VOLUME II: THE EXEGESIS

An Act of Reading and Writing

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ABSTRACT:

This Old Man

This Old Man is comprised of a childhood section from a larger novel that interweaves the experiences of a group of childhood friends who, as adults, are compelled to return to their home town to face an evil they were haunted by as children. Due to word count constraints, the chapters submitted for the Thesis are from the 'childhood section' of the novel only.

The novel in its entirety explores how adult selves are shaped by their past experiences. This first thematic drive is explored alongside another, which focusses on ideas of agency and humanity in the face of these deterministic forces.

The larger work responds to Stephen King's *IT.* It employs the tropes of the Horror genre to tell a story about manhood, boyhood, and what happens in between; a story about the summer when, as kids, the characters were hunted by The Farmer and his Doberman, and the summer nearly twenty years later when they return to finish the battle as adults: adults with inner demons that may prove to be stronger than the Farmer himself; adults who are facing the traumas of their past and attempting to find the capacity to forge and maintain relationships; adults who must finally grow up and accept responsibility for their actions and the fate of their lives.

'An Act of Reading and Writing'

Why am I drawn to heroic genre fiction? Why did I choose it as a mode to explore agency? And why did Horror end up being the mode in which to do it?

What is it about the reinvention of these familiar structures that on the one hand fills a deep need for stability, but on the other challenges the way I think about the world?

Why do reading and writing act as a meditative process? What is it about fiction that evades essentialism, and how do prescriptive structures like the Hero's Journey act as a meditative space that open themselves up to interpret the world around us?

This exegesis explores these questions through a framework of discussions with texts that informed my work. Using a humanist framework centred on the agency of the individual to affect change as argued for by Edward Said, I explore how literature acts as a kind of humanist theology in the post-modern world, as envisaged by Andy Mousley. I then explore how heroic structures in genre fiction might be a meditation on agency.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. There is a two year embargo pending on *This Old Man* at the time of examination.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time. There is a one year embargo pending on *This Old Man* at the time of examination.

Jonathan Zweck

May 30th, 2017

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To Kirby and Isla, thank for putting up with all the grumps and often being more grown up than me.

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THE EXEGESIS:

An Act of Reading and Writing

Jonathan
Zweck

Kids, fiction is the truth inside the lie, and the truth of this fiction is simple enough: the magic exists.

-Stephen King

INTRODUCTION

I think that's what's great about rock and roll. It's not about the music as much as it's about the emotion, and the emotion is what resonates with people: they feel something. I think sometimes we lose sight of that importance…and then all of a sudden someone slaps you upside the head with reality, you know, and you're like, wow, art is really important. It's just… really, super important.

(Tom Delonge 'The Pursuit of Tone').

There are four words you will hear in every creative writing classroom, textbook, or seminar: *write what you know*.

It's a seemingly obvious throwaway line, but I strongly believe it's the foundation of all good writing and it's the basis for why good genre fiction works. Hang on a minute I can hear you saying, but if you've never been hunted by a serial killer, how can you *write what you know* in a thriller? Or, if you weren't a sheriff in a small town in North Dakota at the close of the 19th century how can you write a great Western? And these are important questions in the scope of this paper because I'm writing Horror—and unlike the boys in my novel, I was never stalked by a supernatural incarnation of evil.

The answer may lie in the fact that genre provides us with sets of rules and structures where we can play out what we do know: our own experiences or perceptions, our own conceptions of betrayal, of lust; it is a place where we can explore our own moral compass within the safety of universal frameworks. Genre structures create spaces where we are invited to share, because we are forever just building on the work that has come before, taking familiar conventions and recasting them through our own moment in time and space. The truly original thing we bring to a genre is our own subjective experience of humanity and our own emotional experience.

So what's my truth? What do I know?

These are big questions so I'll try and limit my answer to what's relevant to this PhD novel. Initially I thought I was writing about masculinity (masculinities) and coming of age in an Australian context. But because I write from a more romantic tradition, it's only after looking back that I can see what really shaped the work. And looking back at *This Old Man,* these issues of masculinity and coming of age are present, but the far stronger theme running throughout the book surrounds the agency of the individual.

And here we return to my truth, I think this fascination with agency comes back to truth: *my father is a minister*. Hooray you're probably thinking, my dad was a fireman, so what? Well he wasn't just a minister, he was a conservative minister who'd been a missionary in Papua New Guinea for the best part of two decades. When we moved to Australia I was very young, but from the outset two things became clear to me. The first was that my home life quickly began to feel as alien as school, and the second was that fiction became a wonderful place where I could escape and things actually made sense.

From *Goosebumps* and *Lord of the Rings* to *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*, I was drawn to classic genre conventions. There was a wonderful sense of fun in these narratives, but there was something else, a feeling of continuity, and also a bizarrely rebellious or maybe just stubborn attitude that anything was possible. The continuity makes sense, I'd grown up with the rituals and rhythms of the church, but I think what was far more appealing was the rebellious and stubborn nature of the heroes. I just loved their agency.

Genre heroes were active. At least the ones I loved were. They weren't content to wait for the next life, they were going to live this one.

In those stories I found a range of misfits, outcasts and exiles who were dealt a rough hand by their world. But in the face of seeming hopelessness, they dug deep and

said *no*. They said, not only am I going to survive, I'm going to win. No matter how hopeless, how seemingly meaningless their small existence, they persevered and brought change to their world. And this heroic story that has been told again and again by a thousand different voices over thousands of years, still brings meaning to my life—whether it's in a new incarnation, or the hundredth time I watch *Star Wars*, this structure brings me not just a feeling of security, but also a safe space to meditate on daily struggles; a place I can leave recharged and inspired, reminded that no matter how grim things appear I always have agency.

And that's what this essay tries to grapple with: why do reading and writing act as a meditative process? What is it about the reinvention of these familiar structures that on the one hand fills a deep need for stability, but on the other challenges the way I think about the world. What is it about fiction that evades essentialism, and how do prescriptive structures like the Hero's Journey act as a meditative space that open themselves up to interpret the world around us? I will argue that literature acts as a kind of humanist theology in the post-modern world, and that the heroic structure is a meditation on agency.

In Chapter 1, I begin by looking at *Beginnings* and how the choice to begin, and where to begin, are crucial to what a work might hold. I explore the idea of conversation to look at how my decision to engage with Stephen King's *IT* shaped my work and examine why I used Horror genre conventions to revisit the world of my childhood. I also examine how Horror fiction operates as a quasi-religious experience through which we face our very existence. Picking up humanism in the style envisaged by Edward Said I pave the way for my later discussions of how heroic genre fiction acts as a meditation on the agency of the individual within the constraints of society.

In Chapter 2, 'Humanism and Agency,' I unpack Edward Said's idiosyncratic humanism and explore how for him humanism makes a practice of knowledge. In doing so I explore how perhaps reading is itself a humanist act. This builds the foundation upon which the following chapters construct their argument for emotive fiction to be a place where we are able to meditate upon our reality from within the safety of the world of fiction.

Chapter 3, *Literature as Ersatz Theology*, explores Andy Mousley's question 'Is literature inherently humanist or is this the way English has constructed it?' (Introduction 5). This chapter explores how the author-reader contract creates a scepticism in the reader that allows fiction to be open to interpretation. Taking this one step further, it questions how emotion informs such scepticism. Positioning the reading of the text in relation to the reader's reality, this chapter explores how subjectivity allows us to interrogate (or meditate) upon our reality through fiction.

In Chapter 4, 'Hero's Journey as *Ersatz* Theology of Humanist Practice,' I explore how heroic narratives embody a heroic response to the existential dilemma fiction creates by revealing the fiction of our reality (as raised in Chapters 1 and 2). I begin by examining how emotive fiction compels the reader to sympathise with characters and therefore experience other ways of feeling and thinking, and how this encourages a reflective experience of the text. I then unpack the Hero's Journey itself to show how as a structure it reflects, or celebrates, a humanistic reading process. In doing so, I suggest that heroic narratives are a meditation on agency.

In Chapter 5, 'Stephen King's *IT,'* I do a close reading of that iconic text through the lens I've constructed in the preceding chapters. In doing so I show how, at least for me, Horror and heroic structures are a meditation on existence and agency. However, I also suggest that perhaps the Hero's Journey is merely a reading process, something we

bring to the text, not something necessarily embedded in the text itself. Using the themes of coming of age within *IT*, I suggest that perhaps this heroic structure is in fact the structure of growth, of the progress of knowledge.

BEGINNINGS

The reading of all good books is like engaging in conversation with the most cultivated minds of past centuries who had composed them, or rather, taking part in a well-conducted dialogue in which such minds reveal to us only the best of their thoughts.

(René Descartes *Discourse on the Method* 84-85)

...the novel is an institutionalization of the intention to begin.

(Edward Said *Beginnings* 100*)*

These two ideas can be likened to two horses which drive this PhD. The conversation referred to in the first quote and the intent signalled in the latter are central pillars in understanding how literature might be seen as a kind of *ersatz* theology, as suggested by Andy Mousley, for a new humanism, in the style envisaged by Edward Said. I also believe that reading might be, as Said suggests, a heroic practice, and that the structure of the Hero's Journey might be employed as a model of reading, a heroic model, that mimics a humanist act of reading in the style he envisages. It is a model that celebrates agency, self-reflection and growth. An act that allows literature to be the kind of *ersatz* theology that Mousley proposes. As I noted in the 'Introduction' to this paper, literature is one of the main places I go for self-reflection and to find meaning in my own life, and this is probably not uncommon.

Edward Said might seem at first like a strange choice for talking about agency within the structures of genre fiction. Famous for post-colonial works like *Orientalism, The World the Text and the Critic,* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Said's late work turned more broadly to literary criticism. Although his work in post-colonialism impacts upon Said's thoughts about humanism, I do not think this in anyway limits the humanism he

calls for in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (referred to as *HDC* from now on) to being used only for those studies. The humanism Said suggests is critical of itself for the sake of itself (*HDC* 10). It is this self-reflexivity that resonates with me and provides a mode of criticism that has intent, and that seeks meaning whilst still acknowledging that meaning is unstable. It is this Said that more recent writers such as Andy Mousley have turned to, whose notion of literature as '*ersatz* theology' in the modern world I use in this paper to explore how my work continues a conversation with the texts I go to. *This Old Man*'s genesis lies in a thousand influences, but as its author I acknowledge a distinct intent to have a conversation with Stephen King's *IT*, as well as the adventure stories I grew up with, and to continue these conversations as informed by my contextual experience of the world.

This intent is where I would like to start, arguing that it is the moment of beginning that defines what the work can and will say. I appreciate this claim comes up against a formidable body of work arguing for the reader's interpretation being severed from authorial intent, but what I hope to show is that when an author begins a piece of writing they start, or at least continue, a conversation that will be picked up by any reader who might choose to open those pages.

