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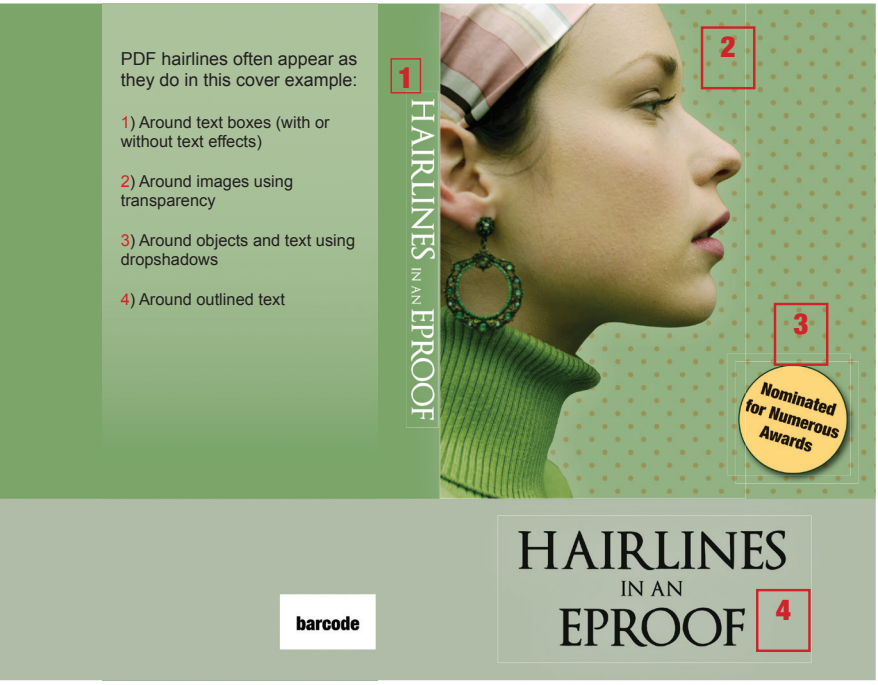

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Long the province of connoisseurs, collectors, hipsters, and eccentrics, the music and art of the margins has begun to find its way into the mainstream. Kurt Cobain took to wearing Daniel Johnston t-shirts before his death; Sufjan Stevens organized a concept album based on the work of Royal Robertson; an illustration by Henry Darger recently sold at auction for more than half a million dollars; The Shaggs' story was turned into a Broadway play. But aside from the ways in which the boundaries of the artworld, music criticism, and even popular taste are being redrawn, it is becoming increasingly clear that the creations of artists and musicians working on the margins may be invested with a particular kind of philosophical significance as well.

American Idiots is neither a book of traditional art or music criticism nor an encomiastic work written from the uncritical perspective of a fan. Rather, it argues that outsider art and music pose significant philosophical problems concerning the nature and meaning of incompetence in the arts. It argues specifically that particular tokens of incompetent outsider art may be regarded as staging important aesthetic and ethical problems with regard to the phenomenon of responsibility. Drawing upon figures such as Heidegger, Levinas, and Simon Critchley, *American Idiots* examines the work of prominent outsider artists and musicians/composers, exploring how in each case their work is invested with a philosophical significance that is tied directly to its deficiencies and shortcomings. In each instance the incompetence on display provides us with key clues regarding the phenomenological structure of obligation and answerability.

Think Media: EGS Media Philosophy Series

David Laraway is an Associate Professor of Hispanic Literatures and Cultures in the College of Humanities at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

ISBN 978-1-940813-38-7
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9 781940 813387

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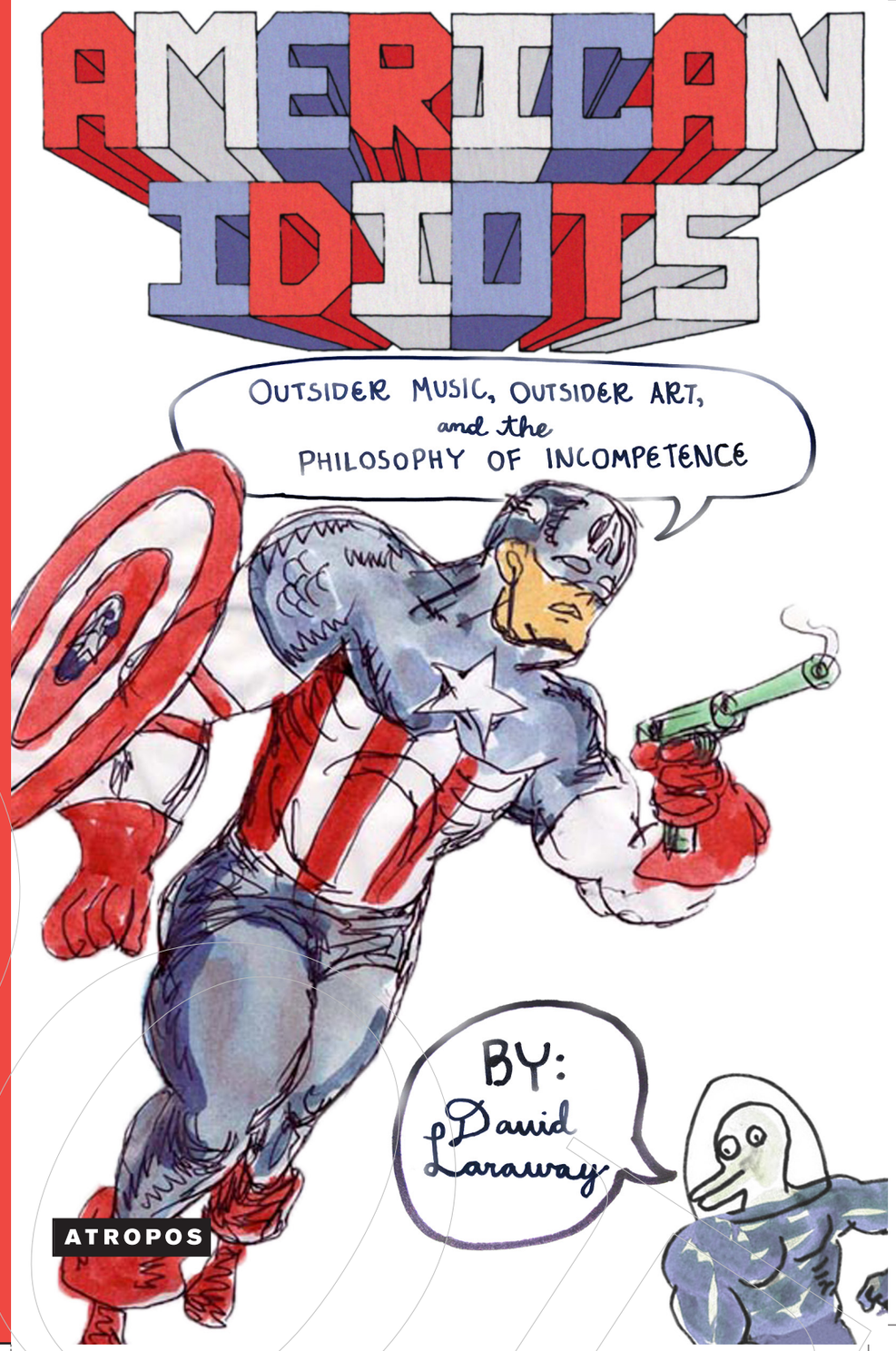

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AMERICAN IDIOTS

OUTSIDER MUSIC, OUTSIDER ART, and the PHILOSOPHY OF INCOMPETENCE

BY: David Laraway

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ATROPOS PRESS
new york • dresden

Think Media EGS Series is supported by the European Graduate School

Cover art courtesy of Daniel Johnston
Cover design by Kaelan Pratt

ATROPOS PRESS
New York • Dresden
151 First Avenue # 14, New York, N.Y. 10003

978-1-940813-38-7

American Idiots:

Outsider Music, Outsider Art, and the Philosophy of Incompetence

David Laraway

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I am not altogether certain whether the thin air and astonishing vistas of the Swiss Alps heighten one's sense of clarity or paradoxically distort it, as if things somehow become too real in such a setting. The mountains surrounding Saas-Fee, Switzerland are almost too majestic; the air is a little too clear, the views a little too sublime. Perhaps it was this heightened sense of clarity that begins to shade over into the unreal that attracted Nietzsche to his mountain retreat in Sils-Maria, a few valleys to the east. At any rate, the seeds for this book were sewn there, during the seminars that I was privileged to attend during the summers of 2012 and 2013 at the European Graduate School. The setting was one of tremendous intellectual and artistic foment and I look back with gratitude on my experiences, which brought me into contact with a diverse array of brilliant seminar participants from around the world, to say nothing of the extraordinary group of faculty members with whom I was privileged to study, including Michael Hardt, Slavoj Žižek, Peter Singer, DJ Spooky, Lev Manovich, Geert Lovink, François Noudelmann, Alenka Zupančič, and others. I am grateful to have learned something from all of them.

Two of them deserve special mention and thanks. First, it was the genius of German philosopher Wolfgang Schirmacher to have brought together such a diverse and distinguished collection of individuals in an absolutely unique and inspiring setting. Those that know Wolfgang will attest that he is a singular figure. I cannot imagine how anyone else could have done what he has done with the European Graduate School and in quite the same way. I express to him my gratitude for his suggestions and criticism of an earlier version of this manuscript; Boris Groys was also a wonderfully sensitive reader of my work and I am grateful for his patience, dedication, and wise observations.

There are few memories that I shall treasure more of my time in Saas-Fee than the pleasure of studying tragedy with Simon Critchley in an impossibly bucolic setting. I recall that it struck me with particular force one morning as we sat in a modest but well-appointed classroom on the hillside above the hamlet. The windows were open and we were discussing Sophoclean tragedy, our discussion occasionally punctuated by a light breeze and the bleating of goats, their bells shaking as they roamed the hillside just outside our window. I couldn't help but be reminded of the etymology of *tragedy* itself: *tragos* [goat] + *oide* [song]. That odd moment crystallized for me the unique character of my experience with the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee: it marked an unexpected, and not entirely unamusing, moment of serendipitous harmony between high culture and prosaic reality, between focused intellectual labor and a kind of natural, unaffected spontaneity.

So, I offer the reader here my own goat-song, even if it verges more on the comic rather than the tragic. I owe Simon a debt of gratitude not only for his advice and suggestions but more importantly for the effortless and graceful way in which his mind seems to range unfettered over so many fields of inquiry and more particularly how graciously he invites others to join him in his intellectual forays. I have learned and benefited immensely from his example.

My work at Saas-Fee and on the manuscript that would eventually become this book would never have been possible without the very generous support of Brigham Young University's College of Humanities. During a time of economic recession and a far too pervasive, far too gloomy, narrative about the decline of the liberal arts, BYU was busy inaugurating a new Center for the Humanities and embarking upon a range of projects designed to reaffirm the value and dignity of humanistic inquiry in higher education. To the College, and particularly its visionary dean, John Rosenberg, as well as his successor, J. Scott Miller, I express my deepest appreciation for having supported my research so generously.

Thanks as well are due to my colleagues at BYU who graciously offered to read through parts of the manuscript. A condensed version of Chapter One and key elements of the argument of Chapter Two were presented at a BYU Humanities colloquium in January 2015, where I received substantive feedback from faculty members in a variety of disciplines in the college. Part of that first chapter was also presented at a meeting of the Popular Culture Association in Chicago in April of 2014.

The kind and very practical assistance of others has proven invaluable in bringing this project to completion. Although none of them bear any responsibility for the interpretations and arguments I develop in this book, I am deeply grateful to the following: Manuel Gracia Rivas, President of the Centro de Estudios Borjanos in Borja, Spain; Dick Johnston, agent and faithful brother of Daniel; artist and collector Andy Nasisse; Lenny Smith and the good people at Asthmatic Kitty; Scott Ogden of Shrine Gallery; Kaelan Pratt for his cover design; Naomi Hurd for her assistance in preparing the manuscript; and, finally, to the remarkable faculty at EGS and the staff at Atropos Press, particularly Peggy Bloomer. To all, my deepest thanks.

Finally, I would be remiss were I not to mention the enormous debt of gratitude I owe to my wife Michelle and my children Alex, Simon, and Eva. Although they did not choose it, they have lived with this project as long as I have. They have probably heard much more outsider music and seen much more outsider art than they had any right to be subjected to. I hope that the failure of these words to thank them properly for their love and patience is a sufficient proof of the impossibility of the task.

.....

I do not know whether it is irony, modesty, or perhaps just a lingering, persistent desire to hedge off criticism in advance that leads me to say this, but I am tempted to suggest that if this book is taken for an exercise itself in incompetence I will count it a compliment. I too am something of an outsider, at least in the fields of art and music criticism. I have found myself thus unencumbered by the kinds of disciplinary constraints that more traditionally qualified investigators might have been sensible enough to respect, not to mention the specialized knowledge they might have brought to bear on a project such as this. Perhaps my "liberation" is in this regard illusory and even irresponsible. But I hope to have at least been faithful in some way to the objects of my own untutored desire.

Arthur Danto once referred in one of his book's prefaces to that peculiar hermeneutic law that renders critics and readers unfailingly wiser than authors. I am content to let this book serve as a confirmation of that indisputable truth.

We shall let no one, least of all science, take from us our ethical duty to be a fool, and our right to be a "holy idiot."
—Wolfgang Schirmacher

Unsere größten Dummheiten können sehr weise sein.
[Our greatest stupidities may be very wise.]
—Wittgenstein

Figure 1.1. Elías García Martínez, *Ecce Homo*, ca. 1930. Fresco, Santuario de Misericordia de Borja, Spain. Oil on plaster. 20 x 16 in. ©2016 Archivo Centro de Estudios Borjanos. Used by Permission.

Figure 1.2. Elías García Martínez, *Ecce Homo*, ca. 1930. Fresco, Santuario de Misericordia de Borja, Spain. Oil on plaster. 20 x 16 in. ©2016 Archivo Centro de Estudios Borjanos. Restoration by Cecilia Giménez, 2012. Used by Permission.

Preface

Behold the Ape

In the late summer of 2012, the internet was abuzz with the story of a fresco in a church in Borja, Spain that had come off somewhat worse for the wear after a botched restoration attempt. The original painting, *Ecce Homo*, by Elías García Martínez (1858-1934), had deteriorated badly and an eighty-something parishioner, Cecilia Giménez, had taken it upon herself to touch it up. Ms. Giménez, well-intentioned but with little discernible talent, produced a work that was noteworthy precisely because of its stunning incompetence (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). It was only a matter of time before news outlets worldwide were running the story of the simian Jesus and scarcely any longer until the new version of *Ecce Homo* had generated a flood of memes and internet parodies. Elderly but enterprising, Ms. Giménez wasted little time in bringing the art history-news-meme cycle to its proper conclusion: she began offering her own work for sale on eBay (Govan).

In Ms. Giménez's defense, it was not as if a Velázquez or a Goya had been defaced. García Martínez was a competent, if minor, provincial painter and his work has tended to be lightly regarded by art critics and historians, largely because of its anachronistic character.[1] That said, his oeuvre is no doubt well enough suited for the devotional purposes for which it was originally produced: chapels throughout Spain are littered with such works and García Martínez's work was perhaps no better and certainly no worse than many similar pieces tucked away in the provincial churches that dot the Spanish countryside. Indeed, one might even be forgiven for speculating that it may have been precisely the homey, utterly non-threatening character of *Ecce Homo*—a painting that would never be confused with a masterpiece of religious portraiture, even for local

1 The scholarly literature on García Martínez is scant. A single monograph on his work has appeared in print, a locally produced, encomiastic catalog of an exhibition (Martínez Ortíz).

worshipers with little grasp of art history—that almost seemed to solicit a novice's attempts to spruce it up.

I believe that the *Ecce Homo* episode may have something to teach us about both our current cultural moment and our art-historical milieu. Certainly the swiftness with which the news story went viral reveals something about our attraction to the missteps of others and the almost voyeuristic interest that we seem to take in their failures, to say nothing of our eagerness to indulge in a bit of schadenfreude and our enjoyment of the vague sense of superiority that the artistic miscarriages of others seem to confer upon us.[2] It must be noted as well that Ms. Giménez's work was not just bad per se, but that it was interestingly bad. And this distinction, it seems to me, has now become relevant and interesting in a way that it might not have been in the past. The fact that what was clearly a failure as a project of art restoration could turn out to be a triumph in other ways—particularly in terms of its commercial potential and artistic notoriety—is also worth noting. Finally, we should observe that the entire affair serves as an invitation for us to reflect upon both the nature of painting itself—it is harder than it looks, even when the standard to be met is only the unexceptional work of a second- or third-tier artist—and the not-inconsiderable skill set required of anyone wishing to restore an old fresco to its former (admittedly modest) glory.

Each of these points is, I think, interesting and worth further investigation, even if I can only mention them in passing here. In the present study I shall be drawn rather to a different sort of problem that could also be said to be instantiated in the *Ecce Homo* affair, one that may prove to be of no small philosophical significance. Consider, first of all, how the episode in question seems to suggest that the democratizing impulse of the social world we inhabit is genuinely universal and bewilderingly indiscriminate in its tacit issuing of a call to any and all to participate in the creative enterprise. We might even go so far as to say that is as if the fresco itself had interpellated Ms. Giménez as an artist, issuing a strange demand to which she apparently felt bound to respond, albeit in a manner that clearly illustrates the gap between the nature of the call that was proffered to her and the response she was prepared to give. The monstrosity of the restored fresco thus manages, in an altogether unexpected way, to show us something of the peculiar power that latently inheres in even a

2 I might point out that Mark O'Connell's brief ebook on bad art also takes the *Ecce Homo* affair as his jumping off point for a discussion of our keen interest in failure.

pedestrian sample of devotional art. Indeed, I think it would not be too much to say that the episode discloses something of the yawning gap between, on the one hand, an irresistible, mysterious call that the work of art issues to whomever is prepared to hear it and, on the other, the artist's painfully limited capacity to respond to that call in an appropriate and aesthetically satisfying way.

It is this gap, this space between a potent and troubling call and an incompetent response, that shall interest me in this book. Now, there have always been bad artists, to be sure, and there is no reason to think that artistic talent was for some reason more parsimoniously distributed in previous generations than it has been in our own. One imagines that some of our cave-painting ancestors were undeniably more gifted than others: perhaps even before the dawn of history the less skilled or visionary were obliged to surrender their charcoal crayons to their more capable peers. For that matter, it's probably safe to say that mediocrity, by definition, is just the default setting for most of humanity most of the time, including those among us that would aspire to be artists and musicians. I do not think that we have been much inclined to give a great deal of thought to the significance of these forms of mediocrity in the art world until now, or at least we have not tended to grant them their full philosophical weight, as I see it. But it strikes me that the tide is now beginning to turn on that count. Ours is a world in which bad art spontaneously seizes our interest in its own right. We have become collectively fascinated with the way in which certain artists seem to be strikingly ill-equipped to respond to whatever muse it was that had summoned them. And although one could probably venture any number of sociological or psychological hypotheses as to why this might be the case, I shall argue in the pages that follow that artworks such as the restoration of *Ecce Homo* may cast a light upon a crucial problem that I shall not hesitate to identify as philosophical and, more specifically, ethical.

We would be hard-pressed to find a more representative case of an outsider artist than Ms. Giménez. Her work seems to me to quite clearly provide a suitable jumping-off point and invitation for us to reflect upon the philosophical significance of the intervention of a non-artist in the the art world. For Ms. Giménez was, and her recent entrepreneurial ventures aside, certainly continues to be, an outsider in the purest sense of the term, an interloper in a field that as much as any other is characterized by its institutions, its rituals, its sacraments, and its gatekeepers. If we wish to

understand not just the art-theoretical and sociocultural aspects of our current moment but its latent philosophical dimensions as well, it is not just to the credentialed and anointed that we must turn. Rather, I argue that there is a great deal to be learned—indeed, there may even be something absolutely crucial to be learned—from those would-be artists who find themselves (sometimes inadvertently, sometimes not) on the side of non-art.

Of course, to speak of outsider artists and musicians and identify them as such precisely in virtue of their limitations and their failure to integrate themselves into any broader artistic tradition is to run the risk of employing a vocabulary that some might find problematic or at least insensitive. Most readers, I hope, will catch the reference in the title of this book to the classic 2004 album by Green Day. Even so, the term I employ may sound sufficiently harsh that I must add an urgent qualification and explanation. By no stretch of the imagination is it my intention to deprecate or belittle those individuals featured in the essays that follow, some of whom have struggled with emotional or psychological problems or other conditions that have placed them in the most precarious and vulnerable of social positions. But I will not go so far as to claim that my choice of terms is merely descriptive either, or at least not entirely so. I recognize that some of the terms used in the pages that follow, including "incompetent," "inept," "untalented" and so on, are customarily used both normatively and in a pejorative sense, in order to suggest that the one to whom such epithets are applied has somehow failed to meet some standard or other and that they are thereby to be faulted for having failed to do so. I accept the fact that the terms generally perform a normative function. However, I reject any suggestion that they must do so pejoratively. On the contrary, I hope that my argument might be read as call for such terms to be revalorized since they may turn out to describe artists and artistic phenomena that have a great deal to teach us about the nature of the demands that art makes upon us and the challenges that we face in responding appropriately to them. By the foolish things of the world are the wise brought low, according to one of the teachings of St. Paul; I personally cannot but study the work of the artists and musicians I have chosen without coming away with a fresh appreciation for the ways in which their work has enlivened my sense of the ethical dimensions of art. I would hope that at the end of the day my readers put down this book with that same sense, regardless of my own incompetence and deficiencies in developing my arguments in the way I would have liked.

So, if nothing else, I hope that if the title of this work stings or seems somehow harsh, the thoughtful reader will finally come to realize that if one is to insist that the term "American idiots" nevertheless retains an air of the pejorative about it, then it may be better applied not to the visionaries that I discuss in this book's pages but rather to the armchair critics and collectors who may profess to enjoy outsider art and music but who always seem to do so from a perspective of comfortably ironic detachment. This will not do: the ethical earnestness of the artists that I study here constantly brings us up short, reveals to us how compromised our own moral vision may be, how cheaply and, yes, how idiotically, we have adopted it and have attempted to maintain it at any cost.

A Ghost Story

Every book, of course, contains its own shadow-book, the ghostly traces and absences of the figures and ideas that subtend the visible text while remaining themselves hidden. I have come to appreciate anew how difficult it is to settle the debts that one owes as an author and in revising the final form of the manuscript that follows I have been struck by the paucity of references to, say, Nietzsche—our greatest thinker of stupidity, that half-brother to incompetence—and one of his contemporary heirs, Avital Ronell, who has done so much to keep our attention trained on the philosophical richness of Nietzsche's legacy in that regard. There are doubtless many others and, if this book were to have aspired to true comprehensiveness it would have been obliged to make a still greater effort to bring these ghostly figures out of the shadows. Alas, I suspect that any such attempt at comprehensiveness would have only resulted in even greater tangible evidence of my own incompetence and lack of suitable qualifications to carry out such a project. Rather than attempt to conceal the flaws in my work through an overly lengthy bibliography, I have chosen to live with those flaws, preferring an incomplete and imperfect work to one that might never have come fully into being. It is often said that the perfect is the enemy of the good. Perhaps that line of thinking should be extended a step further: in my case, it might be claimed that a good but never-quite-finished manuscript is the enemy of the acceptable one that has nevertheless found its way into print.

That said, there are two other debts that I hasten to acknowledge in this introduction, one partially visible, the other less so. Echoes of Simon Critchley's work on the problematic gap between infinite demand and finite response may be heard throughout the pages that follow. The occasional bibliographical references that I provide to his work are altogether insufficient to document the influence he has had upon my own thought, even if I have misinterpreted it or bent it to conform to my own needs and interests (perhaps even rendering it unrecognizable to him). Critchley's work on Levinas's notion of infinite demand and his interpretation of art as the sublimation of trauma, a way of making the demands of infinite responsibility bearable, casts a long shadow over the present work, I hope for good.

I should like to acknowledge one more debt here, evoking by name a ghostly presence that also hovers above and between the words of the work. Ghosts, of course, haunt us because they seek justice, the righting of wrongs that we have committed or have allowed to persist. And I feel compelled to acknowledge, without pretending to pay the debt in full, the way in which the work of Wolfgang Schirmacher has made its influence felt in the essays that follow. Schirmacher has developed over the course of his career a rich philosophical anthropology that analyzes the human in terms of a variety of its capacities and modes of being in the world. One of these he identifies as *homo compensator*. Schirmacher suggests that *homo compensator*'s response to the fact of our inherently flawed character is to attempt to fully ameliorate it. But this would entail a measure of self-deception, insofar as this impulse tends to ascribe our flaws to external forces rather than afford us the possibility of recognizing them as our own. According to Schirmacher, *Homo generator*, by contrast, understands his flaws and shortcomings in an altogether different way, not seeking to eliminate or camouflage them by means of any compensatory drive but instead grants them their own autonomy and integrity, acknowledging that such flaws have a worthy role to play in a life authentically lived. The final lines of his essay, "On the Inability to Recognize the Human Flaw"—which I have chosen as one of the epigraphs for the present work—recall for me Dostoevsky (another ghost who, in the absolute seriousness with which he regards the phenomenon of idiocy, is another revenant haunting these pages): "We shall let no one, least of all science," writes Schirmacher, "take from us our ethical duty to be a fool, and our right to be a 'holy idiot.'"

These lines succinctly capture, I think, the sentiment that I labor at length to describe.

American Idiots is finally a meditation on not only outsider art but also incompetence, idiocy, insufficiency, and excess. It is a reflection on the ways in which each of the figures I examine not only embody a particular stain or flaw in their work but who, through the nature of their artistic creations, demonstrate that those flaws may in fact be an essential part of a life authentically lived, a life lived in response to demands that we perhaps are never ready to fully acknowledge. Even if each of the figures I have chosen to feature in each of the following chapters is American—and even if they all demonstrate a peculiar kind of what I call "American (don't-)know-how"—the moral of their stories is truly universal, in an almost Badiouian sense. We are all, in a way, troublingly skilled at concealing our own flaws, especially from ourselves. Few of us have the courage to disclose those flaws in the pursuit of a stance of radical openness and radical vulnerability. What I find endlessly fascinating about each of the artists explored in the pages that follow is their willingness in their work to commit themselves to their cause in ways that cannot help but bring up short their viewers and listeners. We are accustomed to engaging the art world on our own terms and they will not let us do so. Their fidelity to their own obscure muse is absolute and unquestioning. It obliges us to rethink what we had believed ourselves to know about how we might engage the work of art and the demands that it would appear to lay upon us.

If at the end of the day the reflections that I offer with respect to the work of Daniel Johnston, Henry Darger, The Shaggs, and Royal Robertson do not finally line up strictly as art and music criticism on the one hand or philosophy on the other, I do hope that they offer landmarks and reference points by means of which other scholars more capable than I will be able take their bearings. If nothing else, I have tried to be faithful to this (loosely) Kantian insight: that any philosophical discussion of art that would shirk the hard labor of interpreting individual works and artists will turn out to be empty, just as any study of the artists at issue that fails to attend to the philosophical questions such as I have tried to touch upon will to some degree be blind. I shall have to leave it to the reader to determine the extent to which the enterprise has been successful.

Introduction

Inside, Outside, Around, Through

There can be no doubt that "outsider art" is a critical term that has been on the ascendancy since it was introduced by Roger Cardinal in 1973. By now it has become an integral part of our art-critical vocabulary, taking its rightful place alongside the allied notions of *art brut*, naïve art, folk art, and so on.[1] At that time that Cardinal began to employ it, the term "outsider" still had a certain literal resonance, since the physical spaces inhabited by the artists who created the sorts of works which were collected and displayed by figures such as Jean Dubuffet were far removed from the spaces policed by the duly appointed gatekeepers of the art world. In lieu of studios, galleries, and museums, the works in question were produced and displayed (if, in fact, they were displayed at all) in insane asylums, prison cells, and perhaps the odd doctor's office. Things have changed a lot since then, of course. When it comes to the most prestigious museums and galleries, outsider artists no longer need to sneak in through the back door. They may walk in through the front, collectors and connoisseurs—checkbook at the ready—trailing close behind. Perhaps it goes without saying that there are entire galleries and institutions (the Intuit Center, the American Folk Art Museum, the Collection de l'Art Brut to mention a few) that are now devoted to housing and displaying works that not so long ago would never have been seen and certainly not professionally curated.

Things are not so terribly different in the world of music either. The time has long since passed when work produced by marginally talented and eccentric figures (or those that were even certifiably insane or disturbed) could not aspire to find an audience. The lo-fi movement, along with the

1 In addition to Roger Cardinal's canonical work, the reader may find excellent overviews of the subject in Rhodes and Maclaglan; the periodical *Raw Vision* is an invaluable resource as well. For an excellent survey of the *art brut* phenomenon and its connection to outsider art, see Peiry.

emergence in recent years of a certain DIY aesthetic, has made it possible for us to find a place for musical creations that might have otherwise fallen upon deaf ears. The enduring popularity of a number of artists who struggle with emotional and psychological challenges—together with the proliferation of distribution platforms that allow artists of all stripes to share their work more easily than ever—counts as evidence, I think, that the doors of the musical establishment (or at least what's left of it) are as wide open now as they have ever been.

All this goes to show that we have been witnesses to an intriguing evolution of the notion of outsider art itself. We are no longer concerned with art and music created by figures that are, so to speak, spatially separated from the more competent, as the term "outsider" itself would suggest. The public spaces of collectorship, exhibition, and curation that might have once upon a time been closed off to, say, an Adolph Wölfli or a Wesley Willis, have now been thrown wide open. So of course we must ask: what exactly could the word "outsider" in the phrase "outsider art" possibly mean today? What work could it perform at a time when a savvy artist might well wear the term "outsider" as a badge of honor? What is the significance of the gesture that would allow us continue to identify an artist as an "outsider" when he or she has gained admittance to the most prestigious galleries, whose pieces sell at auction for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and whose work is meticulously scrutinized and dissertated upon by professional art historians who employ a technical vocabulary that would be all but unintelligible to many of its creators? If the term "outsider" is to continue to have any cachet—and, again, there is no question that it is circulating more broadly now than ever before—then we might reasonably be expected to say something about just what the term might mean today.

Jan jagodzinski (note that his name is written in lowercase) has pointed out that the challenge of characterizing outsider art may be thought of in a variety of ways. On the one hand, he points out, we may elect to frame the problem in terms of identity: the art world might be regarded as a political institution which, as such, polices its territory always in terms of an ineliminable, exclusionary binary (i.e., "us"/"not us"), even if it would be happy to concede to outsider art its own political and identificational integrity (160). Alternatively, we might regard the institutions of the art world as essentially parasitic in in their own right, albeit in a conflicted and problematic way. Just as Derrida attempted to think through the notion

of hospitality so as to highlight its ambivalence with regard to a graceful welcoming of the other as well as a kind of latent hostility, our art galleries may also be regarded as always already subject to an endless wavering between territorialization and deterritorialization. Their role therefore may be seen as, to evoke jagodizski's apt phrase, an "institutional management of difference," by purporting to play host to madness, in the guise of underscoring something of the essentially mad core of reason itself (cf. Derrida; jagodzinski 160, 161).

What jagodzinski has helpfully pointed out, however, is that both of these modes of locating outsider art have tended to simply re-authorize well-established conservative values, endowing them with a veneer of alterity but in just such a way as to effectively neutralize them, leaving everything that is most critical unaddressed and the values of their host institutions placidly unchanged and untouched:

> Folk art and naïve art (what was once pejoratively called primitive art) have been comfortably accommodated into the gallery system, as has women's art, African American art, and so on. The institution of art has become a "dealer" in social justice, wherein the moral agenda of the New Left has been betrayed by a neoliberalist agenda that has cleverly co-opted what were forms of radical subjectivity into various forms of liberatory transformations based on democratic liberalism with global designer capitalism that is able to manage difference. What was once considered "outside" becomes consumed as quickly as possible in the name of equality and justice, the distribution of power remains unchanged. He notes that Walter Ben Michael's paradigmatic study on the way diversity is politically managed to simply reproduce the current system of inequality in the United States is a case in point. (161)

Jadozinksi's point is not too far removed from Žižek's familiar take on the nature of contemporary capitalist ideology: namely, that it manages to advocate on behalf of a wealth of *au courant* progressive causes, but always as little more than a surreptitious brief for capitalism itself. It cannibalizes emancipatory rhetoric just as comfortably as it wields neoliberal discourse in order to ensure that the entire discursive field is fully covered and nothing at all could ever fall outside its purview. Even competing and contradictory discourses may be advanced simultaneously in order to further global capitalism's reach (Žižek, "Liberal Utopia"). In response to these art-theoretical dead ends, jagodzinski has sketched his own proposal for engaging outsider art. His own preference is to develop readings of

outsider art in the mode of Deleuzian schizoanalysis, as a way of addressing what he calls the "untranslatable excess" that resists any facile attempt at hermeneutic closure (162). We must begin, he claims, by acknowledging that the task of outsider artists is to assemble their own "imaginary world through art," given that they are unable to let themselves be absorbed into the social world in the same way that most of us are. The outsider project will thus ultimately lead back to an externalized unconscious that is materially grounded in the bodies of the artists themselves. As jagodzinski puts it, "the inside is the outside with Outsider artists." Whereas our propensity as "non-outsider" viewers is to see "what is foreign or uncanny [become] tamed and assimilated into a common sense world to ward off any forms of anxiety," outsider artists, on the other hand, "are able to continuously try and translate what they themselves are unable to grasp as the primal scenes of their own psychic development through their bodies" (162-63). He rounds out his account of the "outside" of outsider art by developing nuanced readings of particular outsider artists (Mark Hogancamp, Daniel Johnston, and Henry Darger) "whose schizophrenic unconsciousness is externalized into their own narratological worlds so that they can be externalized and contained within them" (163).

Jagodzinski offers us a perspicacious take on the problem of outsider art in general. He recognizes that there is no way *around* the dialectic of inside and outside, but rather that one must move, as it were, *through* them. I adopt a similar stance in the pages that follow. I shall forego any attempt to obviate the interpretive challenge posed by outsider art and music by simply maneuvering *around* it, pretending to redraw boundary lines according to identificational criteria that purport to be inclusive or, in a Derridean vein, regarding the problem in terms of an unstable or shifting game of (de)territorializations. Indeed, I do not regard the challenge posed by outsider art and music as (primarily) semantic, rhetorical, political, or even aesthetic, although the task of fully explaining outsider works may on some level involve elements of all of these. Rather, I am interested in exploring what might be described as the "ethical core" of outsider art. If the challenge of making sense of outsider art continues to commend itself to us in topological terms—i.e., if it obliges us to continue to employ the vocabulary of "outside" and "inside"—I will attempt, like jagodzinski, to think *through* the problem rather than skirt it.

As fruitful as the tools of schizoanalysis may be in generating fresh readings of the work of the artists chosen, my approach will nevertheless

be somewhat different. In the pages that follow I prefer to broach the inside/outside frame in terms of another topological concept, one that I take to be particularly germane to helping us think through the central ethical challenge that outsider art seeks to address: proximity. Taking a cue from Levinas, I shall not regard proximity here in crudely spatial-temporal terms, as a way of describing (in an almost geometrical way) the relationship that obtains between determinate, discrete entities (and much less as a narrowly spatio-temporal term). Rather, the kind of proximity at issue involves a kind of radical existential openness, a willingness to expose oneself in all one's vulnerability to the infinite demands placed upon us by an Other. A hallmark of this kind of proximity is a certain capacity for sensibility, a willingness to suffer a wound inflicted by that Other (Levinas, *Beyond Being* 63, 74; cf. Peperzak 169 and Westphal 226). We might then think of those aspects of an outsider artist's work that most immediately tend to draw our attention—its amateurishness, incompetence, mediocrity, and so on—as sensible manifestations of the artist's radical openness to a call that perhaps he or she alone can hear. By understanding the outsider artist's project in terms of its proximity to the source of an unsettling call (which may be all but inaudible to us spectators or listeners), we might begin to appreciate its ethical dimensions.

Now, this may all appear rather abstruse, so perhaps we can articulate the interpretive challenge of outsider art in the following way. When dealing with one of the fanciful artistic creations of, say, Royal Robertson, or one of the compositions of The Shaggs, we might feel obliged to take up one of two possible interpretive stances. On the one hand, we might attempt to engage the work sympathetically by somehow seeking to place ourselves—as readers, viewers, and critics—also "outside" established institutional frameworks and canons of judgment and in some sense alongside the artist in question. On the other hand, we might—for very good reasons—deem that particular approach impossible and instead regard such creations from a comfortable—perhaps even comfortably ironic—distance, one that would allow us to enjoy the work without pretending to understand it "from the inside."

While both these ways of posing the question already involve a certain kind of "inside/outside" topology, I would suggest that we need not feel compelled to fall into such predictable interpretive *aporias*. What so many of us find so tremendously moving and potent in the work of artists such as Henry Darger and Royal Robertson is the recognition that we

find ourselves engaged by an artist who is fully committed to answering a call which perhaps they alone can hear. Their proximity to that Other from which the call issues is defined not spatially or even in crudely relational terms but in terms of the artist's responsiveness, their willingness to hearken and respond to a call that issues from beyond them, that makes a particular demand upon them. I shall suggest that the problem of responding to outsider art is thus not one of taking up a particular position "inside" or "outside" the world opened up by the particular artwork but by, at least in part, maintaining a certain kind of ethical proximity to the work that cannot be reduced to the familiar quasi-spatial trope implied by terms such as "outside" and "inside."

Now, one might object that the notions of proximity and answerability that I employ in order to make sense of outsider art could be germane to the creations of more traditionally gifted artists as well. Perhaps, one might say, all good art—and not just the conceptually problematic and often poorly executed pieces associated with outsider art—may likewise be understood to evince a form of (ethical) responsiveness, of commitment, of a kind of proximity, understood as something like the hearkening to a call. What, we might ask, is finally the difference between an outsider artist like Martín Ramírez who paints his works on discarded paper bags because he lacks access to other materials and, say, the MacArthur genius grant recipient who floats from one lucrative artist-in-residence gig to another, earning plaudits for her bold use of ephemeral or non-traditional media? Might it not be the case that, differences aside, each could be construed as exemplifying a particular kind of commitment or fidelity in their work, regardless of their differing degrees of skill or access to the traditions and institutions of the art world?

It is important to point out that the work of the outsider artist is not characterized exclusively in terms of his or her responsiveness or commitment to heeding a call that issues from beyond them, although this may indeed prove essential. Equally important, I would suggest, is the way in which the response of the outsider artist to that call discloses in a uniquely potent way its own inadequacy and insufficiency. And this is, I would claim, something that characterizes outsider art in general. The structure of the work of the outsider artist is such that it discloses in a peculiarly striking way an unbridgeable gap: here, a demand laid upon the artist which can only be called infinite and unsparing; there, a painfully finite and inadequate response to that demand. In other words, the proximity of

the artist to the source of the call that beckons them may not be reduced to any insider/outsider dialectic of the sort that is so commonly found in discussions of outsider art. For it is measured in terms of an ineliminable, unbridgeable gap between on the one hand a call that is infinite and unrelenting in the demand that it issues and on the other the paucity of the resources that the artist can muster in response to it. The work of the skilled, astute, "insider" artist may not disclose the gap between the two since his or her skills and adeptness at conforming to the protocols of tradition and the artworld typically conceal it. But the outsider artist, I shall suggest, cannot help but reveal something of the structure of ethical responsibility in their attempts to address art's demands. It is in this regard that they stand, as it were, outside the symbolic order, as their work seeks to address—always in a radically deficient way—the unreasonable excesses of the call which only they appear able to hear.

