darger's work, for instance, without a willingness to
trespass. We cannot have his permission to examine what he left behind. There
is no way to speak with his “voice” or keep within his preferred ways of seeing
himself. If I had attempted to be neutral and objective and tried to keep my point
of view out of the study, I would have been reduced to a recitation of Darger
facts (not really a neutral activity anyway). How can I reconcile my ignorance
about what Darger intended and how he viewed himself, with my own
examination of him as an artist with a psychological disorder, and of our
responses to him? What would Darger think about my portrayal of him as
disabled, and of his work as illustrative of the ways in which institutions react to
disability? Not much, I bet. But I cannot “share power” with Darger or “co-create”
with him. The responsibilities of research and critique are mine. Nevertheless, I
have tried to consider Darger’s intentions even if I cannot fully understand them.
In analyzing others’ interpretations of him I have also advanced my own position
that our attitudes toward mental disability are central to how we view the life and
work of Henry Darger.

At each point in my analysis, I have had to struggle with these dilemmas. When
examining the carceral institution in which Darger grew up, how seriously should
I take his late-life nostalgia in comparison to his decision to try to escape? I tried
to move beyond the reductonist portrayals of Darger as a sentimentalized saint or a dangerous pervert, to present him as a complex person with conflicting desires and internal contradictions. Darger's religious beliefs clearly assisted him in making sense of his situation, but in the end he could not make sense of what he thought God was doing to him. From what perspective can we view his mental and spiritual struggles? We may not share his theology, but the ways in which he duplicated the Christian economy of sacrifice in his fiction, by inflicting suffering and death on innocents, should give us pause, rather than, as has often been the case, be used to normalize the violence in Darger's work and the suffering in his own life. I have tried to examine the Christian narrative of suffering and redemption through Darger's extreme fictional re-ennactments of it. I have criticized attempts to fit Darger's life and work, and those of the disabled generally, into a redemptive narrative. I argue that Darger's response to suffering (demanding more suffering) is a Christian one and that his use of it allows us to see Christianity anew and to critically examine the flawed redemptive narrative it sets forth.

Specific interpretations of Darger's life and work have been used to increase his market value. I have discussed what the implications of the outsider art market are for artists with disabilities and the way in which designations of authenticity and marginalization, while good for market value, impact disabled artists negatively. Protecting Darger's image and value as a commodity has also led to
a degree of censorship, as he is re-institutionalized in art galleries and museums.

To counter the sentimentalized image of Darger as a champion of ill-treated children everywhere I have discussed portions of Darger's text which clearly identify children as the objects of his sexual fantasy.

While it is easy to criticize the status and money games involved in the posthumous promotion of Darger's work, the reality is that as an academic researcher I play a part in them. The provocative aspects of Darger's work have intellectual currency. They attract notice. While it is true that there is plenty in Darger to provoke, and even to shock, I have tried to balance the unsettling with the banal. Yes, Darger was exceptionally gifted. He was also psychologically disabled. These are the ways in which he was different from most of us. Yet, even though Darger's creative and imaginative life was tumultuous, his daily existence was, for most of his life, excessively mundane. Our sameness, our kinship with Darger, stems from the less sensational aspects of his life: the need to make a living, a desire for love, understanding and recognition and the perpetual nature of everyday frustrations.

Went on early morning hike. Found plenty of cord which I balled today. Finished also brown twine. Yet also found on railroad track an abundance of thick white string. Began working on that today. I have enough to take days to finish. Had a tantrum to day. Did a lot of swearing. I'm sorry. (Journals, Saturday, April 13, 1968)
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