In his book *Beginnings* Edward Said writes: 'Every writer knows that the choice of a beginning for what he will write is crucial not only because it determines much of what is to follow but also because a work's beginning is, practically speaking, the main entrance to what it offers' (3). This is an interesting thought because, as the title *Beginnings* suggests, often when speaking about beginnings we are not necessarily speaking about one moment of beginning, but rather a number of beginning*s*. So looking to my own work *This Old Man*, even at the most basic level, there are a number of

beginnings. If I am to talk about the text itself, I could argue that it was when I first wrote the now opening line: 'It all started with Stevie Roy.' But then I could argue that it started when I visited my hometown and my girlfriend turned to me and said 'Hey, you grew up in a Stephen King novel.' Or I could argue that the character of Tim predated any of that. And that the real 'Noel', (a pseudonym) upon whom the character Noel (a character from the adult narrative not included in the PhD version) is based, predated (and one could argue inspired) my enrolling in a PhD in creative writing before I even thought of the events of this novel. In fact, the real 'Noel' was based on a regular at a bar where I drank, whose war stories were so horrible he broke my heart.

Said goes on to say of beginnings:

> Moreover, in retrospect we can regard a beginning as the point at which, in a given work, the writer departs from all other works; a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both. (*Beginnings* 3)

Thus even if we can find a specific 'fossil' of a story (an image King uses in *On Writing* that I will go into more detail about later), there are still a myriad of other beginnings on either side of 'finding the fossil' (163-164).

From a reader's perspective, it would be almost impossible to know that *This Old Man* started out as a very different book. I had planned a novel about a young guy called Tim who euthanized an old Vietnam veteran called Noel. I had the book neatly plotted, including my research into trauma, masculinity, cancer pain medication, post-mortem procedures and police process. But, I couldn't write. The words came, but they sucked. If I had the plot, why was it so hard to write? The problem wasn't that I hadn't found the right part of the fossil, it was that I was trying to dig up the wrong dinosaur.

Then, two things happened that would change the course of my novel and of my PhD. The first was that I read Stephen King's novel, *Carrie*, and the second was that I took my girlfriend to see my hometown, Albury. The discovery of King for me, from a creative perspective, was a fundamentally life changing experience. Because of a conservative and literary snobbish upbringing, I approached with wary caution; he was one of those 'airport' authors after all, very popular, and if my education concerning what was good (thankyou hierarchical structures of a conservative childhood) and cool (thankyou adolescent rebellion against said structures) was anything to go by, he was therefore a lightweight.

Assured by my girlfriend, who could see through my problematic assumptions and thrust the book in my hands, I read anyway. As the pages of *Carrie* turned with increasing speed between my fingers, I noticed something. He was anything but lightweight. In a tight little novel he played with form and structure to tell a story that operated on one level as a Gore-Horror story about a high-school girl who, bullied until she snapped, killed her fellow students in a rampage. But on another level it interrogated the abjection of the body, gender, and traumas of adolescence and adulthood.

As I returned to the literature surrounding masculinity, I was able to clarify what King offered. I'd been reading Cormac McCarthy, an author who (like King) is a best-seller. While his focus is still on story, he has a dual focus on form, which lends him high-literary credibility. I was hoping he'd get me out of a jam—he hadn't; still, my writing sucked. My failure to emulate McCarthy led to an unpleasant realisation: I didn't like the artifice of his writing. It didn't make me *feel*, it made me think. And when I tried to emulate it, it just got in my way. But King stayed with me; it just rang true. In the long run, it would unlock my authenticity; it allowed me to stop emulating other writers, and instead allowed me to write what I knew by bringing adventure to the world that I knew.

For a start, King's language was alluringly direct. Page one barrelled straight into the story, a newspaper report dated August 19th, 1966, outlining how stones fell on the White residence two days earlier. Deftly changing the voice to omniscient third King continued the action in a shower room where 'all the girls in the shower room were shocked, thrilled, ashamed, or simply glad that the White bitch had taken it in the mouth again' (*Carrie* 9). The same paragraph finished with the statement: 'What none of them knew, of course, was that Carrie White was telekinetic' (9). In two short paragraphs he had the hook (the telekinesis), the character (Carrie White), her motivation (bullying girls and a strange relationship with her home), and a timeline (the newspaper dated August 19th). As the book continued, the characterisation was direct but sympathetic. His work didn't seem obsessed with being smarter than its reader, the prose served the story. There was no intellectual game playing, all the work was occurring on an emotive level, driven by the story. Reading King *felt* true. It resonated with me.

The trip to Albury was just a two day detour we were making on our way to Melbourne. It was a relatively new relationship and I wanted to show my partner where I grew up. On this trip she was re-reading King's *IT*. When I was kid, I used to read the books in the grown-up section of the library as a way to get around my puritan parents' rather strident censorship (you should have seen the talk I got in Year 5 when Mum caught me reading the novelisation of *Species*). *IT* was one of those books that had scared me. The eyes staring out of the drain on the cover had been too much for my twelve-year old imagination and I *had* to pick the book up off the shelf. While I can't actually remember reading the book, whatever moment I had with *IT* in the library clearly stayed with me because I have lived with an irrational fear of clowns ever since. The short of all this was that the book that had already haunted me in Albury as a child now followed me there as an adult.

Over the next couple of days I took Amy on a tour of the town. I showed her the river, the pool, the monument, my old house, my best friend's house (where I once saw a ghost), the canal, Nailcan Hill, Mungabereena Reserve, the Hume weir and the dam, and then I showed her Eastern hill. As we walked up the dusty road (that had seemed so much steeper when I rode my BMX as a kid) she turned to me and said: 'you grew up in a Stephen King novel.' She was right. Sheltered by my conservative parents, and small-town life, I had the same kind of 1950s childhood King's work often romanticises (only mine was in the 1990s). While on the hill, an idea for a story came to me about a group of twelve year-old boys in the final summer before one of them moves away. They'd see a creature in the bush near Eastern Hill, and on a boyish whim they'd hunt and kill the creature, not realising it was a benevolent force; their actions would bring evil to the town. I jotted the idea down in my 'projects for after the PhD book' and kept on with giving the tour. This moment on Eastern Hill is the closest thing I can come to for finding a beginning, or what King would call 'a fossil,' for the novel that *This Old Man* comes from.

King believes 'stories are found things, like fossils in the ground…stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible' (*On Writing* 163-164). He writes that plot is 'the good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice' (164). Later I'll explore plot a little more, but for now I'll acknowledge that what King is getting at is that good storytelling is the act of excavating 'the fossil' and that a tool like plot used heavy-handedly, like a jackhammer, is able to damage this fossil (164). I find King's fossil metaphor engaging because it lends itself to the idea that stories don't belong to us. They are found things, and if we are lucky enough to trip over one it is

up to us to excavate it as carefully as possible. The work then is not that of some genius of man, but a craft that can be learned, taught, and improved. It also lends itself to the idea that the same fossil might be excavated very differently by different people.

Looking back from the other side of the fourth draft of my novel, I can see a number of bits of the fossil sticking up from the earth: Noel, Tim, Albury, Edward Said, Stephen King; in relation to the skeleton of *This Old Man* they were all just fragments poking up from the dirt. But I can locate one point where all the ideas come together, which brings another one of King's analogies of writing to mind. He talks about how 'good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up' (37). For me this moment came at me with the line 'It all started with Stevie Roy.' I already had this character Tim, and he was already returning to Albury to run away from dealing with grief, and then my conversation with King unlocked the world of my childhood. What if Tim had been running away from something his whole life? The collision of these thoughts was followed by a chapter which felt like it wrote itself, like it was given to me from the air that wafted around my fingertips and all I had to do was guide it onto the page. The voice was that of a storyteller, like King, or Ray Bradbury, and it was inviting me to sit by the fire and hear a tale. It was the direct address of an omniscient narrator taking command of the universe and holding reality at bay. Its world was a world I knew, like the town where I'd grown up (but not that town), with characters like the ones from my childhood (but not the ones from my childhood). Almost as if my childhood home was stuck in time, in the same way film captures a place forever. And it was Tim's childhood, in the world of mine. The world of my childhood, severed in time, a town before an internal bypass, a small town before the internet. The same plane trees,

the same bends in the river, the same threats of a small community: isolation yet a lack of anonymity. Experienced by a group of boys, each with their own cross to bear. And by killing Stevie Roy in the first chapter, I was also killing Steven King (*roi* is French for king), and making a distinct departure from his world into my own.

Picking up Said's idea that 'in retrospect we can regard a beginning as the point at which, in a given work, the writer departs from all other works: a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both' (*Beginnings* 3). It strikes me that *This Old Man* exists very much in a relationship of both continuity and antagonism with the work of Stephen King, particularly the novel *IT*. The text is littered with intentional, as well as more organic winks to King's novel. But this 'play' extends beyond the work of King, it includes many of my favourite texts. For example, as well as tipping my hat to Steven King with the character of Stevie Roy, the characters of Steven Adler and George Bramble pay homage to Steven Spielberg and George Lucas (just in case you were wondering why Adler is always wearing a hat and why George is generously proportioned), and the bike chase in the canal shares structural elements with the Death Star Trench chase from *Star Wars*. Within popular adventure genres like Horror and Science Fiction, this is not uncommon. We only need to look at the recent Netflix hit *Stranger Things*, or J.J. Abrams' *8mm* to see the way narratives are constantly referencing and reinventing those that have come before. As Said argues in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 'literature is an order of repetition, not of originality – but an eccentric order of repetition, not one of sameness.' (12).

Adaptation theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Thomas Leitch, and Julie Sanders would be able to identify the many connections between my book and King's *IT*,

unsurprisingly, because his story unlocked mine. It provided a new way to visit my childhood, a way to cast the world of childhood in a new light. I found a way to revisit my world, the same way other genre writers have visited theirs—with my voice. There are resonances: the flood, the centrality of the library, the canal; but they are real-life resonances: the Murray river broke its banks and flooded South Albury in the early nineties, the library was where I and my friends hung out after school as a kid, and we were all warned about the dangers of flash flooding in the canal. These resonances were what made King's work remind me of my childhood. His Derry was like Albury. I can see other resonances too, but many of these are common tropes of the Horror genre, like the use of smell and gore, as well as the adoption of innocent imagery to create terror through abjection. But a theory of adaptation did not inform my work. *This Old Man* is not, as Hutcheon would suggest of adaptation, 'an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art (Hutcheon 170)'. Rather, it is a continuation of a conversation with King's *IT,* as well as Said and Mousley's visions of humanism, informed by my own childhood experience, to create a meditation on heroic agency. The resonances are not revisitations of *IT*, if anything they are echoes of his work in a new conversation that begins in a setting that resonates with the setting of his text, that attempts to tackle some similar themes of revisiting childhood, but that ultimately is a continuation not a revisitation of a previous conversation (King's *IT*).

This conversation allowed me to unlock the extraordinary in the ordinary of my world. It allowed my world to open itself up to the horror genre without staying grounded in Australian Realism. Later in this thesis, I will look more closely at how horror provides a unique space to meditate on agency, and perhaps that is why King's *IT* helped collide a number of thoughts that had been floating around in my head already. Because, reading King, like Said said of beginnings, provided the moment where as a writer I 'depart[ed]

from all other works,' the moment I 'establishe[d] relationships with works already existing, relationships of continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both' (Said *Beginnings* 3). It was the moment I realised there was nothing stopping me writing about my world the way I wanted to read about others: I could write Horror in Australia, it didn't have to stay an 'American' genre.

What my thesis shows is that King's fiction provided an evocative space where I could meditate on my own childhood. I moved away from Albury at 12 and left behind a childhood world unadulterated by adolescence and the harsh realities of growing up. Of course, the reality is that it wasn't a perfect childhood. I was bullied, I had an often absent father whose faith was frequently more important than his family, and my brother who acted as kind of surrogate dad moved away to university. Returning to your past, either in the real sense of returning to a place, or returning to meditate through narrative, opens these forgotten scars for interpretation. These thoughts led me to a more important question, not whether or how my work was an adaptation of King's, but why King, why Horror, in the first place?