That, at any rate, is the short answer I can offer. The long answer, the proper answer, can only be given in the details of the individual essays that follow. It will only emerge through the patient and systematic study of the particular creations of those individual artists and musicians often identified as outsiders. It is only there, down at ground level—at the level of the particular artists and the particular works at issue—that we can begin to see how outsider art and music may be regarded as constituting a kind of painfully finite response to an infinite demand. The essays in this book attempt to do just this as they develop localized readings of the works and artists in question.

Perhaps it would not be too much to say that the artists and musicians that I shall discuss have precious little in common other than a trait that we might describe simply as incompetence, whether it be their incompetence with respect to the actual execution of their works or their incompetence at navigating the unspoken social and institutional protocols that every artist—no matter how outré their reputation—is expected to master. The first chapter will lay the groundwork for the following ones, as it broaches the problem of outsider art and music by means of a philosophical examination of the notion of incompetence. In my view, the time is ripe for a properly theoretical examination of the notion of incompetence, one that accounts for its aesthetic and ethical significance in the realm of art, broadly construed. It is this chapter that I sketch a philosophical account of incompetence in the realm of art. I do so by way of comparison with better established philosophical discourses

and tropes, namely, good old-fashioned American pragmatism and the notion (much discussed by Heideggerians such as Hubert Dreyfus) of "skillful coping." Of course it is uncontroversial that pragmatism in its many varieties, including its neo-Heideggerian ones, is capable of doing philosophically respectable work. So I take it as kind of a working assumption that if it is reasonable to attach philosophical significance to a notion such as skillful coping, then it must also be reasonable to assign philosophical significance to its contrary. Thus I attempt to sketch in the first chapter a kind of rudimentary account of incompetence as a trait that, when exemplified in the design or execution of particular works of art, may disclose to us something of the nature of the demands—aesthetic, certainly but even more importantly, ethical—that the work of art may make upon us. It is in this respect, I argue, that we may regard outsider art and outsider music as being of a piece.

Just as there is there is nothing particularly skillful about the execution of works such as Cecilia Giménez's restoration of *Ecce Homo*, the artists and musicians that I examine in the chapters that follow have also produced work which, on some level, is incompetent in its design or realization. This is not to say that none of the figures under discussion—visual artists Henry Darger and Royal Robertson and musicians Daniel Johnston and The Shaggs—is not skilled in one way or another (although even this modest claim may be challenged in the case of The Shaggs!). But it is to claim that their work exemplifies in an absolutely critical way some degree of incompetence, which I shall claim in turn is internal to the meaning of their work, rather than being an unfortunate and incidental quirk. In every case, I argue that the artists and musicians in question miss the target at which they have taken aim. But it is in their very misfires and miscues that they manage to reveal to us an essential feature of the work of art itself. In a word, I argue that their labors manage to show us something of the nature of the demand of the work of art and dramatically illustrate—or, better, exemplify—an inability to respond to that demand in a way that would ever be fully commensurate with what it would require of us.

So, then, if Chapter One, *Toward a Philosophy of Incompetence*, develops an interpretation of the notion of incompetence within the framework of outsider art and music, subsequent chapters attempt to elaborate readings of individual artists and musicians whose work is ineluctably marked by their own incompetence. Chapter Two, for instance, takes up the case

of Daniel Johnston, the troubled West Virginian songwriter and performer whose songs are admired by an impressive number of top-shelf musicians and composers. Johnston's music features a unique mélange of good songwriting chops—he is unquestionably capable of composing a nice melodic line and turning out an interesting lyric—and stumbling awkwardness and even incompetence when it comes to performance and recording. He accordingly has become a somewhat challenging figure for a skilled musician to engage, precisely because it is difficult to know how to interpret the vulnerability on display in his work, particularly when this is at least partially due to his own peculiar, troubled history, with all of his deficiencies and shortcomings. It will not do, I argue, simply to parse his work in terms of the familiar categories of irony and sincerity as many listeners are wont to do, at least insofar as the notions are construed as functions of one's degree of self-awareness (or lack thereof). Johnston's work does indeed evince a kind of authenticity, I argue, but it cannot be reduced to any crude irony/sincerity dichotomy, at least in the way that we tend to employ these terms. Rather, the "authenticity" of his work might be better regarded as a form of existential commitment or answerability, a willingness to stage his own vulnerability in response to the demands of a muse that only he appears to be able to hear.

Chapter Three examines the signature work of that most paradigmatic of outsider artists, Henry Darger. Darger's astonishingly painstaking elaboration of a work of truly vast proportions—the more than 15,000 manuscript pages that constitute his epic *The Realms of the Unreal*—is troubling for a variety of reasons. Not least of these are his exquisitely meticulous representations, both verbal and visual, of violence committed against prepubescent girls. Although in its tropes and tone Darger's work is heir to a host of unquestionably innocuous works of popular fiction and the genteel iconography of mass market advertising, his oeuvre is nonetheless characterized by its excesses in every respect. The narrative itself, a hodgepodge sequence of one melodramatic episode piled on top of another, is for all intents and purposes interminable and altogether beyond the scope of any reader to take in, just in terms of its sheer scale alone. But it is also excessive in the way that it imagines, with apparently perverse jouissance, the torture and shockingly imaginative abuse heaped upon his young female protagonists by their male aggressors. The work is deeply troubling on that count. Indeed, I think that facile celebrations of Darger's illustrations—his star has undoubtedly been on the rise of

late—that do not account for these features are at best incomplete or at worst irresponsible. I argue that while we cannot—and should not—explain away the perverse excesses of Darger's work in this regard, we can appreciate the ways in which he seems to dramatize all the vulnerability, danger, and temptation to violence of the fundamental ethical encounter itself. Out of utter poverty, out of a web of scavenged and recycled materials, Darger's work beckons us to recall the most raw and vulnerable aspects of our primordial encounter with the Other. The irony should not be lost on us: few artists have ever lived more solitary lives than Darger or daily existences more bereft of meaningful human contact. But perhaps it is fitting that such a lonely figure would produce an artistic legacy that examines in its own rigorous way the elements of the ethical encounter at its most fundamental level. It is in this way, I will argue, that we might attempt to develop a reading of Darger that would redeem the excesses and incompetence that otherwise would have rendered his work obscene.

The music of The Shaggs takes center stage in Chapter Four, where the performers' musical incompetence (and there is no kinder way to put it) will oblige us to confront the hermeneutic problem par excellence of outsider art. Lacking any obvious way of jumpstarting a cogent interpretation of their work—it just seems too strange to appraise according to our ordinary canons of taste—we find ourselves challenged when listening to The Shaggs to even know where to begin. One comes away from a first encounter with the band feeling as if the musicians spoke a language that shared perhaps a few lexical items with our own musical idiom but which were nevertheless insufficient to allow us to even determine with confidence exactly what language they might be speaking. Are they speaking the language of pop music, but with such a thick accent as to make mutual understanding difficult, if not impossible? Or are they communicating in an altogether different idiom, one of their own devising? I argue that upon closer examination The Shaggs do turn out to demonstrate an impressive degree of rigor and systematicity in their work. Indeed, we might even say that what is most astonishing about their art is the almost troubling degree of fidelity to their muse that they display. In many ways we might be tempted to regard The Shaggs' *Philosophy of the World*—to recall the title of their debut album—as a kind of ironic anti-philosophy, a riot of anti-music. But a curious thing happens as we begin to find our way into The Shaggs' world. While we never come to feel truly at home there in its overwhelming strangeness, we do begin to see that their music embodies,

in its own way, a strong commitment to a weak truth, if the point may be put like that. We might say that this is the token of their fidelity to an obscure muse whose melodies they so clearly hear and labor to communicate to their listeners.

The final essay in this book examines the work of Louisianian artist and self-proclaimed prophet and visionary Royal Robertson. Most accounts of Robertson's life and art make a great deal of his schizophrenia and inability to cope successfully with the trauma resulting from his separation from his wife Adell. But it is far from clear that the meaning of his work is exhausted by references to his mental state and whatever clinical diagnoses we might be inclined to offer. Immersing himself in a pastiche of Old Testament prophecy, esoteric and astrological figures, and science fiction and pop culture motifs, Robertson presents us with an interpretive challenge of the highest order. His work is confusing and problematic precisely because he seems to reject out of hand the notion that the terms of so many of the familiar dichotomies that we tend to use to map our own world—the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical, between apocalypse and utopia, between madness and enlightenment—are truly antithetical after all. We have, of course, a natural and altogether reasonable tendency to make use of such distinctions in order to hold at arm's distance some of the more troubling aspects of visions like those of prophets like Robertson. But we only do so at the price of betraying Robertson's art and insulating ourselves from any kind of existential risk or commitment that his work would invite us to make, as uncomfortable as it may be. I conclude this chapter by exploring how one way out of this impasse would seem to be shown to us by the highly precocious contemporary composer, musician, and visual artist Sufjan Stevens. Stevens has gone to great lengths to meet Robertson on his own terms, but without ever pretending to occupy quite the same space of this extraordinary artist who was afflicted with serious psychological maladies. It is no small feat to steer between the Scylla of over-identification with the outsider artist and the Charybdis of ironic, knowing distance. But Stevens, I think, does just that. He offers us, I claim, one way of thinking about how outsider art might be responsibly engaged, particularly by those that can claim no outsider status of their own.

Chapter One

Toward a Philosophy of Incompetence

> […] in the end stupidity becomes the founder [sic] of metaphysics.
>
> —Adorno

Tocqueville and a Collectively Embodied Pragmatism

The refrain has been sung so many times and for so long that by now we could probably all hum along after just a bar or two: the owl of Minerva never crossed the Atlantic. Her American counterpart—the bald eagle, I suppose—is an unreflective creature of nature, her dreams unruffled by any sense of the past. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great observer of Jacksonian America, captured the sentiment back in 1840. "There is not, I think, a single country in the civilized world," he says, with a hint of admiration he could not quite conceal, "where less attention is paid to philosophy than in the United States" (483). Not that Tocqueville was an enemy of thought per se and of course the quality of his own observations about the nascent United States remains unmatched to this day. What impressed him, rather, was that American genius was categorically distinct from its European cousins. Unburdened by a robust sense of history or debt to any particular intellectual tradition, American thought, according to Tocqueville, was not so much a product of its academic institutions but was rather embodied directly in the actions and dispositions of the country's citizens. "America is therefore one of the countries in the world where philosophy is least studied, and where the precepts of Descartes are best applied," Tocqueville proclaimed. "Americans do not read Descartes," he goes on to clarify, "because their social state discourages speculative

studies, but they respect his maxims because that same social state leaves them naturally disposed to adopt them" (483). I suspect that few instructors of freshmen philosophy courses would disagree with the former sentiment, even if the latter is open to debate.

To be sure, Tocqueville's sanguine appraisal may be vulnerable to all sorts of objections that need not be rehearsed here. But the contrast between what he calls "speculative studies" and a broadly shared, public inclination toward a particular way of life is, I think, quite intriguing, and not just for the kinds of reasons that a historian might value. The distinction has proved enduring, if not in sociological point of fact, then in the elaboration of the American imaginary. American thought, the story goes, is not best apprehended through a study of the discursive content transmitted through its educational institutions but rather may be best viewed in the collective practices of its nation's citizens. The manner in which those citizens approach their activities and projects suggests a kind of socially embodied knowledge, a disposition to action that owes little to the techniques of explicit theorization, much less institutional instruction or even historical awareness.

Clichés, all of it, but let us entertain the stereotype for a bit longer. The philosophical movement most often regarded as truly autochthonous to the United States—pragmatism—has been widely thought to express a certain aspect of the national character, one that stems at least in part from the particular circumstances of the country's historical development. I am not necessarily speaking here of the evolution of academic philosophy in the American university system, where pragmatism has frequently been regarded with something akin to indifference, if not embarrassment or outright hostility.[1] To make the point somewhat crudely, one might say that in the United States, the accent in the phrase "intellectual labor" has generally fallen upon the term "labor," with its emphasis upon the work performed instead of the intellectual energy expended in doing so. The

1 As a discrete philosophical movement or sensibility, pragmatism proper has historically been regarded with suspicion in many philosophy departments in the US: Dewey is probably more often read in schools of education rather than by trained philosophers; Peirce is generally regarded as an iconoclastic linguist; and Royce is mostly a footnote even to historians of philosophy. Richard Rorty, perhaps the greatest contemporary popularizer of pragmatism, found himself mostly banished for much of his career to (shudder!) departments of literature. That said, there are signs of a resurgence of sorts of pragmatism within American philosophical circles, with important work having recently been done by Brandom, Misak, and others. For a thorough, if somewhat journalistic, approach to the topic of America's engagment with philosophical thought—and pragmatism in particular—see Romano.

trope, I trust, is still familiar enough to us whether or not we think it is accurate. American genius, so the story goes, has historically been of a practical sort and is more the offspring of engineering and entrepreneurship than history and philosophy proper. Now, even if in point of fact it could be shown that Tocqueville were wrong about the ways in which theory and praxis have been conjugated in the United States, I think the general point still rightly commands our attention: the American imaginary is shot through with the fantasy of a directly embodied, collective, practical knowledge, one that can be more readily descried in the nation's factories, farms, and shops than in its schools and universities. At issue is a kind of genius born of practical know-how and a fluency in the language of the tools of labor, from the hammer to the 3D printer and precision laser cutting tool. That, at any rate, is the fantasy.

Heidegger under the Hood

It goes without saying that we need not accept the claim that the imaginary of an "American practical genius" in fact constitutes an adequate representation of what's actually happening on the ground. Perhaps, though, there is a kernel of truth there, one that is not so much found in the marshaling of empirical evidence to that effect but rather on rhetorical grounds, in the increasingly potent denunciations of a broad cultural shift away from the kind of practical knowledge that Tocqueville so admired and toward an increasingly intangible, virtual kind of labor that is anything but embodied. Consider, for instance, Matthew Crawford's much discussed *Shop Class as Soulcraft* [2009], which offers a sensitive, philosophically informed argument for the dignity of the manual labor of the craftsman and a sort of brief for the enduring value of vocational training. Crawford, upon completing his PhD in political philosophy at the University of Chicago, withdrew from the world of academia in order to run a motorcycle repair shop. He claims that there is a virtue in our learning to deal with those rough edges of the world that continually resist our best laid plans and that require that we engage it with a set of skills and carefully honed dispositions that can only emerge as a consequence of embodied experience and practical know-how. In

short, his argument is that there may be more to be learned at a lathe than from a graduate seminar.

Now, what kind of knowledge does such labor provide for us? Crawford argues that to forget the embodied knowledge of the craftsman is to forget a great deal indeed, including that impulse that drove us to a scientifically accurate, philosophically rich understanding of the world in the first place:

> Skilled manual labor entails a systematic encounter with the material world, precisely the kind of encounter that gives rise to natural science. From its earliest practice, craft knowledge has entailed knowledge of the "ways" of one's materials—that is, knowledge of their nature, acquired through disciplined perception. [...] Through pragmatic engagement, the carpenter learns the different species of wood, their fitness for such needs as load bearing and water holding, their dimensional stability with changes in the weather, and their varying resistance to rot and insects. The carpenter also gains a knowledge of universals, such as the right angle, the plumb, and the level, which are indispensable for sound construction. It is in the crafts that nature first becomes a thematic object of study, and that study is grounded by a regard for human utility. (21-22)

Crawford is no rube and he gives us no reason to think that his philosophical impulses would ever incline him to argue for a return to naive realism, the view that the spontaneous, untutored attitude with which we approach so many of our daily tasks entails a set of metaphysical claims about what the world is *really* like (and it is worth pointing out that the naive realism that the philosopher ascribes to the "man in the street" is as precious and naïve a daydream as any we could conjure up). His claim is rather that our transformation into a society increasingly reliant on virtual labor and our growing distance from the grittiness of the shop or workbench has produced a host of unanticipated and potentially undesirable results, including an impoverished experience of our own human agency and a tacit acquiescence to the logic of a capitalism that runs the risk of losing whatever human bearings it may have once had.

It's difficult to disagree. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine Tocqueville reading with approval pages from Crawford's book, the latter's argument resonating with the former's claim that the genius of the American people is to be found in their creative approach to embodied labor, the greatest evidence of their philosophical convictions more readily found in their handiwork than in their handbooks. That said, what Tocqueville offered as a generalization about the American populace appears in a very different mode in Crawford. The appeal of *Shop Class as Soulcraft* derives, at least in part, from the reaction that it was surely intended to generate among Crawford's readers (perhaps it goes without saying that they doubtless skew toward highly literate, middle-to-upper class knowledge-industry workers prone to daydream of a different life). That is, we come away from the book with the uncomfortable feeling that our own hands are much too clean to be respectable. What's more, I would argue that for Crawford it is not just that we feel some shame in recognizing that we lack the particular skills—elementary plumbing, basic electrical work, knowing how to change the oil of one's car, and so on—that were doubtless more widely distributed among the populace in previous generations. It is that we intuit that the loss of such skills is not just a personal shortcoming or inadequacy but rather marks a kind of collective failure, a forgetting of some key element of a shared national identity of the sort once described by Tocqueville. It is as if the vague, distressing sense of loss that one experiences in recognizing one's own lack of mechanical aptitude were somehow emblematic of the loss of a collective, practical wisdom on a broad scale. And we might go further still, wondering if what is at stake might be nothing less than the massive reconfiguration of the very field of capitalist labor as such, one that perhaps may bring about consequences we have yet to appreciate. And this would explain why we do not simply regret privately our own unwillingness or inability to change our oil but also why we lament the fact that so many of our fellow citizens seem incapable of changing theirs as well.

And just what, precisely, have we begun to lose? At issue is not just the unfortunate and inconvenient fact that we now need to rely on professional auto mechanics when in the past our parents or grandparents might have replaced their vehicle's brake pads themselves. One cannot come away from Crawford without feeling that there seems to be something of

greater consequence at stake in the argument, something that bears upon our very manner of being in the world.

Although he shows up by name only a handful of times in the book, the shadow of Heidegger hovers over much of Crawford's work. Odd as it may sound, there is, I would suggest, a bright line connecting Tocqueville, Crawford, the American pragmatic tradition, and the dark seer of the Black Forest. Now, one of these things might not seem to be very much like the others, so let us bring Heidegger, or at least a certain reading of Heidegger, into focus by touching upon the way his thought has been appropriated and popularized in perhaps the most unlikely of places. We might begin by acknowledging the work of University of California professor Hubert Dreyfus. Dreyfus's work—increasingly read by non-philosophers of all stripes—is inspired in large measure by the complex relation between that mode of being that Heidegger denominated *Vorhandenheit* (generally translated as "present-at-hand") and the mode of being he refers to as *Zuhandenheit*, or "ready-to-hand."[2] While the latter designates our primary mode of encountering equipment in the world, the former refers to our mode of encountering things that makes it possible for them to be theorized or contemplated. For Dreyfus, intentionality does not primarily involve consciousness per se, but is rather exemplified in the phenomenon he refers to as coping.[3] Against the claim that our actions in the world typically involve some mechanism of mental representation in bringing our beliefs, desires, and actions into alignment, Dreyfus suggests that any analysis of our projects and goals must begin with a keen attentiveness to the ways in which we in fact comport ourselves regarding a world that we already encounter as meaningful, whose constituents present themselves to us as ready-to-hand, prior to any act of cognition on our part. Our primary manner of encountering the world for Dreyfus is one of skillful coping: it is a sort of attunement of our bodily dispositions to the affordances for meaningful action with which we are provided by our surroundings. This process, Dreyfus argues at length, is irreducible to whatever information could in principle be gathered about our brain states or our capacity to represent our surroundings through any kind of cognitive map.

2 As it turns out, Dreyfus has his own idiosyncratic vocabulary for rendering these terms. He prefers "availableness" for *Zuhandenheit* and "occurrentness" for *Vorhandenheit* (*Being-in-the-World*). While I appreciate his reasons for making such choices, I prefer and shall use here the more traditional "ready-to-hand" and "present-at-hand."

3 Dreyfus's views are laid out in a collection of essays on the subject (see *Skillful Coping*).

Dreyfus's reading of Heidegger—a highly engaging, if somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of his texts that I like to think of as "California-style Heideggerism" (CH)—highlights a feature of Heidegger's thought that would certainly have resonated with Tocqueville and the broadest contours of American pragmatism in general. Our most fundamental way of being and acting in the world is not reducible to some kind of intentionality grounded in consciousness or cognition, according to CH. It requires no elaborate theory of mind and no complex mapping of beliefs, desires, and external stimuli or anything else of the sort. What is called for is simply an attentiveness to the ways in which material affordances and practical coping skills are inherently enmeshed. Mark Okrent's reading of Heidegger in light of the sensibilities of American pragmatism squares well with CH. "The primary type of understanding," Okrent argues, "is practical and agent-oriented ('understanding how') rather than theoretical or mental ('understanding that'); and understanding that something is such and such, or believing that some proposition is true, is impossible without understanding how to perform various actions or how to use a variety of tools" (4).

I think the appeal of such a position is apparent enough. To put it crudely, the general strategy here of the pragmatist and the California Heideggerian is of a piece. To apprehend that our fundamental way of orienting ourselves in the world is inseparable from our embodied intentionalities is already to undercut, prima facie, the kind of metaphysical distinction between subject and object that permits long-standing philosophical problems—such as the challenge of external world skepticism or the problem of other minds—to be generated in the first place (cf. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* 246ff).[4] Whether one is more partial to Rorty or to Dreyfus—or whether one just happens to be an uncommonly well-read motorcycle mechanic—one might plausibly hold that any description of our way of comporting ourselves in the world that does not begin with the brute fact of our competence is bound to be flawed and misleading.

But of course things can go wrong and they often do. So what do we make of failure? If we grant that our fundamental way of being in the world is "practical," "agent-oriented" (to borrow Okrent's way of putting it) and

4 That said, we should not be guilty of overstating the coincidence of Heidegger's views and those of orthodox pragmatists. See Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* 253.

predicated upon a certain kind of embodied competence in carrying out our designs, how then should we understand those occasions when things fall apart? Heaven knows we needn't look far to find myriad examples of broken tools and frustrated plans. For Heidegger, these failures and misfires are not anomalies: they are phenomena that open up for us the very possibility of the disclosure of the world as such (cf. *Being and Time* 105). The passage from *Zuhandenheit* to *Vorhandenheit* is the passage from embodied engagement to deliberation, reflection, and, for that matter, the entire suite of mental operations that makes up what Dreyfus calls our "representational intentionality" (*Being-in-the-World* 69). When our tools fail or otherwise frustrate us, our attendant mental states begin to come into focus (e.g., we *desire* now to complete the interrupted task, we *hope* that the tool might still function, and so on). It is at this level that particular aspects of the object are distilled into those discrete properties (to use a respectable philosophical term) that inhere natively in the object itself, apart from any particular use to which it may be put by Dasein.

All well and good. Heidegger's account of broken tools and interrupted projects in *Being and Time* is rich and subtle in its description of how our unreflective engagement with the world may, precisely through experiences of unanticipated frustration and failure, illuminate modes of being in the world without which reflection, deliberation, and even the very notion of a world itself would not be possible. But it is worth noting that Heidegger's discussion of the paradigmatic cases of failure—namely, unavailability, malfunction, and obstinacy[5]—suggests at least the possibility of unimpeded, proper functioning in a phenomenologically meaningful setting where we have some kind of sense of what would count as successful coping. But what if the kind of failure at issue were of a different order? What if some of our failures to carry out our particular projects were less a matter of the failure of our tools but an ineluctable function of the domain in which we attempted to wield them? Or, more radically still, what if failure—specifically that species of failure that arises due to incompetence rather than the inadequacy or the unavailability of some particular tool—were a token of something more consequential, what if it were a tacit acknowledgement of demands that cannot be met, even in principle, the issuing of an IOU that can never be repaid? What if, in short, certain kinds

5 I opt here for Dreyfus's terminology (*Being-in-the-World* 70ff).

of incompetence turned out to open a window upon the structure of something rather more consequential and demanding than our quotidian projects and aims, phenomenologically rich as the analysis of these might be?

I suggest in this book that there is an order of failure that cannot be satisfactorily reduced to the kind of analysis Heidegger provides or dismissed with a wave of the hand by the pragmatist who has already decided that efficacious action in the world is somehow ontologically primitive. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that if the pragmatic notion of competence or skillful coping is to be given any meaningful philosophical work to do, then its contrary, incompetence, must also be set to work. I'm quite prepared, in fact, to accept it as a sort of metaphysical maxim that if any given concept has philosophical content, then its contrary or denial must have philosophical content as well. If this is in fact the case, then we could regard the notion of incompetence as the necessary obverse of skillful coping. Yet it remains, I think, curiously undertheorized and unexamined.

Let us be clear: there is nothing particularly noteworthy or illuminating about the kinds of incompetence with which we are surrounded on a regular basis and which we ourselves tend to exemplify more often than we might care to admit. We often say that our bosses are incompetent, our politicians are incompetent, the talking heads on the airwaves are clueless hacks. So much goes without saying. These are not the kinds of incompetence that are at issue here, since the unfortunate souls whom we may regard as incompetent in these ways are generally unwilling or incapable of meeting the practical demands of their various offices. There is nothing particularly interesting about such cases: their meaning of their incompetence is so apparent to us because we have, or at least think we have, a pretty good idea of what competence would look like, if only things were different.

But it is far from clear that the notion of incompetence within another, decidedly non-practical, domain might not turn out to be something else altogether. What are we to make of incompetence when it is found in a domain where it is much less clear what would count as competence in the first place? To get a more clear sense of a particular mode in which failure may prove to be not just instructive but perhaps philosophically critical, let us then turn to the art world or, to be more precise, to the margins of that world.

We have already mentioned that Roger Cardinal coined the term "outsider art" to designate a broad swath of artworks that were produced by persons that were emotionally or psychologically troubled, isolated from prevailing artistic traditions, or socially disenfranchised in such a way as to set them at a distance from work being done within the institutions of the art world. The term has by now become a crucial reference point in cultural discourse, even if it remains fraught with controversy and it is used in different, sometimes inconsistent or even incompatible, ways. In a sense, it is not entirely inappropriate that the term has become so hotly contested, occupying the position that it currently does at the crossroads where theory and analysis meet marketing and collectorship. For "outsider art" has come to name a shifting and uncertain terrain where the once passé discourses of authenticity and sincerity have been given new life, but in such a way as to oblige us to reflect upon the commercialization (and perhaps the attendant bastardization) of their objects.

It may be fruitless for us to look for any single common denominator or stylistic trait that would join every work purchased, collected, and commodified under the rubric of outsider art. But in more general terms, we might say that a recurring motif, at least in many such works, is the notion of the artist's incompetence or incapacity to appreciate, internalize, and respond to prompts from either the art-historical or general social milieu in a suitably skilled fashion. Just as successful coping in a generic sense involves an ability to avail ourselves of the affordances that the world provides us, successful coping in the world of art—if we may put it like that—minimally entails that the artist be capable of availing himself or herself of the possibilities for engagement and expression that the artworld provides at a determinate art-historical moment. Of course it goes without saying that every artist may fail to one degree or another to avail himself or herself fully of all such creative affordances. There is nothing inherently interesting in noting minor flaws (or, for that matter, many major ones) in an artist's work or even that a given artist may lack imagination and appear blind to at least some of the affordances which he or she may leave unclaimed. The best artists, like the worst, leave countless stones unturned. More germane for my purposes are the cases of those artists whose incompetence discloses in a philosophically illuminating way the chasm between the demand which interpellates the artist as such and the artist's inability to respond cogently to that demand. These are the artists that

interest us here, those who miss the mark—at times quite badly—yet by missing it manage to strike upon something of real consequence.

An Anti-Musical Interlude

Perhaps a brief detour through the history of popular music might help illustrate the point I am trying to make. It is worth noting that the notion of outsider art just happened to enter the critical lexicon at precisely that moment when punk rock was beginning to emerge as a visceral response to radio-friendly pop music and progressive rock, as a kind of riposte to both the increasingly programmatic characteristics of the former and the excessive displays of technical virtuosity of the latter. To put it in somewhat more broad terms we might say that, against both, punk was a defiant gesture that made no attempt to conceal its own working class origins and preoccupations (and, when the former were lacking, to invent them). In fact, it might not even be too much of a stretch to say that the primary achievement of the first wave of punk rock was to open up a defiantly anti-musical space that was to be occupied by (mostly) incompetent non-musicians with the express purpose of calling into question the entire cultural and economic field of musical expression itself. Furthermore, the DIY aesthetic of the punk scene, from lo-fi recordings to fashion to fanzines, was an absolutely essential component of the movement. Incompetence and amateurishness were considered less flaws to be concealed than badges to be proudly worn of one's authenticity and good faith.[6]

The analogy might be played out a bit further. It would be a mistake to assume that the coining of the descriptive term "outsider art" was strictly contemporaneous with the emergence of the phenomenon itself. Outsider art, it has been noted, must be understood in relation to *art brut*, which arose out of the ruins of postwar Europe, bringing together a number of disparate discourses including psychiatry, sociology, criminology, art criticism, and collectorship.[7] And, in a similar fashion, the ethos of punk rock—whether we wish to explain it in terms of its privileging of spontaneous, amateurish musical creation or the unflinching directness

6 For an interesting window into the punk world that takes as its starting point the DIY aesthetic of fanzines, see Triggs.

7 Maclagan provides a helpful survey of the phenomenon in his *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace*.

of the social critique it offers—can likewise be connected with previous moments in the history of music, popular culture, and particular social and economic trends, even if the critical and descriptive vocabulary employed to describe punk developed only gradually.

But it is at this point that the analogy must be refined. If both outsider art and punk rock are predicated upon the phenomenon of the intrusion of the non-artist into the domain of art, it must be noted that the truest parallel that should interest us here will not be between outsider art and punk rock per se, but between outsider art and a later development in music that, while not unconnected to the punk movement, cannot be identified with it *simpliciter*, and which has come to be known, fittingly enough, as outsider music. For while punk was defiantly anti-establishment in the way it positioned itself politically, socially, commercially, and aesthetically, both outsider art and outsider music stand in a much more complex and conflicted relationship to the institutions and social frameworks that produce and disseminate art, broadly conceived. Outsider music is in many respects consonant with certain aspects of a particular punk aesthetic. To be sure, in either case, we find ourselves dealing with, as John Encarnacao has noted, musical idioms that grant pride of place to amateurism and spontaneity (105).[8] But neither should we exaggerate the similarities between the two, for many of the key figures associated with outsider music undeniably embody a set of values that is irreducible to any recognizably punk ethos and which are sometimes even orthogonal to it. While the punk movement pointedly took aim at the commercial pop music industry and then pulled the trigger, many of the key figures we associate with outsider art and music were utterly unaware of—or altogether uninterested in—the institutions of the art world and thus merely indifferent, rather than hostile, toward them. Others, in turn, were notable precisely for also having taken aim at the commercial music business, but with the intent of successfully integrating themselves into it. And their spectacular misses, as we shall see, may be tremendously instructive.

8 Encarnacao's recent *Punk Aesthetics and New Folk* will likely be a watershed work of criticism for years to come on the topic.

Ophelia Joins the Guild

What is shared by each of the artists and musicians in the essays that follow is an element of failure, an incapacity to reconcile the call to which they wish to respond with the painfully finite resources which they have at their disposal. Each of them has heeded a call that seems to outstrip their capacity to respond. In his awkwardly earnest attempts to gain access to the pop music industry and enjoy stardom, Daniel Johnston ended up staging his own failures and limitations in such a way as to obviate familiar, quasi-critical distinctions between sincere artistic expression and ironic detachment on the other. The trio of New Hampshire sisters known as The Shaggs recorded an LP in the late 1960s that was carefully crafted with an eye toward fulfilling a fortune teller's prediction that they would form a pop group that would go on to enjoy tremendous commercial success. But, unable to keep time or tune an instrument, the Wiggin sisters created brilliantly cacophonous songs, based upon something like a language of their own devising and which has fascinated avant-garde musicians and composers and garnered them a sizeable cult following. The reclusive Chicago-born janitor Henry Darger populated his vast private world with an overwhelmingly comprehensive visual pastiche of crudely prepared images of deeply troubling violence and a narrative style so capacious that it demands that we grapple with the ethical and aesthetic dimensions presented by his essentially endless serial narratives. Royal Robertson, Louisiana's homegrown prophet of apocalypse and utopia, created furiously, fashioning an expansive, almost cosmic message that was marked both by its utter lack of adornment and simplicity as well as its deeply hermetic character. Robertson's conjugation of untutored simplicity and private system-building are an enduring testament to a message whose very potency stems precisely from the excessiveness with which it is expressed.

In every case, it would seem that something has somehow gone awry. The artists and musicians explored in the chapters that follow belong to a time out of joint. Whether they are heedless of the institutions and traditions to which they should by rights belong or are precluded from being accepted by those institutions and traditions by virtue of their own limitations, their failure to inscribe themselves into prevailing artistic traditions is instructive. Their work and their lives belie an unflinching

fidelity to some obscure object which they pursue. They heed in a radical way Lacan's famous injunction to *ne pas céder sur son désir*, to not give way on one's desire. It is, I would suggest, somewhat discomfiting for those of us accustomed to making the institutional accommodations necessary to flourish in our own worlds to take stock of such uncompromising visions, whose failures only point up more sharply the aporias and limitations of our art-historical moment. Their failures seem to bypass altogether our now-familiar circuits of irony and misdirection: by taking aim at their object and missing it badly, these artists end up underscoring not only the primacy of the call but the troubling manner in which that call is sounded out. Successful artists, perhaps by definition, manage to navigate the waters in which they swim, their competence as swimmers occluding the dangers that lurk beneath the surface. On the other hand, the artists with whom I shall be concerned flail mightily, their struggles unwittingly instructing us about the unseen perils that assail them. In so doing, they issue to those of us gazing from the shore a call that we might choose to ignore or dismiss with mockery but cannot pretend that we do not hear.

Now, it might be thought that we have seen and done this all before. There is no more familiar cliché in modern art than the perennially fruitless search for an unsullied vantage point from which the artist would carry out his or her saccades. I have no interest here in developing a reading of outsider art and music that merely re-inscribes within the same well-established institutional frameworks that same grandiose and perpetually misbegotten gesture of starting anew. Our history of seeking redemption in imagined and incredible fantasies of innocence is already too long. To be sure, there is often something akin to naïveté and an endearing lack of self-awareness on display in some outsider figures (at least some of the time), but it bears pointing out that these same artists may also evince no lack of malice, a propensity for subversion, and the practice of human-all-too-human modes of deception. What sets apart the artists that interest me from more accomplished ones is an earnestness that could properly be called ethical, for, I claim, their art is elaborated in such a way so as to lay bare the gap between the demand to which they respond and the finite resources that they are able to proffer in response to that call. As spectators and listeners—witnesses, really—we cannot but experience both that same call and a concomitant awareness of our

own finitude: these two things are, we come to discover, two sides of the same coin.

We might sum it up like this: if the contemporary artist, moving comfortably in a world of grants, exhibitions, and remunerated workshops—while carefully cultivating a respectably Bohemian persona—is a contemporary Hamlet torn by incapacitating doubts, the outsider artist is an Ophelia. Now, whether Shakespeare could have written *Hamlet* from the perspective of Ophelia in the same way Tom Stoppard rewrote the play from the perspective of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is an interesting question I shall not venture to rule upon. But it is worth pointing out that Ophelia, at least in terms of the attention bestowed upon her by critics, has begun to have her own day i' th' sun, as it were, and she now enjoys a new-found critical prestige not unlike that of Antigone in the frankness of the moral virtues she exemplifies. If Hamlet's love for Ophelia is capricious and inconstant, obeying a sophisticated logic all its own, her love for Hamlet is unwavering and disarmingly, embarrassingly, direct. True to the end to the object of her desire, she pursues it relentlessly. Her madness does not present itself to us as hysteria per se so much as the altogether too uncomfortable spectacle of watching a soul follow an inexorable path to its object, which also just happens to be the path to its destruction. In contrast to Hamlet, who is adept at playing at madness when it suits him, Ophelia's madness is potent, spontaneous, and overdetermined. She sings her mad song of plants and flowers, heedless of her audience, indifferent to anything but her song's object. Hers is not a simple art of sublimation, if by this we would mean a shield that she would raise against a truth too terrible to name. Or, rather, it is not only that. Hers is an art in which sublimation coincides directly—terribly, unthinkably—with the very object of desire itself.

I would suggest that Ophelia might provide us with a litmus test for not only the contemporary artist but the spectator, listener, or reader who encounters the work of outsider artists and musicians. Consider this question: do we readers of Shakespeare see ourselves reflected more in Hamlet's endless deliberations and his all-too-acute awareness of those deliberations? Or in Ophelia, that figure who "tears out her heart, bleeds, shatter[ing] herself at the limit between life and death, a figure of sacrifice without redemption, who, despite this, still has the will to act"? (Critchley and Webster 214). At the very least, I shall claim, we find ourselves

confronted with forms of art that makes unfathomable demands upon us. And how we respond to those demands—whether we grant them our approval them or not, to borrow Critchley's preferred terminology—is ultimately up to us.

So, then, the project undertaken in this work is finally philosophical in nature even if it takes as its starting point particular art-theoretical and art-historical issues. On the one hand, I hope in the pages that follow to never quite lose the thread of the philosophical stakes in my discussion of the works of the artists and composers I address. On the other hand, I hope that my tracing of philosophical themes never loses sight of the specific test cases that should give our theorization some real-world traction. If I don't manage to get as much grease and dirt under my fingernails as Crawford in his motorcycle shop would perhaps have preferred, I do hope that the essays that follow tinker around enough under the hood of specific artworks and musical compositions to satisfy even the philosopher-cum-mechanic.

Because I realize that certain motifs of my argument will fade into and out of earshot in the chapters that follow, I briefly sketch a few key points below.

1. Idiocy and Incompetence are Fellow Travelers

Idiots and their fellow travelers—ignoramuses, morons, imbeciles, and the like—may be the bastard children of our philosophical tradition but for all that they still boast a surprisingly robust pedigree of their own. There is, for instance, a line connecting Socrates to Lacan in his profession of ignorance and concomitant claims to a special kind of illumination.[9] Another tradition, no less well established and which perhaps reaches its apogee in Nietzsche, posits a direct connection between ignorance and the capacity to act in the world. Whatever idiocy and its inbred cousins might be, they are nothing if not the progenitors of numerous offspring, albeit of a sort rarely discussed or acknowledged in polite company. Slavoj Žižek has sketched a loose taxonomy of the varieties of stupidity, noting, for instance, that idiots can be distinguished from morons in that the former

9 Žižek reminds us that Lacan's "Vers un signifiant nouveau" concludes with this wholly Socratic sentiment: "I am only relatively stupid—that is to say, I am as stupid as all people—perhaps because I got a little enlightened" (*Less than Nothing* 2).

lack the ability to process even elementary contextual rules of social engagement (e.g., that the greeting "How are you doing today?" when offered by a waiter does not constitute a serious inquiry as to the state of one's health and should not be taken as such) while the latter sink too completely and comfortably into the common sense views dictated to us by the big Other, rather like Watson's function as a man-in-the-street foil to Sherlock Holmes in the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*Less than Nothing* 1-3). Imbeciles, Žižek observes, constitute another class altogether: they are unable to do without the support of the big Other even while they cannot bring themselves to trust it. Thus they relentlessly probe and examine it, never to their satisfaction: Wittgenstein, for Žižek, is a paradigmatic case of such an imbecile (2).