John Frow suggests of genre that 'textual meaning is carried by formal structures more powerfully than by explicit thematic content; that what texts do and how they are structured have greater force than what they say they are about' (129). But unlike many other genres you can't define Horror by structures. Horror only works if it elicits emotion. Other genres like Science Fiction, Westerns, and Criminal Procedurals, can exist as purely intellectual exercises, but Horror must cause emotion. Can this be considered a structural element? Josh Kinal argues:

> …Horror is different, it breaks the rules of classification. Horror is defined by the sociological and political climate in which it has been created. It manipulates the audience by highlighting their everyday fears and anxieties, relying for its effectiveness on the audience's emotional involvement (75).

But not just that, the genre is driven by revulsion, disgust, and fear. As Noel Carroll writes, 'there appears to be something paradoxical about the Horror genre. It obviously attracts consumers; but it seems to do so by means of the expressly repulsive' (*A Philosophy of Horror* 158-59).

It is this confrontation of the abject that makes Horror the perfect mode through which to meditate on heroic agency. Our natural disgust and revulsion toward the evil increases the stakes even more than just the inherent risk presented in the average thriller or adventure story. For the heroes of Horror narratives, in having to face an embodiment of their (and our) deeper anxieties, the stakes of heroic behaviour are increased. The supernatural elements of Horror take away the safety net of logic. There is no can or cannot happen anymore, we can't trust the world we and our heroes have entered. More importantly for this essay, the unrelenting nature of the evil in Horror forces even the most reluctant hero into action. By forcing even the weakest, most ordinary protagonist to face a magnified social anxiety, Horror demands a meditation on existence and agency. Or as Tony Magistrale puts it, 'Horror is an existential reminder that we live in an uncertain and terrifying world' (*Abject Terrors* 5). Magistrale continues by unpacking Noel Carroll's discussion of Rudolph Otto in *The Philosophy of Horror.* Otto says that Horror film—and I think it's equally true of what other theorists call Horror-Art—puts the spectator in a vulnerable position 'that inspire[s] awe, the paralysing fear, of being overpowered by forces larger than the self. This process holds its closest analogy to the *numinous* religious experience of encountering God' (5). Carroll writes that 'this encounter with the wholly other does not simply terrify the subject; it also fascinates her. Indeed, its tremendous energy and urgency excites' (166). As Philip J. Nickel writes, 'horror makes us realize that we can still go on, even in the absence of perfect certainty' and not just that, it brings us to the 'epistemological insight' that 'the construction of the

everyday is necessary' (29). Not unlike the religious experience of 'encountering God,' Horror interrogates our practical trust in our perceived reality, but still celebrates that we continue on despite this. In doing so it reminds us of the importance of acting to constantly recreate our reality.

Slavoj Žižek approaches this argument from a 'Lacanian' approach in *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema*. Using Hitchcock's *The Birds* as an example of Horror cinema he argues that in Horror the Horror element disrupts the symbolic order of reality to reveal our more primal human 'Real' (*A Pervert's Guide to Cinema*). He argues that '[f]ictions structure our reality. If you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself' (*A Pervert's Guide to Cinema*). Using *The Matrix's* iconic imagery of the blue and the red pill (one to accept the fiction of our reality, one to break it forever but see the real), he goes on to suggest that perhaps there is a third pill in which fiction in fact makes reality 'more real' (*A Pervert's Guide to Cinema*). The pill metaphor becomes clumsy for me, but I think there is something in this notion that fiction makes reality more real. Julia Kristeva approaches this affect from the position of identity but reaches a similar argument through her theory of abjection:

> A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (2)

Following Žižek,, we might say that when fiction disrupts the symbolic order we then '(re)establish a kind of immediate contact with the presymbolic life substance' (*Enjoy your Symptom* 54). Žižek argues that in this case we are thrown 'back into that abyss of the Real out of which our symbolic reality emerged' (54). Where a religious

experience would turn at this point to God for meaning, I hope to show in the coming chapters how, having caught a glimpse of the Real, and with the knowledge and insight we've gathered from every subjective experience with both texts and the world leading up to that point, we are asked by literature to recreate meaning for ourselves.

HUMANISM AND AGENCY

Humanism is the achievement of form by human will and agency; it is neither system nor impersonal force like the market or the unconscious, however much one may believe in the workings of both.

(Edward Said *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* 15)

A Definition

Another beginning was when I stumbled across a quote by Edward Said in a secondary article. I was writing an Honours paper at the time and was wrestling with the post-structuralist theory that the course and textbooks on literary theory seemed to champion. Embarrassingly saying his name Said like 'said,' I drew first the laughter and then the ire of my lecturer. '*Humanism*, old white men[1],' she said with some contempt. Now appreciating the long history of humanism, and some of the more problematic essentialist positions it has been responsible for in the past, I can appreciate her concern. But this anecdote draws out an important point. Humanism has been caught up in some unpleasant debates in the past and the humanism Said put forward was idiosyncratic. He himself notes:

> ...the hubris that I have found so repellent in the poorly informed encomiums to the Western humanist tradition from Burckhardt to Kristeller to Allan Bloom and his followers is based on a reprehensibly stubborn and deep ignorance about other traditions in which many of the attitudes and practices associated with figures such as Ficino, Montaigne, and Erasmus were prefigured long before Europeans came upon them. ('Presidential Address 1999' 288)

Similar to the burgeoning 'new humanism' that writers Andy Mousley and Rita Felski are aligned with, Said's humanism is self-reflexive. When I first read *Humanism*

[1] And as one reader of this paper has noted, if one was to include Said in such 'essentialist' company, should she not at least have said 'old brown man?'

and Democratic Criticism, I'd not stumbled across this 'new humanism' and I found Said's work refreshing. My scolding fresh in my ears, I was frustrated because I thought he was anything but essentialist, I was blown away by how reasoned his positions were. His writing was clear, and he called for the same from others. The humanism he proposed *spoke* to me. His thoughts on humanist criticism haunted the way I thought and the way I wrote, and while perhaps not what he is most famed for, *his* humanism has provided the foundation for my own.

Said's ability to hold a humanist position in the wake of post-structuralism and the many splinter movements that followed is firmly based upon a profound understanding of post-structuralism to begin with. Said's use of post-structural scholarship was so engaged it led some critics to ask 'whether it was possible for Said to continue to profess allegiance to humanism, with its assumptions of subjective agency and will, while embracing the anti-humanist tendencies of structuralism and post-structuralism' (James Clifford in Mitchell 463; Clifford in Said *HDC* 9-10). Said's answer to such accusations: 'it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism' (*HDC* 10) and, more, it is *'necessary* to be critical of humanism to be worthy of the name' (Mitchell paraphrasing Said in Mitchell 463). Of this humanism, Said says:

> ...schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past from, say Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer and more recently from Richard Poirier, and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused. (*HDC* 11)

To oversimplify for the purposes of this exegesis, this humanism could be seen as *the quest to make knowledge with compassion*. There are three main points in this assertion that I see as salient to this paper. Firstly that knowledge is made, not there to be discovered. Secondly, that making knowledge can be seen as a quest. And thirdly that for

this quest to be humanist, it must be compassionate. By compassionate, I don't mean sympathetic, I mean able to consider within context; to be able to situate the subject within its subjective context whilst simultaneously trying to see our own context (read: privilege, prejudice, other etc.) as analyst.

This first point is based upon Giambattista Vico's notion of *sapienza poetica* that Said picks up in *HDC*: 'historical knowledge based on the human being's capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, and dully' (11). The quest comes, I believe, in what Said draws out of Vico's work in *New Science*. Vico writes 'because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance man makes himself the measure of things' (Vico *New Science* 60). Said unpacks this statement by saying that Vico 'takes the tragic view that human knowledge is permanently undermined by the "indefinite nature of the human mind"'. He continues by saying that 'One can acquire philosophy and knowledge, it is true, but the basically unsatisfactory fallibility (rather than its constant improvement) of the human mind remains nevertheless' (*HDC* 12). There is according to Said therefore:

> ...always something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable, and arguable about humanistic knowledge that Vico never loses sight of and that, as I said, gives the whole idea of humanism a tragic flaw that is constitutive to it and cannot be removed. This flaw can be remedied and mitigated by the disciplines of philological learning and philosophic understanding…but it can never be superceded. (12)

While Said picks up and runs with Vico's idea to examine how structuralism and post-structuralism came to dominate English studies in the United States, I would like to stop and sit with the idea for a moment. For it is also a meditation on thought itself, on knowledge as action, an integral idea to the author-reader space. It is a seemingly simple idea: *subjectivity*. But as Vico and Said have shown here, it is central to understanding that knowledge is unstable and, as the post-structuralists argued, that language is unstable.

Humanism then, despite this subjectivity, is finding a way to say something, to find meaning, and to communicate this discovery to others. The terms 'humanism' and 'subjectivity' both imply an author. Whilst it could be argued that intention cannot be applied to the text, there is always an assumption of a voice behind the text.

Unfortunately, it's not quite this simple. This is where my notion of the quest, and the need for compassion, become important and why narrative, as a space, can be seen as the 'religious text' or '*ersatz* theology' for a secular humanist world. The quest refers to knowledge being a practice and not an object. As Said and Vico have shown, to think of knowledge as finite, fixed, and achievable opens it up to the 'fallibility' of the human mind. Knowledge is something we must constantly question to the best of our abilities. But I would hazard that once again it is not quite this simple, for we must do so with compassion. By compassion, I mean an ability to approach the making of knowledge not only with awareness of our own subjective relationship with the world, but that of other humans; one might even go as far as to say of other life itself. This awareness of subjectivity, as Said and Vico have suggested, demands reflection and critique. Thus understanding comes from the process of repeated objectivity toward one's subjectivity, and toward the limits of one's subjectivity.

In his MLA Presidential Address in 1999, Said said that humanism 'is disclosure; it is agency; it is immersing oneself in the element of history; it is recovering what Vico calls the topics of the mind from the turbulent actualities of human life, "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor," and then submitting them painstakingly to the rational process of judgement and criticism' (290). Humanism is then the act of immersing oneself into the 'turbulent,' 'uncontrollable world,' with agency, and submitting your experience to a 'rational process of judgement and criticism.' In doing so one is able to be critical of texts in spite of love for them, critical of characters in spite of

love for them. What is crucial of this 'heroic ideal in humanism' for Said, 'even in the very act of sympathetically trying to understand the past, is that it is a gesture of resistance and critique' and that the struggle is never over (290). He quotes Adorno, saying: 'the utopian [and, I think one can add, the heroic] moment in thinking is stronger the less it—this too is a form of relapse—objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Open thinking points beyond itself' (Said's square brackets) (Adorno in Said 290). This criticism argues for constant vigilance, for continued self-reflection. For no absolute to ever be reached knowledge should be constantly tested. But one must be sympathetic whilst bringing this criticism, perhaps even with an awareness that critique is inseparable from sympathy. This is where I believe compassion carries slightly more weight than sympathy, in that it implies an understanding that does not necessarily accept the subject. For example, we might understand why someone harbours racism due to circumstances of upbringing or experience, we might hold compassion for why they might be motivated to feel or think this way, but compassion does not mean that the racism is accepted.