All of the above—idiots, morons, and imbeciles—could certainly be said to figure in different ways in the studies that follow. But I should point out that I shall take the liberty of occasionally playing somewhat fast and loose with these terms, as I take less of an interest in the attendant taxonomies of stupidity than in the ways in which these traits link up specifically with the phenomenon of incompetence. The trouble, as I see it, with relying too heavily upon distinctions of the sort that Žižek makes is that they tacitly encourage us to adopt the posture of the clinical diagnostician who would seek to "explain" the work of an artist or musician in terms of the latter's mental capacity, their emotional, psychological, or pharmacological state, their incapacities of whatever stripe, or so on. In a way, this is entirely understandable: we should not forget that the very notion of *art brut* took shape in the hospitals and offices of those who treated, or simply took an interest in, those sad figures whose lives were so often wasted away in institutions and care facilities. And I don't for a second deny that in many cases that a comprehensive examination of say, the work of an Adolf Wölfli or a Wesley Willis would require us at the end of the day to offer something resembling a clinical diagnosis of some sort or other. There are many reasons why a given figure may lack access to the institutions and traditions of the artworld and some of these unquestionably include mental illness, idiocy, stupidity, cluelessness, simple lack of talent, and the like. So while our natural temptation to slip into the role of analyst is readily understandable I shall do my best to resist it since my claim is that it does not follow that we must yield to it in order to produce the kind of interpretive work I have in mind.

So, to invoke those predicates in an explanatory mode is of relatively little interest to me in the essays that follow, at least insofar as they are taken to be symptomatic of some other mental, emotional, or psychological disturbance or flaw. I am interested, rather, in what I would prefer to think of as the functional significance of incompetence, which may, of course, be linked up with the varieties of stupidity that Žižek identifies, depending on the particular circumstances of the artist in question. I would justify my somewhat cavalier attitude on the grounds that the argument I develop is utterly agnostic with regard to whatever clinical diagnoses might be offered regarding these artists. Indeed, my argument only requires that we posit or acknowledge an element of (philosophically interesting) failure on the part of the outsider artist, evidence, that is, in the work itself of the artist's inability to respond competently to whatever call may have summoned them. Now, perhaps it goes without saying that what is to count as "philosophically interesting" can only be determined by the persuasiveness of the interpretation that I am able to provide. And that, at any rate, is something that will need to be assessed by each reader individually. Here, I shall have nowhere to hide: either I will be able to convince my reader that each of the figures discussed misses the mark in a philosophically illuminating way or I will not. At any rate, that is not my call to make.

2. Incompetence is to Pragmatism as Ignorance is to Knowledge

I mentioned earlier a claim that I will simply have to posit here, abusing my reader's goodwill, since I lack a ready proof for it. If pragmatism—insofar as it seeks to provide a philosophically respectable justification (or warrant) for answering an inquiry of some sort—is to be a philosophically substantive position to take up (and not, say, just Samuel Johnson kicking Berkeley's rock), then so too must its contrary or denial be a philosophically substantive position. I reiterate: my interest here is not the same interest that Heidegger takes in that intriguing philosophical moment when the facticity of the object falls short somehow and thus opens out upon the realm of the present-at-hand. That's fine with me, as far as it goes. But I am not confident that it can fully illuminate a particular kind of failure in the domain of art, when the nature of that failure—incompetence—is

conceived functionally and the criteria of what we would count as success anyway is unclear. In many ways, the analyses that follow aim to turn California-style Heideggerism on its head, at least within this particular domain. Just as one is always free to claim that practical coping mechanisms constitute a tacit refutation of long-standing metaphysical problems, so too, I argue, might incompetence and the failure to cope within the realm of art be regarded as a tacit refutation of any purported dissolution of the dissolution of those problems. In short, as I suggest in point #5 below, such failures may illuminate a deep ethical core at the center of the work of art, one that far too often is invisible from either well-established metaphysical positions or the so-called pragmatic dissolution of those positions.

3. There is a Certain (American) Genius in Incompetence

I began by invoking the ghost of Alexis de Tocqueville, but I might have begun also begun this chapter with Hegel's ruminations on America—as curious a blind spot as we might ever identify in that philosopher celebrated for the boundlessness of his concerns. In a sense America lacks philosophical substance, he held, because it necessarily belongs to the one temporal mode with which philosophy cannot be concerned: the future. I confess that I shall not make a great deal of hay about the peculiarly American genius of incompetence, the title of this book notwithstanding. Idiots, imbeciles, and morons, like incompetents, may can be found in all times and climes. And here's further evidence. Perhaps the greatest philosophical idiot since Socrates, René Descartes, initiated our era of philosophical modernity by turning himself into a fool, one who doubted the very sorts of things that no sane person could ever question. And I would note in passing that the greatest companion to the idiocy of Descartes's *Meditations* is surely to be found in the work of his contemporary, Miguel de Cervantes, whose pioneering of the form of the modern novel was predicated precisely upon the author's awareness of his own bumbling incompetence and his incapacity to write a work that he thought anyone would want to read.[10] Thus, in one fell swoop, I would

10 The central conceit of the *Quixote*'s prologue is the author's frank recognition of his deficiencies and incompetence as he laments his inability to master the relevant literary conventions that would place his work in the

argue, we witness both the birth of modern philosophy (in the deliberate descent into stupidity of Descartes) and the modern novel (in Cervantes's painfully self-aware admission of his own failings in attempting to create a work worthy of his literary predecessors).

Alas, in the present work the argument I might offer along these lines in particular shall have to remain at least in part unmade. Suffice it to say that incompetence and idiocy are no respecters of social class, nationality, race, religion, or ethnicity. And even if I have assumed for the sake of discussion that there is a sort of "American" genius in the failure of our pragmatism, I shall make no attempt to push the claim too far. Perhaps I might abuse the generosity and compassion of the French by appropriating the famous post 9/11 headline from *Le Monde*: when it comes to incompetence, "nous sommes tous Américains." Just so: we are all idiots, we are all morons, we are all incompetent. And here, I think, we find the key to unlocking the philosophical significance of incompetence within the realm of art. All competent artists are alike; all incompetent ones are each incompetent in their own way. It just so happens that the figures that interest me in the pages that follow are all Americans; it happens that their stories vividly illuminate the shortcomings of any facile celebration of American pragmatism or know-how. Indeed, they strike me as illustrative of a particular stripe of what we may call "American (don't)-know-how." But I shall not pursue the geo-political angle any further than this and would invite others to catalogue how similar flowers of incompetence riotously bloom in the gardens of other nations.

4. Genius Shines through Incompetence

If one could distill Gadamer's nearly six-hundred page magnum opus *Truth and Method* down to a bumper sticker slogan—and only a stupid or incompetent interpreter would even attempt such a thing, to be sure!—one could do worse than to say this: the task of interpretation always brings us up short. It is this experience of being brought up short, of having one's horizon of expectations suddenly and unexpectedly broadened (or asphyxiatingly constricted, as the case may be) that corresponds, in my view, to a latent ethical content in the work of art that has been

company of other literary classics (Cervantes 7-11).

incompetently designed or executed. A premise that I shall have to insist upon—with no more justification than can be provided here but my readers' good faith effort to reflect upon their own experiences in examining the works that I shall discuss—is that an element of genius that has absolutely nothing to do with skill, talent, or competence (and may in fact almost be inversely correlated with it) may still shine through the imperfect work of art. It is important to point out that the latter claim is manifestly not to be qualified by means of escape hatches represented by such verbal hedges as "nevertheless" or "notwithstanding." This is, I shall argue—and, again, I shall have no more proof on offer than the persuasiveness of the readings I develop of the artists in question—a brute fact about particular works of outsider art. By missing the mark our outsider artists thereby hit it, in unexpected ways and with unexpected results, both affective and ethical. The genius of the works in question is thus of a totally unanticipated sort, at least when compared with the creations of truly gifted artists. It shines through their work, not in the mode of skill, talent, perfection, or flawlessness but in its exemplification of the most fundamental tension of ethics (not to mention economics): i.e., the tension between infinite demands and finite resources. The point is manifestly not that the artists in whom I take an interest are not self-aware and that somehow their obliviousness becomes a guarantee of their sincerity or authenticity: I must disagree here with that great ambassador of outsider music, Irwin Chusid, when he claims that outsider musicians may be identified by their lack of self-awareness (xiv), although I think that that is an easy enough mistake to make (and it undeniably true with respect to at least some artists traditionally identified as outsiders). My claim, rather is that, Ophelia-like, these artists seek no cover under the protective wing of irony and in turn they leave us exposed to the force of demands—ethical, aesthetic—that outstrip our capacity to comprehend them or provide a response commensurate with their strength. It is not so much that they are unaware of what they are doing or what we might think of their efforts. It's just that they don't care: they have bigger fish to fry.

5. The Resources are Finite; the Demand is Infinite

It is at this point, I argue, that the latent ethical dimension of outsider art comes most fully into view. It is not exactly that the work of art as (failed) aesthetic project comes to take on an ethical coloration of some sort after the fact. It is that the ethical becomes available to us as something akin to the other side of the Mobius strip of the aesthetic. This is indeed a puzzle, the articulation of which I owe to Simon Critchley. How is it, Critchley asks, picking up on a key theme of Levinas, that we are not altogether crushed by the infinite demands laid upon us by the Other?[11] Critchley's strategy is to temper Levinas by reading him through Lacan. If Levinas offers us an unflinchingly direct phenomenological account of the crushing, unbearable weight of our answerability to the Other, Lacan offers us, through humor, through play, through art, a way of sublimating that responsibility so that it does not wreck us altogether. It is to those things that Critchley has called "impossible objects"—jokes, works of art, and so on—that we must turn, in order to trace the pathways that sublimation opens to us in the visage of responsibility. This is a way in which one who may claim only finite resources may respond to a call they cannot help but experience as infinite.

That said, while my analysis follows the line pursued by Critchley, I place the accent in a slightly different place. Sublimation, he notes, is an operation designed primarily to dress the wound of responsibility just enough to allow us to go on, maintaining and preserving our capacity to live and to respond in the face of an ethical abyss (69-87). The work of art is the work of sublimation, which is in turn the art of bearing an impossible burden. To recall Beckett's famous line, it is that which allows us to go on when we can't go on. My interest here is likewise in those impossible objects to which Critchley is drawn, and I propose to throw open the doors of the gallery so as to include not only his preferred examples of poetry, humor, and music (*Impossible Objects* 3-4) but more particularly examples drawn from the world of outsider art. I shall be drawn not to the problem of how the wound of trauma scabs over but rather how it is that the work of the artists in question keeps the scar always fresh and bleeding.

11 Critchley articulates the problem like this: "How can the extremity of the ethical picture I have described be borne without crushing the ethical subject? How can I respond in infinite responsibility to the other without extinguishing myself as a subject? Doesn't traumatic ethical separation require aesthetic reparation? (*Infinitely Demanding* 69).

The abjection of these creators and their works will turn out to the token that discloses their ethical character of the work of art.

6. Incompetence through the Lens of Competence

How does one come to see outsider art in such a way that its deficiencies and failures become tokens of the ethical/aesthetic struggle I have described? What is it that makes certain kinds of bad art—not all of them, to be sure—worthy of our time and attention, to say nothing of serving as a whetstone for sharpening our ethical and aesthetic sensitivities and dispositions? It is worth noting that, with regard to each of the four figures I have chosen to study in detail, their work has been interpreted, engaged, and translated by means of artists considerably much more skilled than they. One may hear, to take an example that I shall examine at length, nothing but incompetent and talentless enthusiasm when first listening to Daniel Johnston's original recording of "True Love Will Find You in the End." Yet the virtues of the piece come more sharply into focus as we listen to cover versions of the tune performed by far more proficient musicians (Beck, Jeff Tweedy, Mates of State, and so on). It is not that Johnston's original is simply defective and calls out for its flaws to be remedied by more competent trained musicians. Rather, it is that the transposition of the particular sample of outsider art into other versions (and even other forms of media) lays bare a certain gap that is opened up precisely in the passage from the incompetent original to the competent interpretation or cover version. It is as if in the effort to patch up the aesthetic holes in our garment, we were forced to borrow against its ethical content, which is often revealed precisely through the urgency and artless vulnerability of the original. The genius, then, of the original work produced by the untrained or incompetent outsider is disclosed not through a patching of those defects so as to make the work essentially flawless. On the contrary, it is revealed through a staging of the gap between the incompetent original and the competent interpretation. It cannot be simply a question of "realizing" the potential that is inherent in works that were produced by those artists that were, for whatever reason—because they lack talent, because they are disturbed, or whatever—incapable of actually realizing that potential.

Having forestalled the argument that the former is somehow brought to completion by the latter, I do not mean to suggest either that the latter is ironically deficient by virtue of its competence. It is manifestly not a matter of talent or competence somehow proving to be a defect which would be remedied by returning to the unsullied dreams of the noble savages that created the work in the first place. Indeed, as I have indicated, there shall be no room at all in my argument for the romantic fantasy of elevating the incompetent artist to the level of the drunk, the fool, the child, or the village idiot and scheming a return to a subject position that never really existed in the first place. What is at issue is simply a manner of illuminating the gap in question, rather than occupying a more privileged subject position that would allow us to fill in or close the gap. To attempt to do so would be, I think, to miss the point altogether.

Chapter Two

Daniel Johnston Meets Heidegger and the Hipsters

Cobain's T-shirt and Johnston's Cassette

In September of 1992 Nirvana was at the height of the band's popularity and Kurt Cobain was still two years away from his famously untimely death. Scheduled to play at MTV's Video Music Awards, the group had butted heads with network producers who insisted that the band refrain from playing their preferred number, "Rape Me," during their slot. Cobain eventually acquiesced, though not until playing the proscribed tune's opening chords. Having presumably made his point, he then segued into "Lithium," as the show's producers had insisted. The episode was fraught with all sorts of tension for all the predictable reasons: the quintessential grunge band of the late 80s and early 90s had found itself obliged to confront directly a hegemonic music industry that was primarily concerned with cultivating the group's rebellious image while avoiding sales-inhibiting controversies or FCC-imposed fines. So, the storyline was familiar enough. It was to all appearances one more salvo in the long war between musical artists that insisted on maintaining the integrity of their own vision and an institution whose *raison d'etre* was, unsurprisingly, to monetize that vision.

It did not escape the attention of Cobain's admirers that he had sported at the event a curious t-shirt featuring a crude drawing of a frog-like creature and bearing the lettering, "Hi, How Are You." The image had been taken from the hand-drawn cover art of an album by singer-songwriter Daniel Johnston, an amateurish production recorded on a primitive tape recorder and distributed via cassette. At the time, Johnston, an eccentric West Virginia songwriter and performer who suffered from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, was almost entirely unknown outside of

Austin, Texas where he had become something of a fixture of the local music scene, occasionally gigging while supporting himself with a part-time job at McDonalds. His work to that date had been produced almost entirely on homemade cassettes and recorded in basements, bedrooms, and garages. Since Johnston had no ready means of duplicating his tapes, he would sometimes record an "album" on one blank cassette and then simply insert a new tape into the tape recorder and perform all the songs once again in the same order. The art adorning the cassettes was hand-drawn by Johnston himself. In fact, the end product was in some ways not inconsistent with the mixtape ethos of the 80s—with its fondness for the creation of highly personalized artifacts (tapes, cases, and cover art)—the difference being that Johnston not only curated the songs on the tape, but wrote and recorded them. And not only did he record them once but, at least in some cases, performed anew each individual track on each individual cassette.[1]

What should we make of Cobain's donning of a Daniel Johnston t-shirt on national television? At the risk of reading too much into Cobain's sartorial choices, I would suggest that his gesture was intended on some level to allow Cobain to signal or perhaps reclaim his own status as a musical outsider at precisely that time when his fans might have wondered whether his integrity might not have been compromised by his enjoyment of the fruits of a lucrative major label contract and CD sales in the millions. By advertising his familiarity with an obscure artist utterly unknown to the vast majority of MTV viewers—even while Nirvana was rapidly becoming one of the most popular bands on the planet—the gesture might naturally be regarded as an expression of Cobain's own *bona fides*, a very public declaration of his personal commitment to a model of the production and consumption of music untainted by the values of the recording industry in which he had become enmeshed (cf. Carew).

As it turns out, there's a further twist to the tale. Several years earlier Daniel Johnston had also experienced his own MTV moment. The network's program The Cutting Edge had visited Austin in 1985 in order to document the independent music scene there and Johnston had enjoyed a couple of minutes of airtime during the show.[2] He had performed the

1 This description is based on an account offered by Ken Lieck, music critic for *The Austin Chronicle*, in Jeff Feuerzeig's 2005 documentary, *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*.

2 For discussion of the program and its coverage of Austin's "New Sincerity" scene, see Shank (*Dissonant Iden-*

song "I Live My Broken Dreams" on camera, and, in a brief televised interview, the visibly delighted performer gave an enthusiastic shout-out to his family and friends back home. Unlike Cobain, Johnston, toiling in relative anonymity and dreaming of stardom, left no doubt as to his love of the network, clearly relishing the moment in which the spotlight had ever so fleetingly shown upon him, even as Cobain fled from it. The irony is palpable: Cobain, in large measure because of his exposure on MTV, was in effect trying to invoke Johnston's work and image as a way to leverage his way out of the music business. And Johnston in turn had unabashedly tried to use his brief appearance on MTV to leverage his way in.

It is tempting to regard this brief crossing of Cobain and Johnston as the paradigmatic tale of a somewhat cynical, ironically detached insider and a naïve but sincere outsider. Indeed, the episode almost seems a tailor-made study of contrasts, an x-ray of the competing impulses that define the contours of our cultural moment, since it is not yet clear whether future historians of culture will finally decide that ours has been an age of irony or an age of post-irony. If Cobain could only abide the contradictions and hypocrisy of the contemporary music industry by navigating through such moments as the MTV Video Music Awards in an ironic mode—a mode that finally, tragically, could not sustain him—Johnston would seem to be the poster child of sincere expression, almost-childlike in his bearing and his innocence. To be sure, the comparison will eventually fail, as do all such caricatures, but it is worth keeping in mind, at least for a moment.

Their many differences notwithstanding, Cobain and Johnston may nevertheless be regarded as kindred souls at the level of musical praxis, where the twin arcs of the latter's DIY ethos and the former's grittily powerful aesthetic were sufficiently bent to keep them at least within sight of each other. To be sure, Nirvana's music has never failed to command the respect of critics, even as the rough edges of the band's work constituted a reproach to then-reigning models of music production and distribution. Johnston's music is also abrasive and unpolished, if in very different ways and for very different reasons. Cobain was a technically proficient musician[3] and could afford the luxury of crafting his compositions and

tities 157-58). Shank's work as a whole is an impressively rich and theoretically informed study of the Austin music landscape.

3 *Rolling Stone* music critic David Fricke goes so far as to rate Cobain the 12th best guitarist of all time. Even

recording his own parts so as to communicate a rawness and urgency that would immediately signal an artistic vision distinct from more polished, listener-friendly artists. The abrasiveness of Johnston's work, by contrast, is undoubtedly a function of both his limited access to recording technology and his lack of proficiency as an instrumentalist and singer.

It is in fact the totally unvarnished character of Johnston's performance on his early albums that first grabs the attention of the casual listener. Consider, for example, the following description of one listener's initial encounter with one of Johnston's early signature tunes, "Walking the Cow," from the 1983 album, *Hi, How Are You*. "There was this sound," our informant recalls,

> like someone hitting an empty cardboard box with both hands, almost on every beat, swerving into and out of time, the hands hitting the box together then somehow becoming separated in time but later finding each other and the beat again. […]. The plastic reedy tones [of a Magnus chord organ], completely lacking depth or resonance, were being squeezed out of their box with a manic intention. […]. I heard [Johnston] mash the buttons, furiously, again out of time, or in some weird time of his own, not the time that I knew as rhythm nor quite the time of the beating box, but some other, clashing time, its own arrhythmia. I heard fingers reaching for buttons on a chord organ, one button and instant harmony, but I couldn't recognize them. It wasn't that they were out of tune; you cannot play out of tune on a chord organ. It wasn't that they had odd voicings or complex structures; chord organs play built-in simple triads. I think that what confused me was the contrast between the intensity, the physical ferocity of the performer and the collapsed, empty, and almost unimportant tones that were produced. That contrast was so intriguing that I wanted to listen to the song [again]. (Shank, *Dissonant Identities* 155-56)

This initial reaction to hearing Johnston's work is not, I suspect, atypical, even now. What generally strikes the ear—almost literally!—is

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setting aside the fact that Fricke is apparently not a musician and that he characterizes his list as a catalog of "the best and most influential guitarists in rock"—as if these criteria were interchangeable or even similar—the point remains that Cobain's skills as a musician were widely agreed to have been more than adequate for his purposes (Fricke).

unmistakably incompetence, pure and simple: screeching, enthusiastic vocals that never quite settle on a pitch, a keyboard struck with more passion than accuracy, extremely lo-fi recordings with lots of tape hiss and extraneous noise. The intensity with which Johnston expresses himself seems out of all proportion to the quality of the song's execution or its recording. Apparently heedless of the disconnect between the passionate intensity of his performance and its amateurish quality, Johnston manages to present us with an intriguing puzzle: how might we reconcile the striking asymmetry between the execution of his work and its affective impact upon the listener? We generally assume that these two things stand in a quasi-causal relationship, such that an expertly crafted song, well performed, may issue in a potent affective response on our part as we listen to it. Yet here we have Daniel Johnston, banging away on a keyboard or guitar, tunelessly warbling, creating odd songs that nevertheless are endowed with a strange capacity to move and inspire.

We need to be clear: not all outsider art is worthy of sustained critical attention and philosophical reflection, any more than most run-of-the-mill pop fare, no matter how competently produced and recorded, is worthy of extended critical reflection either. We might note that, as even a casual dip in the seemingly bottomless pool of homemade YouTube music videos suggests, Oscar Wilde was perhaps more right than he knew when he quipped that all bad art is sincere.[4] In a sea of mediocrity—a good deal of it devoid of any degree of self-awareness whatsoever—Johnston's work undeniably stands out, a reminder of the fact that not all cases of incompetence are created equal. For one thing, as his fans never tire of pointing out, the deficiencies of Johnston's musicianship have little to do with his knack for songwriting: if we squint just a bit while listening to him and set aside the infelicities of his vocals and instrumentation, his songs do often evince a surprising degree of lyrical sophistication and a knack for crafting melodies worthy of a life-long devotee of the Beatles. But let us offer a yet more perspicuous and less controversial (if circumstantial) piece of evidence for the quality of Johnston's songwriting: he has never lacked for critically respected interpreters, from Tom Waits to Death Cab for Cutie

4 To be honest, I have not been able to find direct evidence that Oscar Wilde ever uttered directly the phrase, "all bad poetry is sincere" as it is widely attributed to him. Perhaps it was only an oversight on his part, since he often said so many similar things and just never got around to saying it like this. T.S. Eliot would certainly have nodded in agreement as well.

to TV on the Radio. Indeed, in certain circles it seems to be almost *de rigueur* for an artist to have at least one Johnston tune in their repertoire.[5]

I shall return later to the question of what exactly is gained and what is lost as Johnston's work is reinterpreted by more musically competent performers. For now, let us simply note that for an established, well-respected artist to cover Daniel Johnston is for that artist to engage in an aesthetically rich (and even a potentially ethically significant) project. I began this chapter by noting how Kurt Cobain had attempted to leverage the image of Daniel Johnston at precisely that moment when his own relationship to the recording industry had become incredibly complicated; we shall later see how it is that other musicians have likewise attempted to trade on the Johnston brand, offering their own musical interpretations of his work and opening up a rewarding field of inquiry.

What is it about Johnston's work that seems to invite us to negotiate its contours in terms of an apparent tension between, on the one hand, the sense of irony that one must cultivate in order to maintain one's integrity in the face of tremendous institutional pressures and, on the other, what might immediately strike us as a kind of unaffected, artless sincerity? Let me anticipate the conclusion at which I shall eventually arrive, even if the route to get there will prove lengthy and circuitous: I believe that the standard dichotomy between irony and sincerity—so bound up with our current cultural moment—cannot finally be sustained. But I also believe that for us to move beyond such critically problematic categories, we must first pass through them, traversing the critical minefield where they are spontaneously employed by casual fans and critics alike. Only by so doing will we be able to appreciate how the work of Johnston and his interpreters touches upon crucial features of the ethical significance of outsider art.

5 A good survey of some of the many cover versions of Daniel Johnston's songs is the CD entitled *The Late Great Daniel Johnston: Discovered Covered*. Featured artists include Gordon Gano, TV on the Radio, Tom Waits, Guster, and The Flaming Lips, to name just a few.

The "~~Wurlitzer~~ [Magnus Chord] Organ of the Spirit"

> Thus in the jargon transcendence is finally brought closer to men: it is the Wurlitzer organ of the spirit.
>
> —Adorno

I have, up to this point, alluded to a long-standing distinction between irony and sincerity in critical engagements of outsider art and music without spelling out exactly what those terms mean and tacitly relying upon my reader's general intuitions to do all the heavy lifting. Let us now transpose the sincerity/irony pairing into a more ambitious, theoretically sophisticated key, supplementing the former term with the more conceptually robust cognate notion of authenticity. One may of course attempt to unpack the notion of authenticity from any one of a number of distinct critical vantage points. But it seems to me that the most philosophically suitable of these will involve Heidegger and his analysis of Dasein's way of being-in-the-world. We will accordingly begin with a brief summary of some of the more salient features of his account.

In Division One of *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops an account of Dasein's authenticity that purports to show how an authentic mode of being-in-the-world for any individual Dasein must always presuppose the backdrop of what he calls the "they," the third-person plural of his formulation consonant with the impersonal use of the pronoun "one" that we use to designate an unnamed generic actor. This is the mode in which Dasein carries out its regular tasks; these are the anonymous, unsigned ways in which one simply gets things done as one goes about one's business. It is crucial to note that there is nothing in this way of being that might properly be said to belong to any particular Dasein, nothing that might allow any individual Dasein to stand out as distinctive: "The Self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic* Self—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way [*eigens ergriffenen*]. As they-self, the particular Dasein has been dispersed into the "they," and must first find itself" (*Being* 167; italics in original).

Heidegger is absolutely clear about the fact that Dasein's comportment as "they-self" is not something that could ever completely be avoided. Indeed, he calls this a "primordial phenomenon" belonging to Dasein's "positive constitution" (167), since it is unthinkable that Dasein could

ever be otherwise. But if it is not avoidable as a mode of being in the world, neither can it be constitutive of Dasein as such:

> This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of "the Others," and in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the "they" is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the "great mass" as *they* shrink back; we find "shocking" what *they* find shocking. The "they," which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness. (164; italics in original)

Nevertheless, the manner in which Dasein spontaneously gives itself over to the "they" in terms of its everyday comportment—in a word, Dasein in its *in*authenticity—opens up for us a possibility of regarding our aesthetic choices in a truly authentic way, a way that constitutively belongs to the individual Dasein. It is here that Dasein can find itself and genuinely become its own. Over against the homogenization of what Heidegger calls "publicness," one becomes able to resist the pressures of the familiar and the accessible in order to take a distinctive stand in favor of some particular thing or experience, and, so to speak, own one's decision even as one is owned by it. And so it is that "publicness," Heidegger tells us, "proximally controls every way in which the world and Dasein gets interpreted," precisely "because it is insensitive to every difference of level and of genuineness and thus never gets to the 'heart of the matter' [*auf die Sachen*]. By publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone" (*Being* 165).

It would seem that two competing impulses come into play in Heidegger's thought on this point. The first is Heidegger's well-documented predilection for associating authenticity in general—authentic thought, authentic action, an authentic way for Dasein to be in the world—with certain simple, almost primitive, scenarios and motifs. Thus Heidegger is continually drawn to an imagery of thought—and its attendant

language, with all of the idiosyncratic quasi-folk etymologies for which he is known—that takes inspiration from a kind of peasant-like existence. In contradistinction to the modern world of public transport and mass communication systems that make "every Other […] like the next" (164), Heidegger seems to have in mind—and here I am thinking of not just his argument in *Being and Time* but the broadest contours of his later thought as well—a way of being that is immediate, authentic, and effectively autochthonous in its groundedness in the earth.

But it is at just this point that we should interrogate further Heidegger's linking of authenticity, sincerity, and elemental simplicity. We might begin our examination by recalling, for instance, Adorno's too-little studied 1964 work, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (translated in 1973 as *The Jargon of Authenticity*). Adorno had argued there that Heideggerian authenticity was marked precisely by its tendency to sublimate and dehistoricize our concrete manner of being in the world. On Adorno's account, Heidegger fell into the trap of sacralizing certain features of language. The hut, the hearth, the fire, the earth: Heidegger's linguistic tropes—his own jargon—were meant to underscore or even point the way toward reclaiming an authentic way of being that would put us in contact once again with the earth. But the kinds of experiences to which Heidegger was drawn were, for Adorno, nothing more than

> a warmed-over piece of expressionism. They were later made into a permanent institution by Heidegger, under the benediction of public opinion. What he dislikes in dealing with culture, to which, incidentally, his own philological divagations belong, is the business of starting with the experience of something derived. But this cannot be avoided and has to be taken into consciousness. In the universally mediated world, everything experienced in primary terms is culturally preformed. Whoever wants the other has to start with the immanence of culture, in order to break out through it. But fundamental ontology gladly spares itself that, by pretending it has a starting point somewhere outside. (99)

Heidegger's jargon of authenticity, Adorno claims, makes use of an antiquated vocabulary that is not only meaningless or irrelevant with regard to our own experience of the world—always already bound up

with culture and economics—but positively pernicious. For Adorno, in Heidegger's work "the seminal experiences of metaphysics are simply diminished by a habit of thought which sublimates them into metaphysical pain and splits them off from the real pain which gave rise to them" (38). Thus Adorno's claim is that the elemental simplicity to which Heidegger is attracted, in its anachronistic, *faux*-rustic character, artfully conceals the fact that the materiality we encounter in our own lived experience is not the materiality of the earth but rather the materiality of commodities. As Adorno puts it, "Heidegger has praise for the 'splendor of the simple.' He brings back the threadbare ideology of pure materials, from the realm of handicrafts to that of the mind—as if words were pure, and, as it were, roughened material. But textiles of that sort are mediated, today, through their calculated opposition to mass production" (50).

Perhaps the most deliciously pointed critique that Adorno offers of Heidegger's appropriation of the language of authenticity is to be found in Adorno's summary of an article of Heidegger's entitled "Why Do We Remain in the Province?" The piece was originally drafted in order to justify Heidegger's decision to turn down a university teaching appointment in Berlin. Adorno summarizes Heidegger's argument in that article:

> His strategy takes this form: "When on a deep winter night a wild snowstorm rages around the cabin, and covers and conceals everything, then the time is ripe for philosophy. Its question must then become simple and essential." Whether questions are essential can in any case only be judged by the answers given; there is no way of anticipating, and certainly not by the criterion of simplicity based on meteorological events. (53)

So here we have Heidegger hearkening to the call of Being in a snowstorm from the warmth of his mountain hut, fantasizing about the virtues of an agrarian life. And here we have Adorno, concerned about how the anachronism of the life of the small farmer is artificially propped up by state subsidies designed solely to conceal the fact that that small farmer is, in an age of mass agriculture, a dead man walking.[6] Had Adorno truly

6 To wit: "the small farmer owes his continuing existence entirely to gracious gifts from that exchange society by which his very ground and foundation, even in appearance, have been removed; in the face of this exchange the farmers have nothing on their horizon except something worse—the immediate exploitation of the family without which they would be bankrupt: this hollowed-out state, the perpetual crisis of the small farmer's busi-

wished to administer the *coup de grâce*, he might have pointed out the irony of the fact that this brief text from Heidegger was originally prepared for delivery over the radio.

I alluded earlier to two competing impulses in Heidegger's thinking about authenticity: authenticity-as-primordial-simplicity is the first of these. But it would also seem that his notion of authenticity could be taken to enfranchise a particular species of connoisseurship and discrimination when it comes to music and art in general. Here is the argument that I think might be culled from his work, even if I do not think Heidegger would be inclined to endorse it directly. If I am at my least authentic when giving myself over most fully to the "publicness" of the "they"—that is, when I listen to the kind of music "one" should listen to, when I go to the same shows and hang out at the same art galleries that "one" should go to, and so on—then it stands to reason that I am most fully authentic when my own choices rely least upon any kind of public support or social approbation. In other words, I disclose my authenticity most fully when I am prepared to assume the greatest risk in standing out, in owning my decisions. Evidence of my willingness to answer for them becomes increasingly strong to the extent that I break with the consensus of the "they," of all those who would deprive "the particular Dasein of its answerability" (*Being* 165).

Now, an interesting problem arises when my choices—say, concerning my tastes in music or art—just happen to coincide with the predilections of the "they." In such a case my predilections cannot serve to mark my distinctiveness in any particular way. When I happen to choose what is already popular I have merely comported myself as "one" does. In this way, the possibility of Dasein disclosing itself both authentically and primordially may be intercepted from the start.[7] My capacity to choose authentically turns out to be constrained in a perhaps surprising way, since the possibility-space of my choices only expands to the degree that others have not chosen what I have chosen. In such cases, not only can the "they" not provide any support for the authenticity of my choices but in fact the "they" may come to constitute an obstacle to my choosing freely

ness, has its echoes in the hollowness of [Heidegger's] jargon" (55).

7 This is not to claim, of course, that one cannot sincerely like music by Taylor Swift or movies by Steven Spielberg or even affirm some degree of authenticity in doing so; it is that such tastes cannot suffice to constitute any positive evidence of the particular Dasein's authenticity as such.

and authentically. For, at the end of the day, the "they" continues to place me in a position in which I may be unable to own my choices in such a way as to perspicuously disclose the particularity of that Dasein that I myself am.

The Authenticity Paradox and the Hipster Corollary

Here we have, I submit, what we might call the Authenticity Paradox, which may be expressed in the following, admittedly crude, form:

> *The Authenticity Paradox (AP): My capacity to choose authentically is inversely correlated with the choices made by others.*

The point of AP is not just that others constrain my capacity to choose in a way that would disclose my own particularity as an individual Dasein; it is that the "they" both enables such a possibility of choice—by constituting the backdrop against which authentic choices can be made—and preempts it, by encouraging me to choose precisely that which "they" have not chosen. My capacity to choose thus remains curiously determined by social pressures which, although negative and indirect, continue to constitute a not-insignificant constraint upon not so much the possibilities that lay before me, but the mode in which I choose among them.

This may all seem somewhat abstruse. But I think that the Authenticity Paradox that I take to be latent in Heidegger's work can be articulated in a more readily accessible idiom, one that will bring us back around to Daniel Johnston and the interpretive puzzle posed to us by outsider art.[8] Consider now the following corollary to the AP which I shall call, in the spirit of our age, the Hipster Corollary:

8 This may be as good a place as anywhere to mention Barry Shank's recent explication of the evolution of the concept of authenticity in the hardcore and indie music scenes (*Political Force* 147-200). In his richly detailed discussion of performers ranging from Patti Smith to Beat Happening to the musicians of the riot grrrl movement, Shank focuses on how authenticity functions a sort of liminal discourse that mediates between the musical and the extramusical, as a mechanism for the construction and policing of emerging communities (particularly in the case of hardcore) as well as a kind of repository for the exploration of complex and often contradictory emotional states (as in indie). But whereas Shank is concerned to explore the force of the experience of beauty in the formation of self-aware political (or proto-political) communities, my interest lies rather in understanding the ethical dimensions of our encounter with outsider music. Like Shank, I too shall argue in the pages that follow that we need to think about authenticity in terms of commitment. But in contrast to Shank, my interest lies rather in the way that outsider music may disclose to us a form of ethical obligation that is distinct from any self-aware maintenance of communities and which is also irreducible to affect.

Hipster Corollary (HC): The degree of authenticity of an artist is inversely correlated with the degree to which the artist is popular.

The HC expresses the kind of reasoning that I suspect many of us have engaged in more often than we would care to admit. We are all familiar with the cliché that the best bands are the ones no one has ever heard of. Once one of these bands does achieve some degree of popularity—which is predicated, at least in significant measure, upon their obscurity—they immediately become vulnerable to charges of inauthenticity, of having "sold out," and so on. This is in a way fitting, I suppose, for a world in which the lifespan of a band is something less than that of a fruit fly or a Kardashian marriage. Recall the stereotype. By the time the first run of silk-screened t-shirts has dried, the band has already broken up: the drummer works at Abercrombie and Fitch and plays guitar in two other bands; the singer is stocking the shelves at Whole Foods; the keyboardist is writing apps for the iPhone; and the bass player is sleeping on his parents' couch and wondering whether a "reunion" show would help the now-defunct band move at least enough t-shirts to help him make the minimum payment on the credit card that he had used to pay for them in the first place.

The logic of the HC was vividly displayed in a 2013 segment on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* in which Coachella music festival attendees were interviewed. They were asked if they had had the chance to check out such and such a band, which, inconveniently, turned out to be fictitious. Invariably, the response of the interviewees when prompted by the interviewer was, amusingly enough, to speak gushingly of "The Obesity Epidemic" and "The Chelsea Clintons" as if the festivalgoers were already thoroughly familiar with the bands' work, capable of pontificating about it, and excited to see the (non-existent) artists perform live (Robertson).

Their responses were instructive on two counts. First, the fans represented themselves as being knowledgeable about bands that are of such exceedingly limited visibility that, as Kimmel gently put it in his introduction to the segment, "they do not exist." The interviewees' confident assertions of already loving the bands' work constituted an explicit attempt to demonstrate the authenticity of their own aesthetic choices, to make a determined effort to stand out from the "they" that obviously plays such a quintessential role in shaping the tastes of more mainstream

music fans. But the hipster fans' efforts failed (to comic effect) as it became clear that they had merely exchanged one large, inauthentic, impersonal "they" for a much smaller, even minimal, but still inauthentic "they" (constituting, perhaps, only the interviewer and the interviewee). In attempting to answer for their own aesthetic choices they inadvertently expressed a truth that Heidegger, to his credit, would have had no trouble acknowledging: the "they" is not determined demographically but rather in terms of answerability. In their earnest attempts to answer for their own highly idiosyncratic and carefully curated tastes in music, they had simply demonstrated that the "they" possesses a certain phenomenological structure rather than a quantitative one. Kimmel's hapless interviewees, whether they would be willing to admit it or not, continue to be absorbed with the publicness of opinions. Their willingness to answer for their choices remains primarily a willingness to answer to a crowd, albeit a very exclusive one.

The Jimmy Kimmel segment is thus cringe-inducing for all sorts of reasons, and not merely for the way it flouts the jay-walking ignorance of passersby as other late-night variety programs are wont to do. More to the point, it is uncomfortable and awkward for the way in which it vividly illuminates a key operating premise of what is sometimes referred to as hipster culture: it memorably stages that curious moment when the internal contradictions of the Hipster Corollary are fully exposed. The point is not that Coachella festivalgoers happen simply to be dramatizing their lack of knowledge about contemporary music when they wished to be held up as connoisseurs (although this is certainly true), nor that they are consciously trying to deceive the interviewer (although this may certainly be true as well). It is that they have followed the logic of the HC through to its end. From a strictly logical vantage point, the only band that the true hipster can authentically like is the band that does not exist, the band that cannot be appropriated by the nameless, public "they."[9] In an odd sense, we could almost say that the hapless victims of Kimmel's prank are at the same time, the most authentic of souls even if—or perhaps we should

9 One cannot help but recall one of the running gags of the HBO series, *Flight of the Conchords*. The show features the misadventures of a hapless, untalented musical duo from New Zealand that relocates to New York City but proves unable to expand their fanbase beyond a single, bewilderingly devoted fan who stalks them incessantly. The series explores to comic effect one interpretation of the logic of authenticity, which results in the truly "authentic" choice being indistinguishable from the mad one.

say *especially* if—the support upon which their authenticity is grounded turns out to be illusory or unstable.