Once again, narrative as genre, as form, as space between author and reader, provides a unique place within which such compassion can be staged intentionally by an author, and be critiqued compassionately by a reader. It is worth noting that this compassionate critique can be brought to books despite an author's problematic subjective position, and still be found to have cultural and literary value. I think of Said's example of how Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* whilst being primarily about 'ordination' can be read compassionately, or contrapuntally, to also be about how colonial possessions help 'directly establish social order and priorities back home' (*Culture & Imperialism* 62).

In fiction the author is able to bring the subjectivity of reality to philosophical dilemmas, including their own flaws and prejudices as well as their own response to their

reading and their lived experience. Building upon the earlier discussion of genre in Chapter 1, Horror as Robin Wood argues, by self-consciously distancing itself from reality 'can be far more radical and fundamentally undermining than works of conscious social criticism, which must always concern themselves with the possibility of reforming aspects of a social system whose basic rightness must not be challenged' (Wood in Magistrale *Abject Terrors* 2). Said writes that 'reading is, fundamentally, an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment that changes and enhances one's knowledge for purposes other than reductiveness, cynicism, or fruitless standing aside' (*HDC* 66). Perhaps then reading is itself a humanist act, or as I examine in the following chapters, reading is a kind of '*ersatz* theology' for a secular world.

LITERATURE AS *ERSATZ* THEOLOGY

Life isn't the support-system for art. It's the other way around.

(Stephen King, *On Writing* 101)

Andy Mousley, one of the leading proponents of 'new humanism' within literary studies, asks the question: 'Is literature immanently humanist or is this the way English has *constructed* it?' (Mousley 'Introduction' 5). This question is vital for me, because it provides the key to unlocking what genre-style narratives like *This Old Man* might have to offer. Mousley goes on to suggest that 'a key component of humanism's broad, generalist ethos is the role it had within modernity as a *surrogate form of theology, the richest and most complex expression of which is literature*' (5-6). In making this claim Mousley goes on to point out that when he says 'surrogate theology' he is making a careful distinction from the 'fundamentalist "religion" that humanism has sometimes made of humanity' (6). This religion he says had:

> ...an inflated, god-like conception of 'man' as its centre, vested in an overly optimistic faith in human agency, progress and capabilities, whether these capabilities are located in rationality (for enlightenment humanists), in the imagination (for romantic humanists) or in the innate humanness of humanity (for a range of ethical humanists). (6)

In understanding how literature might be seen to act as *ersatz* theology it is important not to reject all that has been written by these 'religions' but to situate the humanist debate within a loose framework of modernity. It is also important to define just exactly what we might mean by *ersatz*. Mousley never specifically defines the term, but rather refers to how within modernity, literature 'mediates ontology' where 'religion had previously monopolised this role' (9). The term *ersatz*, whilst carrying an implication of substitution or replacement, doesn't imply rejection of the subject it replaces or substitutes. It implies

a stand-in for positon, a filling of a similar role. Rather than refuting traditional theology, literature can sometimes play a similar role, fill a similar space in people's lives. According to this line of thought, literature provides a kind of '*ersatz* theology' within the pluralist world of modernity.

Mousley gives a concise 'broad-brush' outline of the modernity that confronted the pre-modern mind:

> 1. The disenchantments, de-traditionalisation and de-sacralisation of world view set in motion either by the exercise of a sceptical critical reason or by the instrumental rationality, or both.
>
> 2. The denaturing of the so called natural, accompanied by the replacement of animist conceptions of nature by a secular, instrumental attitude towards nature as an inert resource: 'the disenchantment of the world is the extirpation of animism' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, 5).
>
> 3. The replacement of charismatic or customary authority by the need for rationally justified authority.
>
> 4. The opening up of gaps between values and facts, mind and world, knower and known.
>
> 5. Sceptical and/or ironic detachment from received ideas, habits, and customs. In its postmodern form, sceptical detachment might be seen as manifesting itself in the widely appealed to notion that meanings are always and everywhere contracted through society and language rather than given, and in a hermeneutics of suspicion which doubts the existence of any foundational principles, including human nature.
>
> 6. Specialisation and the division of the spheres of art, morality, and science (implying a scepticism about the universality of any one of them).
>
> 7. The separation of 'roles', viewed as inauthentic and merely external, from 'selves'.
>
> 8. Alienation, anomie and the sense that modern life had lost direction, foundations, meaning and *telos*.
>
> 9. Various attempts to'(re-enchant' the world and fill it with meaning and *telos*, humanism as a 'religion of humanity' constituting one such attempt. (*8-9*)

Mousley continues by saying that '[l]iterature, unlike religion (or some varieties of it), does not answer the various problems and challenges of modernity, as outlined above, but it stages them, throws them into relief, intensifies them' (9). In doing so, he says 'it urges us to consider, yet *not only* to consider, but to feelingly *experience* the question of the meaning and purpose of human life.' (9) This last point, I believe, is the crux upon which Mousley's theory hangs, and resonates closely with Chapter 1's thoughts regarding adventure driven genres like Horror. It suggests that literature is a place humans can go to mediate, or as I hope to show, meditate, upon meaning, philosophy, and ontology. More than this, it is a place where we *experience*, not just intellectually, but emotionally.

Of this shift into modernity, Rita Felksi writes '[c]ut loose from the bonds of tradition and rigid social hierarchies, individuals are called to the burdensome freedom of choreographing their life and endowing it with a purpose. As selfhood becomes self-reflexive, literature comes to assume a crucial role in exploring what it means to be a person' (*Uses of Literature* 25). It's interesting that the solution to such complexities is found to be present in this formation of the modern consciousness: a hermeneutics of suspicion, although in usage it is more like scepticism. In the modern world, the author writes in knowledge of this scepticism. Think only of Alexander Perchov in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* or even go back to Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* to see classic play made with the assumption of a resistant reader. One an unreliable narrator, the other the author of fictional letters, the affect of these characters is driven by the reader's ability to read coded signs. The author need not spell out how perverse Humbert is, nor how Alexander lies, because it is assumed the reader has agency and is in control of their reading process. Foer's case goes one step further, in that Foer is a character in the text. This fictionalised self draws attention to its artifice,

especially in contrast to Alexander's letters, in turn inviting readers to question what is truth and what is fiction. Modernity encourages scepticism, if anything, because it is built upon reason and rationality, which *should* call for constant questioning of the world around us.

Said suggests that because characters find their 'passable and permissible' genesis, their beginning, in the imagination of the writers they 'satisfy a human urge to add to reality by portraying fictional characters in which one can believe' (*Beginnings* 82). Not unlike Žižek's thoughts in Chapter 1 that Horror, in disrupting reality makes it more real, Said writes that 'the institution of narrative prose fiction is a kind of appetite that writers develop for modifying reality—as if from the beginning—as a desire to create a new or beginning fictional entity while accepting the consequences of that desire' (82). To draw this out further, fiction, no matter how speculative, is inseparable from its genesis in the *human* mind. For a fictional creation to exist in a text, it must by definition exist within the bounds of human imagination. Returning to Žižek's thoughts about the Real from Chapter 1 we are reminded that 'the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real… are not external to each other: at the end of the imaginary as well as the symbolic itinerary, we encounter the Real' (*Enjoy your Symptom!* 21).

Importantly, Said notes, there is a desire to see the world this way, and an acceptance of seeing it so, and of its consequences. Said goes on to write that '[e]very novel is at the same time a form of discovery and also a way of accommodating discovery, if not to a social norm, then to a specialised "novelistic" reading process' (*Beginnings* 82). In choosing to begin with the novel, Said notes, every novelist has adopted the genre as 'both an enabling condition and a restraint upon his inventiveness' (83). He goes on to substitute the words *authority* and *molestation* for *enabling* and

restraint (83). Using the OED and some meditations on common sense and Latin Said arrives at the following definition of *authority*:

> (1) that of the power of an individual to initiate, institute, establish—in short, to begin; (2) that this power and its product are an increase over what had been there previously; (3) that the individual reading wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived there from; (4) that authority maintains the continuity of its course. (83)

All of these notions, Said suggests, 'can be used to describe the way in which narrative fiction asserts itself psychologically and aesthetically through the technical efforts of the novelist' (83). At this juncture we might be concerned that Said has adopted an essentialist position that prescribes a seniority, or hierarchy, of authorship. But his second word *molestation* challenges the first, and in doing so shows the space within which literature operates: the space of the author reader-contract, the space within which the reader as Mousley would say 'engages in ersatz theology' (9-16), or as Rita Felski would say 'self-reflects' (*Uses of Literature* 25), or as I would suggest, meditates. Said describes this *molestation* as the 'responsibility of all [those] powers and efforts' (*Beginnings* 84). No novelist, he argues, 'has ever been unaware that his authority, regardless of how complete, or the authority of a narrator, is a sham' (84). *Molestation* is 'a consciousness of one's duplicity, one's confinement to a fictive, scriptive realm, whether one is a character or a novelist' (84). Said expands this thought by arguing that '[m]olestation occurs when novelists and critics [model readers] traditionally remind themselves of how the novel is always subject to a comparison with reality and thereby found to be an illusion' (84).

Said's theory is on the one hand so simple: authors act to write, they choose to begin, and from that point are bound by the limitations of their beginning. Readers act to read, aware that what they read is text. There is an agreement between reader and author, even if one of them is discontented with the result. But this agreement is a loose one

because readers bring their own agency, their own beginnings. It is this agency of the reader that allows literature to be ersatz theology/self-reflection/meditation. The author is severed; in a secular world, there is no all-knowing God, no Author with a capital A to determine the reader's experience of the text. So often these debates centre on texts which are 'intellectual,' texts that pose philosophical problems, texts that provide intellectual hypotheticals and ethical dilemmas. Texts that write to our emotional selves may prove harder to scrutinize in this light because we begin dealing with affect rather than intellectual play.

Late in his life Said said:

> Art is not simply there: it exists intensely in a state of unreconciled opposition to the depredations of daily life, the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor. One can call this heightened status for art the result of performance, of protracted elaboration (as in the structures of a great novel or poem), of ingenious execution and insight: I myself cannot do without the category of the aesthetic as, in the final analysis, providing resistance not only to my own efforts to understand and clarify and elucidate as reader, but also as escaping the levelling pressures of everyday experience from which, however, art paradoxically derives. (*HDC* 63)

Thus, for Said, literature (art) exists in unreconciled opposition to the depredations of daily life, the life of the author, the life of the reader, and the lives of the characters. It is this opposition within which a reader might approach a text to find subjective meaning informed by the Real, where such subjectivity provides both the space for a reader to self-reflect, and also a subjective experience to take away from a text.

Each reader, each time they read a text, brings a specific subjectivity to their reading, a personal experience that is uniquely theirs. In communicating this idea with another human, in whatever form, however, they surrender their particular idea to the shared and open space of author/reader speaker/listener in conversation. Thus reading is a *personal experience* that occurs in unreconciled opposition to or in dialogue with the

depredations of daily life. I would expand this to say daily lives, as surely there is a trace of the author's daily life in the text, marked by their decision (their agency) to begin the text when, where, and how they did. For both the reader and the author bring their daily lives to the text, their personal experience of the world. Steinbeck's choice to set *Of Mice and Men* during The Great Depression can carry a subjective coding to a reader today. Whether it is seeing a resonance of the effects of capitalism on workers' rights, or perhaps reflecting upon decisions of agency and existence, each reader approaches the book within their own unique space, a space marked out by the choices the author made to begin, and to finish, writing, and the situation within which the reader chose to begin reading. This is why we can pick up Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* eighty years later, and still find relevance today. Such agency forces a reader into forging thoughts and opinions they would not have had if they hadn't engaged with the conversation resting behind the cover of that particular book.

There is something interesting about what texts we are drawn to. Think of how often we hear a friend say of a book, film, or television show, 'it speaks to me.' But think too of how some texts produce strongly polarising reactions. One of my best friends, Rory, loves Thomas Pynchon, but despite his best effort to educate and inspire me (to the point we ended up naming our band after a Pynchon reference in a *Simpsons* episode), and however much I can appreciate Pynchon's craft, I personally find his work frustrating, difficult, and at times wilfully obscure. At the same time I know Rory finds some of my favourite texts overly sentimental. This is not to say that Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is better or worse than *IT* for example (don't tell Rory I said this if you meet him). And it is not to say that Pynchon is not valuable but rather his work resonates, speaks, with Rory in ways it doesn't with me. What is it about texts that draw such strong

attachment from some readers and not others? What is it about different readers? Perhaps Pynchon speaks to Rory's slightly more anxious and paranoid experience of the world; in his own words, it speaks to Rory's 'experience of the constant quest to understand within a framework that doesn't allow it' (in personal conversation, 2015). And King speaks to my overly sensitive, perpetually nostalgic, perhaps even naive experience. Perhaps Pynchon's sense of humour tickles Rory's, and I just don't get it.

Rita Felksi notes: 'Most readers, after all, have no interest in the finer points of literary history; when they pick up a book from the past, they do so in the hope that it will speak to them in the present. And the teaching of literature in schools and universities still pivots, in the last analysis, around an informed individual encounter with a text' (11). Informed by what or by whom? Informed by an *individual* encounter with the text that is also informed by every other text they've ever picked up. An encounter informed by their own cultural time and place, certainly; all texts come loaded, filtered, and coded from a cultural context. But also, an encounter that they experience intellectually *and* emotionally. An encounter that doesn't make a religion of mankind but rather casts us in relief; one that can provide reflection upon the self, and the world around the self.

HERO'S JOURNEY AS *ERSATZ* THEOLOGY OF HUMANIST PRACTICE

Maybe that's why God made us kids first and built us close to the ground, because He knows you got to fall down a lot and bleed a lot before you learn that one simple lesson.
(Stephen King *IT* 98)

Jean-Paul Sartre writes in 'Existentialism is a Humanism:' 'Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is' (Sartre 300). As we will see in the following chapter, the mythic structure of the Hero's Journey centres on the agency of the individual to change, and in doing so bring change to the world around them. Not just this, but to be heroic, sacrifice must be made for the betterment of the society he returns to[2]. For Sartre, existentialism *is* a humanism because it makes anything in life a *practice*. If we are only our acts, then love is a practice, charity is a practice (as are hatred and selfishness). One act does not make one a lover, or a giver, only continuing to act again and again makes a person who he or she is (Sartre 300-302). Rather, Sartre writes, 'the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero. What counts is the total commitment, and it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether' (Sartre 302). Similarly, in Campbell's and Vogler's mythic structure, the hero forges himself through his acts. The wisdom he earns from these acts must be taken back to his society where he might make it useful through further acts.

Said concludes *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* with the thought that:

[2] For the sake of clarity I will use the word 'he' when referring to the hero. 'He' was chosen as it is most consistent with the source material I quote from, but I use it to stand in for a non-gender specific hero.

> [T]he intellectual's provisional home is the domain of an exigent, resistant, intransigent art into which, alas, one can neither retreat nor search for solutions. But only in that precarious exilic realm can one first truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway. (144)

Said's vision of a self-reflexive criticism that writes contrapuntally against itself re-enforces a *quest* of knowledge; a quest of something unknowable and unachievable. This quest that knows that its success exists only in its constant struggle resonates strongly with Sartre's thesis of existentialism being humanism as practice, not a set theory or framework. The word *practice* I use specifically because it suggests a continued practice of acting. The never ending struggle that Said indicates ('Presidential Address' 290).

At this point I want to shift Said's thesis from the 'elite' to the 'ordinary.' I'll remind you of Rita Felski's quote earlier that '[m]ost readers, after all, have no interest in the finer points of literary history; when they pick up a book from the past [which all books are to some degree], they do so in the hope that it will speak to them in the present' (*Introduction* 11). People go to books because reading is like having a conversation, they go there to find meaning on some level, even if a specific intention has not been fully formulated. Following this line of thought, 'Joe Bloggs' doesn't consider himself an intellectual, and 'Joe Bloggs' doesn't necessarily consider himself a critic, but he still engages with the narratives he enjoys. It is this connection that I believe is most important to literature's place as what Mousley calls '*ersatz* theology' because it is this experiential, even emotional connection that makes the text *feel* important to a reader. But what of the 'self-reflection' of Mousley's *ersatz* theology?' Is it possible that emotional intelligence is also an act that can be practiced?

Murray Smith writes: 'Observing the behaviour of a person in a certain situation about which we have limited knowledge—as is often the case with a character in

fiction—we imaginatively project ourselves into their situation, and hypothesize as to the emotion(s) they are experiencing (Smith in Gorton 76). He calls this experience 'emotional simulation.' Kristyn Gorton argues that even such fictive 'emotions connect [readers] to a sense that relationships, whether the family, community, workplace, matter and that they will enable us to cope with the everyday struggles of life' (78). Emotions, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum elaborates, 'involve judgements in which…we acknowledge our own neediness and in-completeness before the parts of the world that we do not fully control' (Nussbaum in Gorton 78). Performed emotion within text has a powerful pull on the reader, drawing us close to the characters of our favourite novels, films, and television serials as we recognise a feeling of attachment. From there a sense of emotional risk develops that drives even the most complexly plotted thriller. It is emotion therefore that 'grips' a reader. As Andy Mousley writes, reading is an '*immersive experience'* and texts become *'objects of attachment*' that function as 'an antidote to the alienation, characteristic of modernity, of subjects from objects' (12). Mousley quotes Adorno that the 'object' in the form of the aesthetic image 'instead of following the bidding of the alienated world and persisting obdurately in a state of reification' is 'spontaneously absorbed into the subject' (12). This is not dissimilar to Said's earlier assertion that 'Art is not simply there: it exists intensely in a state of unreconciled opposition to the depredations of daily life' (*HDC* 63). The attachment to the text invites the reader to invest in the subjective content, to become immersed in the experience of reading, an experience that can reflect upon the challenges of their ordinary existence.

Mousley goes on to suggest that this 'spontaneous absorption is due to literature's sensuous and emotional appeal' (12). This appeal is driven by its '*affectively charged sensuousness*' (Altieri in Mousley 13), 'its *incarnation* or *embodiment* of facts or ideas in characters who simulate rudimentary human feelings/sensations/urges' (Mousley 13).

Mousley suggests that literature can constitute 'an advanced *form of emotional and sensuous immersion* because it represents complex and often conflicting emotional states/urges' (13). He argues that literature's reduction of life can act as an intensification due to literature's creative impulse to exploit the dramatic aspects of a theme or subject (13). He continues by suggesting this is what gives literature its depth, and its capacity to provoke debate and commentary (13). He is careful to note that although over time different writers and movements have privileged emotive or subjective intensity, thought and feeling share an organic relationship in literature (13). It is this relationship of thought and feeling, in his view, that creates a '*whole-person engagement*' that 'helps reverse modernity's damaging separation of life into distinct spheres' (13). Literature's ability to do this through a process of *estrangement* helps cultivate more complex and richer selves (14). Thus when literature 'estranges' or 'transports' us, it estranges the comfort of a '*near universality*' of 'human needs, urges, and anxieties' and 'emotions' and 'sensations' (14-15.) The resulting tension becomes a space within which a reader brings their own subjectivity, their own reflection. In engaging with his estrangement the reader practices empathy, or, as I would argue, compassion in seeking understanding. Bridging the space between the unknown (text) and the known (self) we find knowledge, and the possibility of cultivating 'more complex and richer selves.' This builds on Said's humanist ideal of 'sympathetically understanding' with 'resistance and critique' ('Presidential Address 1999' 290).

For these reasons, in Mousley's analysis, literature shares with religion fundamental questions about the nature and meaning of human life. Literary books therefore come to matter intensely to selves (as sacred books once did or still do) (16). This makes me think of Deborah Knight's story about the philosopher confused by why 'the sentimentalist is watching *Roman Holiday* in the first place let alone the umpteenth

time.' Furthermore, 'why is she ''weeping over it again,'' and why is she ''in an odd sort of way, happy while she weeps''' (Knight in Gorton 77). It's because these texts matter to us in ways we might find hard to conceptualise intellectually. They affect us on a sensual emotional level. These texts engage an emotional intelligence, and allow us to practice, or engage with, the very real emotions we struggle with on a daily basis. By seeing these emotive experiences cast into relief in other lives, and other selves, we subconsciously and consciously reflect on our own. The Hero's Journey is just one such structure in which this occurs, but as I've hinted earlier, one that re-enforces or celebrates a humanistic reading process.

The Hero's Journey

This one a long time have I watched. All his life has he looked away... to the future, to the horizon. Never his mind on where he was. Hmm? What he was doing. Hmph. Adventure. Heh. Excitement. Heh. A Jedi craves not these things. You are reckless.

—Yoda (*The Empire Strikes Back*)

Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' has been used widely in inter-disciplinary criticism. In my research I have seen it used for everything from a model of pedagogical structures, to accounting structures. One of the reasons for its wide usage comes from its methodological way of breaking down a 'text' into an understandable start-conflict-climax-end structure. The flipside of this is that it is extremely useful in 'fixing' or 'diagnosing' how structure is not working in genre based narrative (Vogler *The Writer's Journey xxvii-xxxii*). I would like to take it up as a kind of meta-structure for writing and reading, but I will get to that later. First it is important to understand what the Hero's Journey is, where it stems from, and how it relates to genre-style narratives like my novel.

Jean Bedford writes that one popular 'criticism (rather morally censorious)' of 'popular fiction' is that it is 'escapist, that is doesn't invite the reader to reflect on the issues of the world, but provides a way of avoiding doing so' ('Writing Genre' 89). She then explains that 'you could argue all narrative is escapist. It isn't lived life in the body in "reality" but an imaginary, and imaginative, experience brought about by the interpretation of the meanings of words on a page' (89). What Bedford draws to the fore here is that because popular fiction often departs from a realist portrayal of the world (more specifically verisimilitude to our lived existence), much is asked of the reader's imagination. There is also an assumption in any such criticism that readers are too unimaginative to draw any thoughts from a fantastical narrative. It's a fun dichotomy in which the reader is both assumed to have too much imagination in that they are willing to stray from 'realism,' but also not enough to be able to construct an independent interpretation from what they are reading. What I hope to suggest in the next chapter is that the Hero's Journey can be seen as a model for reading, a narrative that acts as self-reflection. After which, the reader returns to the world with knowledge, similar to the way the hero whose journey they have read returns to his fictional home with what he has learned.