Tractatus Logico-Hipsterophicus

The Nirvana episode I mentioned earlier nicely sums up one crucial aspect of the logic of outsider music and its complex relationship to the musical mainstream. Consider another recent form that this logic has taken. In 2012, Christy Wampole published a much-discussed piece in *The Stone*, the primary outlet for philosophical content in *The New York Times*, that I think has a direct bearing on the issue at hand. Entitled "How to Live Without Irony," the article offers a blunt and unflattering characterization of hipster culture, which it regards as the most culturally current form of corrosive irony. Wampole's argument, in a nutshell, is that hipsters are—and I loosely paraphrase here—ironic twits, walking scare quotes, unable to bootstrap themselves out of their self-referential worlds of trucker caps, porn moustaches, and Justin Bieber t-shirts.

Wampole's diagnosis of the ills of Williamsburg-inflected tastes hinges on an account of hipsterism that regards the phenomenon as emerging from a surfeit of self-awareness. Engaging constantly in performance and nothing but, the hipster "harvests awkwardness and self-consciousness," each of his choices the product of a chain of carefully calculated decisions. It is as if in the final analysis the hipster's self-awareness amounted to neither more nor less than a determination to never attempt to deviate from or challenge the watchful eye of the Lacanian big Other. Indeed, it is as if the big Other were invested for the hipster with all the normative force that it has for Žižek's idiot, even if its social embodiment has been reduced asymptotically to its smallest possible dimension (much as the band-fan relationship had been reduced to its most elemental configuration in *Flight of the Conchords* or, better yet, with respect to the nonexistent bands at Coachella). What the self-consciousness of the hipster amounts to, were we to extend the vector of Wampole's line of reasoning, is really a kind of relentless self-policing and a willingness to submit one's every aesthetic decision to the big Other's scrutiny.

It might be worth pausing for a moment to assess the ethical implications of the position that Wampole has sketched. The hipster's idiotic submission

to the Lacanian big Other should not be confused with submission to the Levinasian Other. The hipster's constant mindfulness of the big Other is not by any means an expression of true answerability to any Levinasian Other but entails issuing a demand of its own. This demand, in a word, is that the big Other—or, more accurately, its proxy in the Symbolic Order, however minimally that representative may be conceived—acknowledge at the same time the hipster's demand for recognition of his or her compliance with the big Other's demand and that the hipster has unfailingly heeded its every whim. And round and round it goes.

This endless deferral of answerability is the natural byproduct of the surfeit of self-awareness that defines the hipster and undercuts any possibility that he may become truly answerable for his choices. Implicit in the hipster's game of endless citation is an attempt to "dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic or otherwise," as Wampole puts it, a refusal of answerability, an unwillingness to accept even the slightest degree of risk, and an insistence upon securing reassurances that he or she has complied fully with the big Other's demands, even if the big Other's proxy in reality has become vanishingly small.

This is why it is not just for aesthetic but for ethical reasons that Wampole commends to us, instead of the endless irony and self-referential ju-jitsu of the hipster, the lives of those who live non-ironically: toddlers, old people, religious people, handicapped people, the poor, the politically oppressed (Wampole). These are the folks, she tells us, who give themselves over spontaneously to their real desires; they don't hedge their bets; they aren't crippled or incapacitated by self-awareness; they don't feel compelled to advertise their guilty pleasures. The New Sincerity movement—by which Wampole means, well, whatever it is that Cat Power, David Foster Wallace, and Wes Anderson all have in common—represents one possible alternative to hipster irony and offers us the possibility of replenishing our cultural reserves instead of draining them through the degradation of endless, irresponsible citation.[10]

If hipsters are too self-aware, the non-ironic are by contrast blissfully unaware or oblivious. And there's the rub: Wampole is all too cognizant, even as she is making the argument, that one cannot blithely sidestep the trap of ironic self-awareness and the potential for affective detachment

10 That said, while Wampole singles out for attention the "New Sincerity" movement, she concedes that it has already, as a matter of fact, fallen short. Now we live, she tells us, in "the new age of Deep Irony" (Wampole).

without somehow stumbling into it again. Hence, her reflections unsurprisingly feature the kind of confession that has become a staple, it seems, of all critical conversations about hipster irony, namely, a degree of self-awareness that tempers one's disgust with the hipster aesthetic (upon which all commentators seem to agree) with a measure of self-criticism. "I too exhibit ironic tendencies," she wistfully tells us:

> For example, I find it difficult to give sincere gifts. Instead, I often give what in the past would only have been accepted only at a White Elephant gift exchange: a kitschy painting from a thrift store, a coffee mug with flashy images of "Texas, the Lone Star State," plastic Mexican wrestler figures. Good for a chuckle in the moment, but worth little in the long term. [...] The simple act of noticing my self-defensive behavior has made me think deeply about how potentially toxic ironic posturing could be. (Wampole)

Of course, from another vantage point, Wampole's acute awareness of her own hipster leanings merely seals the deal. Once she has acknowledged on a cognitive level her own attraction to the lure of hipster irony and the minor pleasures and satisfactions it brings (if only fleetingly), the battle is pretty much over. It is unclear how, once self-referential self-awareness is lost, one could ever hope to regain it. It is easy to understand how those social groups that Wampole singles out for praise would prove attractive to her as an alternative to ironic self-awareness. Thoroughly immersed in the already meaningful worlds in which they find themselves, they are blessed, it would seem, with a lack of self-consciousness that can only appear to the sophisticated observer as enviably direct and unmediated, not to say naïve and quaintly innocent. They have a capacity to think, to feel, to act, that is unencumbered by the very considerations that so often prevent us from staging yet again our own tendency to slip too readily into our role as impotent but stylish Hamlets.

Wampole's argument is appealing and powerful, I think, even if it is ultimately flawed. We err, I would argue, in continuing to frame the problem at hand in terms of self-awareness, whether we think that the distinction between irony and sincerity could be adjudicated on the level of cognition (or, more ambitiously, on an ideological level, in terms of competing

models of consumption).[11] Indeed, to pursue this angle too aggressively is to run the risk of falling yet again into the romantic trap that invites us to regard the usual suspects—children, drunks, addicts, the insane, and so on—as enjoying a privileged vantage point that somehow bestows upon them the gifts of innocence and an unjaundiced eye that have been denied us. Been there, done that.

Daniel Johnston presents us with an interesting case study of an outsider artist whose significance cannot be reduced to a simple matter of self-awareness or the lack thereof. Although he is widely associated with the "New Sincerity" sensibility that Wampole praises, it is far from clear that he belongs in the same category as those pure, unspotted souls who she imagines have somehow kept their souls untainted of ironic detachment (if, that is, those souls really do exist). Johnston is many things—vulnerable, disarmingly direct, fully given over to an artistic vision which at times the listener struggles to appreciate—but he, like most other outsider artists, is by no means an artless, innocent creature in the way Wampole's argument might lead us to suppose. We could do worse than to illustrate this point by making reference to a song that, as well as any other, presumes to offer us a kind of unfiltered glimpse into Johnston's inner life.

"Peek A Boo," from Johnston's 1982 cassette *The What of Whom*, purports to offer the listener an autobiographical sketch of the singer's life as it underscores his feelings of alienation and his ongoing struggles with mental illness and depression: "Junior High I lost my mind. / I don't know why. It's a terrible thing. / Since that day it's been a struggle / Trying to make sense of scrambled eggs."[12] A subsequent stanza makes reference to a moment when he believed he had been the victim of a specific injustice: "I painted a bar and never got paid, / in a town where everyone was unemployed. / I was locked in on Easter day. / All I had to eat was a piece of bread." Although one might wonder to what extent Johnston is perhaps exaggerating or embellishing upon the story, the next stanza renders it somewhat more plausible by linking the episode with the famously troubled relationship he had with his mother during his difficult teenage years: "When I got home my mother said / 'You're a lazy bum

11 For an provocative collection of essays on the topic, see Greif et al.

12 Many of Johnston's early tunes—too many, some might feel—deal extensively with his own adolescent feelings of alienation and the perception that his upbringing was unduly strict. Among these, "Peek a Boo" is both thematically representative and musically exemplary. It was rightly featured as the opening track on perhaps his bestselling album, the 2006 compilation *Welcome to My World*.

and that's how come / You suffer like that and you'll starve / All your life. All your life." Her words were, he goes on to say, "spoken just like it was a curse." Little wonder that the chorus, repeated again and again, consists exclusively of the line, "Please hear my cry for help / and save me from myself." One could hardly imagine a more poignant, heartfelt portrait of a twenty-something still living at home and struggling to deal with untrusting, uncomprehending parents and a world that seems inexplicably hostile to him.

But no sooner does he tell us of his mother's verbal abuse than the very next stanza calls into question his own reportage: although her words might seem unduly harsh to the listener, Johnston puzzlingly reassures us, "But it really didn't sound so bad. / I like to make things up, / It's the healthiest thing that I do." And as if to prove his point, the next stanza offers up an odd image that seems to hover between comical exaggeration and earnest metaphor: "But I'm tired / from being kidnapped / By a dark wolf that would / Do me in."

Is Johnston's "dark wolf" a case of him simply making things up to garner attention? Or is this a metaphor for his darkening mental state? And how are we to explain the troubling vacillation between his apparently artless recounting of his struggle with depression and his sudden appropriation of the language of the counselor or analyst—"It's the healthiest thing that I do"—to mediate his own words for us, processing them through an interpretive framework that he himself is more than happy to provide? This is no portrait of the artist as a naïve, innocent outsider, unsullied by any significant degree of self-awareness. On the contrary, as Encarnacao has observed, Johnston's *oeuvre* is permeated by gestures—from the repetition of thematic and lyrical motifs across his songs to his highlighting of the impoverishment of his own lo-fi recording set-up—that suggest an artist who is very much invested in the self-aware staging of his own work (Encarnacao 150-51).[13]

On the other hand, we cannot comfortably dismiss the real, palpable anguish that the song clearly communicates. In fact, I would argue that

13 An extraordinary example of Johnston's self-awareness may be found in the opening shot of Jeff Feuerzeig's *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, which features a twenty-something Johnston filming himself standing in front of a mirror, announcing that he is the ghost of Daniel Johnston, speaking of the current moment (1985) as if it belonged to the distant past and announcing his determination to speak to his viewers "about my condition," presumably an allusion to his struggles with schizophrenia. It is a stunning example of Johnston's self-awareness and a textbook case of narrative *mise-en-abîme* (cf. jagodzinski 170-71).

the listener comes to appreciate the emotional depth of the song, not in spite of Johnston's self-awareness but because of it. It is at this point that we begin to sense the limitations of Wampole's essay: her argument suggests, as do so many contemporary discussions of irony and sincerity, that we are obliged to adjudicate between the two on a cognitive level, as it were. The idea seems to be that the hipster suffers from a surfeit of self-awareness while the true outsider lacks it. But Johnston's work demonstrates that the tension that we are so readily inclined to frame in terms of the irony/sincerity pairing might be better approached on an altogether different level, i.e., a non-cognitive one. We shall see that some of the key features of this reconfiguration of the issue may be disclosed to us by an exploration of the particular challenges that Johnston's work provides for his more musically gifted interpreters.

Only If You're Looking Will It Find You

Johnston's best-known tune is no doubt "True Love Will Find You in the End," from his 1984 cassette, *Retired Boxer*. The song has been featured in a number of films but also reached a wide audience as the soundtrack for the 2012 Axe Body Spray commercial, "Office Love," which as of this writing has garnered over one million views on YouTube.[14] The characteristics of the song are not unlike those of other Johnston compositions. Three open chords are earnestly strummed on a not-quite in-tune guitar, supplemented by Johnston's plaintive voice and a melancholic lyric that is by turns optimistic and full of anguish. The song's ostensible faith in the redeeming power of love is somehow both reinforced and subverted by the sparseness of the song's production and Johnston's earnest yet self-aware performance. The track was singled out for special attention by popular indie music website "Pigeons and Planes" in a feature devoted to Johnston's work, with the author rightly noting that "the thing that has always been interesting about this song is how greatly listeners' interpretations vary. Some take it as the most uplifting song of Daniel's entire catalog, and some see it as the most tragic" ("10 Best").

14 Notably, the ad, part of an aggressively eccentric—if not arguably sexist—campaign designed by the firm of BBH, had garnered (as of September 20, 2015) nearly identical numbers of positive (1,262) and negative ratings (1,315) from Youtube viewers. That said, there can be little doubt that reactions to the ad have been driven mostly by its sexist visuals and not the soundtrack, as many of the viewer comments would suggest.

The song has been covered with varying degrees of success by an array of artists, including such well-known acts as Beck, Wilco, and Spiritualized. Each of Johnston's interpreters has had to make critical decisions about how to navigate the intriguing interpretive challenges that the composition provides. Musically, the original recording of the tune is, as I have noted, disarmingly simple: an out-of-tune acoustic guitar strums a handful of open chords with an unadorned voice repeating a couple of choruses:

> True love will find you in the end
> You'll find out just who was your friend
> Don't be sad, I know you will,
> But don't give up until
> True love finds you in the end.
>
> This is a promise with a catch
> Only if you're looking will it find you
> 'Cause true love is searching too
> But how can it recognize you
> Unless you step out into the light?
> Don't be sad, I know you will
> But don't give up until
> True love finds you in the end.

One of the primary challenges for an artist covering the song consists in determining how to negotiate the fragility of Johnston's vocal line. To follow him too closely is to risk a descent into bathos: the vocal of the original version is stark and fragile, an unadorned melody left utterly unconcealed and exposed by a rudimentary guitar accompaniment. Johnston's most accomplished interpreters have unsurprisingly tended to forego some of the starkness of the original performance, tending instead to deflect something of the song's raw affective power by imagining it as a bit of carefully arranged neo-Americana. Beck's version, for example, preserves the starkness of the original in the simplicity of his arrangement: a strummed acoustic guitar forms the backdrop for the harmonica's statement of the theme, which is then later picked up by Beck's trademark sleepy and understated vocals. Wilco has recorded a languorous

interpretation of the number as well, complete with wheezy harmonica, pedal steel guitar, tinkling piano, and Jeff Tweedy's plaintive voice. And Spiritualized, in turn, has taken to performing the piece live with an accompanying choir, rendering the piece as a bit of gospel, the choir backdrop providing the counterpoint to the vulnerability of lead singer Jason Pierce's performance: a metaphor, perhaps, for the trope of a troubled, lonely soul in search of spiritual redemption that is so common in that band's work.

But, in order to bring into focus the way in which the song brings up short the kind of hipster logic that we have been considering, let us look at two recent interpretations of the tune, one by ukulele songstress Sophie Madeleine and the other by husband-wife duo Mates of State, finally comparing these with a widely disseminated video of Johnston's own 2010 performance of the piece in Sydney, Australia.

Sophie Madeleine's interpretation of "True Love" is one of the more popular covers of the tune on YouTube, having been featured as the third of her "30 Covers in 30 Days" series. Riding the wave that marked the unexpected return of the ukulele to popular music, Sophie Madeleine has become one of the best known and most commercially successful of the young-woman-playing-the-ukulele-and-singing microgenre that seemed to be everywhere online a few years back and which was championed by popular websites such as boingboing.net. A native of Brighton, England, Sophie Madeleine holds an MA in songwriting but switched from the guitar to the ukulele as her primary instrument and securing an enviable niche in the YouTube ecosystem in the process. Her home-recorded videos of classic pop songs and originals have garnered a total of more than 4.5 million views on her YouTube channel and her online popularity eventually springboarded her into a recording contract.

Sophie Madeleine's interpretation of the song was uploaded in June of 2011 and she noted in the video's comments that it is one of her favorite songs, finding it "incredibly sweet." Accordingly, her performance is unstintingly sunny, her version following Johnston's arrangement fairly closely with the exception of her addition of a chorus of wordless vocals, performed in her somewhat precious and slightly anachronistic vocal style, characterized by a rapid, quavery vibrato. Of course the substitution of a ukulele for Johnston's original guitar deeply marks the character of the song as well. While her 7th chords lend a bit of harmonic spice to the tune,

the ukulele does exactly what we would expect it to do, adding an upbeat, percussive punch that cannot but help to turn a somewhat ambivalent and emotionally complex tune into a happy, uptempo love song, an earnest expression of faith in the possibility of finding love at last. And perhaps it goes without saying that the ukulele itself suggests an eschewal of high quality production values in favor of a decidedly lo-fi ethos that, in good hipster fashion, doesn't hesitate to flirt with kitsch (cf. Dolan).

The Mates of State's version of the song likewise trades on the kinds of unorthodox instrumentation that are commonly associated with the more hipster fringes of indie pop. Challenged to record the song and make the video in a single day, they produced a result that is a textbook example of preciousness that, while not altogether unpleasant, seems to want nothing to do with the original's wistfulness, trading it instead for a blissfully stupid interpretation. Their version of the tune kicks off with sharply punctuated handclaps, their crispness and precision perhaps striking the listener as an almost too obvious reference to Daniel Johnston's well-known rhythmic challenges. The chorus features layered, pitch-perfect harmonies—again, in evident contrast to Daniel Johnston's often doomed efforts to settle on a single pitch—while a xylophone makes an appearance as does (perhaps inevitably) a ukulele. Their version of "True Love" builds to a climax of cascading vocal overdubs before finally fading out with a final strum or two of the ukulele. Through it all, the interpretation of the song is undeniably twee. The accompanying video, which includes footage from the recording session, features the two band members first laying down the tracks in a basement studio and then taking to the subways and streets of New York, projecting the images of the recording session with a tiny, handheld projector onto indifferent passersby, who seem uncertain about how to react to the musicians who, in their eagerness to demonstrate their playfulness, can't help but come across as rather narcissistic twits, to put it bluntly, poster-children for the kind of hipsterism Wampole warned us about.

While reaction to the YouTube video has been overwhelming positive (429 likes compared with 35 dislikes as of the date of this writing), some commenters—presumably those most familiar with Daniel Johnston's original version—have noted that Mates of State transformed the character of the tune in unfortunate ways. As one YouTube commenter notes, "they took a song driven by bittersweet emotion and made it upbeat, poppy,

and sterile. I'm all for re-interpretation, but when the cover artist doesn't understand whats [sic] so special about a song it [sic] the first place, crap like this results."[15]

I think the commenter has a point, even if it is inelegantly expressed. To read the song as a triumphant celebration of the power of love is to miss altogether what many listeners would identify as its crucial staging of the theme of vulnerability, both at the level of the lyric and the instrumental performance. The contrast between the ambivalent but darkly evocative dimensions of the song and the cheery versions of Sophie Madeleine and Mates of State may be brought into sharper focus by way of comparison with Daniel Johnston's own performance of the song in his 2010 Sydney concert. Having gained a tremendous amount of weight (due at least in part to his medication regimen), his hair almost entirely white, the performer that took the stage on that evening bore little resemblance to that youthful Daniel Johnston that some of his audience members might have expected to see. Shaking fitfully (and it is unclear to what extent it was a consequence of his medication, his nervousness, or a combination of the two), his performance of the song is almost painfully vulnerable. His voice is thin and fragile; his hands, gripping the mike stand, tremble badly while he reads the lyrics off a sheet of paper. His own fervent strumming on the guitar on the original recording has been exchanged for the crisply played arpeggios of an unseen professional accompanist. Although "True Love" was performed on this occasion as a solo acoustic number, the concert itself featured a full band and was professionally recorded in a well-appointed venue. Ironically, the professional backdrop and high production values of the concert recording made Johnston's interpretation of the song seem particularly vulnerable, almost too much so. Upon viewing the performance, one simply does not know whether he will make it through to the end of the song without the whole thing falling apart in front of a live audience. A particularly telling shot is provided by the camera as it briefly isolates the faces of two audience members that seem slightly embarrassed by the spectacle of Johnston, who is shaking and stammering onstage. One readily imagines that they were somewhat unprepared for such a vulnerable, awkward performance, one that offers no possibility of a buffer of ironic detachment. But there can be no doubt

15 See the comment from user named "LiarsBall."

about it: the vulnerability of Johnston's performance is part and parcel of its strength. He performs the piece with a degree of integrity and power that the other versions—as pleasant as they may be—quite simply lack, for all their technical mastery.

What exactly is it that sets Johnston's performance of his song off from the other interpretations I have mentioned? I certainly do not want to claim that his disarming performance could be explained as an artless, sincere expression of some sort while his hipster peers are too self-aware for their own good. Indeed, part of the appeal of Johnston's song is precisely the way in which it perspicuously evinces the songwriter's cognizance of his own dilemma. "Don't be sad," he tells us, immediately adding, "I know you will." By no means is Johnston naïve: acutely aware of the inefficacy and impotence of his own words, Johnston no sooner issues a challenge to his listeners ("Don't be sad") than he acknowledges that his plea is fated to fall on deaf ears, that he is bound to fail ("I know you will"). I don't know how one could hope to define self-awareness any more clearly than this. It is a striking moment that highlights the weakness of Johnston's discursive position, his awareness of the weakness of that position, and his determination to soldier on, regardless. This very weakness is, in fact, the greatest strength of his interpretation.

I think the case of "True Love Will Find You in the End" demonstrates that it is a mistake to attempt to articulate the tension between what we loosely call "irony" and "sincerity" or "authenticity" as something to be adjudicated on the level of cognition, or self-awareness, or representational states, or what have you. But if we are not to think of how Johnston's performance of his own tune differs from the ones offered by Mates of State or Sophie Madeleine in terms of the interplay between irony and sincerity, how are we then to do so? An important clue may be found in the final lines of the song's chorus, which round out the structure of the demand that is at stake and issue a challenge which I am not satisfied that the cover versions that we have examined fully appreciate, much less address. Having acknowledged the issuing of a demand which is impossible to enforce ("don't be sad"), the last lines present us with another imperative which, even if it is in principle achievable, remains obscure with regard to how we might go about accomplishing it: "[...] don't give up until / True love finds you in the end." The demand is non-negotiable, it is

incumbent upon us, and yet it is accompanied by no particular guidance as to how we might begin to meet it.

What does the song betoken then, if not the hackneyed interplay of irony and sincerity, interpreted on the level of competing and contradictory intentional states? The answer, I think is as disarmingly simple as the form of the imperative that the song issues and which Johnston himself seems to do his best to heed: a robust existential commitment. One cannot escape the feeling while listening to Johnston that something is at stake, that a risk is called for and must be taken, that the modest resources one may offer are never enough (and never will be), that one must nevertheless answer the call in all one's vulnerability and inadequacy. To a troubling, uncompromising demand one may choose either response or denial, but of course denial is itself but an inauthentic response. As pleasant and technically proficient as the versions of the song that are on offer from Sophie Madeleine and Mates of State, it is difficult to see how one would go about interpreting them as authentic responses to the kind of muse to which Johnston seems to feel compelled to respond.

My claim is then that Johnston's music could be seen to explore the peculiar kind of power that inheres in powerlessness itself. Indeed, this is the very kind of power that, as Critchley has argued, characterizes ethics proper: it is the sober awareness that one has of one's infinite answerability to the Other and one's all too finite capacity to respond adequately to that call. And yet one responds all the same (cf. *Faith* 160-65). Is not the same sensibility on display here? I know of no better way to characterize Johnston's career than as a unique, unstinting response to a call that perhaps he alone can hear, one made all the more poignant and paradoxically articulate by its very lack of eloquence. We might recall yet again the form of the imperative that Lacanian psychoanalysis taught us to appreciate: "Do not give way on your desire." Johnston's work is an Ophelia-like record of his almost troubling fidelity to that call. If he has admonished his listeners to never give up—and he himself has shown no indication of doing any such thing—how then could we?

Chapter Three

Darger's Dark Thoughts

Rehabilitating Henry Darger

Perhaps it was inevitable. On December 2, 2014, Christie's in Paris auctioned off an untitled piece by American artist Henry Darger for over €600,000. "More than ever contemporary collectors are buying outsider art," cooed gallery owner Andrew Edlin. "I think in general people respond to how fresh the work is," he added by way of explanation. "And that's to a large degree because it's not derivative. All contemporary art is based on, or certainly informed by, art historical references. The fact that these artists are not working in that continuum—most of the times the audience isn't even in the equation when these […] artists are making the work—that's why the work is so radically individualistic" (Duray).

Darger would certainly appear to fit the bill: a man of limited education and few opportunities, he spent his life working as a dishwasher and custodian in almost complete social, not to say artistic, isolation. A loner with very few friends or even meaningful acquaintances, he would retire in his free hours to the tiny Chicago apartment where he spent his evenings filling notebooks with vast, sprawling narratives accompanied by a wealth of illustrations, which were inspired in part by the newspaper clippings, catalogs, and pulp art that he salvaged from dumpsters. The extent of his creative endeavors seems to have been almost totally unknown during his lifetime: he was apparently content to supplant his tiny corner of a merciless world in an impoverished Chicago neighborhood with a vast work of the imagination. The full extent of his immense productive labors—over 30,000 pages of prose and hundreds of watercolors, collages

and other mixed media artworks—was only discovered and catalogued upon his death in 1973.[1]

That the art world should stumble upon Darger and subsequently bestow upon his work a value he could never have imagined is the kind of irony to which we have by now become accustomed. That that same art world would come to appreciate Darger's work on the basis of its alleged innocence with respect to the tradition is no great surprise either. The trope of the mad romantic artist creating furiously, heedless of institutional norms or art history, is a myth so deeply ingrained in us that we find it difficult to cast it off even when we know all too well that it is false, requiring as it does a kind of willful naïveté on our part, an indulgence in the common fantasy that some artists' eyes really might be unjaundiced and the attendant hope that perhaps ours, as critics, spectators, and readers, might be as well.

But the discovery and valorization of Darger's work as it is emblematized by the moment of the Christie's auction is striking for another reason. It suggests an interesting art-historical development, namely that the accusations, generally uttered *sotto voce* even as his work was first discovered and exhibited in the late 1970s, was evidence of a truly disturbed soul, a pedophile whose violent impulses were perhaps only kept in check—if, indeed, they were kept in check—by a simple lack of opportunity.[2] One enjoyed Darger's work, if one did so at all, by bracketing or explaining away some of its deeply disturbing content: image after image of eviscerated

1 That's not to say that the surge of interest in his work is a sudden or isolated phenomenon. Even if the Christie's auction was something of a watershed moment in Darger's "arrival," there can be no doubt that he had been on his way for quite a while. His work had long since found a sizeable network of admirers and he was firmly in the sights of the makers of taste and culture. Jessica Yu directed an excellent documentary film on Darger; John Ashbery had published a long poem in response to Darger's work; Wikipedia informs us that Darger's artwork has influenced not only numerous artists but even the visual design of a multiplayer game; and a long list of indie musicians and bands have engaged his work in one way or another. Even Giorgio Agamben has devoted a number of pages in his essay *Nymphs* to Darger's *The Realms of the Unreal*. As outsider artists go, Darger has by now become about as much of an insider as you can get.

2 MacGregor considers the possibility that Darger may have murdered a four-year old girl, although he ultimately rejects it. Still, he says the following of *Realms*: "While it is perfectly possible to dismiss Darger's more barbarous fantasy inventions as a playful, even childlike dabbling with the horrorific […] this is clearly not the position taken here. Although set in *The Realms of the Unreal*, their psychic reality is undeniable, the fairy-tale context merely a mask concealing a deeply troubled and troubling inner world. These are, unmistakably, the fantasy-constructs of a borderline personality, poised on the edge of violent and irrational sadistic activity. Whether or not they were acted upon, these are the ongoing fantasies of a serial killer. For every individual who suddenly breaks loose, setting off a succession of serial killings, there are many more who manage somehow, througout a lifetime, to contain their fantasies, suppressing the impulse to move into action in the world outside their minds" (596).

or strangled nude little girls, suffering at the hands of their older male oppressors. To be sure, the violence of the scenes Darger depicted was attenuated somewhat by the medium in which he worked, his figures more cartoonish than realistic, the landscapes and settings clearly fantastic rather than narrowly representational. But even so, the concatenation of Darger's impoverished, isolated circumstances and the troubling themes of his work—a conjunction that has only been rendered more worrisome by what we have come to learn about the kinds of abuse that Darger himself had suffered in his youth—might give some viewers pause, as if their enjoyment of his work might at the same time represent a willingness to close one's eyes to a troubled, lonely man's most perverse fantasies.

So, the question remains: how is that an obscure custodian, dishwasher, and self-taught artist has become enfranchised by the moneyed institutions that shape our aesthetic and cultural tastes? One thing is clear: if Darger's work has always been read symptomatically, as a decipherable expression of the scars, obsessions, prurient desires and even traumatic abuses to which its creator had been subjected, it is also true that the nature of those symptomatic readings of his work has evolved. Early warnings about its troubling content—and, not to put too fine a point on it, explicit accusations of pedophilia and even murder—have largely given way to somewhat more subtle, if not exculpatory, discussions of his work. Consider two recent engagements of Darger, each substantive in its own way, each approaching him and his work from a distinct vantage point. In his recent biography of the reclusive artist, Jim Elledge provides a reading of Darger's creative endeavors that does not deny some of their troubling aspects. Rather, he attempts to read them as a problematic and conflicted sublimation of what Elledge takes to be Darger's queer identity. Michael Moon's impressive recent reading of Darger's work, on the other hand, largely eschews biographical detail in its analysis, favoring instead a rigorous contextualization of his work with respect to a variety of well-established aesthetic and narrative frames—from Catholic martyrological iconography, to the juvenilia of the Bronte siblings, to the aesthetics of mid-twentieth century pulp fiction.

There is much to be said for what I would call symptomatic readings of Darger and it is natural that most interpretive strategies would tend to focus on either the roiling psycho-social forces that shaped him (and, a fortiori, his modes of artistic expression) or the ways in which his work

might be located with regard to a discrete aesthetic and cultural framework, even if he was not always aware of that framework himself and the ways in which it may have shaped his own experience. Both kinds of readings might be regarded as symptomatic in their own way, inasmuch as they regard his work first and foremost as providing us with clues as to how subject and subject matter jointly map each other.[3]

The recent critical and popular rehabilitation of Darger is predicated upon interpretive strategies such as these and, while I regard them as insightful and perhaps even necessary, it is not clear to me that they are sufficient to account for what I regard as the ethical significance of his work.[4] In order for this dimension to come properly into view, we shall need, I claim, not to rehabilitate Darger by striking upon hermeneutic strategies that would bracket off or even contextualize the most troubling aspects of his work but rather to find a way to acknowledge its disturbing character without thereby domesticating it. If that work is indeed invested with moral significance—as I believe it is—that significance will become apparent to the extent that we are able to undo much of the critical effort that has been expended to make his troubled life and art more comprehensible, more familiar. In short, we shall need to wrest Darger's work from the well-heeled collectors and galleries and place Darger's work back on the margins in order to appreciate its truly disturbing character. Only by doing so can we recognize, in all of its excesses and troubling character, the profound ethical demand that it continues to make upon us.

I shall therefore argue that a powerful ethical impulse is disclosed through Darger's work in peculiarly striking ways, and that we might

3 I should point out that the interpretive approach adopted here is consonant in important ways with one of the considerations that informed Moon's book on Darger: "to promote some recognition that Darger's tendency to return to scenes of massacre and atrocity, rather than simply being a symptom of personal psychological damage on his part, may be better understood as the expression of a profound fidelity to some important but generally unwelcome truths about the place of just such forms of extreme violence, often perpetrated against highly vulnerable populations" (12). Moon's study, however, is primarily art-historical in its orientation while I have elected to make use of somewhat different tools in my study.

4 Adam Zachary Newton—well known for his nuanced and insightful work on the dialogics of narrative and ethics—has also recently discovered in Darger a rich repository of materials that foreground the ethical question proper. "Ethics," as he aptly characterized the problem in his 1995 *Narrative Ethics*, "signifies recursive, contingent, and interactive dramas of encounter and recognition, the sort which prose fiction both crystallizes and recirculates in acts of interpretive engagement" (12). Newton's most recent work deepens this claim, offering sensitive reflections on both the materiality of *Realms of the Unreal* and the text's unreadability, drawing out the ethical dimensions of features of the text that may have appeared to be utterly contingent. Newton's discussion of Darger, like mine, takes its bearings from Levinas's thought, although his line of interrogation is different from—but not, I think, incompatible with—the one that I develop here (cf. Newton *To Make the Hands* 95-127).

learn to read it in something of a phenomenological mode, one that would allow us to appreciate the way in which it instantiates, in a brutally straightforward way, the full force of the ethical encounter proper while bringing up short the fantasy that we as viewers might remain untainted and untouched by the demons that Darger directly exemplified or staged—and not merely imagined or represented—in his creations. It confronts us in an altogether unexpected manner with something that we should not hesitate to identify as monstrous, in a loosely Kantian sense.[5] If Darger's work is characterized precisely by the surpassing of any bounded economics of exchange or reciprocity, it is precisely this very excess that discloses to us something that we should not hesitate to call the infinite. I am not speaking metaphorically here: Darger's work, I argue, may be thought of as a machine that transposes the infinite demand of responsibility into an infinite narrative, a work of art that for all intents and purposes is endless. We shall thus see that the most troubling and hermeneutically problematic aspects of Darger's work will also turn out to illuminate the ethical dimensions of what we might think of as an economy of excess.

In short, my claim is that we may regard Darger's creative labors as constituting a work of sublimation at both its purest and, so to speak, at its least pure. If *Realms of the Unreal*—his most emblematic creation—discloses to us in a painfully transparent way how the infinite demand of the suffering Other may be sublimated into the work of art, it does so by constantly effacing the line upon which Kant had insisted between the sublime and the monstrous. On the one hand, we shall see that Darger's work vouchsafes the relentless, infinite call of the suffering Other, permits it to resonate, ensures that we hear it, attunes us to it. Yet on the other hand it does not allow the labor of aesthetic repair to cover over entirely the traumatic wound that the call itself inflicts. It renders the call audible, to be sure, but only by allowing it to grip us with a kind of terrible hold that never slackens. It is precisely the inexhaustible character of Darger's artistic production—one never seems to get to the end of it—and not just the excess of its content per se that brings it within the sphere of this monstrous sublime. This, I shall suggest, is a crucial meaning of Darger's

5 Kant's remarks on the monstrous in the *Third Critique* are brief and schematic, to be sure. But they hinge on the notion that the monstrous object is strictly antithetical to the sphere of aesthetics as such, insofar as the object's size and proportions exceed the natural boundaries of the sublime, "nullify[ing] the purpose that constitutes its concept" (109).

narrative, one that the reader or spectator can never take in at a glance, can never fully appropriate or digest, whose vastness constitutes a response to a call impossible to ignore even if it cannot be dismissed or dispatched. We need to be careful with Darger: to rehabilitate him by bringing him fully into the fold of critical acceptability would be to run the risk of failing to acknowledge the troubling demand that his work makes upon us.

My argument will accordingly touch upon the following points. First, I shall address perhaps the most disquieting feature of Darger's *The Realms of the Unreal*: its troublingly resourceful and imaginative depictions of violence perpetrated against young female subjects by older male aggressors. This is the bone that must stick in the throat of any of Darger's admirers who might be inclined to gentrify him or bemusedly hold forth upon some of his stylistic quirks and idiosyncrasies. No, there is indeed a deeply problematic violence in Darger's work and I find any willingness to ignore it or explain it away disingenuous. In 2002, the psychoanalyst and art critic John MacGregor published his landmark study of *Realms of the Unreal*, developing a reading of Darger that, to MacGregor's credit, made no apologies or excuses for his darkest pages. If the intervening years have been characterized by the willingness of critics and collectors to distance themselves from MacGregor's unabashedly moralizing vantage point or to seek to change the subject, then I think that something valuable, and perhaps even essential, will have been lost. It will not do to domesticate Darger. I will suggest instead that we must address the excesses of his work—including its sadism—in order to discern crucial aspects of its powerful, if latent, ethical content.

That is not to say that we are obliged to follow MacGregor and most of Darger's other critics in developing a symptomatic reading of his work along the lines already described. Rather, while acknowledging the virtues of such interpretive strategies, I will opt instead to explore how Darger's work may be read as a phenomenologically sensitive exploration of the ethical encounter as such. The very violence of his work, I shall argue, is intimately bound up with its ethical content and in fact may illuminate the trauma and horror of an encounter with an infinitely vulnerable yet infinitely demanding Other. In short, what might naturally begin as a symptomatic reading of Darger will turn into something else altogether: a documentation of how the infinite call of responsibility to that Other keeps the wound of trauma from ever scabbing over even while it buoys

up the ethical subject so as to allow that infinite responsibility to be transposed into what will turn out to be essentially an infinite narrative. An important interlocutor for us here will be Georges Bataille, insofar as he can show us how to begin to think constructively about some of the the violently transgressive excesses of Darger's work.

Next, we shall examine a crucial feature of Darger's work that far too often has been ignored by his critics or mentioned only as a curious item of incidental or biographical interest, namely, its altogether impoverished character. From the scavenged materials with which it was produced to Darger's deficient or at least incomplete mastery of the narrative and representational conventions that might have brought his work more readily into the artistic mainstream, the poverty, the emptiness, out of which he spun his narrative is a direct embodiment of the ethical problem to which it constituted a response. It is not just an accidental feature of Darger's work, I argue, that it was prepared with refuse salvaged from dumpsters or materials of inferior quality that were never designed for artistic ends. The poverty of Darger's labors is, as it were, internal to the peculiar logic of sublimation that permeates his work. Just as we may read him as offering a finite response to an infinite call of responsibility, the peculiar material features of that work may be seen as the direct embodiment of the phenomenological structure of responsibility. The scarcity and lack from which Darger's work arises and from which it is crafted provides us with an important clue as to what it might mean for us to heed an infinite demand when we have only painfully limited resources to offer in response. Here we shall find it helpful to turn to Levinas to help us understand the significance of the kind of destitution that is on display in *The Realms of the Unreal*. It is at this point that the excrescence of the general economy that so fascinated Bataille will be brought into dialogue with the structure of profligacy that for Levinas was emblematic of the ethical encounter proper.

At issue is the kind of attestation that is on offer in and through Darger's art. It is significant that his work was manifestly not produced with an eye toward publication or distribution: virtually no one was aware of the existence of *Realms* during Darger's lifetime. Even on his deathbed he went so far as to suggest that he would just as soon see his life's work thrown away as see it saved (Elledge 312). The significance of the interpretive challenge posed by this point should not be lost upon us: we must decide what

it could possibly mean to claim that Darger was a witness to an "unreal" violence, enacted upon "unreal" victims, and which was documented by a solitary, undeniably troubled soul that never sought to proffer that witness to anyone. Moon has argued, not without justification, that Darger ought to be regarded as, in some general way, a witness of "the terrible ordinariness of violence in the history of the twentieth century—especially violence against children, and specifically against girls" (Moon ix). I think he is right. But if this witness of Darger's is to be understood as anything but allegorical, we would still need to appreciate, first, how it is that such an exchange—i.e., of fictional creations for a real, suffering Other—could somehow be more than a metaphor and thus rise to the level of a proper ethical gesture and, second, how it is that we are to regard the brute fact that Darger took scant interest in sharing his witness with anyone at all. What are we to make of a silent testimony that may readily strike us as, at best, an exorcism of one's private demons but certainly not an efficacious witness in any juridical sense of the word? I shall argue that it is here that the enduring ethical and phenomenological significance of both the utter poverty of Darger's work and its interminable, excessive character may be brought into focus together.