Before looking at this extrapolation though, it is important to briefly unpack Campbell's model. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Campbell, using Carl Jung's theories of the collective unconscious and of archetypes, examines the existence of a monomyth in human psychology. While the psychoanalytical theories that Jung and Campbell refer to are problematic at best, the theories are nonetheless interesting and have continuing traction, particularly if we treat them, like all theories, as frameworks with which to bring our own subjectivity to our reading of the text.

Campbell's thesis in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is, in summary, that all story is drawn from myth, and that myth is a subconscious or unconscious space from which all human culture stems. The Hero's Journey is a model for understanding the structures of this monomyth. Campbell writes:

> It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religiousness, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic magic ring of myth. (3)

Craig Batty suggests that for Campbell, 'myth is an "opening" through which humans understand life and how to live it; a way of reaching beyond manifestation of the everyday scenario, and locating at its heart emotional experience that connects all of humanity as one' (48). Campbell himself writes that 'the whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale' (121). Batty quotes K. Cunningham who says that this universal structural pattern 'of the protagonist's movement across a narrative…also relates to patterns of living undertaken by humans; it '"conceptualizes a deep process of psychic growth by projecting it outward into a world as an adventure…[where] an older perspective or life-view is seen to break down and die, giving way to a broader, more inclusive appreciation of life"' (Cunningham in Batty 47). Campbell argues that '[i]t has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to carry symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant other human fantasies that tend to tie it back' (Campbell 11).

What Campbell, Batty, Vogler, Cunningham, Felski, and Mousley are drawing to our attention is that there is a space, a process of interpretation, between story and reader, a space in which the reader finds meaning, and that this space has a universality that is

still subjective. By whatever name we give it, text, myth, 'the fossil,' it is a common space of the imagination, a shared consciousness, where the conversation between author and reader is able to happen. A space that will be subjective each and every time it is approached.

Batty notes 'Myth is emotion; a truth which gives resonance. The myth's manifestation may be in the outer, physical action (as in the structure of the Hero's Journey), but it is always driven from within; created from human emotion' (Batty 45). While our heroes might no longer be gods, this mythic structure has carried over into popular narrative storytelling. In popular fiction we still see a dominant Aristotelian narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end, in which a protagonist faces conflict and finds resolution. And it is with this structure that Campbell begins.

Campbell writes that 'the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth' (Campbell 30). To convey how this operates in narrative terms, Campbell writes '*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow the boons on his fellow man*' (30) (italics Campbell's).

Christopher Vogler breaks down the Hero's Journey into the following helpful stages:

1. Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD, where
2. they receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE.

> 3. They are RELUCTANT at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but
> 4 are encouraged by a MENTOR to
> 5.CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD and enter the SPECIAL WORLD, where
> 6. they encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.
> 7. They APPROACH THE INMOST CAVE, crossing a second threshold
> 8. where they endure the ORDEAL.
> 9. They take possession of their REWARD and
> 10. are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the Ordinary World.
> 11. They cross the third threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and are transformed by the experience.
> 12. They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World. (19)

Before expanding upon these narrative points it is worth noting that Vogler stresses that it is not a set structure (*The Writer's Journey* 19-20) and Campbell's model does not list the points in order but rather as relating to parts of the world/sides of the threshold (245). Campbell, perhaps reductively, suggests that 'beneath its many costumes' all myth is the same (13). However, there *are* many costumes, 'a thousand faces' as his title suggests. Perhaps we can understand this in the sense that all texts share the nature of being text. They are all conversations held between author and reader through a medium that transcends time and space—'telepathy,' as King calls it (*On Writing* 103-105). The Hero's Journey, rather than being a totalising or unifying structure, can be seen instead as a reading practice, a process of interpretation and interrogation; a structure that shows character growth on a narrative level that mimics the process of growth that is provided by reading itself. It is also a process that celebrates self-reflexivity and compassion. I'll now briefly run through the model to examine how it reinforces a humanist philosophy of the kind Said and Mousley articulate. If you are already familiar with the Hero's Journey I apologise in advance for the following explication.

The Journey begins in the Ordinary World, the point of contrast for the Special World or Worlds the hero will visit on his adventure. There is then a clear difference between the world of the hero and the world of adventure. These differences can be seen to be physical. For example, in the film *Star Wars* (a famous example of the Hero's Journey), Luke Skywalker's home planet of Tatooine represents the Ordinary World, and the unknown Special World(s) of adventure are physically different locations: the Death Star, Yavin, Alderaan, etc. But the worlds can also be metaphorical, for example Luke crossing the bridge from adolescence to adulthood. Vogler stipulates '[t]he Ordinary World in one sense is the place you came from last. In life we pass through a succession of Special Worlds which slowly become ordinary as we get used to them' (87). This suggests, however, that if taken as a point of interpretation, then the Special World of the text becomes representative of the unknown in our own lives. This resonates with Mousley's and Felski's ideas that fiction can be a space of self-reflection.

Called to adventure by an external force such as a messenger or threat the hero either rejects or answers the call. Whilst persistent or outright refusal of the call often results in the narrative turning into a tragedy some refusal of the call reveals the humanity of the hero. Revealing their flaws, they reveal their ordinariness. But most importantly the call presents the hero with the moment of agency, a moment to decide to act.

Meeting a mentor figure the hero is given knowledge or 'amulets,' the latter symbolic of wisdom from mentor to hero. Batty writes that this 'suggests an emotional relationship between hero and Mentor' and 'links to generational wisdom and protection.' (60)

A guardian stands at the threshold of the Special World. According to Campbell this guardian 'stands for the limits of the hero's present sphere, of life horizon' (77). He likens the guardian's authority to that of a parent or that of social self-policing (77-78).

Defeating the guardian and passing the threshold the hero's Ordinary World self is killed and re-born as they enter the Special World. This re-birth facilitates the Hero's Journey being one of change, because the hero does not begin as hero, but rather becomes hero.

Crashing into the Special World, literally or figuratively the hero faces a number of obstacles, tests, and meetings that according to Batty 'force him to consider his actions and consequences' (62) The hero leans to look inward and outward respectively as he finds inner-strength, while also learning how to differentiate enemies from allies.

Heroes, Vogler suggests, 'in some way in every story…face death or something like it: their greatest fears, the failure of an enterprise, the end of relationship, the death of an old personality. Most of the time, they magically survive this death and are literally or symbolically reborn to reap the consequences of having cheated death' (Vogler 155-56). The hero's ego is resurrected, but in the process reborn, shaped by the experiences of their journey.

Survival of the ordeal presents a reward for the hero. The physical reward is also emblematic of emotional change. However, although the hero is changed, their journey is not complete until he brings this knowledge back to a divided world, until he makes the division of the worlds, ordinary and special, as complete as the divisions of his own self that occurred in apotheosis.

Tested one last time the hero brings the knowledge from the Special World back as applied wisdom (Vogler 199). Campbell writes that the hero glimpses a 'vision transcending the scope of normal human destiny,' no longer obsessed by 'his personal fate' but rather 'the fate of all mankind, of life as a whole, the atom and all the solar systems, has been opened to him' (234). In this last phase, Vogler argues, the hero must also shed the personality of the journey and build one suitable for the new world (198).

This hero, Campbell notes, is ‘the champion of things becoming, not of things become’ (Campbell 243). The hero shows evidence of continuing amongst the new Ordinary World he has returned to, as the new self, forged in resurrection.

Catharsis

Campbell writes:

> The battlefield is symbolic of the field of life, where every creature lives on the death of another. A realization of the inevitable guilt may so sicken the heart that, like Hamlet or like Arjuna, one may refuse to go on with it. On the other hand, like most of the rest of us, one may invent a false, finally unjustified, image of oneself as an exceptional phenomenon in the world, not guilty as others are, but justified in one’s inevitable sinning because one represents the good. Such self-righteousness leads to a misunderstanding, not only of oneself but of the nature of both man and the cosmos. The goal of the myth is to dispel the need for such life ignorance by effecting a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will. And this is effected through a realization of the true relationship of the passing phenomena of time to the imperishable life that lives and dies in all. (238)

Here Campbell draws attention to how the field of battle (myth/story/film/novel) is symbolic of life. We all live on surrounded by the death of others, in the knowledge our own end is inevitable. Elsewhere Campbell writes about the up and down forces that ‘constitute the totality of life.’ The hero must ‘know and love’ these forces (*kathodos* and *anodos)* ‘if he is to be purged of sin (disobedience to the divine will) and death (identification with the mortal form)’ (Campbell 28). In the long quote above, which epitomises Campbell’s thesis, he points to the two absolute ways of responding to the awareness of our mortality. First there is the Hamlet-like option of being cast down by despair. The other extreme is to live in a fantasy of our own self-importance (self-righteousness). Campbell argues that myth dispels the ‘life ignorance’ (which includes the

cosmos—the world around us) caused by such extreme reactions by reminding us of the shared humanity that outlives us all. The hero's agency is thus always driven both by and for the 'universal will,' the 'imperishable life that flows within us all.' Perhaps then, the hero's journey can be seen as exemplary existential humanist practice. In life we are constantly called to new challenges, be they personal, professional, moral, or ethical. The hero's journey celebrates the agency of the individual to act within and for a society. Following this line of thought, the hero can also be seen as exemplifying how humanist practices engage with texts. The hero, in this case the reader, is called to adventure by a text. There may be reluctance in the form of a resistant reader (a hermeneutics of suspicion), but nevertheless the reader-hero crosses the threshold into the Special World of the text. In this world they face challenges and are joined by allies both within the text (in the form of characters) and externally (in the form of other texts they may have encountered). They are guided by mentors (the author and all those they have read before). In the text they face the ordeal subjectively (the author's thesis, intentional or otherwise) and in doing so realise their ego is not all-knowing. The hero-reader is rewarded with knowledge as a result of their effort. However, unless this knowledge is brought back to their 'real world' and applied, the hero is not heroic (not humanist). In bringing knowledge back to the 'real' world their ego is resurrected.

This structure parallels the earlier argument that humanist practice is the making of knowledge with compassion and that this is done through action and self-awareness, agency and self-reflection, the two central pillars of the Hero's Journey. Perhaps this structure in its simplest incarnation is just the structure of growing, of learning to shoulder burdens, and eventually passing wisdom on to those coming after you. It is then a part of our humanity that is timeless and shared across cultures. We walk inevitably to death, and left with no absolutes except our own existence, we are left with only our agency to shape

our experiences. The hero's journey celebrates how this agency might be used to change both our internal and external worlds for the betterment of those around us. The hero must experience internal change to make external change. The internal change is the acquiring of knowledge, and for this to be a heroic process the knowledge must be brought back to the Ordinary World, which, in the case of reader as hero, is their lived experience.

But writing is also a form of reading. This book I have written is my conversation with Stephen King's book *IT*, as well countless other narratives; it's a response to reading. In the following chapter I will explore my reading of the climax of *IT* through the lens of the Hero's Journey as I brought it back to my life; in doing so I will draw out the centrality of agency in my reading, a reading that informed my writing.

STEPHEN KING'S *IT*

You pay for what you get, you own what you pay for… and sooner or later whatever you own comes back home to you.

(King *IT* 98)

Earlier I quoted Stephen King's off-hand remark in *On Writing* that plot is the dullard's choice for excavating the fossil of fiction. It's a remarkable statement from a man whose fiction so often takes the form of complexly plotted fiction. Perhaps it can be taken as a warning against using plot heavy-handedly, letting plot predict character and not the other way around. A deterministic plot might be the real danger. *IT* is certainly one of King's more complexly plotted novels. In its current edition, the publisher markets it as an 'Epic Thriller,' instantly situating it within a pantheon of texts that follow mythic tradition. Published in 1986, *IT*'s 1,300 plus pages recount the story of a group of childhood friends, the Losers Club, who are called back to their hometown to face an evil that haunted them as kids.

From line one, the narrative voice calls our attention to the artifice of its fiction, and in doing so invites us to suspend disbelief. 'The terror which would not end for another twenty-eight years—if it ever did end—began, so far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain' (*IT* 3). The self-awareness of the narrative voice draws attention to a storyteller voice between the narrative and the reader. The presence of that mediation establishes a level of artifice. In drawing attention to the artifice, the narrative framing asks of the reader: if this is not truth, what am I looking for?

King's opening line belongs to a first chapter that acts more like a prologue. In a glimpse of the 'Special World' we meet Bill and his little brother Georgie as children in their home in small-town Derry in 1958 folding paper boats. When Georgie's arm is torn

off by Pennywise the Clown who is lurking in the storm drain, and Georgie subsequently dies, the stakes are set early. If children can die, any character can. The introduction is continued with a glimpse of the Special World of Derry in 1984. The evil continues when a gang throw Adrian Mellon off a bridge in a homophobic hazing. Pennywise is witnessed to have been under the bridge but, despite the number of witnesses, nothing is said of the clown at the criminal trial. It is made apparent that the gang of boys let the evil in, and that Pennywise wields some kind of persuasive power. These opening chapters situate Pennywise in Derry, and Derry as the Special World, before we even meet the 'heroes' of the text.

A year later in 1985, six remaining members of what we learn was called the 'Losers Club' receive phone calls from the seventh member, Mike Hanlon. Mike has never left Derry and has a modest job as a librarian, but the rest have all moved away from their childhood town and within their Ordinary Worlds are professionally highly successful. These six returning characters could be likened to an ensemble hero, but Bill Denbrough is clearly separated as 'main' protagonist. As each character literally receives a call to adventure, their responses exemplify a number of responses to the call. Stan Uris presents a violent example of the refusal of the call as he suicides in the bath. Unwilling, or unable, to face the horrors of the Special World of his childhood, he rejects the call in the most absolute way possible. The framing of the chapter through the perspective of his wife Patty shows the instant and direct effect of the refusal of the call upon the Ordinary World. Instead of focussing our attention on Stan's existential crisis, the deep third person perspective of Patty focusses our attention on who is effected most: his wife (his Ordinary World).

Richie Tozier is now a successful radio DJ who feels at a loss after accepting Mike's call. After adopting his fictitious radio character voices to appease his travel agent

he feels like himself again. 'It was easier to be brave when you were someone else' (73). Struggling with shadows of addiction he also struggles with the shadow of his former self '*You're not Rich 'Records' Tozier down there; down there you're just Richie 'Four Eyes' Tozier*' (76). 'Down there' in the book often thematically refers to the sewers under Derry where It lives, but also can be read as how the place represents everything we bury deep, everything we repress.

Ben Hanscom we meet in a bar; he is a tall, lean, attractive architect at the top of his game, and he is so distressed by the call that even the bartender is worried about him. He can't remember anything of his childhood except that, 'I was fat and we were poor…and I remember that either a girl named Beverly or Stuttering Bill saved my life with a silver dollar' (97). He is going back though because 'all I've ever gotten and all I have now is somehow due to what we did then, and you pay for what you get in this world (97-98). Called to adventure, Ben, although reluctant, is aware of a responsibility, a debt to life. He knows that he must face what is due in the Special World of his childhood.

Eddie Kaspbrak has ended up in a marriage with an overbearing woman similar to his mother. As the memories bubble up during a train journey Eddie makes the observation that returning to Derry was like returning to the childhood he couldn't remember. '*Because it's not a train; it's a time machine. Not north; back. Back in time.*' (122). Derry, for those who left, is severed in time. Derry is separated from the Ordinary World by time and space.

Bill Denbrough, now a successful author (who shares some resemblances with King himself), receives the call from England, where he is married to a woman he 'still loves' (149). He tells her fragments of his past in Derry assuring her he could tell her more if he tried, and that the memories lurk like they're behind a cloud. Remembering a

‘blood-promise’ he made with the other members of the Losers Club, the scars begin to return to the palms of his hands (163-66); the promise: ‘that if it ever started to happen again…we’d go back. And we’d do it again. And stop it. Forever’ (166). Bill’s chapter is the last of the calls and reinforces the duality of the call. Each of the characters receives the physical call from Mike, but the inner call comes from their own character, and the promise they each made as children. The call is thus from the Special World of the present, and the Special World of the past.

Unlike the rest (except perhaps Richie), Beverly shows little or no reluctance to the call. In fact she shows excitement at seeing Bill again. Instead she faces the controlling emotional and physical abuse of her partner Tom. The reluctance to accept the call can be read as showing elements of the guardian to the first threshold. Thus Richie’s childhood insecurity can be seen to haunt him like a spectre (or guardian), that he begrudgingly must slip past in order to return. Beverly, on the other hand, has the physically threatening threshold guardian of Tom, her abusive and controlling partner. After escaping another physical beating at his hands, Beverly leaves for Derry.

Already we can see, as Campbell and Vogler suggest, that the Hero’s Journey is not a set structure, but one that can be likened to a series of narrative beats. The beats don’t necessarily need to occur in a set order, or be told in a set order, and they can vary in volume, but their presence or absence is noticeable. These beats flesh out a developmental narrative of the hero from childlike selfishness to self-aware adulthood. King’s interweaving of two chronologically separate narratives in *IT* make it necessary to depart from a linear reading of the text and in its place follow the points of the model of the Hero’s Journey.

The first obvious problem of reading *IT* through this model is that the narrative can be read either as two separate narratives or a narrative in two parts. This framing

shows just how much reading affects meaning. Take for example the figure of the mentor. If we consider *IT* as one narrative in two parts, then Mike can be seen as the mentor. By staying he becomes the veteran of old adventures who is familiar with the Special World. The gang have all forgotten the past. Their lives in the Ordinary World have brought them better things and when they return to Derry they need Mike's help to remember their quest and to find direction in a disorienting world. However, if we consider the beats differently, and the events of '58 as a separate journey to the one of '85, then we can see how Ben can be read as a wise outsider who brings knowledge to the gang as children. This potential is made evident when George plans the building of the dam in the creek, and again when he creates the silver bullets which eventually act as a failed weapon against Pennywise. Similarly, from a structural point of view, we can read the division of the Ordinary World from the Special World differently. For example, one could read the Ordinary World as the lives the gang live away from Derry, and Derry as the Special World. Alternatively, and I believe more powerfully, we can read the Ordinary World as adult life and the Special World as childhood. But I think there is a third way of looking at the text, which incorporates the failed or aborted journey. In this model we see the children's section as a failed journey and, as Vogler and Campbell suggest, the failed journey (like the refused journey) leads to tragedy (Campbell 59 & Vogler 109). In not defeating the evil as children, the gang entered adulthood as tragic figures.

Regardless of which way we dissect the structure, there are no shortage of tests, allies, and enemies. The gang forms an obvious alliance and the number of events shows a variety of tests and enemies. There are the human enemies like Henry Bowers, Al Marsh, and Tom, who start out as men who bully, and who let the evil enter them, allowing them to become truly horrific figures. But there are also the manifestations of *IT* that each of the gang faces, like Richie's werewolf and Eddie's leper. In these

confrontations the Losers Club find inner strength and strength in each other. As adults the tests continue when the gang return to Derry. Ben sees Pennywise as a vampire in the library before finding a balloon signed Pennywise, and finally finding a book he borrowed from his childhood graffitied in red ink, like blood. After these events Ben 'stood in the new sunlight, suddenly wondering what was happening to the others' (661). As an adult he stands in sunlight, a symbol of change, but he still thinks of the others before himself. And this, like the thrust of the Hero's Journey, is central to my reading of *IT*: none of them acts alone: they act for each other. Not surprisingly this is most evident in the beats of the Ordeal and the Resurrection.

Whichever way you approach dissecting the novel, the Ordeal in *IT* is the first Ritual of Chüd, when the Losers Club attempts to defeat It for the first time. It resides under Derry in the guise of a giant spider. Piles of bones betray the lost lives of other children who have surrendered to the seduction of It. During the confrontation, Bill, who as a child suffers from a severe stutter, is transported into the void, where he races toward the deadlights. As he races through the void, his teeth clenched on the spider's tongue, he passes an old turtle who speaks to him: '*son, you've got to thrust your fists against the posts and still insist you see the ghosts…that's all I can tell you. once* [sic] *you get into cosmological shit like this, you've got to throw away the instruction manual'* (1277) These words are from an old rhyme that Bill practices to help his stutter. Overcoming his inner struggle with his stutter, his struggle to communicate, Bill finds the words and is able to yell them at the spider. As the spider reels, Bill hears the voice of the turtle again: '*stand, be brave, be true, stand for your brother, your friends; believe, believe in all the things you have believed in*' (1280). The voice goes on to list symbols of innocence and hope: the policeman who'll take care of you, the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, that your mother and father love you, that courage is possible and words will come smoothly. In

rapture Bill realises he does believe in these things and that 'things turned out right a ridiculous amount of the time' (1281). With this glimmer of transcendence, similar to that of the resurrection, Bill is sucked back to the 'real' world where his friends are facing the spider. The spider, now maimed, retreats and they congratulate themselves on their success. But Bill hears the voice of the turtle '*I'd finish it now; don't let It get away…what can be done when you're eleven can often never be done again* (1284). But the gang don't finish it then, and so it disappears, only to return some twenty-seven years later.

By not completing the quest the gang return without the elixir. Bill has a hint of the elixir, the knowledge that to defeat the deadlights (It's true form) he needs to believe, but like the others he begins to forget. By the time we meet them as adults, the six who have left Derry have all forgotten the past events completely and, in one way or another, live in tragic childless marriages. In these lives they, as Campbell suggests of the hero who refuses the call, lose 'the power of significant subjective action and become victim[s] to be saved' (59). Even though they have built 'empires of renown' (read successful professional careers) whatever they have built is 'a house of death: a labyrinth of cyclopean walls to hide from [them their] Minotaur' (Campbell 59). Hence, Bill cannot properly commit to Audra and there is distance in his marriage, Richie struggles with addiction to cope with his insecurity of character, and Bev lives with a Minotaur in the form of her abusive partner (who is reminiscent of her abusive father). [3]

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[3] It is worth acknowledging that Beverly's arc through the ordeal could be the subject of its own paper, and there is not room to get into it in this one. Shadowed by the abusive relationships with her father and partner, the scene where the boys all have sex with Beverly in succession leaves an uncomfortable feeling. Tony Magistrale suggests that the act 'cements their union; she becomes the centre of their magic circle, and serves as an effective feminine force to counterbalance the evil of the female It' (*Landscape of Fear* 118). Campbell includes a discussion on 'meeting the goddess' (109-120) and 'woman as temptress' (120-126) in his analysis of apotheosis. Such an analysis may be applicable to this scene.