Finally, we shall ultimately find ourselves obliged to reflect upon the ways in which we, as Darger's eavesdropping, voyeuristic audience—the same audience that he never apparently intended to address—may have a role to play in the ethical and aesthetic economy of his life's work. His labors were never undertaken for exhibition or public consumption. Yet the viewer or reader of *Realms of the Unreal* finds him or herself cast in the impossible role of witnesses to an artist who offers us his own (real) witness of imaginary violence perpetrated in an ostensibly imaginary world whose ethical structure is nonetheless only rendered visible in its sublimated, fictional character. What would it mean for us readers or spectators to occupy this impossible position? Neither more nor less than for us to allow ourselves to read, indeed, to be interpellated, as proper ethical subjects. It is to be forced to confront our own vulnerabilities and painfully limited resources in the face of infinite demands.

An Unreal Violence

The strength of the ligatures binding psychoanalysis to art criticism has never been in doubt. Even so, Darger would seem to present us with a particularly striking case where it becomes simply impossible to do criticism without engaging in at least a modicum of psychologically-informed hypothesizing. Although he produced an ersatz sequel to *Realms* entitled *Crazy House*, a lengthy work of autobiography (which veered off into sheer fantasy after a couple hundred pages) and another immense tome about an anthropomorphized tornado named Sweetie Pie (an expression of his life-long obsession with extreme weather events), Darger's critics have rightly trained their interpretive efforts primarily upon on his magnum opus, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion.* He began the work sometime around 1910 and it occupied him for decades after. *Realms* has been called the longest novel ever written, even if it is not altogether clear if it belongs to that genre or any other.[6] Accompanying the work are hundreds of illustrations dealing with the travails of its protagonists, the seven Vivian Girls, the sisters who have devoted themselves to resisting the evil forces of the Glandelinians, who in turn are bent on forcing the world's children into slavery. *Realms* is the interminable story of the endless battle between their arrayed forces.

A full interpretation—or even comprehensive description—of *The Realms of the Unreal* could keep a reader gainfully occupied for a very long time: in its motifs the work owes a great deal to tropes drawn from Darger's keen interest in the Civil War and Catholic martyrology, as well as reportage from the first World War; in its structure, it recalls the vast, serialized narratives of dime store literature and comic strips; in its diction and modes of verbal expression it recalls Dickens and the Victorian-inflected children's didactic readers of the early decades of the twentieth century. All the while it provides us with occasional glimpses of a degree of self-awareness that would not be out of place in the most emblematic monuments of modern literature.[7] For all that,

6 Indeed, *Realms of the Unreal* remains unpublished to date and only selected excerpts have found their way into print (Bonesteel, *Henry Darger*).

7 Moon notes that Darger's personal library included *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Don Quixote* and hypothesizes that he may have been particularly attracted to works that "sequelate," works, that is, that anticipate and prepare the ground for their own sequels (5). Consider the following striking moment, in which the Vivian Girls and their guardian, Jack Ambrose Evans, come across the notebooks comprising the text of *Realms*, in

Figure 3.1. Detail from Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. Everything is allright though storm continues.* Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper. 24in x 108 1/4in. American Folk Art Museum. Accession Number 2001.16.2A. ©2016 Kiyoko Lerner/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Used by Permission.

Realms is frequently ungainly, awkward, and amateurish. To call the work sprawling would be to grant it more coherence than it often has. Featuring an endless gallery of barely distinguishable cardboard characters, it proceeds in episodic fashion to describe in minute detail the struggles of the Vivian Girls and their allies against their oppressors. Lightly disguised descriptions of Darger himself turn up again and again, mostly on the side of the girls, but with some of his avatars actively opposing and persecuting them. While a few excerpts from *Realms* have made their way into print and those fragments occasionally evince some modest virtues of a literary nature, the work as a whole is quite literally unreadable—for a variety of reasons that we shall later examine—and, to date, its notoriety is predicated primarily upon the illustrations that accompany it. And yet *Realms* is potent, arresting,

which they themselves are characters: "Soon they had them on the table. Evans proceeded to examine them. He took the pictures first. These he examined carefully. 'Why this is very extraordinary,' he exclaimed. 'Every picture seems to look you straight in the face, as if you had some secret to tell them, or as if you suspected them of knowing your thoughts. And probably he [Darger] had to use them as company as he was childless.' 'Maybe that is so, and he wanted them all to look as if they were paying attention to him' said Jennie. 'He must have been a very odd man'" (cit. in MacGregor 315). The moment calls to mind the opening chapters of the second part of *Don Quixote*, published ten years after the wildly successful first part, in which Don Quixote and Sancho Panza ruminate on how they had been treated by the narrator in part one and offer some insightful criticism on Cervantes's handling of their adventures.

and endlessly captivating in the strictest sense of the term, as it enthralls not so much for the story it recounts but for the uncanny sensation it gives us of being witnesses to a vision that, Ophelia-like, is absolutely uncompromising and absolutely unwilling to give way on the obscure object of its desire.

These two forces would seem to be in play throughout the work: an artless innocence and a sometimes startlingly violent imagination. *The Realms of the Unreal*'s prepubescent protagonists, the Vivian Girls, emblematize the former, while the latter is associated with the Glandelinians, the cruel male slave drivers hell-bent on subjecting the children to their every whim. Darger's prose style is often turgid but there is no mistaking his casting of the children in a nearly hagiographic mode (cf. Figure 3.1). In addition to their sagacity and wit, the girls are, unsurprisingly, dazzlingly beautiful. The following is a description of their magnificence by their guardian, Jack Evans:

> Indeed for my part, human language is utterly inadequate to express the beauty of the Vivian Girls. The supreme loveliness of the celestial spirits, it seems to me, is nothing compared with the Vivian Girls, who far surpass everything that is pleasing to our mortal eyes. How exquisitely beautiful are the blue vaulted heavens, when it is studded with so many stars like so many sparkling gems. All natural beauty and grandeur grows dim when compared to the charm and magnificence of the starry heavens on a tranquil summer night. Beautiful is the sun, which because of its wonderful splendor and radiance, was adored as a divine being by so many pagan nations. But more beautiful is the form of the Vivian Girls. When I accompanied them through the streets of the Abbieannian towns, the little girls were so attractive that people came flocking around to gaze at their lovely features and the mere sight of them turned mere sadness into joy and love. (Bonesteel, *Henry Darger* 129-30)

The Glandelinians, by contrast, will stop at nothing to bend the girls to their will and are relentless in their drive to enslave the armies of children the girls lead. Their desire to assert control over them in the cruelest manner possible—together with the children and their allies' attempts to

resist—constitutes the primary narrative arc of the work. While the children demonstrate time and time again their indefatigable resilience and tenacity, Darger does not hesitate to describe every Glandelinian victory in brutally frank terms, offering us unflinching glimpses of their depravity. If on the one hand *Realms of the Unreal* is a celebration of the bravery and fortitude of the little girls—a kind of morality tale not unlike those associated with early twentieth-century children's didactic literature—it may also be read as an extended study of the economies of exploitation and excess as these are disclosed through enslavement and torture.

But the logic of exploitation at work in Darger is curious indeed. Ostensibly, the Glandelinians are motivated by a desire to enslave the children. But the constant threat of bondage leveraged against the protagonists often seems only lightly tethered to actual labor per se, at least insofar as this would characterize the kinds of economic systems with which we are most familiar.[8] Of far greater interest to Darger is the way that the meaning of enslavement is inexorably bound up, not with economic production as it is generally understood, but with excess, torture, bodily dismemberment, and death. Consider the following terrible scene, when Violet and her sisters are taken to an iron and steel mill where they are made to witness the unimaginable suffering of the children found there:

> Misery was everywhere in that building, and the noise of the machines was deafening. One child overcome by the heat reeled and fell into a vat of molten steel his death screams being heart rending. Two little girls were strangled within sight of Violet and her sisters, and before they had barely recovered, they were made to work harder at the dangerous machines. [...]. The children were trembling with terror for the room was like that of a slaughter house, and as the Glandelinians entered with other children, the terrified ones drew back in the greatest fear. But the wicked Glandelinians made the children follow them. Dead cut up bodies of little children lay in rows, or heaps, while rows of them hung by chains their little bodies frightfully sliced. Blood covered the floor, while the walls at the lower parts were besmearched [sic] with gore. In the small straight rows, hung the hearts of the butchered innocents,

8 For a detailed description of one such site of labor, see MacGregor 544.

> the lungs and wind pipe attached to it, while the rest of the intestines lay all over the floor. (cit. in MacGregor 548-49)

A contemporary director of splatter cinema would be hard pressed to match such imagery. Indeed, a great deal of *Realms* makes for extremely difficult reading precisely because of such passages. The violence inflicted upon the children is so unrelenting and so unsettling that it is not difficult to understand why MacGregor—in his dual capacities as practicing analyst as well as art critic—believed that Darger desperately required proper clinical diagnosis and treatment.[9] It would be difficult to argue the point.

But let us set aside the evidence of Darger's personal symptoms that may or may not be on display in such passages and examine instead the workings of the economy of sacrifice that governs the *Realms*. How ought we to understand such scenes, the violence of which has little in common with ordinary notions of instrumental exploitation, since the drive of the Glandelinians to bend the girls to their will is not predicated upon actual economic utility or even sadistic gratification as it is customarily understood?

It is worth noting that, for a work ostensibly dedicated to the theme of child slavery, Darger gives but the faintest lip service to a description of the mechanisms by which profit is gleaned from the labor of the exploited children. Darger is no Dickens. The savagery of the Glandelinians is striking precisely on account of its excessive character, since it seems altogether unmotivated by the kinds of considerations we generally associate with economic systems founded on systematic exploitation. While a narrowly symptomatic reading of *Realms* may be inclined to regard this feature of the text—the treatment of slavery as a mere pretext for extended descriptions of unbridled sadism—as evidence of a violently predatory disposition on the part of its author, I would suggest that it hints at the peculiar economic logic that governs the work.

We might recall at this point Bataille's famous distinction between a "restricted economy" and what he calls the "general economy." The former designates that function by means of which systems are able to recapture

9 After citing this particular passage, MacGregor adds his own note: "His fantasies grew more explicit and sexual, focused on individual children and their sufferings. He enters into the strange, intense relationship that comes to exist between the torturer and his victim, exploring the outer edges of eroticism, the sexuality of cruelty. As with de Sade, extremes lead only to greater extremes. What he ultimately seeks to explore is death itself" (549).

surplus production in order to facilitate their own growth and proliferation. There is no doubt that, by this standard, *Realms* could indeed be regarded as providing little more than an occasion for the author to express his most perverse fantasies under the guise of defending little children from those that would harm them. But I would suggest that more germane to the interpretation of Darger's work than traditional economic reckonings of expenditure and cost would be Bataille's notion of the "general economy," that is, of the propensity of a given system to generate energies that cannot be recaptured, repurposed, or set to work. They are, in short, wasted energies, expended without gain, without benefit, and without any element of reciprocity or recompense. As a historical example of the general economy, Bataille cites the ritual of human sacrifice as practiced by the Aztecs. "The victim of the sacrifice cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel," he claims (56). Rather,

> [t]he victim is a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the *accursed share*, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the *order of things*; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings. (59; italics in original)

Now, as it turns out, there is some question about whether or not Bataille's account represents a plausible interpretation of the institution of human sacrifice as it was practiced among the Aztecs.[10] But I think the general point still stands: whereas most accounts of slavery or servitude might highlight the ways in which excess energy is recaptured as surplus

10 Denis Hollier takes Bataille to task for failing to recognize that his account of Aztec sacrifice missed precisely the ceremony's most important element, one that is in fact more consistent with a utilitarian restricted economy instead of the general economy that Bataille took such great pains to explore: "Men must constantly nourish the Sun by shedding human blood. To be sure, Bataille is careful to make it clear that 'the victim of the sacrifice cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel.' Yet this is exactly what he describes. War is presented as the great earthly supplier of solar energy, whether it be the blood of warriors who give their lives on the field of battle or the blood of the vanquished who are reduced to slavery and later sacrificed. Essentially, wars are required for the nourishment of the Sun, for 'if they ceased the Sun would cease to give light.' Men shed their blood so that the Sun will not go out" (20). That said, it is not clear to me that, even if the practice of human sacrifice were of instrumental value for the Aztecs, that we should therefore regard it as exclusively instrumental. One might argue instead that human sacrifice represented a complex gesture whose meaning was not exhausted by its utilitarian function. Indeed, Inga Glendinnen has argued that while it is certainly possible to regard Aztec ritual in terms of rites designed to be casually efficacious in a very practical sense, "the major thrust was not instrumental but rather aesthetic, expressive, interrogative, and creative" (239).

and subsequently reinvested in the cultivation and growth of the system itself, it seems that something very different is at stake in Darger's world, something that we might think about in terms of a non-utilitarian or non-restricted economy. Darger's interest in *Realms* seems to lie more in the profligacy of waste, so to speak. That is, he is concerned with the ways in which the children provide not so much a source of labor that would generate surplus value for their oppressors but rather how they so often serve as an endless supply of fodder for the Glandelinians, their dead and mutilated bodies constituting what Bataille might call an expenditure without return.

By eliding the profit motive from his characterization of the Glandelinians' stratagems or treating it only very superficially, Darger insists that we train our attention instead upon the most ontologically fundamental features of the phenomenon of enslavement through the elimination or attenuation of the variables of surplus and profit that characterize the restricted economy. Darger discloses in *Realms* a substratum of expenditure, waste, and profligacy that seems irreducible to crude economic calculation. Note the irony here: Darger could hardly have been unaware of the socioeconomic meaning of exploitation in a capitalist society. Indeed, we could hardly imagine a writer and artist whose life circumstances better fit the description of menial, exploited labor than Darger, who wore out his days as a custodian and dishwasher. But it is as if in *Realms* Darger had intuited the kernel of truth at the heart of enslavement and violence itself: namely, that its logic is finally irreducible to mere instrumental exchange. It requires rather that we explore the notion of excess associated with the general economy, discovering in the process that the moment of the ethical encounter is in fact that same moment in which murder presents itself to us as a possibility.

This, I would argue, is a step we need to take if we are to fully appreciate the ethical significance of Darger's work. To be sure, the scenes of carnage so elaborately staged in *Realms* may, or may not, tell us something of the personal demons with which their author struggled, or even of the peculiar subject position Darger happened to occupy at the historical junction marking the crossing of the particular discourses of sociology, criminology, aesthetics, pop culture, and so on. But what is truly noteworthy in *Realms of the Unreal*, in my view, is its capacity to illuminate the role played by violence in the functioning of the general economy while

hinting at the possibility of revealing and reconstructing the logic of the ethical encounter.

Darger's narrative descriptions of unconscionable sadism are famously complemented by his illustrations. And perhaps there is no better example of his examination of violent excess than in the battle scene of "At Norma Catherine via Jennie Richee" (Figures 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3). Constructed as a triptych, the work hovers between abstraction, particularly in the placement of its geometric forms—crudely three-dimensional crosses and dolmen-like rectangular blocks that might also represent canvases—and a grisly realism that is at once childlike in its execution yet clinical in its degree of anatomical detail. Dozens of bodies of maimed and dismembered children litter the composition. Brains, hearts, lungs, livers, and intestines are all exhibited with a startling degree of precision and a troubling clarity. All the children are bathed in blood, some with eyes gouged out, others decapitated, still others reduced to a mere bloody trunk, their limbs hacked away. In some cases the viscera lay exposed as if the bodies had been subjected to a clinical autopsy; in other cases the organs have been separated from the body altogether. Organs without a body, indeed.

Figures 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3. Henry Darger, *At Norma Catherine via Jennie Richee* [...]. Three-panel collage-drawing. Watercolor, pencil, carbon on paper. 22 x 89 in. ©2016 Kiyoko Lerner/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Used by Permission.

The Glandelinian oppressors do figure in the scene as well, either dispatching the few remaining children with maces, sabers, and clubs or strangling them impassively. Even so, the grey tones with which the girls' antagonists are depicted render them almost invisible by comparison with their victims. The viewer's eye scans Darger's illustrations and finds no relief: nothing lures it away from the children's eviscerated bodies. In almost every instance, the children's eyes are closed, as if to suggest an affinity with stylized depictions of Catholic martyrs, albeit with entirely neutral, almost vacuous, facial expressions in lieu of the expressions that would suggest beatitude and redemptory martyrdom.

I would suggest that in both its gruesome theme and its peculiar stylization "At Norma Catherine" recalls nothing so much as the scenes depicted in the Mexican codices that documented the horrors of Aztec ritual sacrifice and which so fascinated Bataille. From the contorted postures of the victims' bodies to the work's monochromatic palette—punctuated only by the dull but insistent redness of spilled blood—to the clumsily earnest precision with which the dismembered bodies are rendered, Darger's work recalls the earliest chronicles of the apocalypse of the Aztecs, as, for example, certain images found in the Florentine Codex.[11]

Although the connections between the codices and "At Norma Catherine" are undoubtedly accidental, perhaps we could assay one final observation in this respect. Bataille claims in *The Accursed Share* that the kind of warfare practiced by the Aztecs was not of an imperial or military nature, or at least not exclusively so. Rather, Aztec warfare during the height of their empire was directed less at conquest and territorial expansion than in providing a steady stream of victims for ritual sacrifice (Townsend 208). The *xochiyaoyotl*, or war of flowers associated with the Aztecs, was a kind of unrelenting, low-intensity, ritualistic warfare. It was an indispensable element of a sacrificial economy that regarded the offering of human sacrifice as an acknowledgement of perennial debt and obligation to the universe itself that could never be fully discharged. Similarly, the nature of the interminable warfare of *Realms of the Unreal* seems to have very little to do with the sorts of causes—economic opportunity, territorial

11 See, for instance, the fourth folio of the Florentine Codex of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*. The Biblioteca Medicea Laurenciana of Florencia has digitized the codex and made it available online; the kind of image I have in mind may be viewed at https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10096/view/1/420/. The similarity to Darger's illustrations is uncanny, although there is no reason to think that Darger would have been aware of such images.

expansion, even ideology—that generally inspire collective violence on a massive scale. Its primary meaning seems to be primarily a liberation of excess, a profligate exercise in killing and torture that furthers no strategic end. It is, in short, a terrible wastefulness for the sake of wastefulness itself.

"The Person Who Tortures is Me"

While Bataille's notion of the general economy may take us some distance toward understanding the logic of surplus and excess in Darger's work, additional resources will need to be deployed if we are to say anything coherent about any properly ethical dimension in the terrible violence of *Realms*. We are in dire straits indeed if we cannot descry an ethics in Darger sufficiently robust that it might be capable of distinguishing between sadism and solicitude. I have been suggesting that we may think of the unabated violent imagery in Darger as, per Bataille, an emblem of expenditure without reciprocation. In its brutal, unrelenting persistence, the unflinchingly methodical application of his imagination to the depiction of extreme scenarios, Darger lays bare the possibility of a violence without measure, perpetrated against defenseless victims, guided by no particular instrumental or practical aim. Certainly, it would seem, there could be nothing more unethical, more disturbing, that that. And yet one wonders if it might not be possible to read such scenes as staging a crucial moment at the heart of the ethical encounter itself.

It is at this point that Levinas's exploration of the primordial ethical encounter may prove helpful. It is perhaps unfortunate that popular accounts of his thought have tended to reduce it to pious platitudes about the nature and extent of our responsibility to the vulnerable Other. What is too often missed, I think, is Levinas's sensitivity to the theme of violence, not just my willingness to suffer on the Other's behalf, but rather the ways in which the very possibility of committing violence against that Other are inseparably bound up with that moment when I become a responsible subject and ethics as such becomes possible.

What is it, after all, that I encounter in the visage of the Other for Levinas? It is not simply a call that issues in my responsibility for the one who suffers. On this point, Levinas is unequivocal, even if he does not dwell on it at length: it is not just that I am met by a gaze that demands my

solicitude. It is that this moment of encounter is bound up with a deeply disturbing temptation to kill, to spill the blood of the one that summons me into being in the first place. "The epiphany of the face," Levinas writes, "brings forth the possibility of gauging the infinity of the temptation to murder" (*Totality* 199). The other presents itself to me as not just as a call to peace but a temptation to war, to destruction. As he puts it in "Peace and Proximity," "the face of the other (*autri*) [...] in its precariousness and defenselessness is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the 'You shall not kill'" ("Peace" 167). The notion of ethics as first philosophy for Levinas does not preclude the possibility of violence: rather, it presupposes it. As we shall soon see, the temptation to enact violence—a violence that can never achieve its objective (for it has none) and can never silence the other who calls—is intimately connected with the vulnerability of the other who faces me. It is a powerlessness that tempts me to see the other as prey even as I discover that this very powerlessness is the hidden source of the infinite demands that the other makes upon me.

What does this mean in terms of the narrative of *Realms*? It has been noted of the work that Darger himself, whether lightly or heavily disguised, is a constant presence throughout and while his principal avatars are primarily defenders of the children, other avatars are among their cruelest enemies. The point I wish to highlight is not the banal claim that every character in every work of art has something of the author in him or her, such that the reader is always tacitly invited to trace the chains of inference that lead from the text back to the empirical author or subject of analysis. Rather it is that we may regard *Realms* as instantiating the diverse moments of the ethical encounter, as laying them out in a narrative form such that the work, taken as a whole, may be seen as a dramatization of the ethical encounter as such, in each of its complex and even contradictory contours.

It was to similar effect that Marguerite Duras once noted of her semi-autobiographical avatar in *La Douleur* that, "The person who tortures the informer is me. […] I give you the torturer along with the rest of the texts" (cit. in Lotringer 9). With respect to this disquieting confession Sylvère Lotringer has remarked, "It was a brave gesture, of course, owning up publicly to her own dark deeds. Telling the entire truth." "But," he goes on to ask, "can the truth of darkness ever be told in broad daylight?" (9).

Just as Duras's confession hints at a willingness to acknowledge that the potential for perpetrating violence is ever with us—and which we must therefore freely acknowledge as our own—we might similarly regard *Realms* as a brutally direct acknowledgement of not only the subject's desire to protect and shelter the vulnerable other—explicitly dramatized in the vulnerability of the children—but also one's own potential to visit violence upon them. Such is the condition of the ethical encounter itself, as an attempt to tell the truth under the most inopportune conditions.

The result is curious indeed: symptomatic readings of Darger—as profitable and informative as they may be in helping us to understand better the forces that shaped him in a biographical sense—cannot account for the unfathomable violence associated with his personae, since they are, as it were, hidden in plain sight. At the level of ethics, we might go so far as to say that in some crucial respect there is nothing hidden, nothing repressed, in *Realms*: even psychoanalysis is in a sense beside the point since the subject of psychoanalysis is already exposed to us. Indeed, to attempt to psychoanalyze Darger by referring to the violence of his images is to knock on a door that is already open.

I think that Paola Piglia-Veronese nicely captures the interpretive challenge we face in dealing with Darger when she writes that he "soared into the abyss in a manic escalation of violent excesses" (204). We are now prepared, I believe, to examine in greater depth the claim that the encounter with the Other is always at the same time a temptation to murder.

Art, Poverty, and the Power of Powerlessness

Given that the face to face encounter with the other issues in both a temptation to murder and a call to responsibility, how are we to understand the double character of the visage that presents itself as vulnerable and yet unstinting in the demands it makes upon us? The resistance that the face offers us must be understood, *pace* Levinas, in terms of that which cannot resist, a kind of power in powerlessness: "The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenseless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of resistance, but with something

absolutely other: the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance" (*Totality* 199).[12]

Here we begin to approach a crucial point regarding the nature of Levinas's project as well as an important key for our reading of Darger: the complexity of the ethical encounter and in particular its issuing of a call is not predicated upon a demand issued to me in the mode of power. Rather, it appears in an entirely different register. If the call of responsibility that comes to me from the vulnerable other is indeed infinite and unsatisfiable in its demands, the nature of this infinite demand is disclosed to me insofar as it reveals my own powerlessness, my own finitude. The kind of powerlessness at issue is thus double: on the one hand, the visage of the other which gazes upon me is powerless—and thus in its fragile alterity may tempt me to murder—and yet on the other hand, my own finitude, my own powerlessness, comes into view as I am brought up short by the other, as I sense the (infinite) gap between a call that I cannot avoid and a response that I cannot offer.[13]

This is, I think, a subtle but crucial point for our reading of Darger. I have suggested that the logic of *Realms* might be read in terms of Bataille's notion of the general economy. It is a work that is characterized by excess, not only thematically but also materially: we should not forget that it comprises thousands upon thousands of pages and hundreds of illustrations. Indeed, the work became so vast that, once Darger's notebooks became disordered, he appears to have recognized the impossibility of ever reordering them coherently.[14] Such a proliferation of material—precisely in view of its excess and, so to speak, its wastefulness—is I think integral to

12 My discussion of this point is heavily indebted to Simon Critchley's reflections on Levinasian violence and powerlessness in his *The Faith of the Faithless* (221-27).

13 Perhaps a further brief digression could be made at this point as well. A great deal of hypothesizing has been done with regard to what is perhaps the first thing about Darger's art that catches one's eye: his propensity for depicting his young heroines as nude, prepubescent girls. Of course their nakedness is rendered yet more problematic by his much discussed custom of depicting his female protagonists with male genitalia. This element of his work has given rise to a great deal of speculation about Darger's motives, and even his knowledge about basic anatomy. Of course many other explanations of a psychoanalytic nature have been developed as well, to the point that this particular interpretive issue has become endowed by critics and casual observers with perhaps a greater degree of attention than it deserves. Without wishing to exclude other explanations for this aspect of his work, it seems to me that the nudity of Darger's figures is a more or less straightforward exemplification of Levinas's point regarding "the nudity of the absolute openness of Transcendence" (*Totality* 199). The nudity of the children is a direct embodiment of their vulnerability. The alleged complexity of attributing to his protagonists a determinate gender is really better understood as its irrelevance: the point in my view is that the children's vulnerability as such is not explicable in terms of traditional gendered categories.

14 For a succinct summary of the challenges of organizing the notebooks that comprise *Realms*, see Bonesteel (*Henry Darger* 34, n.36).

the meaning of *Realms*. But it will not do to simply characterize the work along the lines suggested to us by Bataille, as an emblem of expenditure that is irreducible to any economic calculation of benefit and cost. To fully understand the functioning of profligacy of *Realms*—both at the level of content and of material composition—we need to move beyond Bataille, supplementing his account of the general economy with a Levinasian ethics of expenditure.[15]

Perhaps the nature of such an ethics can be best articulated by beginning with an observation regarding the manner in which certain of the formal characteristics of *Realms of the Unreal* illuminate the material circumstances surrounding the creation of the text as well as Darger's working methodology. He was, let us not forget—and not withstanding his recent popularity—the outsider par excellence with respect to the artworld. Of course it is axiomatic that what we call outsider art is marginal with respect to the traditions and institutions of the art world. By definition, the figures associated with the phenomenon of outsider art move in circles that only accidentally converge with those of more competent and qualified artists, and more often turn on different axes altogether. This de facto marginalization is sometimes reflected in the challenges that practitioners of "outsider art" encounter as they seek access to the physical materials employed in the creation of their works, to say nothing of their limited access to the forms and conventions that have traditionally governed the employment of those materials. Henry Darger here is squarely in the mainstream of outsider art, if we may put it that way. As noted earlier, his own economic circumstances were always precarious, as he labored at a series of menial jobs for scant pay and perpetually lacked funds for quality materials. When Darger's two-room living quarters on Webster Street in Chicago were explored upon his death, it was discovered that he had been, perhaps predictably, a hoarder. Enormous piles of scavenged materials were found, from shoes and eyeglasses to bundles of newspapers and clippings from popular magazines (Elledge 302-12). One has no way of knowing what Darger's plans might have been for the items he collected—perhaps, he like most other hoarders, had no specific designs for them but retained them as a way of satisfying some deep-seated psychological need—but at least some of them did seem to provide a

15 I owe this latter phrase to Edith Wyschogrod (171).

reservoir of materials from which he would freely draw in weaving his interminable narratives.

Consider as well Darger's daily routine, which seemed to stage directly particular aspects of the kind of ethical encounter that Levinas labored to describe. After completing for the day his menial responsibilities as janitor or dishwasher, Darger would customarily venture out into the neighborhoods surrounding his tiny apartment in order to rummage through dumpsters and trash heaps, rescuing materials of no economic value whatsoever and repurposing them quite literally into the nymph-figures that came to emblematize untold worlds of juvenile suffering. The image of Darger scavenging through trash heaps is curiously appropriate, as it suggests that the only response to be proffered to an infinite demand issued by the Other is one of weakness, vulnerability, destitution, and powerlessness. To pretend to offer more than this would be to pretend that somehow the gap between an infinite demand and our finite resources might nevertheless be closed, if only partially. But Darger's work—in its scavenged, impoverished, improvised character—allow us no such luxury. His was an infinite art that was born out of limitation and scarcity.[16]

This material impoverishment is consistent with his working methodology, which we might summarize as broadly appropriative. With respect to the text of *Realms of the Unreal*, for instance, it comprises a curious mishmash of Darger's own unique characters, settings, and plot devices to be sure, but its more than 15,000 pages include swaths of prose lifted, sometimes modified in only the most cosmetic of ways, from works ranging from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to *The Wizard of Oz*, to James Oliver Curwood's 1921 adventure novel *The Flaming Forest* (Moon 2). The work also owes a great deal to comic strips and popular serialized fiction, with some of Darger's characters being simply lifted wholesale from the narratives that popular culture had woven all around him. The most significant of these, no doubt, was Annie Aronburg, the leader of the first slave rebellion in *Realms* and one of Darger's most important characters. As it turns out, the character of Annie was modeled directly on five-year old murder victim Elsie Paroubek, whose disappearance in April of 1911 was covered widely in the Chicago press. Darger followed her case intently.

16 Jagodzinski has discussed Darger—as outsider artist par excellence—as one who wanders through a field of debris, "lay[ing] hands on to use whatever he can so that the narrative that emerges assembles these bits and pieces of found material into the creation of [his] own *double* (180; italics in original).

The discovery of Elsie's murdered body the following month apparently had a powerful impact upon him and a newspaper photograph of Elsie that Darger had clipped out became a particularly treasured possession. When he discovered that he had misplaced or inadvertently threw the image away, he was devastated. But he then set out to do the only thing that he could do in response to its loss: he staged the loss of the photo as a plot device in *Realms*, making his ongoing search for it into a plot point and narrative catalyst (cf. MacGregor 494-519).

With respect to his working methodology with his illustrations Darger was similarly resourceful. Although he possessed some modest skills at freehand drawing and became increasingly proficient as a colorist, his preferred method of creation, as Agamben has noted, consisted of assemblage. He created collages of images, appropriating figures from popular media sources—newspapers, magazines, and advertisements—and modifying them to suit his needs.[17] While some of these images very much bear the traces of their own material history and, in their execution, would not be out of place with the experiments with collage undertaken by canonical avant-garde artists, others offer a striking case study of how the materials and imagery of American consumer culture could be repurposed in a seemingly endless variety of ways, for Darger's own absolutely idiosyncratic narrative ends.[18]

What's more, *Realms*' appropriative character was not merely a function of necessity and circumstance. As Moon has insightfully noted, it constituted a sort of governing aesthetic principle in Darger's work. With respect to Darger's interest in cases of kidnapping and abduction, Moon notes a certain homology with the artist's approach to his own creations:

> Darger's most characteristic mode of composition enacts a similar, if relatively harmless, form of abduction—in this case, of words

17 Of Darger's working methodology, Agamben says the following: "what interests us the most is Darger's ingenious compositional procedure—he would cut images of little girls from comics or newspapers and copy them on tracing paper; if an image was too small, he would photograph it and have it magnified to suit his purpose. In this way, the artist ultimately had at his disposal a formulaic and general repertoire (serial variations of one *Pathosformel* that we can call *nympha dargeriana*) that he could freely combine in his large panels by means of collage or tracing. Darger thus offers the extreme case of an artistic composition made solely of *Pathosformeln*, one that produces an extraordinary effect of modernity" (18).

18 An outstanding example of the former is Darger's illusionistic collage, "Nicht argern nur wundern" (MacGregor 138), which I daresay could have been slipped in to many an avant-garde exhibition in the 1930s without anyone batting an eye. For a highly detailed and insightful description of Darger's techniques in manipulating found images, see MacGregor 118-81.

> and images. But in studying his work, I am struck by the regularity with which its appropriated words and images recur in scenes of the abduction and violation of children, as though the borrowed forms and materials could never be quite effectively purged of or detached from the sometimes extreme violence associated with the appropriation of children as slave laborers. (81)

The connection, I think, is important, for it brings together what we know concerning Darger's work habits, his creative vision, and the popular cultural tropes of the moment—widely disbursed and digested through the organs of pop culture including comic strips and serials—with respect to the phenomena of appropriation, abduction, kidnapping, orphanhood, and rescue. Darger's total vision, Moon argues, is thus not only internally consistent but in fact is of a piece with broader cultural currents and collective social anxieties.

What's more, I think that the appropriation/repurposing/rescue tropes may prove useful in yet another way, namely, by helping us to see the connection between Darger's praxis, the material circumstances of his work and daily life, and the ethical dimensions of his work *vis-à-vis* his response to what he rightly recognized as the scandal of a society that would not do enough to safeguard its children. It is not just a matter of poetic justice that Darger's concern for the weakest, most vulnerable members of society was to find expression through the impoverished resources available to a weak, vulnerable artist on the margins of the art world. The point is that by responding to an infinite demand to which he felt accountable from a position of utter weakness and deprivation, the very character and meaning of Darger's work was itself transformed. The materials that he recycled and repurposed were no longer just a contingent medium that happened to embody those very traits—weakness, powerlessness, fragility—with which his narrative was concerned. Rather, the material aspects of Darger's creative endeavors—from the scavenged physical materials with which he fashioned his illustrations to the scavenged stories that he reworked—constituted a sort of transubstantiation of the materials themselves. In *Realms of the Unreal*, the ethical significance of these materials was, so to speak, inscribed directly upon their surfaces.

Reading Darger from the Outside-In

Now, one should be entitled to be suspicious of any critical reading of Darger that highlights its ethical character, not just for the obvious reason that his output could so easily be read symptomatically, as an expression of his own perversions and obsessions, but also for the simple reason that *Realms of the Unreal* is a work of the imagination. To what, exactly, could Darger stand as a witness? And to whom was his testimony directed? Even if we were to grant that he seemed to wish to bind himself in fidelity to some event—á la Badiou—there would seem to be no such event as such and no suffering Other to whom he could bind himself.[19]

But to frame the problem like this is perhaps already to go astray. Whatever the ethical significance of Darger's work, it obviously cannot be predicated upon some empirical contact with an other to whom he felt some particular accountability. Far from stripping his work of its ethical significance, the solitary and isolated circumstances of its production may be regarded as paradoxically freeing it up to address the problem of the ethical demand as such. Darger's status as the consummate social and artistic outsider allowed him to explore the nature of the infinite demand whose pull he so clearly felt, transmuting it into an endless narrative form, one that was unbound, unconstrained by the sorts of practical considerations that might have truncated or compromised the work and thought of an artist living in the institutional art world, one filled with all the contingent, ongoing exigencies of a life that has at least a minimal social component.

The point should perhaps be explored in greater depth. I mentioned earlier the monstrous character of Darger's work: certainly one could explicate the notion with reference to the violent scenes that we have already discussed. But I would suggest that the very structure of *Realms of the Unreal* also directly embodies a kind of monstrous character such that the very vastness and incompleteness of the work exceeds the cognitive capacity of its readers or viewers to take in. It finally overwhelms them. "An object is monstrous," wrote Kant, "if by its size it destroys the purpose which constitutes the concept of it" (113). As we have noted earlier, *The*

19 The point is not merely academic: there is evidence that at one time Darger and the one friend of his adult life, William Schloeder, inquired into the possibility of adopting an unwanted child; when their efforts were either rebuffed or ignored, they briefly formed a private society named Gemini devoted to the cause of defending unwanted and unloved children (Elledge 182-89). But to Darger's great disappointment, there was no event, no appearance of a suffering Other to whom the lonely artist and janitor could have bound himself. This, in part, must be the meaning of the terrible loneliness that haunted him for nearly his entire life.

Realms of the Unreal was such a vast undertaking that Darger himself apparently lost his way when trying to keep track of the notebooks and loose pages upon which it was composed and, when the materials became disordered, he apparently felt the task of ever reconstructing the order of those pages too daunting to even begin. It is perhaps not surprising then that, to this day, the work remains fragmented in its vastness, too massive in scope to be circumscribed into a traditional narrative or compiled in a systematic way.

The point, I think, might be put like this: the measure of Darger's work was the measure of his life—the two were for all intents and purposes coextensive—and it was only the radical identification of the two that made it possible for his work to take on such breadth and scope. This is one of the reasons why Darger's output—not just *Realms of the Unreal* but, really, the entirety of his artistic production, taken as a whole—is unreadable, both literally and conceptually. While there may be narratives more vast in scope than is Darger's, these are few in number indeed and most of them involve a degree of collaborative authorship; Darger's literary and artistic output is notable precisely for the utterly isolated and impoverished circumstances in which it was produced.[20] To read it all, to view it all, to decipher it all, would be impossible. This, at least in part, must be the meaning of the monstrous sublimity that his work embodies.

What, then, does it mean to read Darger? I think we can say this: it is a task that cannot be completed; it is a task that will finally overwhelm us. While one can identify themes and motifs and construct hypotheses as to what the work might mean with respect to Darger's own psychological or emotional states, to do so is in some significant respect to miss the point. To watch Darger write and illustrate his endless narrative of the Vivian Girls is to watch Ophelia throw herself against Hamlet in an attempt to absorb the blows that he attempted to inflict upon himself. To read Darger is to find oneself a witness of a terrible project: to translate the infinite burden of the call of the suffering Other into a narrative that for all intents and purposes is endless as well. In its very flaws, blemishes, excesses, and

20 This is perhaps a reason why Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin's collection of essays, *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, deals almost exclusively with massive multiplayer online games and cult television shows produced collaboratively. Michael Bonesteel's excellent essay on Darger in the collection is an anomaly ("Henry Darger's Search").

excrescences, *Realms* bears witness to the traumatic kernel at the heart of the ethical encounter.

It is thus somewhat misleading to speak of Darger as an "outsider" artist. To be sure, Darger's place is—perhaps necessarily—on the margins of institutional art and creative expression. Given the excessiveness of his work's content and its all-encompassing scope, perhaps it could not have been otherwise. But his eccentric position on the periphery of our cultural field does not thereby allow us to read him from any marginal or distant vantage point of our own choosing. One does not encounter the dark workings of a soul so consumed with monstrosity as was Darger's and close the book unchanged. To have been in the presence of a soul so attuned to the call of an infinitely demanding Other and so keen to let that call resonate forever throughout their life and artistic labors—even if these labors were never directed to any other reader or witness but seemed to be directed to the very essence of suffering itself—is to already have found oneself brought up short. In the very poverty of Darger's expression, in his sublimation of infinite suffering into an infinite work of art, we find ourselves attending to the clarity and richness of an ethical call that issues from somewhere beyond ourselves.

Chapter Four

Twilight of the (American) Idols, or, How The Shaggs Philosophize with an Axe

> It's very intentional music that's channeled in a totally unorthodox way, which results in something that to most would be the sound of chaos.
>
> —Harry Koisser[1]

> When you are philosophizing, you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.
>
> —Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 65e

An Uncontacted Tribe in the Studio

At first, the story reads like another ledger out of the Annals of Bad Parenting. As American pop music began to acquire its distinctive institutional and cultural physiognomy at the end of the 1960s, a somewhat manipulative and undeniably delusional father from rural New Hampshire, apparently keen on living out some private fantasy of his own, pressured his young daughters into booking time at a recording studio. Never mind the fact that the girls were musical novices and seem to have not even learned to properly tune their instruments. They complied with the demand, recording an album's worth of songs about the sorts of topics that were undoubtedly on the minds of many teenage girls at the time:

1 Koisser is best known as the vocalist and guitarist of *Peace*. See "101 Albums."

boys, their pet cat, their love for Jesus, the thrill of riding in a sports car, their relationship with their parents, the mysteries of life. The album, *Philosophy of the World*, was curiously earnest in its design yet utterly hapless in its execution. The vast majority of the thousand LPs that were pressed disappeared and, with the exception of only a few copies that were circulated beyond a tight circle of family and friends, the record died a merciful death.

The story should have ended there, if not sooner. But it did not. The Shaggs—comprised of sisters Dot, Betty, and Helen Wiggin—have come to occupy a unique place within the history of American popular music and culture even if that place amounts to, as one critic has put it, "an asterisk to a footnote" of music history proper (Isherwood). Be that as it may, their story was found to be sufficiently compelling that it inspired an off-Broadway musical which, in turn, led to the film rights to the story being optioned in 2013 to Tom Cruise's production company. As of this writing, Ken Kwapis (*He's Just Not That Into You*) is set to direct while Betty and Dot are slated to serve as consultants on the film.[2]

The story of The Shaggs is interesting for all sorts of reasons, and not just the kinds that entice passersby to rubberneck at car accidents. At first glance the girls seem unable to keep a steady beat, to tune an instrument, or to carry a tune in a bucket. And, well, come to think of it, at second glance and third glance as well. How might one describe The Shaggs to someone who had never heard them? One could do worse than to say that their music sounds as if it were created by members of a previously uncontacted tribe who were locked in a room with musical instruments they had never seen before, given a verbal description of what a pop song was (having never actually heard one), and instructed to produce a dozen such "songs" by the end of the week. It is unsurprising that their music has been categorized as "naïve rock," given the earnestness and utter lack of affectation that it displays (Sarig 80-83).

But it seems to me that the songs of *Philosophy of the World* (*PoW*) cannot finally be explained away as the garden-variety hackery of novices unfamiliar with their instruments and who, by some quirk of fate, found themselves in a recording studio and so memorialized their musical shortcomings for generations to come. Rather, we shall see that

2 Isherwood's negative review of the musical in the *New York Times* seems to have done little to squelch enthusiasm for the project. For reportage on the movie version of The Shaggs' story, see Collis.

their music is consistently characterized by a kind of rigor and strict fidelity to a distinctive vision that, if not possessed of a meaning immediately apparent to most listeners, is nonetheless compelling for all its obscurity and difficulty. Thus it is, I shall claim, that The Shaggs' oblique and non-traditional engagement of the conventions of pop music solicits us to take up broader questions about the nature of outsider music itself. In the pages that follow I shall be interested in thinking through the philosophical significance of the lessons that The Shaggs have to teach us about the nature of incompetence and the unexpected creative and even ethical possibilities that such incompetence may afford us. At a time when the art of the fail has become an established form of cultural currency, The Shaggs' achievement, I shall claim, represents something other than mediocrity *simpliciter*. I shall argue that *PoW* marks an expansion of the repertoire of incompetence such that it becomes a uniquely potent and sensitive form of response to a call that issues from beyond oneself, one that makes unreasonable demands upon the artist and the listener alike. Indeed, The Shaggs' work illuminates conceptual depths that they probably could not have plumbed had their talents and vision been realized along more familiar (read: more skilled) lines.

It is in this regard that we could regard *PoW* as a kind of "impossible object" that may disclose in surprising ways the notion of not only musical competence, but the nature of the work of art itself. Recall the familiar Heideggerian story about how we find our way in the world: rather than regard Dasein's way of being as one predicated upon conceptual mapping or mental representations, Heidegger holds that we find ourselves always already engaged with the world in the mode of what his interpreter Hubert Dreyfus calls "skillful coping." The Shaggs' work, by contrast, invites us to appreciate the aesthetic, and even ethical, significance of an inability to cope skillfully: theirs is not a case of tool-failure in the familiar sense in which a tool is missing, defective, or does not conform to our expectations, but rather in the allied but distinct mode of incompetence, which in turn manages to disclose our finitude in a distinctive aesthetic and ethical register.

Wittgenstein once mused that if a lion were to speak, we would not be able to understand him. His dictum has generally been understood to mean that the problem is that we would not share a "form of life" with him; we would not be able to identify that suite of affinities with the lion

that intelligible speech must presuppose. As we shall see, the story is much more complicated than this, but the general point is not hard to grasp. The Shaggs' music seems at first so utterly foreign that we struggle to reconcile our desire to find it meaningful with the earnest incompetence with which it is executed. So much of it appears to be (grey) noise, a function of the sisters' inability to either grasp the conventions of songwriting or to master the skills required to play their instruments competently that it becomes difficult to know exactly how the interpretive task is to even get off the ground.

This is precisely the nature of the first question to be addressed in the pages that follow. It is the interpretive problem par excellence regarding outsider art and music precisely because it is really just a transposition of the hermeneutic challenge in its broadest contours into the medium of popular artistic expression. If Wittgenstein will prove helpful in sensitizing us to the challenge of recognizing The Shaggs' work as music (and not, say, just arrhythmic, unmelodious cacophony), it is to Arthur Danto that we shall turn in order to properly frame the interpretive problem peculiar to their art. Superficial dismissals of *PoW* as simply bad music miss the point, as do fashionable but naïve celebrations of its outré character. The interpretive challenge consists in understanding how what cannot fail to strike us as incompetence on the part of the musicians may likewise be regarded as an uncommonly rigorous and systematic pursuit of a muse which only they seem able to hear. Seen under the latter aspect, the "errors" that are everywhere in evidence on the record come to seem almost deliberate, as if they were really phenomena that just happened to be governed by a syntax with which we are not familiar. In fact, one sometimes has the impression that The Shaggs are speaking a kind of foreign language in which we recognize a number of cognates with our own lexicon but which we cannot finally locate in any extant dictionary.[3] In fact if one squints just a bit while listening to *PoW*, it may strike us something produced by an avant-garde collective rather than three uncoordinated teenagers from rural New England who had gotten in over their head. It is along these very lines that Danto's notion of "indiscernible

3 The situation calls to mind a 1972 song and music video entitled "Prisencolinesinainciusol" by Italian comedian Adriano Celentano which resurfaced in 2006 and quickly went viral. It was an Italian pop song whose lyrics were composed entirely of English morphemes and which superficially sounded like English, but which were in fact gibberish. The song's disorienting effect on native English speakers was due to the fact that it sounded like it should have made sense while it was in fact utter nonsense (Celentano).

counterparts"—a heuristic device that he commends to us as a way to sort out empirical problems from ones belonging to philosophy proper—will help us frame the interpretive challenge that their music provides.

At issue is the nature of the instrumentality dramatized by their work, inasmuch as their manipulation of both their musical instruments and the conventions of the genre of the pop song hint at something like the passage from Heidegger's notion of *Zuhandenheit* to the primitive language of the peculiar community of builders described in the opening pages of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. I shall argue in the following pages that The Shaggs occupy a philosophically rich intermediate space which is located somewhere between Heidegger's notion of skillful coping and Wittgenstein's notion of the workings of a limited language. For Heidegger, the possibility of failure—and the experience of finitude—is what emerges in the gap between *Vorhandenheit* (present-at-hand) and *Zuhandenheit* (ready-to-hand). Wittgenstein in turn invites us to consider whether the verbal exchanges and common projects of a small community of builders might not be regarded as a kind of primitive language in its own right. What is finally needed, I shall claim, is another category, one that is sensitive to the kind of unskillful incompetence that The Shaggs display. It is this intermediate instrumentality on display in *Philosophy of the World*—wisely stupid and rigorously incompetent, if we may put it like that—that hints at the peculiar interstitial situation of the call that is extended through the artwork.

So in what then does the unique character of The Shaggs' *Philosophy of the World* consist? I want to suggest that we might regard the album as an occasion for thinking through the distinction—crucial to Alain Badiou's work—between philosophy and antiphilosophy. Recall the crux of Badiou's argument: if philosophy aspires to universality through the dynamic emergence of truth at particular conditions or contexts, antiphilosophy is a counter-discourse that aims not so much to dissolve philosophy as a discipline, but rather to supplant it by means of a form of reason that at the end of the day will nevertheless end up being subordinate to some other (non-philosophical) project. And here we have The Shaggs, whose listeners have generally regarded the band's work as a kind of anti-music and thus a reproach to pop music proper, on account of its radically singular character. It is as if The Shaggs were to pop music as Nietzsche was to philosophy proper: a kind of bold if inarticulate grasping

at life itself—in all its dumb facticity—with no need for conceptual or philosophical mediation or even, perhaps it goes without saying, truth. But things will turn out to be more complex than that. Perhaps it could not have been otherwise.

The Lion Speaks Tonight

> If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.
>
> —Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 223e

> Foot Foot, where can you be?
> Foot Foot, why won't you answer me?
> Foot Foot, oh Foot Foot
> Wherever you are
> I want you to come home with me.
> —The Shaggs, "My Pal Foot Foot"

There is no need for us to speculate as to what the very first listeners of *Philosophy of the World* made of it. The album was recorded at Fleetwood Studios in Revere, Massachusetts, a local operation that worked primarily with local and regional artists, including school marching bands. The studio's engineers were doubtless familiar with all kinds of amateur musicians but even so The Shaggs clearly caught them off guard. Bobby Herne, who worked at Fleetwood at the time, recalled that during the girls' sessions the staff were forced to close the control room doors to conceal their laughter, not just at the sisters' haplessness with their instruments, but at their utter obliviousness as to how terrible they sounded (Chusid 4).[4]

Eventually a few copies of the LP found their way into the hands of collectors and eccentrics and *PoW* began to attract attention. In 1976

4 Herne recalled that "Austin [the girls' father] came into Fleetwood and said he needed to cut some sides because he was the 'proprietor' of this band. The father [...] brought them in and they did this stuff. It was horrible. They did not know what they were doing, but they thought it was okay. They were just in another world" (Chusid 4). "During the sessions," Chusid reports Herne saying, "the girls would occasionally interrupt recording halfway through a song. 'Why'd they stop?' the engineers would ask. 'Because they made a mistake,' snorted Austin, in total seriousness" (4).

Frank Zappa mentioned the band in an interview with *Playboy* magazine and he famously indicated that he considered The Shaggs "better than the Beatles" (Chusid 2; Orlean). It was not long before others followed Zappa's lead and began checking out the album as well. By the mid-1990s, *PoW* was beginning to be mentioned by all sorts of respected musicians and composers and the album even began showing up in "best-of" lists in reputable publications such as *Rolling Stone* (Chusid 1).

If the reversal of The Shaggs' fortunes has been striking and perhaps unexpected, it does not follow that the reasons for that reversal are either well understood or properly convincing. To be sure, one might attempt to explain the band's new-found respect in terms of a set of aesthetic values that even today remain in the ascendancy: for instance, *PoW*'s DIY character, the quirky treatment of the themes addressed on the album, the unquestionable earnestness and good faith of the musicians, and so on. But it is far from clear that such reasons are sufficient in themselves to explain why The Shaggs' star has risen while many other outsider musicians of similarly questionable talent have been forever doomed to obscurity.

Let us set aside for the time being the question of the artists' sincerity and earnestness in performing their work and the tension between their unaffected performance on *PoW* and the ironically self-aware character of the vast majority of their listeners and fans. More germane to our purposes here is the fact that, even while their work might obviously be regarded as incompetent, it might also be described as "difficult," in the sense made familiar to us by the burgeoning musical avant-garde that was flourishing at around the same time. The point, I think, is worth exploring: an ambitious and creative listener might regard The Shaggs' distinctive musical vision as coherent in a way that uncannily resembled crucial aspects of highly experimental creations on the fringes of the respectable musical world. That is, it is far from obvious, for instance, that there is any clear and unproblematic distinction to be drawn between a guitar that is out of tune and one that employs an alternative tuning (including microtones that simply sound sharp or flat in standard tuning) or between a drummer that fails to keep the beat and one that makes use of highly irregular, uncommon time signatures that are constantly shifting from one measure to the next. Indeed, at one point after the girls' sessions had concluded, Herne actually made an attempt to clean up some of the tracks, going so far as to bring

in studio musicians to take off some of the rough edges. "Can't do it, Bob," one drummer finally exclaimed to him, having failed to find the pulse of the track (Chusid 5). It proved simply impossible to clean up the girls' work without effectively transforming the songs into something else altogether, without, that is, making them into non-Shaggs songs.

The point could be made more clearly by considering the following hypothetical scenario. Since we have already mentioned Frank Zappa's championing of the band, let us invoke his ghost again. Imagine that The Mothers of Invention, extending some of the creative lines Zappa had begun to explore in, say, the Mothers' debut album *Freak Out!* (1966) or their *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets* (1968), perform a series of scores that Zappa had painstakingly composed, complete with lyrics written by Zappa himself in which he imagined himself to be a somewhat sheltered teenage girl from rural New England. The Mothers are, as always, musically in fine form and they manage to pull off the exercise, even if Zappa's carefully prepared charts drive long-time drummer Jimmy Carl Black nearly mad in requiring that he consistently rush the beat or drop it altogether. The sessions concluded, the album (let us also call it *Philosophy of the World*), is released. It doesn't sell many copies but immediately garners the acclaim of critics and connoisseurs, who wax eloquent about Zappa's sly dismantling of the emerging consensus about the conventions of the pop song, even as he paid homage to it.[5]

Let us stipulate further that, by a strange quirk of fate, the album is note for note identical to the one produced by The Shaggs such that not even the most discriminating listener could tell the two apart: drop a needle on The Shaggs' record and then on Zappa's record and they sound identical. It is at this point that we come to the kind of question that Danto has taught us to ask: if we cannot tell them apart, what then would be the difference between The Shaggs' *Philosophy of the World* and Zappa's *Philosophy of the World*? We might be inclined to regard the former as mere hackery and the second as a work of genius but on what grounds could such a distinction be made?

The kind of scenario we have described involves a made-to-order example of what Arthur Danto would call "indiscernible counterparts." Danto was known throughout his career for his careful development of a

5 This kind of thought experiment is perhaps not so far fetched as it might sound. Critics have debated, for instance, whether the doo-wop tunes of *Ruben and the Jets* were to be read as a parody of the genre or an homage.

heuristic device that turned Leibniz' principle of the identity of indiscernibles into the key element of a full-fledged philosophical methodology, one that was designed to help us distinguish between philosophical and other sorts of problems. Danto created an impressive philosophical menagerie—including discussions of Duchamp's snow shovel and its non-art counterpart; Pierre Menard's version of *Don Quixote* and Cervantes's original text; and Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes, together with their less distinguished if identical cousins available for sale in supermarkets everywhere—and the Shaggs/Zappa scenario I have imagined would fit comfortably alongside them. In each of these cases, there is no discernible difference or mark that would suffice to distinguish the work of art from its more mundane alter-ego (which, of course, it exactly resembles). The lessons to be learned for Danto are that (1) in every case the two paired objects differ in meaningful ways, including with respect to their ontological status (since some are works of art while their doppelgangers are not); (2) that it is the work of the philosopher to tell them apart, because mere empirical inspection will not suffice; and (3) that the problem of indiscernible counterparts is useful, and may even prove essential, in helping us to distinguish problems of a truly philosophical character from others that turn out to be devoid of deep theoretical interest.[6]

We might note that the problem of indiscernible counterparts as I have described it with regards to The Shaggs' *Philosophy of the World* is really a reflection of the hermeneutic problem par excellence with regard to outsider art. What is it, we must ask, that distinguishes run-of-the-mill mediocrity from misunderstood genius if mere inspection alone—no matter how careful or thorough it may be—is not sufficient to tell them apart? If we can't trust our ears, what can we trust?

The answer is: nothing. There is no discrete, readily identifiable trait or characteristic that distinguishes the work of art from a bit of hackery. Now, if that's the case, it would be tempting to take a short line and insist that if they share all publicly verifiable properties, they must be—pace Leibniz's principle—identical.[7] But this is a step Danto is not willing to take. Consider the case of Borges's Pierre Menard, to take an example of

6 Danto works out his account of indiscernible counterparts throughout his formidable bibliography (and across an array of subdisciplines, including metaphysics, the philosophy of history, and action theory) but his most influential deployment of the heuristic, with regard to the philosophy of art, may be found in his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

7 For an excellent overview of the issue, including a brief treatment of Leibniz's thought, see Forrest.

which Danto is particularly fond. As Borges tells it, Menard, an otherwise forgettable twentieth-century French writer, sets out to rewrite Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and manages to do so, at least in part, by producing a text that is visually indistinguishable from Cervantes's masterpiece, but which bears profoundly different meanings. While a page from Cervantes, for example, refers to the prosaic reality of the author's surroundings in sixteenth-century provincial Spain, the corresponding page from Menard evokes a host of philosophical and cultural issues that would have been totally unintelligible to Cervantes. Passages found in both works are identical—nothing at all distinguishes them—and yet their meanings, Borges suggests, are radically distinct. For one thing, Menard's work is about, *inter alia*, Cervantes's work, in a way in which Cervantes's work could never be about itself (Borges 88-95; cf. Danto 33-39).[8]

Far from regarding this thought experiment as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the claim that Menard's and Cervantes's texts really are different, Danto insists that this "nothing" that distinguishes the two texts is precisely the "nothing" upon which the interpretive efforts of the philosopher must be brought to bear. Indeed, we could not hope for a finer characterization of the hermeneutic challenge of outsider art: nothing distinguishes it from pedestrian mediocrity. But far from absolving us of our responsibility to interpret, the "nothing" in question functions as an invitation, if not an imperative: we must begin to read philosophically. Or, in the case of outsider music, we must begin to listen philosophically.

Danto's full account of what this might mean is rich and subtle and I shall not attempt to do justice to it here. But as a first approximation, let us note that he believes that the ontology of the artwork is such that its very being *qua* artwork and not a mere object—such as a (non-Duchamp) snow shovel or a (non-Warhol) Brillo box—is inseparable from the interpretation of the work itself. When it comes to art, *esse* is *intepretari*, he says, tweaking an old formula of Bishop Berkeley's, since the interpretation of the work is, in some deep sense, constitutive of it, *qua* artwork

8 Of course *Don Quixote* is definitely a work concerned with itself in other crucial respects: it is remains the paradigmatic modern exemplar of the self-conscious novel. The point is that certain features of Menard's novel are situated in a world that Cervantes couldn't have known, for fairly obvious reasons. With its tacit references to "the land of Carmen," and the thought of William James (Borges 93-94), Menard's work exploits referential possibilities that were not available to Cervantes, even though the texts of Menard and Cervantes could never be told apart from mere inspection alone.

(125).[9] And this is how, according to Danto, we begin to get a philosophical Something out of Nothing.

Now, let us rotate slightly the Shaggs/Zappa example so as to characterize our own particular interpretive problem regarding *Philosophy of the World* in somewhat more germane terms. Under what kind of interpretation might one regard *PoW* as, if not a work of artistic genius, at least a serious and substantive work worthy of careful study in a way that another highly similar (i.e., identical) work might not be? How are we to draw a line between mediocrity and real art, if the two cannot be told apart?

Well, that is the nub of the controversy surrounding The Shaggs, since their defenders insist that the band's work is meritorious and their detractors that it is objectively of scant value, once we have stripped away the mythology that attends the group and good old-fashioned, hipster-inflected bandwagonism. We might take a first step toward adjudicating the debate—or at least profitably displacing it—by recalling the epigraph from Wittgenstein with which we began. When Wittgenstein posited that we could not understand a speaking lion, the point was ostensibly that we would not have any grounds for regarding the sounds he might make as speech, given that the contours of our life are so far removed from those of the lion. But does this claim adequately characterize the interpretive challenge at issue?

Now let us shagg-ify, if we may put it like that, Wittgenstein's example by swapping out his enigmatic lion for a housecat whose motives for acting are no less mysterious. Among an album's worth of curios, one of the most popular has proven to be the song, "My Pal Foot Foot." The tune describes a cat that has taken to wandering far from home and his owner's worry that even if he does return, he might well decide to up and leave again:

> My pal's name is Foot Foot.
> He always likes to roam.
> My pal's name is Foot Foot.

9 This is not to say that Danto subscribes to the institutional theory of art, a mistake that is often and easily enough made regarding his work. The ontological status of artworks is not just conferred upon them by whatever institutions happen to constitute the artworld; on the contrary, that status is a function of real, mind-independent properties which are inseparable from the object in question, even if institutions do play an important role in eliciting, fomenting, and promoting particular interpretations of the art-historical world and the artefacts that make them up.

I never find him home.
[.....]
I don't have time to roam
I have things to do
I have to go home
Oh, Foot Foot, where are you?
[.....]
Foot Foot, please come to me
Foot Foot, now that you're here
Won't you come home
Foot Foot, promise me this
That you will never again roam.

A homey theme and homespun lyrics, to be sure: the song's central conceit turns on the inscrutable behavior of the singer's pet cat and it concludes with her (doubtless vain) attempt to extract a promise that the cat will not wander off again. As an exploration of feline psychology, I must say I think that the song actually hits the mark pretty well. Attempts to reason with Foot Foot are doomed from the start because, well, cats will do what cats will do and all the love and affection one may shower upon them will never be sufficient to guarantee the kind of loyalty one would hope for from a beloved pet. The singer acknowledges that she is fated to love the cat even if there can be no guarantee that it will not roam again, since his motives are inscrutable. So, we can put the question like this: if Foot Foot could speak, could we understand him? Given Foot Foot's track record when it comes to behaving himself, I guess we'd have to say no. He's always liable to take off again.

But let us explore the curious way in which the music complements this foray into the depths of animal psychology. The unadorned and artless lyrics are perfectly complemented by a musical design that is, at first glance, no less enigmatic and flat-out odd than the mind of the cat under discussion. The track kicks off with, of all things, a fifteen-second long, haphazard drum solo by Helen. Actually, it is less a coherent drum solo than an apparently random collection of fills and frills. She begins with a limping, uneven roll on the snare that sounds as if she strongly favors her right hand while the left struggles to keep up (a common enough phenomenon with non-drummers messing around on a kit). This comes to

an abrupt end when out of nowhere she hits the ride cymbal a few times, shifting tempo as if she had been driving a car and suddenly decided to shift gears without engaging the clutch. After another awkward fill or two that includes some timid poking at the toms, a guitar fades in, earnestly strumming a splayed, dissonant chord, as if to distract us from whatever is going on with the drums. For the next couple of measures the guitar and the drums seem undecided about who is in charge, before they finally reach a detente with each one doing what it wants, pretty much heedless of the other. At about forty seconds into the track, a vocal appears out of nowhere, singing a melody that initially bears no discernible relation to the harmony provided by the guitar. And so it goes: in short, a typical Shaggs song.

What are we to make of this? Well, if we were to imagine "My Pal Foot Foot" as a composition by Frank Zappa, we might well laud the ingenious way it deconstructs the standard elements from which pop songs are generally put together. To stick with the example we have already mentioned, we might remark upon the brilliant way the song begins with a concatenation of drum fills: instead of deploy them throughout the song as fills are generally used, say, to underscore the transition between a verse and a chorus, or to add emphasis and round out a measure, they are gotten out of the way at the very beginning. Breaking the pop song into its constituent parts and putting them back together in a completely different way, Zappa's hypothetical "Foot Foot" de-naturalizes those conventions of pop music that had, by the late 1960s, already begun to seem to many listeners timeless and perhaps inevitable. But then again, if we were to choose to focus on the fact that the track was written and recorded by self-taught musical neophytes from rural New Hampshire, well, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that it's just plain bad.

And, let there be no mistake, "My Pal Foot Foot" is incompetent: no amount of interpretive *feng shui* could oblige us to conclude otherwise. But the track is, I would claim, rigorous in its incompetence, and this will turn out to make all the difference in the world. While the original and Frank Zappa's hypothetical version of "My Pal Foot Foot" might be indiscernible counterparts of each other, the two may nonetheless mean very different things.

Now, I have been speaking of Zappa's version of the song as if it were the avant-garde masterpiece and The Shaggs' version as if it were merely

inept. But this is not quite right either. For I think that, even while we would be hard-pressed to refute the claim that The Shaggs are, objectively speaking, subpar musicians and composers, it does not follow that their work may not sustain a kind of theoretical or philosophical interest that garden-variety incompetence could never hold for us. If we are to follow Danto's lead and, by dint of interpretation alone, bootstrap the abject thing into the elevated ontological plane of art, we must begin by descrying the method to the madness of The Shaggs' mediocrity.

Instrumentality: From Heidegger's Ready-to-Hand to Wittgenstein's "Bring Me a Slab!"

There is something indeed impressive about the way in which The Shaggs wield their axes, so to speak, since their instruments take on a quite different character in the sisters' hands than they would in the hands of more gifted and dexterous performers. There is no question that they are by most objective standards truly incompetent musicians. But there is bad art and then there is bad art. How should we think about the nature of a mediocrity that finally yields a composition as weird as "My Pal Foot Foot," both in its theme and its execution? For if we might say that pop music constitutes a language of its own—whose syntax and most important lexical elements the vast majority of us acquire quite naturally, like a child surrounded by language eventually comes to acquire it for themselves—The Shaggs seem to be so halting in their speech that we might wonder whether they are speaking the same language as us at all. And indeed this is the reason why we are not entitled to simply conclude that our hypothetical Frank Zappa version of *The Philosophy of the World* would differ from that of The Shaggs because Zappa intended to deconstruct the song format while the Wiggin sisters had no such intentions: they were simply unable to even master it in the first place. That said, I would argue that the systematicity of the girls' performance is such that it rules out the hypothesis of mere cacophony: the rigor and discipline with which they develop their ideas is such that we keep finding ourselves wondering, if we haven't just missed something, if we haven't just failed to understand the conventions of the pop music dialect that they appear to be speaking.

We shall return later to the possibility of thinking of The Shaggs' music in terms of language, but for now let us observe that there is a familiar enough story to be told—Heideggerian in its broad contours—that purports to account for the philosophical significance of failure. A key element of that story concerns the distinction between what Heidegger referred to as *Zuhandenheit* (generally rendered in English as "ready-to-hand") and *Vorhandenheit* ("present-at-hand"). One of Heidegger's achievements was, of course, his distinction between the distinct modes of being associated with each one as well as his account of how the failures, interruptions and deficiencies in the mode of the former give rise to the possibility of the latter. On this view, we find ourselves primordially engaged in our world in the mode of successful coping, absorbed in a host of projects to which we orient ourselves in manifestly non-cognitive ways. Our intentionality may be described as existential or even just corporeal, rather than cognitive, psychological, or representational.

Failures to cope successfully with the affordances extended to us by the world disclose not only that way of being that Heidegger calls *Vorhandenheit* in which the thing mutely offers itself to us in its most abstract character but also our own finitude. The unexpected weight of the hammer in my hand, or my sudden realization that the handle is not properly attached to the head, brings the hammer to my attention in a way that is utterly distinct from my ordinary, spontaneous way of engaging with it. A whole suite of mental states emerges in connection with this discovery: suddenly I do not hammer but *desire* to hammer, I *worry* that the handle might come detached, I *recalibrate* the force with which I need to swing it, and so on. Once the hammer has become an object of my mental representations and discloses itself to me as something to be explored, analyzed, and theorized in a more general way, I begin to take a crucial step toward the development of a notion of the world as such—one which, needless to say, includes a place for defective hammers within it—as well as hone a sense that such failures, ubiquitous as they are, play a crucial role in disclosing to ourselves our own finite character.

But is this the kind of instrumental failure at issue in the case of The Shaggs' incompetence? Certainly, the musical technique that they bring to bear in the songs of *PoW* betokens anything but skillful coping: their playing is almost painfully deliberate and labored in a way that a truly competent performance would never be. But it is far from clear that what

is truly interesting about the failures on a track as, say, "My Pal Foot Foot" or "We Have a Savior" has much to do at all with the deficiencies that are revealed through the limitations and shortcomings of the instruments themselves—or even the encounter between performer and instrument—and the ways in which the instruments display, in the mode of *Vorhandenheit*, the limited and circumscribed way that the character of the world as such is thrown into relief. Consider the role of the guitars on "My Pal Foot Foot." Had any other professional band recorded a track with guitars that badly out of tune, it would be regarded as an oddity or an embarrassment, yet there is no indication that The Shaggs regarded the tunings as deficient since they were maintained consistently from song to song on the album.[10]

Indeed, a feature of The Shaggs' performance that begins to impress itself upon the listener after careful study is precisely the rigor of the execution of their songs. Whatever failures the band may be guilty of, they cannot be accused of having failed to be consistent, since the songs are indeed remarkably uniform, both internally and with relation to each other: each is instantly identifiable as a Shaggs creation; each is rigorously, if incompetently, executed. That the apparent chaos and unpredictability of their compositions is just that, only apparent, becomes clear when we notice that their work indeed seems to be rule-bound, even if the precise nature of those rules is unclear. For instance, the melodic lines of their songs are not arbitrary, even if they may strike the listener as lacking a readily identifiable tonal center. Dot's melodies are manifestly not being improvised on the spot, since Betty, the guitarist and backup vocalist, doubles those same lines herself, sometimes in close sync with Dot, at other times responding to Dot's melodies with her own contrapuntal exclamations. There is, in short, a logic at work in The Shaggs' music and our account of the role of incompetence in their work cannot amount to a story of simple tool-failure or deficiency. Hence we find ourselves as listeners in the peculiar situation of recognizing that The Shaggs' songs adhere scrupulously to some set of rules, that they are unfailingly faithful

10 Of course, such a performance might be regarded by hardcore fans of a generally competent band as a mark of authenticity, as if an out-of-tune guitar were somehow a token of spontaneity or integrity and thus, paradoxically, evidence of a particular band's greatness. One cannot help but think here of the flawed performance of the Rolling Stones in their famous 1969 Hyde Park concert. It was a terrible show in many respects—including guitars that wandered in and out of tune—but it is a performance for that reason all the more ardently defended by the group's most devoted fans.

to something, even if we cannot quite identify precisely what that something may be.

The situation that concerns us might be illuminated via a brief detour through the work of the late Wittgenstein. In the first pages of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a scenario in which something like a primitive language is being used in a very narrowly circumscribed scenario. This language, he tells us,

> is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block," "pillar," "slab," "beam." A calls them out; —B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. (3e)

And so it goes, with Wittgenstein suggesting that the builders operate in particular ways, their various calls playing a determinate role in successfully carrying out their project. He further hints that it would be misguided or problematic to ask whether these word-commands are merely elliptical expressions of commands such that, for instance, the meaning of "Slab!" would be "I want you to bring me a slab." Such an interpretation, he notes, might lead us naturally to infer that the simple words of the language are but a convenient shorthand for some complex representational machinery that we might be inclined to assume is invisibly turning in the background. The temptation, Wittgenstein points out, is to posit that if "Slab!" in the language of the builders is taken to mean, "I want you to bring me a slab!" in our language, then there must be some kind of operation in place that truncates the latter expression into the former and which presumably includes the ascription of a complex set of mental states to the builders.

Crucially, Wittgenstein tells us that we are to think of the utterances of the builders as constituting a "*complete* primitive language" (3e; italics mine). The claim may appear odd, given that their language lacks a robust syntax, lacks any mechanism for generating new lexical items, consists of a single mood (the imperative) and so on. Nevertheless, it may be called complete, since it makes no sense to say of any language that it is incomplete from within: languages simply are what they are, which is not to

say that they may not be expanded when the need presents itself and the scenario that he envisions does not require this (cf. Baker and Hacker 27).

Wittgenstein's discussion of the builders in this particular vignette—one to which he returned repeatedly in his writings (cf. Goldfarb 270)—seems to have been motivated by a variety of purposes, including its capacity to prod us to examine whether we might be able to imagine a system of verbal utterances and shared, goal-driven projects that could be characterized without unnecessarily positing any particular framework of mental representations. Ultimately, of course, Wittgenstein will be interested in thinking about how these rudimentary utterances and discrete, goal-oriented actions are connected to each other in terms of what he famously refers to as a "language game" (5e), as well as the attempts we might make to describe these activities in terms of our own, evidently more robust, language.

Now, let us think of The Shaggs, by analogy with the builders, as having devised their own system of communication which informs their creative project. This system includes meaning-bearing units—a species of "utterances"—whose superficial similarities to our own musical language might lead us to think of them as nonstandard, deficient, or at the very least elliptical expressions when rendered into our own musical language. The questions that arise are ultimately hermeneutic ones: ought we to regard The Shaggs' music as the expression of a kind of surface grammar that partially conceals, partially reveals, a deep grammar, which is not fully visible to us through their deficient language/music tokens? And what, if anything, can we infer about the psychological phenomena—including the musicians' intentions—that attend their expression?

It seems reasonable to infer that the songs conform to quasi-syntactic rules of some sort, given the systematicity that their work evinces. Consider, for instance, how the integrity and coherence of The Shaggs' melodies—as unfamiliar and occasionally jarring as they may be to most listeners—is underscored by the band's use of guitar. Here again "My Pal Foot Foot" is representative: while one guitar awkwardly strums a couple of chords, the other doubles the vocal line with impressive exactness. The lead guitar does not behave like a guitar in any conventional sense: it neither plays any recognizable riff nor does it slip back into chordal accompaniment in support of the vocals. For that matter, Betty does not use vibrato, hammer-ons, pull-offs, or any of the other techniques that are the stock

in trade of guitarists, from amateurs just learning the instrument to the most seasoned professional. Legato is non-existent as well, as the lead guitar's role is strictly limited to picking out the melody along with the lead vocal in a brutally percussive manner. The instrument's deployment is not expressive but functional: it guides and accompanies the vocal. And together the lead guitar and the lead vocal drive The Shaggs' songs forward.

Here, I think, we may find a key to approaching the syntax of The Shaggs' music. The group does not assign to rhythm and melody the familiar roles that they have come to assume in the culture of American pop music. Veteran guitarist Mike Fornatale (ex-Moby Grape), who has begun to work with Dot Wiggin on new material as well as new arrangements of older Shaggs' material, has rightly noted that one cannot approach the girls' music with the same set of expectations with which one approaches most pop tunes:

> It's hard to describe The Shaggs' sound. It's not based on rhythm, which is why everyone always thought that Helen, the drummer, didn't know what she was doing. She knew what she was doing, she just wasn't doing what Dot and Betty were doing. It's based on melody and it follows the melody ruthlessly without regard for rhythm. (Fornatale)

Fornatale's observation hints at a crucial point, one that must inform any serious discussion of The Shaggs' music. One may, after a superficial listen, regard *PoW* as a riot of disjunct sounds, lacking all sense of rhythm and any conventional notion of melody and harmony. But one may also find in that cacophony a sort of rigor and faithfulness to a vision that appears to be crystal clear to the musicians and which we listeners may struggle to appreciate. This fidelity is disclosed through a scrupulous adherence to a highly limited and local syntax, a sort of idiolect spoken by the girls which presents interesting problems for anyone wishing to translate their work into a more familiar musical idiom.[11] Much like Wittgenstein's builders, the sisters could be said to speak a mutually intelligible, entirely functional language that is perfectly suited to their purposes, even if, from our vantage point as outsiders, it would appear that the syntax that

11 For a vivid demonstration of how challenging it is for competent musicians to appropriate The Shaggs' language and create faithful cover versions of their songs, see, e.g., the video footage from the rehearsals for the cover of "My Pal Foot Foot" for the "Still Better Than The Beatles" Shaggs tribute show ("Still Better").

governs their utterances is at best elliptical or at worst deficient. Indeed, for most listeners, the forms of musical expression that one finds on *PoW* would barely register as such. Those of us that have internalized without even realizing it the conventions of popular music—as well as, it scarcely needs to be said, the rules that govern how those conventions are to be appropriately violated—might hardly be able to identify the rules that shape The Shaggs' vision. And, given the elaborate and complex musical language that we all speak natively, The Shaggs' compositions might seem to us indistinguishable from mere hackery.

I mentioned in Chapter One an image that strikes me as particularly helpful in characterizing our own complex relationship to the kind of outsider music produced by The Shaggs. We listeners tend to slip all too comfortably into the role of painfully self-conscious Hamlets, keenly attuned not only to the conventions of the social world we inhabit but of the ways in which that social world tacitly solicits us to break those rules in predetermined ways. One widely shared conceit is that The Shaggs' music must therefore be enjoyed in an ironic mode. But, by way of contrast with the Hamlet of their listeners, The Shaggs play a role more akin to that of Ophelia. Recall the report of Ophelia's madness as it reaches Gertrude: "Her speech is nothing, / yet the unshaped use of it doth move / the hearers to collection. They yawn [aim] at it / and botch the words up fit to their own thoughts" (4.5.8-11). I would suggest that Dot's fidelity to that melody—marked by the melody's own apparent capriciousness and her own fidelity to it, in spite of everything—is the perfect analogue to the kind of mad devotion with which Ophelia pursues the object of her desire. My claim is this: we must learn to read The Shaggs in something akin to the spirit of an Ophelia, appreciating the syntax that governs the mad song of their flowers without simply writing their utterances off as defective. To do this we must be prepared, as Wittgenstein reminds us in the epigraph with which we began, to descend into primeval chaos and make ourselves at home there.

Here we find an essential clue to help us make sense of The Shaggs' project. Our interpretive task consists of identifying the peculiar syntax that structures their work and, more particularly, the principle that seems to guide their work throughout: the unyielding rigor with which they hew to the muse whose song only they appear to be able to hear. To this end, Mike Fornatale has observed the following with regard to the challenge we face

in following The Shaggs' lead: "I don't think Dot hears rhythm," he notes of the drummer. "I'm not sure about that and I'm certainly not insulting her when I say that. I think she hears music in a different way than the rest of us do. I think she really only hears the melody, and the melody goes where it will, and if you're lucky you follow it" (Fornatale).

We would be well served to regard The Shaggs as following rigorously a line that to them is straight and undeviating, even if it may appear to us to bend and swerve.

The Shaggs, Alain Badiou, and the (Anti)Philosophy of the World

The interpretive task is arduous, perhaps even quixotic, since we are so readily tempted to engage The Shaggs in the mode of irony. Indeed, it is worth touching briefly upon that particular mode of engaging outsider art. How is it, one might wonder, that we could approach a work such as *PoW* in anything but an ironic mode, one in which our enjoyment of the music is predicated upon (1) our recognition of its incompetence; and (2) our recognition of its performers' lack of awareness of said incompetence? Might we not naturally, and justifiably, be inclined to take up the same stance toward The Shaggs' music that was taken up by the sound engineers that originally recorded it, taking our enjoyment not only in its deficiencies but in its creators' obliviousness to them?

A proper answer to such questions, I think, must begin by questioning our familiar notion of irony as a kind of cognitive or representational element that attaches to discourse, regarding it instead as the mark of an unwillingness to make an existential commitment in the face of a given demand. A crucial function of ironic distance—more visible than ever in our current cultural moment—is that it serves as a mechanism that allows us to decline or defer the call to take up a committed stance with regard to a particular event or situation that may make a potentially troubling demand upon us. To take refuge in irony, I would suggest, is to refuse to heed a call that may expose one's finitude and leave one distressingly vulnerable and exposed.