The Resurrection comes when as adults the gang face It again. Structurally interwoven with the events of the Ordeal, our attention is drawn to how the Ordeal informs, and affects the Resurrection. This interweaving also draws attention to It's warning to Bill as a child that *'what can be done when you're eleven can often never be done again'* (1284). King sets up the confrontation with the spider incarnation of It, just as it happened to the gang as children: 'It was an exact replay of what happened before—at first' (1286). But then Richie notices the first difference: he sees Audra's body hanging in the web, alive not dead (1286). This alerts us to a second difference: unlike the first time the gang faced It, we are present in Richie's point of view and not Bill's; the chapter is even sub-headed '*Richie'* not '*Bill.*' It first displays concern when she is challenged by Bill *and* Richie. Using the voices of his radio characters, Richie gives himself the support he needs to help Bill; he reaches in, to reach out. Richie hurtles through the void as Bill did and reaches the deadlights, It's true form, which he finds stretch infinitely and are alive and pull like a magnetic force. The deadlights are pulling Bill across a threshold and Richie can see inside his friend's leg like an x-ray (1291). As Bill begins to slip through, Richie looks deep within himself. He 'summoned all of his force and shouted… ''*Pull us back or I'll kill you! I...I'll Voice you to death!*'' (1291). Richie finds his strength when he needs it to save his friend. He is successful and It pulls them back to the 'real' world, a place Richie believes 'he would never think of…as exactly "real" again; he would see it as a clever canvas scene underlaid with a criss-crossing of support-cables…cables like the strands of a spiderweb' (1291). Richie has the strength Bill has lost. Magistrale suggests that Richie, through his love of rock and roll, has held on to some part of childhood. He suggests that rock and roll taps into a 'sense of personal and collective disenfranchisement' shared by young people (*Landscape of Fear* 119-120). It's interesting that in childhood we are still creating our reality, still structuring our symbolic

order. By tapping into childhood we are tapping into a time when we were closer to the Real.

As Bill and Richie arrive in the 'real' world (return to their corporeal bodies), Eddie, who suffers from asthma and is a hypochondriac and generally afraid of life, watches as Bill slumps to the floor and Richie struggles with the Spider. He thinks to himself '*Why are we just standing around here? We could hurt It while It's occupied with Richie! Why doesn't someone move for Christ's sake?' (*King 1292) But then he hears the voice of his overbearing mother '*Don't go near that thing, Eddie! Don't go near It! Things like that give you cancer!* (1293). Screaming at his mum to 'shut up' he leaps forward and fires his asthma-aspirator down the spider's throat. As the spider reels it tears Eddie's arm off and as he falls to the floor, Bill stands up shakily. Eddie's sacrifice has given them all a chance.

Bill and Richie chase It who eventually turns to face them. It offers them the lures of the material world '*money, fame, fortune, power*', it even tells Bill it can give him his wife back (1321). Bill and Richie decline the offer through their actions, and instead, they attack the Spider. But it wasn't really their fists that struck but 'their combined force, augmented by the force of the Other; it was the force of memory and desire; above all else it was the force of love and unforgotten childhood like one big wheel' (1322). Bill thrusts his hands into It's body and tears out It's heart. As he staggers away he hears the voice of the Other, 'the Turtle might be dead, but whatever had invested it was not. *"Son, you did real good*"' (1324).

In this Resurrection we see a number of arcs reaching climax. There are the obvious arcs like Eddie's sacrifice, and Richie reaching his own resolution and self-

realisation. For a section, it is unclear if Richie is alive or dead, so we can also see a kind of re-birth occurring after his revelation near the deadlights. But we also have Bill (whether intentionally or not), heeding the knowledge learnt back during the ordeal that a) he can't do what an eleven year old can, and b) that It needed to be killed properly. He enlists Richie's help instead; he has learnt that he is stronger with allies, stronger when he admits he has weakness. He also sees that the strength came from the love they shared. But there is something more. When Bill and Richie return to the void as adults the Turtle (which can be read as God, Hope, Good, to the deadlights' Devil, Despair, Evil) is gone. But, despite the Turtle being gone, in acting, Bill is able to then hear its voice: '*Son, you did real good*' (1324). Thus despite the child-like innocence that lets one believe in the tooth fairy now robbed by adulthood, Bill realises he is able to recreate its essence through his acts.

To complete the journey cycle, Bill must return with this elixir to the Ordinary World. While the club make their way out of the tunnel carrying Audra's catatonic body, the town of Derry collapses as the warren of evil beneath it crumbles. There is much to be written about evil being literally present in the infrastructure beneath the town but I will leave that for another day and instead focus on Bill's return to the Ordinary World. As soon as the Loser's Club exit the tunnels their memories begin to fade. The members of the club who leave the town forget more quickly. Bill stays while Mike recuperates.

Audra is catatonic and Bill cares for her. Examining his aging body in the mirror, Bill contemplates his plan to save Audra: '*You're too old for what you've got in mind, Billy-boy. You'll kill both of you.*' (1365) But then he reminds himself '*If we'd believed that, we never could have…have done whatever it was we did'* (1365). Already Bill has forgotten the events, but he can remember the lesson learnt. It's a lesson he sees every time he bumps into the kid on the skateboard: '*You can't be careful on a skateboard*

(1369). Loading Audra onto Silver, his old bike, the amulet from his childhood, he tells himself to '*Be brave, be true, stand.*' Pedalling faster and faster as he races them down the hill he 'raced to beat the devil' (1372).

At this juncture the narrative voice breaks into direct second-person address: '*leaving. So you leave'* (1372). The narrator continues addressing the reader with what I think is one of King's most impressive passages of writing:

> *'Not all boats which sail away into darkness never find the sun again, or the hand of another child; if life teaches anything at all, it teaches that there are so many happy endings that the man who believes there is no God needs his rationality called into serious question.*' (1372-73)
>
> So you leave, he says:
>
> *And if you spare a last thought maybe it's ghosts you wonder about…the ghosts of children standing in the water at sunset, standing in a circle, standing with their hands joined together, their faces young, sure, but tough…tough enough, anyway, to give birth to the people they will become, tough enough to understand, maybe, that the people they will become must necessarily birth the people they were before they can get on with trying to understand simple morality. The circle closes, the wheel rolls, and that's all there is.*
>
> *You don't have to look back to see those children; part of your mind will see them forever, live with them forever, love with them forever. They are not necessarily the best part of you, but they were once the repository of all you could become*.
>
> Children I love you. I love you so much.
>
> *So drive away quick…drive away from Derry, from memory…but not from desire. That stays, the bright cameo of all we were and all we believed as children, all that shone in our eyes when we were lost and the wind blew in the night.*
>
> *Drive away and try to keep smiling. Get a little rock and roll on the radio and go toward all the life there is with all the courage you can find and all the belief you can muster. Be true, be brave, stand.*
>
> *All the rest is darkness.* (1372-3)

Sutured into the middle of Bill's reckless childish race down the hill that brings Audra back to consciousness, this meditation can't help but be read against the resurrection of Audra through Bill's embracing of his childhood. As hero he brings back childlike faith and innocence from his adventure: he uses Silver, as an amulet from his Special World of childhood, and he brings it to Audra. In bringing a more open mind back from the world of childhood, he brings Hope to his Ordinary World, a belief that if he acts he can be the agent of change. But he had first to birth the child inside him, just as the child had birthed the man he is now. He had to let that child go and become its own part of the world. Thus, this time he can let go of the memory, but as he says '*not the desire*.' The secret is to be able to visit childhood and reclaim the desire but let go of the memories. The childlike desire he will hang on to, just like Richie hung on to his through his love of Rock and Roll and made up characters. But the narrator continues. He notes that visiting this Special World of childhood is like a circle that closes. Like the structure of Campbell's heroic journey. But as the circle closes, the wheel rolls, again and again and again. This is reinforced in the penultimate lines of the book. 'But it's nice to think that childhood has its own sweet secrets and confirms mortality, and that mortality defines all courage and love. To think what has looked forward must also look back, and that each life makes its own imitation of immortality: a wheel' (1376).

AND ME AND MY BOOK?

You don't have to look back to see those children; part of your mind will see them forever, live with them forever, love with them forever. They are not necessarily the best part of you, but they were once the repository of all you could become.

(King 1372-73)

In these words from *IT*, I find resonance with my novel, the novel which the section *This Old Man* comes from. In these words we are brought back to beginnings, '*the repository of all you could become*.' Back in September of 2013 as I walked around my hometown I saw the ghosts of my childhood in the places I walked. The years that followed my leaving Albury in 1996 held a number of traumas, some private and some I have mentioned earlier in this thesis. But revisiting my old places: Eastern Hill, the Hume Weir, my old family home, the River, and the pool, I revisited childhood. I found myself engaging with who I was then and who I am now, and perhaps who I could still become.

Because of the way moving had severed it from my later life, childhood was a magical place, a place before the difficult times of adolescence and adulthood. When I read *IT* I found not just a book that resonated with my meditations on this subject, but an author and a voice that resonated with my philosophy of life. *IT* spoke to me in the way gripping books do, and the novel of which *This Old Man* is a part is me speaking back, entering and continuing a conversation. It's not my place to speak about what my novel says, but I hope that is brings some of my unique perceptions to the conversation and hopefully it itself resonates with readers down the track to continue their own.

This exegesis is my conversation with the academic process of the PhD. It's neither here nor there whether there is or isn't, as Campbell sought, a monomyth that all narrative stems from. But what this structure I've explored in this dissertation reveals is a reading process. The reader is called to adventure by the author, and faced with trials, enemies, and allies in the reading process. There is an ordeal (arrival at their own

exegetical reading), and there is returning with the elixir to defeat the problems in their own lives. Like Campbell's structure it is a cyclical process, repeated again and again with text after text. It is a humanist process of reading in which we seek meaning or knowledge we can bring to our Ordinary World. The repeating of the act opens itself up to constant reflection, the kind of self-reflexive humanism that Said called for, the kind of self-reflection that Mousley suggests makes literature a kind of *ersatz* theology.

In my reading of *IT* I have found all these themes of childhood and adulthood, but perhaps that's because subjectively that's what I was looking for. I'm writing from the point of turning 30, stepping into adulthood. King certainly wrote about childhood, but I brought the interpretation. And for me, that is what I can bring to the conversation, my subjectivity. The Hero's Journey gives a framework of a compassionate quest for knowledge, a humanist reading process. It's an interpretation, a philosophy, and, as Said writes:

> To reveal wavering and vacillation in all writing is useful to a point, just as it may here and there be useful to show, with Foucault, that knowledge in the end serves power. But both alternatives defer too long a declaration that the actuality of reading is, fundamentally, an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment that changes and enhances one's knowledge for purposes other than reductiveness, cynicism, or fruitless standing aside. (66)

Perhaps then it's not so much that The Hero's Journey is a reading practice, or that Horror is by nature a meditation on agency (although as I've shown in this paper there are grounds to say both) but that reading is a heroic practice. A meditation where the world of fiction disrupts our reality to reveal the Real. And in this void we have no choice but to act in (re)creating meaning again and again, each time more informed and with more empathy. The Hero's Journey then is not a structure that's inherent in story, but is a heroic journey to re-examine our Ordinary lived world through the Special world of fiction.

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