It is thus crucial that we not regard the irony/innocence dialectic in this context as merely a question of dueling discursive positions or the degree of one's self-awareness (or the lack thereof) but in terms of one's

willingness to make an existential commitment on the same order as the one made by the artist. I can think of no more helpful way to articulate this view than by making reference to the work of Alain Badiou, who has been unsparing in his criticism of postmodern ironic detachment. For Badiou, the call of philosophy has been degraded and obscured by a debasement of the notion of truth such that we are often solicited to regard its pursuit either as the result of a conceptual confusion—to be effaced through a proper appreciation of the functioning of language—or a symptom that will ultimately prove reducible to some principle other than truth. The first category he designates as sophistry and the second as antiphilosophy. While Badiou holds antiphilosophy in somewhat higher regard than sophistry—as it articulates itself as a rival to philosophy, rather than a mere tool for dissolving philosophical problems—both, at the end of the day, represent for him a reduction of truth to something else: either, on the one hand, to a function of grammar (as in the late Wittgenstein) or perhaps writing (Derrida) or, on the other, to an expression of some yet more fundamental discourse (Lacan, Nietzsche, or the early, "mystical" Wittgenstein). According to Badiou, the former figures attempt to dissolve truth in their elaboration of a relativistic, anthropological taxonomization of expression; the latter to circumscribe it within some other (non-philosophical) master discourse. For Badiou, truth emerges, it erupts through an event to which we choose to bind ourselves, without ground and without guarantee (cf. *Infinite Thought* 46). Philosophy does not *interpret* the new so much as *enact* it, and it does so in such a way that it blocks the ground of retreat, soliciting—or, better, demanding—our commitment. Badiou's thought thus constitutes a rebuke to postmodern irony, which always leaves a back door open for a convenient escape.

It is difficult to imagine a more apt description of The Shaggs' troubling and disconcerting project. While they doubtless did not seek to bring anything properly new into being—presumably they only wished to write and record music of a pleasant and familiar sort—their muse had other plans for them. And to their credit they are unfailingly loyal to that muse, exemplifying in their work a peculiar kind of fidelity to a vision that perhaps only they can behold, even as it demands of us a response of some sort.

Now, if there is something about The Shaggs' artistic vision that, like Ophelia's, is almost embarrassingly uncompromising in its earnestness,

that same vision is also discomfiting in its unabashed scope and ambition. To be sure, the girls do take on unusually modest topics, as we have already seen, from a wandering pet ("My Pal Foot Foot") to their favorite holiday ("It's Halloween!"). But neither do they shirk from the big questions. "Things I Wonder," for example, is utterly artless in its attempt to express the vocalist's inarticulate longings: "There are many things I wonder. / There are many things I don't. / It seems as though the things I wonder most / Are the things I never find out." The track "Why I Feel" is similarly disarming in its directness: "There are times when I feel sad. / There are times when I feel blue. / What makes me feel this way the most / Is when I don't know why I do the things I do." Okay, even if The Shaggs are Ophelia, their lyrics certainly aren't Shakespeare.

It is in the title track, though, where we find The Shaggs taking up their most uncompromising and most vulnerable position. Here they attempt to develop a comprehensive account of why the world is the way it is, at least from the perspective of a semi-inquisitive teenager who is somewhat given to abstract thought:

> Oh, the rich people want what the poor peoples [sic] got.
> And the poor people want what the rich peoples got.
> And the skinny people want what the fat peoples got.
> And the fat people want what the skinny peoples got.

Setting aside the dubious claims that rich people generally want to be poor and skinny people generally want to be fat, the conceit is easy enough to appreciate. Subsequent stanzas will develop the point further by means of similar examples (short people, tall people, girls with short hair, girls with long hair, and so on). The takeaway from all this is summed up in a brief chorus that expresses an insight that even a Marcus Aurelius or a Schopenhauer would be hard pressed to criticize:

> You can never please anybody in this world.

Musically, the song is a model of awkward earnestness as well. Apparently the girls did not bother to count in before beginning to play, so the guitar leads off, with Helen on the drums coming in as soon as she hears the guitar but, naturally enough, now she is a fraction of a beat behind. The drums and guitar then engage in a bit of tag-team rhythm,

producing, apparently unintentionally, a syncopated beat that ebbs and flows in intensity from bar to bar. Dot's vocal finally comes in and settles the debate, or at least tries to. Her guitar and melody line introduce a new tempo altogether, one to which the others struggle to accommodate themselves, the guitar especially struggling to change chords fast enough to keep up with the vocals. Encarnacao describes the situation like this:

> In "Philosophy," verse lines such as "Oh the rich people want what the poor people's got" would seem to fit into a bar of 6/4 followed by one of 4/4, but the next line of singing begins in the cracks between beats—not a half beat, not a quarter beat, but just where Dot Wiggin placed it in that moment. And where our ears may easily slot each phrase of the refrain into a bar of 4/4, where each starts after the last one ends is … one hesitates to say imprecise, as the whole concept of imprecision would seem to be irrelevant here. (114)

Things do get a bit better and, for all the noisy jangling of the tune, by the time the song reaches its conclusion, the instruments are at least in the same zip code. And then, almost by miracle, the song's final chord is struck on the two guitars at pretty much the same time that Helen punctuates things with a strike on the snare. It literally took them the entire song, but they finally managed to finish together and on time.[12] That, in a nutshell, is the "Philosophy of the World," according to The Shaggs: you can't always get what you want (particularly if you want the musicians to be on the same page, as most respectable musicians are). But you do get what you need.

As far as the explicit philosophical perspective articulated through the lyrics goes, it's not like "Philosophy of the World" is by any means advocating an incoherent or unrespectable position. Is it jejune in its expression?

12 While I develop my interpretation of The Shaggs' music in terms of what I have regarded as their somewhat idiosyncratic musical "syntax," we might also profitably approach it in terms of what Roholt would characterize as the "groove" of their music. Roholt's extraordinary phenomenological examination of the notion of groove draws upon Merleau-Ponty's work as he develops an interpretation of groove as a kind of synchronization of motor intentionalities: quantitative analyses of mathematical variations in timing and rhythm fail to capture what is most essential to it. One can imagine a case being made that The Shaggs' music might indeed be characterized in terms of a particular groove, even if it is one that—pace the studio drummer who tried to clean up some of their tracks after the fact—it might prove extremely difficult for most listeners to discover. At any rate, it would doubtless be a groove that could only be characterized in terms of bodily affect and the evocation of motor intentionalities. Attempts to discover the groove of The Shaggs' music by counting off would probably be doomed to failure (cf. 131-37 for a succinct summary, but Roholt's entire book is readable and enlightening).

Certainly. But to be honest it wouldn't take a great deal of work to dress the song's theme up in respectable Lacanian language and wring some theory out of it. However, to do so would certainly miss the point. Just as it would be possible, but unfruitful, to expend all our interpretive energies on parsing the imagery in Ophelia's mad canticle of flowers when the real point is the existential claim she stakes through the singing of her song, we could do better than to reduce the force of "Philosophy of the World" to its lyrical content and ungainly musical performance. What is really at stake, I argue, is the way in which the song unabashedly stakes a claim and elicits utter fidelity to a particular vision on the part of the performers. What is our response, as listeners? We too have a decision to make: we can dismiss it, we can enjoy, or pretend to enjoy, the song in an ironic mode, or we can let ourselves be called up short by it, allowing ourselves to respond to its unadorned artlessness, accepting the song for what it is and refusing to take cover under shelter of irony.

Now, assuming that we find a way to engage The Shaggs in this latter way, what does this mean with regard to the founding of the kind of truth that Badiou would wish to re-enshrine as the proper domain for philosophy? As helpful as Badiou may be for showing us how to break with the cover of ironic distance and insisting upon an unscheduled, unmediated encounter with the new in the guise of truth, it is less clear to me that he can fully account for the unique character of the incompetence on display in The Shaggs's music. There is indeed, I would claim, a potency to their artistic vision that I would not hesitate to describe as ethical, and it is predicated precisely upon their weakness, their incompetence, their deficiencies. What I have in mind is by no means the fantasy of unsullied authenticity that is too often used to justify the significance of outsider art. It is a kind of potency that is inseparable from impotence, from a kind of weakness that betokens strength, and I am not convinced that Badiou's account of how truth is grasped—definitively, confidently, and in an unmistakably virile way—is wholly adequate for characterizing what is at stake in The Shaggs' music.

I can only sketch in the briefest way here what I have in mind. In 2009 [English translation: 2011], Badiou published a little book on Wittgenstein, comprising a pair of essays in which he had attempted to situate Wittgenstein vis-à-vis Badiou's own unique conception of the project of philosophy. Wittgenstein didn't come off too well: the late Wittgenstein

was dismissed as a sophist and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* was somewhat grudgingly admitted as an antiphilosopher, thereby at least putting him in the company of Nietzsche and St. Paul. On Badiou's view, Wittgenstein was simply unable to acknowledge the role of truth as an evental occurrence, much less bind himself to it in a gesture of fidelity. Rather, maddeningly, he opted either to subjugate it to another field altogether—a mysticism beyond language—or to undermine the task of philosophy proper by dissolving it into just so many word games. The latter project was particularly unfortunate from Badiou's perspective, since the breaking up of philosophy into so many distinct grammatical entanglements served to undermine any radical liberatory potential that it may have claimed.

But it is far from clear to me that the kind of activity on display in the *Investigations* is to be so blithely dismissed a mere rearrangement of the philosophical furniture. To be sure, the kind of philosophical activity that Wittgenstein engaged in after announcing the end of philosophy in the *Tractatus* and returning to problems he had once declared solved does not aspire to the same kind of universality that Badiou might have hoped for. It is not an evental project. It heralds no new Messiah. But it is no less committed to truth for all that. I would suggest that it is a tacit recognition that the domain of truth is to be found in the smallest, most unexpected of places and that it reveals itself only with the most patient of inquiries and not only a willingness to interrogate but to a willingness to allow oneself to be interrogated. To return once again to the words that serve as an epigraph to this chapter, when we are truly doing philosophy, we must descend into primeval chaos and make ourselves at home there. Such a willingness betokens a kind of power without power, a principled willingness to pursue the crooked path of truth, wherever it may lead. What could this mean in the domain of art, particularly that kind of art that dramatizes the ineluctable, unbridgeable gap between the call that sets us to work and our own insufficient resources to complete that work? I have tried to suggest in the previous pages that this is precisely the interpretive challenge set to us by three young, untrained girls from rural New Hampshire. They faltered in their attempts to grasp the conventions of a social world to which they aspired to belong. But in so doing they produced something perhaps more illuminating than the work of more accomplished

artists whose very competence served to occlude the very gap that The Shaggs cannot help but reveal.

Chapter Five

Royal Robertson at the End of the World

> We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak but ye are strong; ye are honorable but we are despised.
>
> —St. Paul to the Corinthians

Performing Prophecy

Hosea married a whore and gave his children names like "No Mercy" and "Not My People." Isaiah walked around naked for three years. Jeremiah buried his old underwear, dug it up, and then paraded around in it. Ezekiel lay on his side for over a year next to a diorama of the city of Jerusalem and subsisted upon bread baked with cow dung (after he talked God out of requiring him to do it with human feces).[1] All of these Biblical prophets engaged in acts of "rhetorical nonverbal communication," as one scholar politely puts it (Friebel). One cannot help but think that had similar acts of "rhetorical nonverbal communication" been performed in 2015 by the heirs of Karen Finley or Chris Burden, they would have been less kindly regarded by that same segment of the public that most vociferously agitates for the Bible to be re-enshrined in public discourse. Even so, one can only imagine that it would have been unconscionably worse for these emissaries of Yahweh to have received federal funds in the form of NEA grants in support of their antics, even if for some curious reason it seems to be beyond question that religious institutions should

1 See Hosea 1-9; Jeremiah 13:1-11; Isaiah 20:2-4; Ezekiel 4:1-17.

be exempt from paying taxes. Chalk it up as yet another item on our ever-growing list of cultural ironies.

In many ways, nothing could seem more remote to us than the world of pre-exilic Judaea, with its fevered anticipations of uncomfortably literal woes being pronounced upon society by some of its most eccentric members. And yet the art world has evolved to the point that many contemporary performance pieces can be understood not so much as a break with artistic tradition as a return to some of its most distant, half-forgotten Biblical roots. I do not know if it is a cliché, but if it is not, perhaps it should be: our performance artists of today may be seen as successors to this odd and too often glossed-over tradition of the Biblical prophets. Their message, like that of their predecessors, tends toward the didactic or exhortatory and is often communicated through the medium of the body, which in its abasement comes to constitute an object lesson or cautionary tale for the spectator, a witness to the workings of obscure if unfailingly deleterious forces. Just as Israel's prophets inscribed the woes of their people upon their flesh and rendered in a painfully blunt way the imprecations of an angry god upon his unfaithful people, contemporary performance artists seem given to enact in an almost embarrassingly literal and material register the sins of their host societies.[2]

No less important than the message of prophets and performance artists is the place from which their message is issued. While there was of course a well-established Biblical tradition of court-sanctioned prophets and seers, many of Israel's most uncompromising moral voices were raised from the fringes of society and their marginality—quite literally, their eccentricity, religiously, morally, and socially speaking—was inextricably bound up with their message. If one was prepared to claim that Israel had become a wicked and idolatrous nation ripe for destruction, then one had better be prepared to give an accounting of one's own relationship to such a morally corrupt social world or risk losing all credibility. The problem for contemporary artists is not so different: if you are an artist wishing to excoriate your host society for, say, its consumerism, its racism, or its affinity for violence, then you had better be prepared to address difficult questions about the ways in which the performance in question might tend to surreptitiously endorse or reinforce the structures that made such a denunciation possible in the

2 On the performative aspects of the message of the Biblical prophets, see the work of Friebel, Roosa, and Doan and Giles.

first place, to say nothing of your own brute culpability. The issuing of jeremiads is neither for the morally obtuse nor for the selectively introspective and one does so always at the risk of being labeled a hypocrite.

Now, this is not to say that one must be personally absolved of every trace of blame before speaking in a prophetic mode. On the contrary, it would seem to be almost obligatory for many performance artists to not only condemn behaviors that are morally deplorable but also to acknowledge their own complicity in the structures that have perpetuated them: it is not without good reason that confessions and *mea culpas* have become part of the stock in trade of such projects. So it not surprising that many performance artists seem to be possessed of not only a highly sensitive moral conscience but also a keen sense of irony and a sharp sense of guilt. Or at least they must believe themselves to be possessed of such things.

Thus we may say, uncontroversially, I hope, that if performance artists, like Biblical prophets, speak from a decidedly eccentric vantage point then their own complex relationship to the dominant culture in question—with all its attendant vices and moral deficiencies—is mediated through a complex algorithm of self-awareness, introspection, acknowledgment of personal culpability, and righteous indignation, with the precise measure of each determined by the artist and work in question. Given the degree of theoretical nuance of the situation perhaps we should not be surprised to note that things now seem to be coming full circle: theologians have begun to take note of performance artists, finding in their labors an important catalyst to theological reflection (Mathews).

Now that we have touched upon one way in which prophecy and performance art exemplify a particular relationship between moral denunciation and marginality, we might ask what it is we are to do with a figure like Royal Robertson, the Cajun maverick, visionary, paranoiac, and artist whose life and work are unabashedly prophetic and exhortatory in tone and yet whose art shows few traces of the kind of irony or self-consciousness that one associates with sophisticated performance artists? To be sure, Robertson did not spring fully formed from the head of Zeus: the Louisiana-born artist swam in the same cultural waters that spawned the Reverend Howard Finster and other well-known figures of Southern outsider and folk art (cf. Crown and Russell). Robertson's work, while undeniably fascinating in its own right, was not produced in a vacuum and the efforts one might make to catalog the diverse influences that

show up in it would doubtless be amply rewarded. From the vast array of decorative elements that defined his personal living space (including, most notably, his seemingly tireless production of religiously-themed signage) to his distinctive sense of visual style—one that drew freely and without discrimination upon Biblical motifs as readily as comic book and girlie magazine tropes—Robertson's work represents the conjugation of a Biblical prophetic tradition in all its admonitory splendor with loopy fantasies about aliens and space travel that located him squarely on the cultural periphery. No matter: everything was grist for Robertson's mill, a mill whose function was at least in part to render intelligible the unbearably traumatic event of having been abandoned by his long-time wife Adell, the mother of his eleven children.

If the earnest idiosyncretism—if I may be permitted a neologism—of Robertson's vision brings him on the one hand within the orbit of a Jeremiah or an Ezekiel, he seems utterly uninterested in the accoutrements of irony and self-awareness that are *de rigueur* for his contemporaries working in the field of performance art. Where their work is self-aware and deeply informed by a sensitivity to its own morally problematic character, Robertson's work hits us with all the force and subtlety of a Category Five hurricane. It is not really so much that his art is not self-aware: Robertson was as capable as any other astute artist of consciously appropriating and repurposing cultural materials for his projects. In fact, its scavenged and repurposed character is absolutely central to its aesthetic. It is rather that self-awareness per se plays such a decidedly secondary role in the proper interpretation of his work. Or so I shall argue. More to the point is the way in which the earnestness, the insistence and persistence, of that work is so excessive and unchecked in ways that are not often found with more accomplished artists. If a certain degree of competence is required to bring off a successful performance art piece today—not just competence in the sense of raw talent but competence in the skill of recognizing and navigating the social protocols issued by the big Other of the artworld—then Robertson's work is undeniably incompetent. For while he undeniably possesses a certain degree of skill—as a former sign-painter, he had had some training in lettering, at least—his work is incompetent in the way that it fails to account appropriately for those unspoken social protocols and conventions to which every artist, no matter how studiedly idiosyncratic they might fancy themselves to be, must conform.

Slavoj Žižek is fond of pointing out that irony and self-referentiality are anything but "Get Out of Jail Free" cards when it comes to vouchsafing the integrity of one's own moral or political position. Indeed, such devices, on his view, do not so much allow us to guard against falling prey to the dominant ideology as they enable that ideology to function unimpeded. The claim is that the workings of ideology in the way our social universe is structured are no longer intelligible in terms of a simple disconnect between knowledge and action: the old formula, "they know not what they do" no longer captures its subtending logic. Rather, ideology today functions in a decidedly different mode, one that is fully able to take into account the standard defensive moves of ironic self-distancing. The proper formula that describes it, he claims, is this one: "they know very well what they are doing and yet they are still doing it." The problem, or at least one of them, is that the circuit between knowledge and action appears to be open in the first case and closed in the second. Meanwhile we often fail to notice that, even if the circuit between knowledge and action is taken to be properly closed, the circuit itself is not hooked up to anything at all. It is for all intents and purposes epiphenomenal, thereby generating the illusion of performing labor while its true function is to ensure that nothing is ever done, that nothing ever changes (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 28-33).

Robertson's decidedly non-ironic work, I shall argue, would break the circuit in question and oblige us to reconnect it to the machine from which it had become disengaged. His art is simultaneously verbose—it cannot but strike us as a case of visual logorrhea, if we may put it somewhat crudely—and yet at the same time mute and dumb in its elemental, material facticity. This is manifestly not to say that Robertson is some sort of naïf, one who speaks to us in an unaffected, innocent voice that is untarnished by irony or self-awareness: there can no more be an artist worthy of the name that is fully innocent than there can be a fully self-conscious artist who thereby manages to slip the bonds of ideology. On the contrary, it is to claim that we might read Robertson as an outsider artist whose work's urgency is best explained not by reference to the psychological, cognitive, or even narrowly phenomenological elements that constitute the usual register in which irony and self-awareness are posited and made available to criticism. Rather, what seems to be crucial to Robertson is his staking of an existential claim that is irreducible to intentionality in any kind of quasi-cognitive guise. If Robertson's art is difficult to interpret, it is

not necessarily so because it is recondite or abstract. The problem is that it is so blunt and uncompromising in the blinding clarity of its vision. If his work presents us with interpretive challenges, these are not due exclusively to its hermetic character but also, in some way, to its unexpected clarity, as if in some deep sense it obviated any kind of split between the directness of the literal and the hermeticism of the metaphorical or allegorical.

Discussions of Robertson's work customarily begin with the manner in which it was produced and the spaces in which it was displayed. That is as good a place as any to start and I shall focus first in the pages that follow on the spaces that defined Robertson's world and the curious relationship between decoration and exhortation that emerges there in response to the trauma of Adell's departure. It is in fact the tension between her absence and the excesses of the work that Robertson produces in response to that absence that defines the space that the prophet-artist inhabits. It would not be too much to say that Adell's departure marked both the ending of one world—thereby precipitating the apocalypse to which Robertson's work attests—and the beginning of another world, one aimed at healing the wound of her traumatic departure by the production of a surfeit of art. This art will evince its incompetence, not in Robertson's lack of skill or talent per se, but in its very excess, in its heedless ignorance of (or indifference to) the protocols of the art world, its inability to stop.

Furthermore, Robertson's vision will lead him along what may at first appear to be a strange and unexpected path, one that bears at least a superficial similarity to what has been called Afrofuturism, in its deployment of a decidedly sci-fi or fantasy sensibility in the elaboration of a Black utopian vision. This will serve as the yin to the yang of Robertson's notion of apocalypse. In this regard, Robertson recalls no one so much as Sun Ra, who remains the gold standard for the fusion of themes of Black liberation and campy cosmologies within a wildly creative artistic milieu. Now, as it turns out, the science fiction elements of Afrofuturism have recently attracted the attention of critics and scholars, even if the artists themselves had never been in any doubt as to the expressive potential afforded them by fantasies about interstellar travel and alien abductions. That said, our mention of Robertson's dabbling with Afrofuturistic motifs, however, will not be driven by art-historical or taxonomic considerations per se but by an interest in understanding how the artist's incompetence—channeled through the trappings of fantasy and science fiction—catalyzes his peculiar

visions of apocalypse and utopia. Here we shall see how Robertson's debt to the Biblical prophetic tradition materializes in a way that differs significantly from the dominant strains of the tradition of performance artists. Lacking the capacity or even the interest to negotiate successfully the social codes of the art world, Royal Robertson offers us an oeuvre that presents an altogether different set of interpretive challenges.

The next stage in our exploration of Robertson's work will require that we disentangle the meaning of the figure that I regard as the primary visual motif of his art—the spiral—that binds together the Biblical pedigree of his work and the sensibilities and an eschatological vision that is both terrible and paradisiacal. If Robertson is at once the artist of prophetic imprecations and pronouncements of doom, he is also the herald of love and hope, a love that in its very stumbling, repetitive inarticulacy somehow finds its own voice and that somehow remains faithful to the object of its devotion.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of composer and musician Sufjan Stevens' attempt to engage Robertson's work so as to bring out some of these elements in a suitably responsible way. Stevens' 2010 album, *The Age of Adz*, was directly inspired by Robertson's work and it is widely agreed to have been a noteworthy achievement from a musical perspective. I shall claim that the album, in the direct and explicit debt that it owes to Robertson, provides us with an interesting case study in how the work of an outsider artist may be meaningfully engaged by a more technically accomplished artist whose own competence and skill are beyond reproach. It is here, I shall argue, in the dialogue between an obscure and difficult outsider artist such as Royal Robertson and an insider artist such as Sufjan Stevens, that we can begin to appreciate how one might respond to the call that issues to us from the work of outsider art. We shall see that Stevens' engagement with Robertson provides us with an opportunity to imagine how we too might think about how to begin to respond to the call that outsider art extends to us.

It's The End of the World As We Know It

The general contours of Royal Robertson's personal story are well known: the Louisiana native was born in 1936, trained as a sign painter, married Adell Brent in 1955, and had eleven children with her. She left him twenty years later and her departure exacerbated a number of issues—including paranoid schizophrenia—with which he had long struggled. Believing that she had left him for another man, Robertson's response was to produce art manically, convinced that in light of Adell's betrayal he needed to fully assume the prophetic role that he felt God had assigned him. He thereafter warned tirelessly in his work of the treacheries of women, announced the coming apocalypse, and foretold the eventual establishment of a utopian world, one perhaps located somewhere else in the universe. He decorated the exterior of his Baldwin, Louisiana residence with hundreds of carefully hand-painted signs denouncing Adell, women in general, and warning of imminent destruction. He became obsessed as well with calendars and dates, particularly as these bore upon his own theories about the destruction of the world and the redemption of the faithful. The motifs of popular art and illustrations that are common currency in men's magazines and comic books provided Robertson with a basic palette to work from, but he really seemed to draw inspiration from everything he could get his hands on. Working in a wide range of media, he left no corner of his dwelling untouched or undecorated as he ceaselessly strove to realize not only his artistic vision but also what he regarded as a prophetic assignment. The house, long considered an eyesore by his neighbors, was finally destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in August of 1992; Robertson passed away five years later (cf. Congdon and Hallmark 276-78).

It is not surprising that Frédéric Allamel, one of Royal Robertson's most astute commentators, organizes perhaps his most important essay on his subject as an exercise in topoanalysis, an examination, that is, of the constitution of the spaces that made up Robertson's home ("Architectural Odyssey"). And it is indeed with the house itself—as a work of art in its own right—that we should begin. As the visitor approaches the dwelling, he or she is impressed not so much with the physical structure of the home, but rather how the walls of text demarcate it from the world, sacralize it in an explicitly defensive mode. Specifically, the visitor encounters a mosaic of diverse signs and billboards, each hand-lettered, each making reference

to a verse of scripture or warning away miscreants and evil-doers, thereby establishing clear boundaries between the space controlled by the artist and external threats that might compromise his vision.

The limpid and careful, if unadorned, lettering of the signs suggests a degree of proficiency and even professionalism on Robertson's part even while the message being conveyed is somewhat surprising for its unvarnished presentation. Spelling and grammatical errors abound and the sentiments expressed are uncommonly blunt, a clear indication that the project was not commissioned but was entirely a private initiative on the part of Robertson himself. "I'm a Libra," announces one sign, "I Don't Marry Other Men Wife's [sic]." "All Crazy Person's Keep Off Lot" admonishes another. "All Nasty Adell And Dope Pusher Men Nasty Boys Keep Off" warns a third. And yet another states "No Foolish Rapies Adultrous Allowed [sic]," citing Jeremiah 20:11 (which reads, "But the Lord is with me as a mighty terrible one: therefore my persecutors shall stumble, and they shall not prevail"). Indeed, so overwhelming is the array of signs adorning the exterior of Robertson's house that it seems fair to say that the mosaic of warnings and curses constitutes a kind of defensive force field designed to filter out the evil, the mischievous, and the misguided so that only the purified may enter (cf. Allamel, "Architectural Odyssey" 154). Only by penetrating this protective field of texts could one enter the abode proper of the "Prophet Royal Robertson" (as a sign hanging over the porch once announced to his visitors).[3]

Having traversed the narrow path and the strait gate of words, one would then enter Robertson's home, Allamel reports, only to encounter a "paranoid architecture," one that seemed to change from one visit to the next, as if its express purpose were to keep his visitors "in a state of bewilderment" (156; 157). This ongoing remodeling included the constant reconfiguration of walls and doors with elements of the house being continually repurposed according to the artist's needs and changing moods. No surface or space was spared from Robertson's endeavors and the few available photographs of the interior suggest that interior spaces were populated with art just as extensively the exterior ones were, even if it was illustrations and mixed media creations, and not just painted text, that filled the rooms ("Souls Grown Deep").

3 Robertson's more complete (self-given) title was "Libra Patriarch Prophet Lord Archbishop Apostle Visionary Mystic Psychic Saint Royal Robertson" (Allamel, "Sacred Spaces" 31).

While we shall later examine specific works by Robertson, for now it is sufficient to make two key observations. First, we should note that the residence itself effaced the distinction between living space and the space of art: the former just was the latter, as if to underscore that for Robertson, as for the Biblical prophets, the message at issue was not so much conveyed verbally as embodied in some kind of comprehensive sense. Second, every surface of the dwelling was rendered into a canvas, as if to suggest that not only were art and life coextensive for Robertson but that every available space was to be filled with the tokens of prophetic-artistic expression.

To be sure, it is not terribly difficult to contrive a plausible psychological explanation as to why Robertson was so driven to produce art and surround himself with it. His obsession with turning every corner of his house into a declamatory work of art is an obvious sense a token of his ongoing attempt to work through the trauma of Adell's abandonment of him, as if her absence obliged him to attempt, frantically and fruitlessly, to fill the void of her absence. Fair enough. But it may also be that the case of Royal Robertson has more to offer us than a simple reminder that it can be ugly and challenging to work through trauma, if one ever works through it at all.

Consider first of all the significance of the *horror vacui* as it manifests itself in Robertson's work: no space in his dwelling is beyond the realm of his art; every space must be filled. Of course in many ways, the *horror vacui* is a staple of the work of other outsider artists, including most notably Augustin Lesage and Adolf Wölfli, and its genealogy is indeed rich, as is its potential for theorization.[4] But it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect upon the function of the *horror vacui* in Robertson's aesthetic, since the way in which his art messily proliferates is far removed from the vision of, say, a Lesage, where the *horror vacui* is manifested as an obsession with organization and symmetry. For Robertson, the logic that governs the horror of the void seems to be distinct and somehow of a piece with the generally apocalyptic character of his work.

4 Design theorist and critic Mario Praz, who is credited with coining the term, used it to designate excessive clutter in design settings. One handbook offers the following suggestive observation about the relationship between the *horror vacui* and material abundance: "Recent research into how *horror vacui* is perceived suggests a general inverse relationship between *horror vacui* and value perception—that is, as *horror vacui* increases, perceived value decreases [...]. It may be that the inverse relationship between the affluence of a society and the perceived value associated with *horror vacui*—that is, for those accustomed to having more, less is more, and for those accustomed to having less, more is more" (Lidwell et al. 128).

To be sure, Robertson's treatment of the apocalypse is highly idiosyncratic in its own right. Although he produced a vast body of boldly colored illustrations of his visions, relatively few of these were concerned with illustrating the end of the world in the kinds of ways we have become accustomed to expect: anxious imaginings of natural disaster, chaos, war, and bloodshed were never Robertson's strong suit. Rather, the eschatological force of his work tends to be disclosed jointly through two other elements: the aforementioned *horror vacui*—the compulsion to populate completely his living space with art—and an obsession with calendars, dates, and numbers. The form of the block calendar, with its numbered boxes, provided Robertson with a particularly fertile source of inspiration, as it served him both as canvas and a catalyst for his imagination as he created and populated endless calendars crowded with highly idiosyncratic numbers and messages (Figure 5.1). Although occasionally his calendars include references to the kinds of mundane tasks that fill up most of our pedestrian agendas, Robertson almost always chose to fill them instead with verses of scripture or obscure phrases of private meaning, which were often color-coded and supplemented with pasted-in horoscope clippings. These seem to point to the inscrutable logic that governed Robertson's universe. The calendar, its days filled up with the evidence of a steadily deteriorating world—was a sort of brief against the wickedness against which he was called to testify—as well as prophetic maledictions and reminders to forsake a world ripe for destruction.

In many ways, Robertson's preference for working with the calendar structure is of a piece with his penchant for filling all the available spaces in his dwelling with art: it is as if he were strictly heeding an imperative or injunction audible to him alone. One must, we can imagine the voice saying to him, try every combination, fill every space, denounce and catalogue every wrongdoing and act of treachery. It is not so much that Robertson understood that this world would end in fire—although he seems not to have rejected that possibility—but rather through a kind of dogged exhaustion of every possibility and combination of evil. We might think of Robertson as almost making a modal argument, hinting that the end of this world will necessarily come to pass when every possible evil act has been realized: the prophetic artwork that was his house and his obsession with calendars serve to document the exhaustion of that world. The *horror vacui* in Robertson—a kind of trailer park Baroque,

as it were—constitutes a witness against the treachery of this world, and the opening up of an altogether new kind of space of the imagination, a response to the call of a very different kind of world.

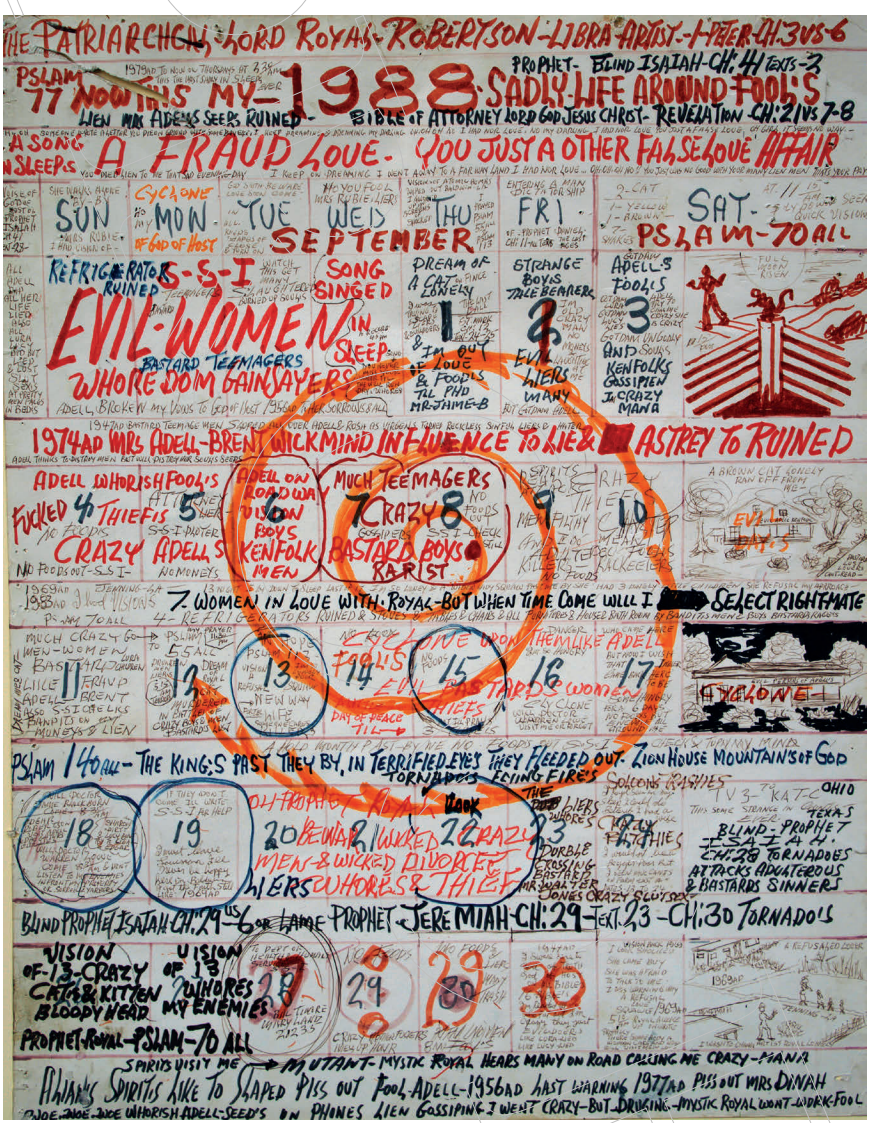

Figure 5.1. Prophet Royal Robertson, *Untitled (Evil Women)*, n.d. Mixed media on poster paper. 28x 22 in. Photo: Andy Nasisse. ©2017 Andy Nasisse. Used by Permission.

Back to the Future: Robertson's Utopian Afrofuturism

Fortunately, this world has a sequel, one that Robertson went to great lengths to document. If on the one hand the artist was obsessed with the ancient Biblical past and saw himself as a direct heir to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, on the other hand he regarded himself as a kind of temporal pioneer who had seen the future, whose visions were born of alien abductions and instruction from on high. Many of Robertson's best known and most artistically interesting pieces in fact depict the utopias that he had been privileged to witness.

Consider, for instance, his 1980 composition, "Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Ladder Day Saint" (Figure 5.2). The yellow and black tones of the composition are rendered in marker, paint, and pencil on a 2'x2' piece of posterboard. The work features a towering edifice set upon a rolling hillside with symmetrical crosses on either side of the building's central column; other crosses adorn the courtyard immediately before it. But instead of capping the central structure with a traditional steeple, Robertson chooses to adorn it with an ovaloid dome which is curiously reminiscent of the Space Needle in Seattle. The church is flanked on either side by similar ovaloid shapes, the one on the left capping another building of uncertain significance, the one on the right describing the shape of what appears to be a flying saucer. The Christian imagery of the piece is supplemented by additional signage in the foreground featuring shapes that recall the Bohr model of the atom that was popular in the 1950s. The sky is given its texture by crosshatched ink lines, and the rigid perspectivism of the plaza and the foreground—somewhat mechanically rendered, as one can easily imagine Robertson working carefully and methodically with a straight-edge—is relieved somewhat by not only the elliptical forms already mentioned but similarly shaped trees and what appear to be footpaths arranged in something of a spiral configuration. The work bears the name of the artist ("Archbishop Seer Robertson") in the lower right-hand corner and is dated November 1980, with a text explaining that the work was produced "under shelter of vision." The title of the piece is provided as well at the bottom center of the frame, the words "Ladder Day Saint" appearing against a somewhat irregularly whitened background, suggesting that the artist may have struggle to provide the correct title and had erased or corrected previous efforts at lettering.

What demands our attention and explanation is the unblinking, deadpan presentation of the piece, as it manages to conjoin traditional religious iconography and fanciful science fiction motifs with no trace whatsoever of irony or even explanation. The title is particularly suggestive, alluding as it does to the "Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" (RLDS) a church belonging to the Mormon restorationist movement, albeit a denomination less well known than its larger cousin headquartered in Salt Lake City.[5] While Robertson's fanciful architecture seems to bear no

Figure 5.2. Prophet Royal Robertson, Untitled (Ladder Day Saint), 1980, mixed media on poster board, 22 x 22 inches, collection of Fred Blair and Patrick Ryan, image courtesy of Shrine (NYC). Used by Permission.

5 The RLDS church changed its somewhat unwieldy name in 2001 to The Community of Christ. Per Wikipedia, it currently boasts some 250,000 members, to the Utah-based LDS church's 15,000,000 adherents.

relation to any RLDS building he might conceivably have seen, it seems that the name of the denomination was what had drawn his attention, for he surely would have been attracted to both the notion of a church that has been "reorganized" along utopian lines, not to mention the homonym of "ladder" / "latter," which manages to catch the notion of an "ascent," as well as the eschatological resonances that the term "latter" would suggest.

As for the UFOs in the picture, well, that may require a bit more untangling. While there is little evidence that Robertson consciously drew from other African American artists who had developed their own science fiction and fantasy mythos, his persistent recurrence to the myth of alien visitation cannot be detached from his utopian dreams. Given the sorry state of the world with which Robertson was perpetually at war and its inexorable descent into apocalypse, it stood to reason that redemption could only come through a *deus ex machina*, but rather than interpret that *deus ex machina* as does the mainstream Christian tradition—with the emphasis falling upon the *deus*, the figure of the man-god who literally descends from the heavens to redeem his creation—Robertson chooses instead to emphasize the *machina*, depicting with care the fantastic flying machines that he imagined would preside over the orderly, clean world of the future. His illustrations of UFOs resemble nothing so much as the way flying saucers were imagined in American popular culture in the 1950s and early 1960s and the dioramas in which he placed them likewise seemed drawn from a 1950s aesthetic with its privileging of straight, clean lines and a tidy, almost rigidly symmetrical organization of the elements within the picture.

It is worth pointing out that Robertson's curious conjugation of eschatology, futurism, and science fiction was not entirely novel and indeed may be understood as an echo—in all likelihood unconscious—of a well-established, if relatively unnoticed and generally unappreciated, aspect of African American artistic culture that took root in the early-to-mid twentieth century and which persists to this day, namely, Afrofuturism.[6] Although the best known representative of the tendency is undoubtedly Sun Ra, with his careful fashioning of a complex cosmology involving

6 Mark Dery coined the term in his seminal "Black to the Future" essay/interview piece in 1994. Of course the combination of science fiction and eschatology could also be said to have more distant roots in scripture as well, as the first chapters of Ezekiel—the Merkabah or heavenly chariot vision—have long provided fodder for fringe speculation about the connection between mysticism and extraterrestrial contact.

other planets and a celebration of the possibility of space travel, similar veins have been mined by an array of other African American artists, from George Clinton to fellow Louisianian Lil Wayne (Weiner).[7]

What might these more abstruse elements of Robertson's thought have possibly meant? To be sure, they might be circumscribed within a kind of sociological or ideological frame so as to bring out the social injustices suffered by the African American community, and its recourse to the devices of science fiction to seek redress, as if any response to the depth of the social problems at issue could only be found somewhere beyond our time or beyond this world. The question, as Mark Dery, articulates it, is whether a group "whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history," might be able to draw upon the resources of Afrofuturism to imagine new "possible futures" (Dery 180). But my interest here is not so much in reading Robertson as offering us a window into the forces that shaped African American culture and the modes of resistance that it developed in response to those forces—important as those may be—but the way in which he deployed his prophetic and artistic tools in his own distinctive way, one undeniably marked by his own idiosyncratic and, frankly, incompetent attempt to engage the traditions—religious and artistic—from which he drew inspiration. In short, my interest consists primarily in developing a reading of Robertson as outsider, even if it could plausibly argued that African American vernacular and folk art just is outsider art.

Too Early, Too Late, Never On Time: Royal Robertson Spirals Out of Control

> What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Aren't we straying as through an

7 For an excellent introduction to Sun Ra's unique brand of Afrofuturism, along with a sampling of related materials, see the guide to the 2006-2007 Hyde Center Art Park exhibition prepared by Corbett, Elms, and Kapsalis.

infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

—W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Thirty-eight years separate the appearance of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* [1882], with its famously prescient parable of the madman who announces the death of God, and W.B. Yeats's initial publication of "The Second Coming" [1920], that dark monument of modernism. Of course it would appear that in many ways, the temporal gap between the two texts makes all the difference. Nietzsche writes from a pre-*fin-de-siècle* vantage point, in prophetic anticipation of how the gathering clouds will soon be threatening the gaiety of the marketplace. Yeats in turn writes at that moment when the storm has just broken off, the blood-soaked fields of Europe still damp and muddy and strewn with broken bodies, the air silent and still in anticipation of a revelation that has not yet arrived.

So there is a sense in which one text is written in a mode of anticipation, and the other in a mode of documentation, as a way of bearing witness to the fact that the unthinkable has, in fact, occurred. But it is worth noting that even if Nietzsche's and Yeats's texts are separated by nearly four decades and a lot of traumatic world history, they are cognate in that they are both governed by what we might call the logic of prophecy, a logic that is strictly temporal, if not narrowly chronological per se. In either case, the time is out of joint. Both Nietzsche and Yeats speak of the disappearance of the world, a dissolution in which everything that is solid has melted into air. Both speak of apocalypse—whether it be the commemoration of the death of the god of this world or the gathering of the forces of entropy—and offer a suggestive yet incomplete glimpse into some event dimly glimpsed on the horizon.

To better appreciate the form that this logic assumes, let us briefly consider Nietzsche's text. Few philosophical writings have penetrated the public consciousness in quite the same way Nietzsche's has; few have been

more poorly understood. I would argue that the key achievement of "The Madman" is not its explicit wager on atheism, as much as grandmothers and contemporary culture warriors may enjoy feeling scandalized by Nietzsche's striking announcement. For that matter, I do not think that Nietzsche's point is reducible to the fact that we have not yet fully appreciated the consequences of jumping on the bandwagon of socially respectable atheism, although this is much nearer the mark. I think that the enduring interest of Nietzsche's parable has more to do with the problem of the intelligibility of the madman's words, coming as they do at a time when his audience cannot possibly understand them. Recall how when the madman concludes his peroration, he gazes at his audience in anticipation of their response:

> Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him with astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. "I come too early," he said then; "my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—*and yet they have done it themselves*." (96; italics in original)

The waiting is the hardest part: to the crowd, the mad prophet's words appear to have issued from the future. Rather than quaintly announce the death of God—news that his listeners already found tiresomely old and obvious—his utterance belongs to an altogether different plane and can thus only strike his audience as completely unintelligible. The temporal logic of prophecy thus displays here an unexpectedly complex structure: the deed has already been done by the madman's listeners yet its meaning cannot be disclosed in that same world in which it was enacted, since the conditions that made that deed possible no longer obtain. Although they do not comprehend it, the madman's audience now occupies an impossible space between the past moment of the deed and the future disclosure of the deed's meaning. This space is impossible precisely because one cannot

dwell within it, one is always "plunging continually," "backward, sideward, forward, in all directions."

In Yeats' poem the deed in question is likewise taken as a *fait accompli* and the moment of its telling is, *pace* Nietzsche, that same indeterminate, vexing moment between the accomplishment of the deed itself and the announcement of its meaning. The blood-dimmed tide has been loosed and the moment for action has passed, as we are relegated to waiting for the unveiling of whatever is to come next. "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand" (187) announces the poet, the repetition of the word "surely" ironically underscoring the completely uncertain and indeterminate nature of the revelation that will ostensibly come. His vision of a dark, sphinx-like presence plays itself out and then concludes as the curtain drops, with a terrible question echoing in its wake: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

In either case, the two texts perfectly define the parameters of the standard temporal logic of prophecy: the deed is always already done—its empirical fulfillment, traumatic though it may be, is but a mere footnote to the prophecy itself—and the moment in which the meaning of that deed would be disclosed is forever deferred. The prophetic/poetic utterance always comes too early or too late. It can never arrive on time.

It is significant that both Nietzsche and Yeats employ a similar figure to describe—and I now use that word in a strictly geometric sense—the downward trajectory of our path through an impossible space. For Nietzsche, we are falling continually, with no way of getting our bearings or finding our feet. We are moving, but in an indeterminate direction at an indeterminate speed, lending a curiously paradoxical quality to the very notion of this movement itself, one that recalls the "dolly-zoom" technique that Hitchcock perfected in *Vertigo*, in which the camera would simultaneously zoom in on its object even as it was being pulled back (Mercado 149). With regard to Yeats, of course, well, perhaps too many undergraduate papers have already been written attempting to explain the image of the ever-widening gyre of the falcon in terms of Yeats' own homebrewed mysticism. We can dispense with such readings and focus more straightforwardly instead on the form of the vertiginous descent: a downward spiral that is likewise a directionless, centerless falling into a bottomless void.

And here we have Royal Robertson, also declaiming in a prophetic mode, also issuing dark pronouncements of woe, also alluding, albeit in a more direct and positive way, to the meaning of the travails through which we are continually passing. Apocalypse and utopia: these are perhaps just other names for the ceaseless falling and the anticipation of, or hope for, its sudden arrest, the moment when all will be illuminated, when the meaning of all our suffering will finally be disclosed. And, like Nietzsche and Yeats, Robertson seals the prophetic mode of his discourse by means of this same figure, the figure of the spiral, a visual token of the curious dynamic that informs his work's oscillation between prophesying of apocalypse and the exploration of apocalypse's meaning.

If Robertson's work has a signature, a kind of mark or imprint that seals his work as his own, this is it. Consider how the figure of the spiral frequently graces his carefully prepared calendars, a colorful swirl dropped into the middle of the page, a kind of vortex around which everything else seems to rotate. It also shows up in other, more traditional works, if only as a hint or suggestion, as in the way that the walkways interweave and curve back upon themselves as we have already seen in Figure 5.2 ("Reorganized Church"). Allamel, drawing upon some of Robertson's own comments about his work, has made an invaluable attempt to penetrate the thicket of meanings that attend Robertson's employment of the figure. The spiral is, as Allamel notes, a path and passage into other worlds, a tunnel of time, a "tool for ascent," connecting Heaven and Earth, a model for representing interstellar travel, and, strikingly, a kind of eerie foreshadowing of the destructive force of the apocalyptic Hurricane Andrew that would finally lay waste to Robertson's own home ("Architectural Odyssey" 161ff.). The fact that the symbol is so rich and polyvalent is not a problem for Robertson: he seemed to feel no need for deciding between all these options. His work seems to often say "yes" to all simultaneously, as if the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical could not hold in the ever-widening gyre of his work.

That said, I think that it is important that we resist the temptation to circumscribe Robertson's spirals within any interpretive framework that might purport to reconstruct, in a totally coherent and systematic way, any kind of personal mythology or coherent belief system that would finally unlock the figure's meaning. Robertson is no Yeats: he would not be well served by any attempt to shoehorn his work into an interpretive

framework that would render it intelligible at the price of sacrificing its truly ex-centric, outsider character or absorb its irreducible marginality into any particular intellectual or artistic tradition. The temporal gap that so fascinated Nietzsche and Yeats between the moment of utterance and the disclosure of the utterance's meaning is not to be found in Robertson, who is much less cagey about the problem of accounting for that gap. Nietzsche, of course, found it necessary to don the mask of the madman in order to illuminate the disjointed temporal gap constitutive of prophetic discourse. In Robertson, there is no such mask: it is the artist *qua* idiot or incompetent that simply steamrolls his way through such distinctions, stupidly collapsing altogether the gap between event and meaning. His work does not present itself to us as a hermeneutic challenge to be solved—as enigmatic as much of it is—but as a vision that we can accept or ignore, but which we cannot in good faith subordinate to any particular coherent interpretive paradigm.

This is why the spiral is perhaps the single most dominant motif in Robertson's work. There is, I would suggest, no comparable interpretive problem to solve in his work precisely because he displaces the question of the end of the world—that is, the world as such regarded as something that can be, at least in principle, comprehended—from the domain of prediction and retrospection and stages it instead as a *fait accompli*, effectively de-temporalizing it. The time of Apocalypse is Now; the time of Utopia is Now; the Future is Now: there is no other time, there is no temporal gap to be closed, there is no problem of meaning to be solved. Robertson's apocalyptic and utopian visions do not issue from the perspective of an impartial observer or witness who sets out to comprehend them and then subsequently disclose their meaning or decide how to act upon them (or even whether such action is possible). Rather, his stubbornly insistent incompetence cuts through the Gordian knot of interpretation that marks the work of Nietzsche and Yeats and his message—unlike the message of Nietzsche's contrived madman—is issued with scant regard for his audience or sensitivity as to its own timing. Robertson's visions could be said to be bodied forth, as it were, taking the form of an existential commitment, one that takes no thought for the circumstances surrounding his visions or the manner in which they are staged.

The point is sufficiently subtle that it might help to bring it out more clearly by way of contrast with one of Heidegger's more darkly oracular

moments. In 1976, *Der Spiegel* published an interview Heidegger that had taken place a decade earlier. Per the magazine's agreement with Heidegger, the interview was not published until after his passing. The text was notable both for Heidegger's feeble attempts to deflect suspicions about his earlier dalliance with the movement of National Socialism as well as his famously gnomic pronouncement that "only a god can save us" ("Only a God" 57). To his interviewer's question about whether human beings may yet play a decisive role in shaping their own circumstances and destiny, Heidegger responded in this way:

> Philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all human reflection and endeavor. Only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poeticizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god or for the absence of a god in our decline, insofar as in the view of the absent god we are in a state of decline. ("Only a God" 57).

What, then, is our task according to Heidegger, given that all our efforts to change our situation are bound to come to naught? The best we can hope to do, he claims, is to "awaken a readiness to wait." Note the lengths to which Heidegger will go in suggesting that all our actions and projects will prove ultimately to be inefficacious. Our task is not even to await the gods per se, but to ready ourselves so that we may wait. The task that falls to us now is the "readying of this readiness" (57).

It is easy to see why Heidegger's performance in the interview left him vulnerable to accusations of obfuscation and a failure to own up fully to his own historical relationship with National Socialism, to say nothing of the moral quietism that he appears to tacitly commends to us under the guise of "thinking." There is no way around it: it is indeed embarrassing to observe how the ensign thinker of existential commitment declines to take a stand at the very moment when he most urgently needed to do so. So it is that we find ourselves, he insists, occupying a peculiar place in what I have called the temporal logic of prophecy, the gap between the coming apart of the world and the appearance of a salvific god. Naturally, this gap begins to look suspiciously like a pretext for inaction and indifference. If anything, Heidegger's position to all appearances lacks the

courage of even the positions staked out by Nietzsche and Yeats. Given an opportunity to come clean, the sage of the Black Forest flees commitment like an old bachelor.

Robertson, by contrast, takes license to lay his vision before us and commit himself to it without any hedging and without entangling himself in hermeneutic aporias. Let there be no mistake: it is a license granted by, not to put too fine a point on it, his own eccentricity and incompetence at (or disinterest in) navigating the hermeneutic codes implicit in the discourses of apocalypse and utopia. The spiral forms that proliferate in his work signal a kind of dialectic without sublation, a perpetual oscillation between the end of the world and the revelation that attends that end. It is important to point out that this is not an oscillation between two distinct points of (future) time, since apocalypse and utopia are not regarded in Robertson as vague future states but real, contemporary presences. This will have, as we shall see, important consequences regarding the manner in which we observers find ourselves interpellated by his work. We are enjoined to accompany the artist as he commits himself fully to his vision, without holding anything back or keeping anything in reserve. This is where Royal Robertson leaves no doubt: Ophelia-like, he binds himself unflinchingly and unapologetically to the object of his desire. Come hell or, well, high water.

The figure of the spiral is thus not merely a decorative motif in Robertson but a signature and an organizing device, a way of rendering in visual form the structure of the work of art as it both responds to a call and issues a call to us. We might even venture a further claim: the spiral also serves as a fitting emblem for the interpretive/existential challenge posed to us by outsider art in general. I have been arguing that outsider art may be understood as a response to a demand that in turn becomes a demand of its own, specifically, a demand that is now issued to the viewer, reader, or listener. Robertson's spiral nicely captures this ongoing, dynamic dialectic, one which offers no prospect of definitive closure or sublation. To recall Critchley's formula, we may say that Robertson's work issues to us—precisely in its awkward excesses that constantly overshoot the mark—a demand that solicits our approval. It is up to us to either grant that approval or refuse to do so. But we cannot, in good faith, respond to it in the mode of enjoyment, taking shelter in self-serving, self-distancing mechanisms of self-protective irony.

The Age of Odds: Sufjan Stevens Responds to Royal Robertson

Given the idiosyncrasy and intensity of Royal Robertson's vision, it might seem impossible or at least highly problematic for us—cynical, self-aware creatures that we are—to engage with it in the proper register, without simply regarding it as something to be enjoyed ironically. And let there be no mistake: the risks of such modes of engagement are considerable, since we may be tempted to ignore the call to commitment that such works of art extend to us while losing ourselves in labyrinths of interpretation. But I have been arguing that the challenge of outsider art, in all its messy, excessive, sometimes shocking incompetence, is to regard it as a painfully finite response to an infinite call, one proffered in such a way as to underscore the gap between our own finitude and a call that is relentlessly demanding. How then might one suitably engage the work of an artist like Robertson without effacing that call or converting it into a mere commodity, an object commended to us for our enjoyment?

It might not appear terribly promising to propose that we address the question by appealing to Sufjan Stevens' 2010 album *The Age of Adz*. To be sure Stevens was explicit in acknowledging the album's debt to Robertson, from the cover art, to the lyrics, to the music videos that accompanied it.[8] Stevens, it will be recalled, is the gifted songwriter and performer who had cemented his reputation as a darling of the indie scene with his 2005 concept album *Illinoise*, the second in what he had claimed would be a project to record one album for each of the fifty states of the US (the first was *Michigan*, issued two years previously). But it must be said that Stevens is a hipster mainstay with impeccable credentials in that regard. Persian name given by hippie parents? Check. Achingly sensitive lyrics? Check. A propensity for sporting trucker caps? Check. Creative arrangements of old Christian gospel standards? Check. A soft spot for banjos and brass instruments? Check. And so on. There has never been any question that Stevens is a supremely talented composer, musician, and arranger and his sensitivity to language was no doubt honed as he pursued his MFA in Creative Writing. But to ask a banjo-playing, overeducated thirty-something in skinny jeans and a trucker cap to help us develop a philosophically informed reading of outsider art may be asking too much. As we have

8 It should also be noted that the 2011 documentary *Make*, which features the work of Robertson and other marginal artists, was produced by Asthmatic Kitty, the record label and media distribution company founded by Stevens.

seen in previous chapters, the figure of the hipster all too often represents a disappointingly reductive response to the call of outsider art. But neither can we eschew or dismiss the potential of a figure such as Sufjan Stevens to help us think more clearly about what kind of response an artist like Royal Robertson might properly evoke. For, at the end of the day, where the danger of hipsterism is, grows the saving power also.

The Age of Adz marked Stevens' first proper album since the triumph of *Illinoise* in 2005 and fans found themselves immediately obliged to figure out what to do with his embrace of electronic and heavily processed soundscapes (by way of contrast with the more traditional instrumentation of his best-known previous work). The tour in promotion of the album was ambitious in every respect, from the sizeable accompanying band that Stevens put together for the tour (eleven members), to elaborate homemade costumes, to his use of fairly intricate choreography. It was a dramatic change of pace for an artist whose best known previous work was characterized by its acoustic intimacy. But both the album and the tour were well received, even if most listeners soon realized that it might take some work to appreciate this latest offering and the reason why it seemed to owe such a tremendous debt to an African American outsider artist from Louisiana who most of them had never heard of.

Stevens apparently believed that Robertson cast a sufficiently long shadow over his own work that an explanation to his audience was in order. He consequently made it a practice to incorporate into his shows a lengthy (occasionally as long as about ten minutes) verbal excursus on the album's origins and the role that Robertson had played in inspiring it. Stevens' remarks at the Salt Lake City show on November 1, 2010—available on YouTube—touch on some of the relevant elements of the story, and the clip is worth watching all the way through. Stevens describes in his remarks his own disenchantment with his previous songwriting habits, his decision to abandon traditional methods of song composition, and his interest in simply collecting and manipulating electronic samples, independent of any songwriting designs. As he tells it, he had no intention of even sharing the material he had been archiving or, for that matter, even regarding them as music. The discovery of Royal Robertson's art struck him with the force of a revelation. Robertson inspired him to revisit the raw sonic material he had been accumulating and give it form. Robertson's world was, he readily acknowledged, disturbing from a psychological

point of view. Nevertheless, he found that it offered him a way out of a deep personal and creative impasse. I cite his words from that November 2010 explanation of the journey he had taken:

> Psychotic as [his work] was, I found it a very comfortable place to live, to reside in, and somehow it allowed me to work through and contextualize a lot of [my own] material. And it allowed me to see a relationship between the imagination, the vastness of that, the cosmos, and the body, the physical body, the personal side of things, the interior self. […] It began to relate to my own fantasy world, my own imagination. And I began to see correlations between those two things. ("Royal Robertson Story")

Of course we should be cautious in our assessment of Stevens' account of his engagement of Robertson. If Stevens could be called a hipster, he is manifestly one drawn to sincerity more than irony and his comments—both on this particular occasion and other similar ones—cannot but recall the tension which we have already examined between the impulse to authenticity and the burden of self-consciousness.

What is of note, I think, is the way in which his comments hint at a provocative strategy for responding to the call that he claims to have heard in Robertson's work. First of all is the simple fact that he had experienced Robertson's art as precisely that, that is, as constituting a call to him, something that was profound, incomprehensible, and yet unflinchingly demanding in that it solicited a personal response on his part. But he also points out that it was not a call that he was allowed to enjoy in any kind of detached way: it was heard and responded to insofar as it resonated with his own personal circumstances, including the long creative and even emotional impasse with which he had been struggling.

It might thus be appropriate to speak of Stevens' response to Robertson as the discovery of a kind of affinity or attunement. There is no question here of Stevens having to decide whether to demonstrate his fidelity to Robertson's call by means of imitation: the adept, fully competent artist cannot imitate the incompetent one, in all his or her limitations, in good faith. But neither is his response so untethered to his source material that he is able to manipulate or disregard it at will. John Ashbery's treatment of Henry Darger's Vivian Girls in *Girls on the Run* is a masterful poem and

unquestionably was influence by Darger's illustrations. But it would be going too far to claim that it is faithful to Darger in the way that Stevens is to Robertson. Robertson's relationship to Stevens is undoubtedly more complex in that it is not a question of thematic convergence but a matter of structural harmonization and the latter's fidelity to his mentor is more a function of letting it complete his own work than it is an overly literal interpretation or a vague and imprecise "inspiration."

Consider two pieces of evidence that might be adduced for the claim that we are better off thinking of Sufjan Stevens' relationship to Royal Robertson as one of call, attunement, and commitment, rather than source and inspiration. First, Stevens pointed out that his own experiments with electronic microstructures—beats, blips, and beeps, with no melody, harmony, or song-like characteristics—were formless and unorganized until his encounter with Robertson: Stevens' experiments were little more than homeless, wandering data to be archived. But the assemblages of sound on *The Age of Adz* unquestionably were repurposed and found their proper place after having passed through the filter of Robinson's odd visions. To mention but a single example, the asynchronous blips with which "Bad Communication" begins—presumably drawn from the banks of formless sounds that Stevens said he had been collecting for years—now unmistakably hint at Robertson's flying saucers. In similar fashion the electronic swooshes that adorn that same track recall the sounds effects from the 1950s science fiction milieu that so fascinated Robertson.

It is important to appreciate the point. It is not that these little sonic elements are adornments or flourishes meant to provide an aural illustration of Robertson's visual imagery; they only come to have meaning insofar as Stevens' work is brought to completion through his heeding of the call that drew him to Robertson in the first place. The minor sound experiments Stevens had been carrying out only came to be what they are once he had encountered Robertson's work. In a similar way we might note that the visual aspects of Sufjan Stevens' live show and music videos were designed to pay homage to Robertson's universe and the latter constitute particularly convincing evidence of the spell that Robertson cast upon Stevens. With only limited training of his own in the visual arts, he meticulously animated the video for the track "Get Real, Get Right" as well as the sequences that formed the backdrop for the live shows (Lewis). In the case of these visuals, his work with respect to Robertson is, in a straightforward way,

illustrative. But it does not follow that they are therefore derivative. Rather, his liberation of Robertson's own images is transacted not so much in the mode of homage—which would run the risk of falling back into imitation (whether ironically or sincerely fashioned) but, I would suggest, as an extension of Robertson's work itself. Brought up short by the feverish and fantastic work of his forebear, Stevens acknowledges his debts by finding ways to give his mentor's work new life. Again, this does not mean that Robertson's work was somehow incomplete or deficient until a more competent artist redeemed it. Rather, it is better understood as a way of prolonging and amplifying its echo.

The Age of Adz has been widely recognized as an intensely personal album for Stevens and the first-person voice that predominates throughout is unsparing in the way it gives itself over to self-criticism on Stevens' part, not in an ironic mode but as a way of seeking atonement for himself and redemption for Robertson. "I know you want it," begins "Get Real, Get Right:"

> I know you really want to get it right.
>
> Have you forsaken, have you mistaken me for someone else?
>
> Saturday night you sleep with a rifle at your side
>
> Delivering speeches, delivering speeches left and right
>
> Follow these created deaths
>
> Fortune save me from his wrath
>
> Spaceship out the house at night
>
> Prophet speak what's on your mind.
>
> You know you really got to get right with the Lord.

The repeated refrain, "You know you really got to get right with the Lord," should be read not only as Robertsonian prophetic verbiage but a bit of self-directed admonition and criticism. Subsequent stanzas are even more direct in the way that they evoke Robertson's private worlds even while they clearly suggest a self-directed call to step back from the dark side:

> I know I've caused you trouble
>
> I know I've caused you pain

But I must do the right thing
I must do myself a favor and get real
Get right with the Lord
I know I've lost my conscience
I know I've lost all shame
But I must do the right thing
I must do myself a favor and get real
Get right with the Lord.

It is telling that these words could have been voiced by either Robertson or Stevens. In a straightforward way, we can imagine them in the context of Royal Robertson's prophetic vocation, a kind of calling to repentance he might have issued to one and all, including himself. But the burden that these same words would impose is one that Stevens suggests is his as well. And perhaps this is a key that could help us to think fruitfully about how we ourselves might learn to hear and heed the call that comes to us from an art born and bred on our cultural margins. To truly see it, to truly hear it, we have no choice but to give ourselves over to its always unreasonable demands, even when—especially when—this entails that we be willing to let ourselves be unmade and remade anew in our attempt to answer that call responsibly.

Coda

Homer's Gods, Johnston's Superheroes

Perhaps it would be appropriate to conclude this study by picking up a thread that was introduced in the first chapter and which proved fundamental to the account of incompetence that I developed there. It is undeniable that there is something deeply satisfying about the ways in which a skilled artist or craftsman may tease out the affordances that the world offers to one who is blessed with a keen eye and a steady hand. The sorts of creators I have in mind are able to expand our sense of the possible by means of a carefully honed attunement to such affordances and their possession of the requisite motor skills which have been honed by patient practice. This point—which is of a piece with what I called in Chapter One "California-style Heideggerism"—has recently been brought to the attention of a broad reading public by Hubert Dreyfus and his former student Sean Kelly. Dreyfus and Kelly's 2011 work *All Things Shining* was by all accounts a smash-hit (well, at least as far as the sales of philosophy books goes), climbing up the *New York Times* bestseller lists and earning the authors an audience that most professional philosophers could only dream of. Whereas much of the authors' more specialized academic work has been devoted to ferreting out the technical implications of how our embodied intentionalities are revealed in the mode of skillful coping, *All Things Shining* took the further step of showing how such a relatively abstruse philosophical topic could enliven any attentive reader's sense of the meaningfulness of his or her own life.

For Dreyfus and Kelly, the *poiesis* on display in the patient work of the craftsman discloses a phenomenon to which the ancient Greeks were highly attuned and which we have tended to forget, in our obsession with technology and in the absence of any incontrovertible transcendent

source of value. The authors remind us that for the ancient Greeks, the world was suffused with gods. These gods manifested themselves in terms of what we today call "moods," a kind of ebb and flow of affordances for thought and action that present themselves to us in a given moment. When the Greeks spoke of the gods being present—as when Homer speaks of the involvement of Aphrodite, Athena, and Zeus in the world of human affairs—the point was to highlight how a set of possibilities for acting appropriately was disclosed to human beings in a set of determinate circumstances. For the ancient Greeks, to act well was not a matter of simply imposing one's own will upon a recalcitrant world but it was rather to manifest a certain sensitivity to the divine solicitations and affordances for action that are extended to us in a particular situation. For Dreyfus and Kelly, to acknowledge the gods means to be attuned to the mood of the moment and to act well.

They argue that such a possibility remains open to us today. This happens when we are tuned in to the exigencies of the moment and respond to our surroundings as if they were not so much a background canvas for our projects and desires but rather a web of demands and solicitations for us to be meaningfully concerned with projects that are not entirely of our own authorship. These demands are directed not so much to our cognitive faculties but rather to the totality of our being as embodied creatures already enmeshed in that world. While the most accomplished artists and artisans among us already know this, the rest of us might also benefit from becoming re-sensitized to the affordances that the world provides us and learn to choose and act with purpose. What we need, Dreyfus and Kelly argue, is nothing less than a rediscovery of the sacred. Theirs is not a sacred predicated upon any kind of theism but rather a kind of "secular sacred," so to speak, which is inspired by the polytheism we associate with the world of Homer, for whom all things indeed were shining and the gods were everywhere. It is time, they argue, that we summon the gods once again. And the names of the gods whose presence we invoke are simply the names of the diverse ways in which the world solicits our meaningful engagement in the mode of skillful coping. To acknowledge the gods, then, is to appreciate the ways in which our embodied intentionalities are woven into the fabric of a world that we always already encounter as meaningful.

What Dreyfus and Kelly offer us, in essence, is a re-enchantment of the world. At a time when we would seem to be obliged to choose between

accepting the postulates of nihilism on the one hand or attempting to impose our own arbitrary will upon the world on the other, their recommendation is to recognize that we may encounter the world in an altogether different mode. And this consists of not merely taking in our surroundings in a detached sense but always experiencing them instead in terms of the demands that they continually make upon us.[1] This, finally, is the lesson of art, of *poiesis*. The *poiesis* of a meaningful life, one artfully and mindfully lived, may be achieved by all, provided that we are willing to draw upon the lessons that those who excel in their vocation—the artisan, the musician, the craftsman—have to teach us. The argument of *All Things Shining*, Heideggerian in its broadest contours, is on this point almost Nietzschean. One's life may be a work of art and the most banal of rituals—say, the taking of one's morning cup of coffee—may be done with a degree of sensitivity and mindfulness that may invest even the most mundane of rituals with a beauty all its own and something worthy of the gods (216-19). This is skillful coping, raised to the level of art. And this is not only art, but, again, effectively a re-sacralization of the world.

And then we have Daniel Johnston, the outsider artist par excellence.

The contrast, it would seem, could not be greater. For Dreyfus and Kelly, the world is a clean and well-lit place. It shimmers with grace, with divine agencies that are distributed across what we might have once regarded as an abyss separating subject from object. We find our involvement and concern actively solicited as we go about our daily tasks; we are continually extended calls to act and intervene. Johnston's world, by comparison, is anything but clean and well-lit. It is messy, disorganized, and distressingly chaotic (quite literally so, in the case of his personal workspaces). His is a world brimming with ideas, passion, and vision but, it must be said, the ideas are often half-formed, the passion sometimes ill-directed, and the vision often inconsistent and idiosyncratic. In short, Johnston's is just the kind of world that we might expect from

1 The dramatic anecdote with which their book begins is intended to illuminate this point. Dreyfus and Kelly highlight a recent news story in which an individual had fallen upon the subway tracks at 137th and Broadway in Manhattan just as a train was rapidly approaching. With no time to haul him up to the safety of the platform, one of the passersby leaped down to assist the victim, shielding him with his body from the oncoming train by pressing him down into a depression between the two rails as the train passed harmlessly over the two of them. While others on the platform could only watch in stunned horror, the hero responded later that he had simply done what needed to be done, without any forethought, plan, or calculation. By contrast with the other spectators, the hero "not only experienced his surroundings," they note, but "he experienced them directly in terms of what they demanded from him," namely a call to action (9).

an outsider artist whose powers of imagination outstrip his capacity to execute his designs.

But for all that, it seems to me that there is a curious resonance between the vision of Dreyfus and Kelly on the one hand and the labors of a Daniel Johnston on the other. We have already discussed his music at some length but his vision is not exhausted by musical creativity alone. Johnston, as many of my readers will know, is not just a composer and performer but also a visual artist, one whose style is immediately recognizable and increasingly sought after by collectors and fans. An indefatigable illustrator, Johnston has produced hundreds of drawings, sketches, and cartoons that have, in their totality, hinted at a richly populated universe of his own devising, and which include a wealth of figures including superheroes and cartoon characters, images drawn from traditional Christian narratives and a strange collection of symbols and motifs of his own private invention. While it is certainly going too far to suggest, as some have, that Johnston is our generation's Blake in his elaboration of a mythology that crosses artistic and generic boundaries (cf. Yazdani and Goede 41), there is no question that there is something curiously epic about the scope of his vision and his utter fidelity to it, weird as it may be.[2]

Captain America, Casper the Friendly Ghost, Red Skull, disembodied eyeballs, assorted devils and demons: it's pretty hard to imagine that Johnston's personal pantheon was quite what Dreyfus and Kelly had in mind when they called for a return of the gods. But on the other hand, Johnston's universe seems to exhibit certain crucial features that are strikingly similar to those commended to us by the authors of *All Things Shining*. Like Dreyfus and Kelly, Johnston's is a world in which agency is located neither in the subject acting absolutely autonomously nor a mind-independent world indifferent to our presence. For Johnston, as for Dreyfus and Kelly, agency is not so much on the side of either the traditional subject or object but is to be found within the nexus or web that brings them both together. The superheroes beckon to Johnston, just as the Homeric gods do to Dreyfus and Kelly.

Of course, that is not to say that there is not a crucial difference between them in terms of where the accent falls. For while Dreyfus and Kelly describe a subtle and complex world in which only one's sensitive

2 Yazdani and Goede provide a very helpful rough taxonomy of the motifs of Daniel Johnston's visual art (see especially 41-56). See also jagodzinski 173-75.

attunement to one's environment results in the discernment of the demands that the world issues to us, Johnston's understanding of demand and response is less equivocal and more blunt: "I believe in God, and I certainly believe in the Devil," he once said, giving Jeff Feuerzeig an eminently suitable epigraph with which to frame his 2005 award-winning documentary, *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*. But if Johnston's point was to underscore what he took to be the manifestly Christian pillars of his own vision, the words he went on to utter next make it clear where the emphasis was really to be placed: "There's certainly a devil and he knows my name."

For Johnston, the emphasis on the devilish and the demonic takes many forms, none more clear or significant than the way in which he understands himself as one who must respond to an ethical call, even while he is beset on all sides by the temptation to let down his guard and shirk his duties. "In the darkness there is no other love except you Daniel Johnston," reads the text of the title page of his 2012 graphic novel, *Space Ducks*, a quintessentially Johnstonian tale about how ducks in space ships put down a demon uprising.[3] Now, it may seem at first glance that we could not have asked for a more subject-oriented statement than this, as it places the weight of the world upon the speaking subject. And, indeed it is quite literally a speaking subject, as this phrase is the first thing we hear as we begin the first adventure in Johnston's accompanying Space Ducks app for the iPad, with Johnston himself pronouncing these words. But as our eyes become accustomed to the darkness of Johnston's world, so to speak, we come to understand that the centrality of our hero to his own universe is more complex than it might have at first appeared. Dreyfus and Kelly had warned in *All Things Shining* of the temptation for us, in a world apparently bereft of inherent meaning, to attempt to assume the responsibility of redeeming that world by means of a Nietzschean gesture of self-affirmation, attempting in effect to become gods ourselves (49). But I find no Nietzschean self-aggrandizement on display in Johnston's work, no tacit invitation to proclaim oneself an übermensch and impose oneself upon the world (regardless of the degree of narcissism that his work at

3 The lack of punctuation of this simple phrase may turn out to be highly significant and richly ambiguous. Should we read it as if an invisible comma were understood to follow the word "you," in which case Johnston would be speaking to himself, reminding himself of his responsibilities in the face of tremendous difficulty? Or might the "you" be directed toward the reader, interpellating him or her as the responsible agent, with the name "Daniel Johnston" serving rather as a signature, the mark of the one who has authored the call or from whom it issues?

times demonstrates). Rather, the phrase is clearly articulated in the mode of responsibility, and the nature of the call seems to owe more to Levinas than to Nietzsche.

Be that as it may, even if Space Ducks, like the rest of Johnston's creative work, takes seriously the weight of responsibility that the artist feels, we cannot forget that we are, after all, speaking of, well, how to put this? Ducks in space suits that are trying to save the world. One doubts that Homer—or his contemporary mouthpieces, Dreyfus and Kelly—had heroic waterfowl in mind when they described their shining gods (although that's not to say that Homer Simpson might not have been entertained by Johnston's weird epic). We should not be put off by Johnston's messy universe, where one finds Satan and ducks doing battle on a cosmic scale. Just as we saw with Royal Robertson's troubled visions, the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical for Johnston drops out and we find ourselves simply marveling at the ways in which the artist's articulation of his vision is utterly engrossing, not in spite of its incoherence and incompetence but, in some measure, because of it. As for the notion that in comparing the Homeric gods to Johnston's menagerie of superheroes, Christian icons, and waterfowl, we are somehow comparing apples to oranges, it bears recalling that it is far from clear that the Greeks themselves were altogether clear on how the stories of their own gods were to be harmonized. And, if nothing else, the messy and conflicting stories about the gods' messy and conflicting personalities simply served to catalyze the telling of new stories, new ways of imagining how these competing agencies and forces might be conjugated.

It goes without saying that the particulars of Daniel Johnston's personal mythology—the Caspers, the Captain Americas, the floating eyeballs, and so on—are not really the point here. What is at issue is the way in which a suite of agencies, demands, and responses somehow emerge together in the work of a sensitive artist who lacks the resources to convince us that they may all be tidily harmonized. The dilemma of the outsider artist is the dilemma of one who responds to a call that he or she is always willing to follow without ever being prepared to do so. In some of the first pages of this study I suggested that I was more than happy to grant the notion of "skillful coping" a certain philosophical value and weight, provided that its contrary, incompetence, would also be appreciated for its philosophical significance. The studies of outsider art that followed were attempts to

illustrate how misbegotten and incompetent works of art may illuminate crucial aspects of the bonds, ethical and otherwise, that bind us to a world whose demands upon us never slacken. Perhaps it is fitting that at the end of the day, even the dullest of things—the most unorthodox and least competent works of art, even when measured against more traditional canons of excellence and skill—may yet turn out to shine the brightest of all.

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Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee. Everything is allright though storm continues*. Detail. Watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper. 24in x 108 1/4in. American Folk Art Museum. Accession Number 2001.16.2A. © 2016 Kiyoko Lerner/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Used by Permission.

Henry Darger, *At Norma Catherine via Jennie Richee* [...]. Three-panel collage-drawing. Watercolor, pencil, carbon on paper. 22 x 89 in. © 2016 Kiyoko Lerner/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Used by Permission.

Prophet Royal Robertson, *Untitled (Evil Women)*, n.d. Mixed media on poster paper. 28 x 22 in. Photo: Andy Nasisse. © 2017 Andy Nasisse. Used by Permission.

Prophet Royal Robertson, Untitled (Ladder Day Saint), 1980, mixed media on poster board, 22 x 22 inches, collection of Fred Blair and Patrick Ryan, image courtesy of Shrine (NYC). Used by Permission.

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$29.95 PHILOSOPHY | ART | CULTURE

Long the province of connoisseurs, collectors, hipsters, and eccentrics, the music and art of the margins has begun to find its way into the mainstream. Kurt Cobain took to wearing Daniel Johnston t-shirts before his death; Sufjan Stevens organized a concept album based on the work of Royal Robertson; an illustration by Henry Darger recently sold at auction for more than half a million dollars; The Shaggs' story was turned into a Broadway play. But aside from the ways in which the boundaries of the artworld, music criticism, and even popular taste are being redrawn, it is becoming increasingly clear that the creations of artists and musicians working on the margins may be invested with a particular kind of philosophical significance as well.

American Idiots is neither a book of traditional art or music criticism nor an encomiastic work written from the uncritical perspective of a fan. Rather, it argues that outsider art and music pose significant philosophical problems concerning the nature and meaning of incompetence in the arts. It argues specifically that particular tokens of incompetent outsider art may be regarded as staging important aesthetic and ethical problems with regard to the phenomenon of responsibility. Drawing upon figures such as Heidegger, Levinas, and Simon Critchley, *American Idiots* examines the work of prominent outsider artists and musicians/composers, exploring how in each case their work is invested with a philosophical significance that is tied directly to its deficiencies and shortcomings. In each instance the incompetence on display provides us with key clues regarding the phenomenological structure of obligation and answerability.

Think Media: EGS Media Philosophy Series

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ISBN 978-1-940813-38-7
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9 781940 813387

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